A Longitudinal Study of Adolescents' Attitudes About Assistance in the Development of Moral Values

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ABSTRACT. A questionnaire-based study of 2,863 adolescents (ages 12 to 22 years), with data collected over 15 years, measured the extent to which informants believed that elementary, secondary, and college-age young people should receive guidance on moral issues from the family, school, clergy, peers, and/or the individual himself or herself. Averaging the ratings of all respondents over the first three categories yielded an overall authority score of 1.85, where a score of 2.00 represented a belief in moderate influence. Results showed a minimal difference in the ratings between genders, among different age groups, and across the different calendar years of questionnaire administration. Much more substantial differences existed among the actual influences investigated and across the ages of those to whom the influence was to be directed.

THE IMPORTANCE of proper moral development to the individual and to the society in which he or she is a member is a straightforward idea that is hard to challenge. How such development should be achieved, however, is much more problematic and even controversial. A little less than 20 years ago I encountered a fact that was surprising at the time: 79% of the general American public, according to a then-current Gallup poll (Gallup Poll, 1973), believed that the schools should be involved in the moral development of their students. On the other hand, a review of 19 educational psychology textbooks from 12 major publishers showed an amazing paucity of consideration of how to deal with at least some moral issues in the classroom (Zern, 1982). It seemed impossible to properly understand the implications of either that poll or the related research without placing the results within a larger context. A thorough review of the literature failed to uncover relevant data to answer questions such as the following:

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1. How do people compare the extent to which they believe that other authoritarian institutions of the society besides the school (i.e., the family and the clergy) should also be influential in the moral development of the individual?

In today’s world, the school often seems to be used as the panacea to solve problems ranging from AIDS to integration. Is this perception of the school’s role correct? In this study, I investigated this question by examining the role people see for the other authorities (i.e., family and clergy) in addition to the school.

2. To what extent do people believe that peers and the individual himself or herself should contribute to the individual’s changing moral sense?

Again, there seems to be both a popular perception that people in today’s society believe that the individual is the master of his or her own fate, either with or without peer support, and that he or she prefers it that way. In this study, I explored the perceived influence of peers and of the individual himself or herself and explicitly compared those perceived roles with those of the school, the family, and the clergy.

3. Do people change their ideas about the nature and degree of the various influences on the individual as the individual they express their attitudes about grows older?

It seems even more clear—quite obvious, in fact—that older people need less guidance in making moral decisions than do younger people. It is not clear to what extent and how quickly those assumed changes occur, or whether they take place at the same rate across the range of influences that exist. This study will enable an analysis of those changes in the perception of who needs how much help.

4. Do people of different ages have a different point of view on the issues raised?

Unfortunately, this question could receive only a partial answer, given the limited age range of the individuals from whom data were collected systematically (roughly between 12 and 22 years of age). Still, some comparisons could be made with the more general empirical information of the Gallup poll, and the results are related to the implications of some classic developmental theories.

5. Have people’s ideas on all or some of these issues changed over the fairly recent past (i.e., the last 17 years)?

I began asking these questions in a systematic manner to a large number of adolescents (about 650) some 17 years ago and have continued the data collection with about the same number of respondents every 5 years, through 1993. The broader database acquired across the past 15 years enables an extensive answer to this question.
I chose adolescents as the population for this study for a number of reasons. The exploration of the whole issue of guidance in moral development focuses, by definition, on the functioning of young people. The attitudes of members of the group for whom this guidance may be sought toward the role that needs to be occupied by families, schools, religious institutions, peers, and the individual himself or herself must be considered. After all, they are the captive audience for values-education curricula in one form or another, whether the education comes from the school, the family, or the clergy. It is important to know whether the potential students for such curricula see them in a positive or negative light. In this study, I assessed the extent to which young people themselves believe that a variety of cultural institutions, as well as peers and the individual himself or herself, should be involved in the moral development of the young.

Theoretically, of course, informants even younger than 12 years could have been used. However, the concepts tapped by the questions are rather abstract, and the younger the child, the more likely it is that the ideas will simply be too difficult to be understood. In that connection, beginning with seventh graders was a bit arbitrary (and admittedly was decided in part by easy accessibility to a sample). Still, there is a certain face validity to beginning the investigation with the start of the middle school years, at an age that many developmental psychologists feel introduces a somewhat intellectually distinct, more advanced, developmental stage (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). Moreover, earlier research (Zern, 1985, 1991) established empirically that 12- and 13-year-olds were, in fact, able to understand the task.

In addition, having adolescents as informants builds on the aforementioned idea of a change in developmental level, with an emphasis on the emotional–social component of development, rather than the purely conceptual component, although the dimensions are inextricably interconnected. Thus, the early adolescence of the middle school presages the beginning of the so-called adolescent rebellion, purportedly a time of turning away from an emotional reliance on authority figures and a time of finding one’s own way morally, as well as intellectually and emotionally. This argument has been made from many perspectives, but the classic developmental models, as well as the most basic, are the psychoanalytic model of Anna Freud (1958) and the cognitive model of Piaget (1965). Each model, in its own way, promotes the perspective that adolescents constitute the age group likely to view most negatively the idea of having authorities involved in their own moral development.

Thus, by assuming the basic validity of these developmental models, I acquired the methodological advantage of making the study of the adolescent an extreme case, so to speak, which can most easily establish the validity of the contention that all people want guidance in their moral development. If those people (i.e., the adolescents) who are most independent clearly want guidance from authorities, then surely so does everyone else. To be sure, this conclusion would not be empirically defensible, based on logical deductions from some theories
and a minimal database in a few polls. Still, it would be an intriguing finding and was actually the finding of this study.

Method

Sample

A total of 2,861 students were administered the same basic questionnaire over a period of 15 years at 5-year intervals (i.e., 1978, 1983, 1988, and 1993). A sample of college students from the same, generally politically liberal, non-sectarian, selective, liberal arts institution completed the questionnaire each of the 4 years in which it was administered. A large number of students answered the questionnaire at each college grade level: 341, 285, 290, and 221, respectively, from freshman to senior. Over the same time period, 7th-, 8th-, and 9th-grade students from two public schools participated in the study. Each school was heterogeneous in terms of race, ethnic groups, and socioeconomic level. The schools were both located in the same New England city of about 180,000 inhabitants in which the college was located. Students at each of these grade levels also completed the questionnaire in roughly similar numbers: 364 (7th grade), 441 (8th grade), and 392 (9th grade), respectively. In 1993, 10th-, 11th-, and 12th-grade students (in much smaller numbers) from the same city completed the questionnaire: \( n = 56, 79, \) and 34, respectively. And finally, in 1993, 299 students from a small, selective Catholic college in the same city also completed the questionnaire, including 62 freshmen, 61 sophomores, 78 juniors, and 98 seniors. In general, as to the overall findings, data from all but the last subgroup were similar and will be reported together in most instances. Data from the students at the Catholic college yielded results so consistently different from those of the rest of the sample as to warrant being reported separately.

Instruments

The single-sheet, 1978, questionnaire contained the following introduction: “Worcester has designated a time to be set aside as National Education Week in response to federal legislation and a presidential proclamation. A major theme of the week is the teaching of moral values. To explore student reaction to the teaching of values, we would like you to respond to the following items.”

In the 3 different years of administration since 1978, the following introduction has been used: “Some people argue that our society seems to be increasing its interest in the development of moral values. Opinion is divided on how this development should occur. To explore students’ reactions to the development of values, I would like you to respond to the following items.”

Two different types of questions were asked in the various administrations of the instrument. One type consisted of 12 items in the first two administrations
of the instrument (1978 and 1983), and it consisted of 15 items in the last two administrations (1988 and 1993). The basic format was the following:

The importance that the **family** should have in the development of moral values on the **elementary school age** person is ________________________.

The instructions stated:

Circle the comment that best describes your own opinion.

The choices were **great** (scored as 3 points on the statistical analyses that follow), **moderate** (scored as 2 points), **little** (scored as 1 point), and **none** (scored as 0 points). Individual questions varied to include each of the elementary, secondary, and college levels separately, and each of four possible influences—family, school, clergy, and the individual himself or herself for the first two administrations of the instrument, and an addition of peers as a potential influence for the last two administrations. The actual questions were formed from all the possible combinations and thus consisted of 12 and 15 questions for the first two and last two administrations, respectively.

Three additional questions focused on the most important influence by asking the following:

The **most** important influence of moral values in the **elementary school age** person should be the ________________________.

The choices were family, school, clergy, and individual for the first two administrations, and the same plus peers for the last two administrations. The second and third questions focused in a similar way on assessment of what was most important for secondary and college-age persons.

Thus, two different kinds of questions were asked of the informants involved in the study:

1. Twelve questions in the first two administrations of the questionnaire (or 15 in the last two administrations) asked the informants to rate the absolute importance of four (or five) possible influences on youths of different ages—that is, whether the particular influence mentioned should even be involved and, if so, to what extent. Most of the data analysis focuses on these data.

2. The remaining three questions required the informant to choose the most important among the four (or five) possible influences for each of the age periods, even if he or she felt that two or more influences were of equally great importance at a particular time.

Procedure

Two different procedures were used to secure informants for the study. College students were solicited on an individual basis in most instances. That is,
research assistants and I would invite the students to fill out the questionnaire if we saw them at the college’s mailroom or cafeteria. Thus, the place where students were encountered was a place where there was equal opportunity for each student to be present. For the 4 separate years in which data were solicited, returned questionnaires averaged 82.8% of those handed out, with no appreciable differences from one administration to the next. In a few cases, college student data were obtained from intact college classes in different disciplines. Preliminary data analyses showed no differences in the data from the two sources, and all college data from the one school were combined for the final analyses.

Data from the younger adolescents were all obtained with the aid of teachers from intact homerooms before regular class periods. For all seventh- and eighth-grade data, the entire school was canvassed, as was the case for the ninth-grade data for the first three administrations. The rest of the noncollege data were obtained from a representative set of English classes with the help of the teacher. All questionnaires handed out by the teacher were returned and used.

Results

Overall Results

The mean rating that the average adolescent gave to authority over the 15 years of administering the questionnaire was 1.85 on a scale ranging from 0 to 3 (see Table 1). This score was obtained by averaging the nine scores consisting of rating family’s, school’s, and clergy’s importance for elementary, high school, and college students. (This score will hereinafter be labeled the “overall authority” score.) A total of 2,348 students rated all nine possibilities. Only their scores were considered in calculating the 1.85 overall figure. Only two of those respondents (.17% of the sample) believed that no authority was of any importance at any age period. About one third of the sample (32.8%) believed that the average authority was of at least moderate importance. Only 3.4% of the sample gave an average score of less than little importance to overall authority. The average overall authority rating at the Catholic college was 2.16, which was significantly higher than the rest of the sample, \( t = 12.33, \ p < .001 \).

There were large differences among the ratings given to various influences, ranging from an average score across all respondents and across age levels of 2.21 for family, through 1.89 for school, and to 1.45 for clergy. The comparable score for individual was 2.52, and peers received an average score of 1.83. Every \( t \) test between different influences yielded statistically significant differences at beyond the .001 level. This was true even of the comparison between influence of peers (1.83) and schools (1.89).

With such a large sample, even quantitatively small absolute differences are quite stable and hence highly statistically significant, although of arguable meaningfulness. In this context, particular caution is necessary in order to make the
### TABLE 1

Average Ratings of Respondents (With Catholic-School Students Separate) on Preferred Influences for Three Age Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Overall Authority</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Clergy</th>
<th>Peer</th>
<th>Individual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCS respondents</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>2.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS respondents</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCS respondents</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>2.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS respondents</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCS respondents</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>2.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS respondents</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>2.93</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCS respondents</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>2.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS respondents</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>2.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In the best sense of all the results, a point to bear in mind as all the results are presented. For this reason, I report mean scores as well as the data on the more traditional measures of statistically significant differences.

Each of the ratings of all five influences averaged over all three age periods was correlated with the ratings of each of the other four influences. Only one pairing was not statistically significant: that between clergy and the individual ($r = -0.007$). There were highly statistically significant correlations between individual and the other three factors, although they were small in absolute value. (Again, the number of respondents in each correlation was on the order of 2,700, except when peer influence was considered, in which case the number of respondents was essentially halved.) Thus, the correlation was .187 between the perceived importance of the individual and the family, .183 between individual and peers, and .107 between individual and school. These findings contrast with the cluster of correlations for the three authorities: .400 for family and school, .305 for family and clergy, and .247 for school and clergy. The appropriateness of peer influence was quite significantly related to school (.443), family (.143), and clergy (.133).

**Effect of Year of Rating**

In general, the overall authority scores have increased over the past 15 years. Between 1978 and 1983, scores were essentially identical for ratings of overall
authority (1.80 and 1.81, respectively), but in 1988, the rating of overall authority rose to 1.85, followed by an increase to 1.92 in 1993. All of the differences except those between 1978 and 1983 are statistically significant at the .048 level at least. The mean score of the respondents from the Catholic college, as noted earlier, was 2.16, also clearly significantly different from the rest of the scores.

Over time, individual and peer influences reveal results that are essentially a mirror image of the ratings of the overall authority score, a finding that makes conceptual sense. Thus, there were essentially identical overall ratings of the influence that individuals should have on moral development in 1978 and 1983: 2.56 and 2.57, respectively. By 1988, the rating had decreased to 2.44, and it then rebounded somewhat to 2.51 in 1993. All differences were statistically significant at the .040 level or less, except for those between 1978 and 1983. Students at the Catholic college had a surprisingly high rating of individual's importance: 2.69.

The scores for influence that peers should have remained almost identical between 1988 (1.82) and 1993 (1.80), the only years that peers were included on the questionnaire. Students at the Catholic college were almost at the midpoint: 1.81.

Despite the large number of statistically significant differences in a variety of scores between different years of administration of the questionnaire, I decided to collapse the data across all years (while keeping separate those of the Catholic college) because of the aforementioned phenomenon in which highly statistically significant findings could be found even with quite small absolute differences. For example, some of the aforementioned statistically significant differences reflected an absolute size difference of .057 out of a possible range of 3.000, or 1.9% of the possible difference. Moreover, the largest difference between years of administration on the major variable was .137, or 4.6% of the possible range. Thus, on balance, it seemed most useful to combine data across the various years of administration of the instrument.

Age of Participants

In general, there is a very clear pattern in the ratings of the importance of each authority separately, of overall authority, of the individual himself or herself, and of peers, such that scores given by the college students (again not including the data from the Catholic college) differed significantly from their middle school and secondary school counterparts, and there was little, if any, difference among the college students or the rest of the students compared with each other. Still, there were some interesting deviations from the overall pattern that make the details worth recording.

First, an analysis of variance (ANOVA, one-way) for overall authority yielded an F score of 2.836 (df = 9, 2279, p = .003) for the four college grades and Grades 7 through 12 taken as a whole. The means for each grade revealed an average score of 1.81 for the college students, with the 4 years of college students
themselves having a range of 1.79 to 1.85, \( F(3, 1430) = 1.06, p = .365 \), and of 1.90 for the 7th through 12th grades, with a range of 1.82 to 1.96, \( F(5, 1368) = 2.25, p = .048 \); there was a highly significant difference between the two large groups, \( t(2789) = 5.23, p < .001 \). Perhaps more important is the fact that there was only one reversal from a perfect ranking of each grade, such that all four grade levels of college students rated the overall authority influence lower than any of the noncollege students, and that reversal made the highest college grade score only .03 higher than the lowest noncollege score. In contrast, the Catholic college students averaged 2.16 for total authority (as noted earlier).

The particular components of the general authority scores show exactly the same pattern for school and clergy and an interesting reversal for family (itself an equally stable finding):

1. For clergy, an ANOVA for the 10 grades used as respondents yielded \( F(9, 2419) = 5.23, p \leq .001 \). The average score for non-Catholic-school college students was 1.34, with a range from 1.26 to 1.41, \( F(3, 1119) = 2.17, p = .09 \). The average score for younger adolescents was 1.55, with a range from 1.53 to 1.58, \( F(5, 1343) = .12, p = .987 \). Catholic school students had a much higher average score of 1.89.

2. For school, the pattern was essentially identical; overall \( F(9, 2413) = 3.95, p \leq .001 \). The average score for non-Catholic-school college students was 1.83, with a range from 1.79 to 1.85, \( F(3, 1116) = .70, p = .553 \). Noncollege students had an average score of 1.98, with a range of 1.84 to 2.10, \( F(5, 1316) = 3.13, p = .008 \). The only exception to a nonoverlapping group of scores involved a mean difference of .01. The Catholic school students had an average rating for schools of 2.03.

3. Family ratings showed a reversal of perceived influence, with older adolescents producing significantly higher scores than younger ones, overall \( F(9, 2393) = 5.01, p \leq .001 \). The average score for non-Catholic college students was 2.26, with a range of 2.24 to 2.29, \( F(3, 1125) = .19, p = .841 \). Younger adolescents averaged 2.17, with a range of 2.11 to 2.27, \( F(5, 1312) = 3.01, p = .010 \). The Catholic school students’ average rating was 2.53.

The nonauthority variables yielded somewhat mixed results. The importance that different-aged respondents saw for the individual himself or herself was somewhat comparable with the other data, overall \( F(9, 2411) = 3.05, p \leq .001 \). The average score for non-Catholic college students was 2.61, with a range of 2.61 to 2.62, \( F(3, 1121) = 0.018, p = .97 \). Younger adolescents averaged a rating of 2.43, ranging from 2.28 to 2.58, \( F(5, 1321) = 5.07, p \leq .001 \). Students from the Catholic college averaged a surprisingly high 2.68.

In relation to peers, no significant age differences were found between the two major age groups, \( F(9, 917) = 1.41, p = .181 \). The absolute range of scores in the 10 grades was from 1.65 to 1.91, with college students having both the highest and lowest averages. The Catholic college students’ rating was 1.81.
Gender

The results of this research coincide well with existing literature on gender differences in moral development: Female respondents, unlike the male respondents, uniformly believed that authorities should be a source of influence in moral development. With respect to the overall authority score, the female respondents had a mean rating of 1.90; the comparable score for male respondents was only 1.78, \( t(2789) = 6.26, p \leq .001 \). Similarly, for each of the three authority figures separately across age levels, \( t \) scores were statistically significant at the .002 level or higher, with mean differences ranging from .08 (school), to .11 (family), to .15 (clergy); scores in all cases were higher for female respondents.

The results for individual and peer influence show the same pattern; however, these results are not so easy to understand. The mean rating for girls on the importance of individual influence was significantly higher than that for the boys (2.55 to 2.49, respectively, \( df = 2788, p = .003 \)), and, similarly, the girls gave significantly higher ratings for peer influence than the boys did: 1.87 to 1.72, respectively, \( df = 2791, p = .001 \).

Perceived Importance of Various Influences for Different Ages

In the analysis of the data done so far, there were impressive amounts of statistical significance to be noted in the variety of comparisons that were made. Nonetheless, because there were large numbers of informants involved, high levels of statistical significance were possible with relatively small percentages of difference between groups. Thus, a difference between two groups of less than 2% of the absolute scores involved was sufficient to produce a probability level of less than .001. The differences discussed in this and the following section are of a much greater order of magnitude. This difference was noted earlier, and a separate section is devoted to an explicit consideration of these data.

The first set of ratings reported does not include those from the Catholic college. There is a separate description of those data after the analysis of the main body of data. Given the numbers involved, all the differences reported are overwhelmingly significant.

The average rating of the overall authority score of 1.85 across all three age periods masks a very substantial variation among the three components of that score and for the three age periods separately. Thus, averaging the scores across year of administration, age of informant, and age of person for whom the rating of appropriate influence was given revealed a variation of more than 50% between the low mean scores of 1.45 for clergy and 2.21 for the family, with school close to a midpoint (1.89). Similarly, the variation between the perceived importance of these influences for elementary versus college-age students was over 40%; the average scores across all influences were 1.51 and 2.13, respectively, and the perceived importance for the secondary students was 1.91.
Somewhat more subtle and refined patterns could be teased out of the thousands of responses by breaking down the type of influence and the age being influenced and identifying nine separate authority scores. Once again, a simple description and analysis of the relevant means seems to convey the important information quite well. Thus, the disparity between the mean scores of perceived importance of the family and of the clergy for elementary-age children was more than 1 full point (2.67 versus 1.61), with school almost exactly in the middle (2.12). However, in terms of perceived importance for college-age people, those same authorities were perceived as much more similar to each other (mean ratings of 1.65, 1.62, and 1.26, for family, school, and clergy, respectively), as well as much less important. As expected, the data for perceived importance to secondary-age students fell between those for elementary and college-age students. However, it might not have been so easy to predict that the drop from secondary to college was, in each case, almost twice that between elementary and secondary (mean ratings of 2.31, 1.94, and 1.49 for family, school, and clergy, respectively, at the secondary level).

One more pattern is worth noting in the authority scores. Although family was always perceived as the most important influence, both family and school received high ratings at both the elementary and secondary levels, averaging very close to, or over, a mean rating of 2.00. And finally, although the other five scores (family and school at the college level and clergy at the elementary, secondary, and college levels) were substantially lower than the other four average ratings, three of the remaining five average scores were closer to a perception of moderate importance than to little importance, and even the remaining two were seen as of more than a little importance.

The two other influences—peers and the individual himself or herself—were also rated across age periods and showed rather different patterns:

1. Peers were rated only in 1988 and 1993, but this fact does not seem to explain the basically identical sets of ratings given this factor. Thus, peers were given a mean rating of 1.81 for appropriate influence on elementary-age children, with the average score increasing by .03 to 1.84 for secondary-age children, and decreasing by .03 to 1.78 for college-age young people.

2. The appropriate influence of the individual himself or herself changed more than that of peers, but less than that of any authority figure. Perhaps of greater importance, it changed in the other direction. Thus, the average informant thought that the individual should have an influence of 2.34 on the elementary student, going up to 2.55 at the secondary level, and increasing to 2.66 for the college-age student.

In general, the data from the Catholic college were as expected, given the results reported earlier for this subgroup and given the patterns just reported on the rest of the sample. Thus, all the authority scores went down from what was deemed appropriate for young children to what was appropriate for older people:
1. Family ratings went down from 2.96, to 2.69, to 1.95.
2. School ratings went down from 2.34, to 2.08, to 1.67.
3. Clergy ratings went down from 2.11, to 1.94, to 1.62.

Therefore, every rating at the Catholic school was higher than the corresponding rating for the rest of the sample, as was expected. Moreover, although the differences between informants at the Catholic college and the rest of the sample averaged .23 for family and school, the average difference for clergy scores was .44.

Ratings for peers essentially stayed the same at the Catholic college, moving from 1.73, to 1.88, to 1.82, and these scores also resembled those of the rest of the sample.

The surprising finding that students at the Catholic college rated appropriate individual influence higher than did the rest of the sample held up for each age period, with the average scores going from 2.39, to 2.74, to 2.93 as older age periods were rated.

Religion

The final major category was a self-report on the individual's degree of religiousness. The average rating for the 2,453 respondents was 1.73, meaning that the average student perceived himself or herself as close to moderately religious. Of perhaps more relevance to this study, and not at all surprising, is that self-report on religiousness was correlated with the overall authority score for the entire sample at a highly significant .347. Similarly, religion self-rating was significantly correlated to overall ratings of clergy, family, and school (.433, .195, and .086, respectively) and only very slightly (nonsignificantly) related to overall ratings of individual and peer influence: .006 and −.029, respectively. Very similar results were obtained when the data from the Catholic college were included. Thus, in the same order, correlations were .326, .415, .169, .074, −.016, and −.044, respectively.

Most Important Influences

As indicated earlier, three of the questions asked informants to pick out the influence they felt should be most important at each age period. Two different kinds of findings stand out:

1. Even with the addition of an extra category (i.e., peers) for 1988 and 1993, the data were remarkably stable over time. Thus, in terms of percentages of respondents choosing a given category, and not considering the small numbers of 10th- through 12th-grade students who were respondents in 1993 only, all changes over time in the perception of what was the most important influence were less than 25% different from the relevant perception, as first articulated in 1978. Even more impressive, perhaps, is the fact that only one reversal of the
ranking of what was perceived as the most important influence ever occurred over the 15 years. This reversal occurred in 1993, when perceived family influence at the secondary level moved from secondary to primary importance, switching places with the perceived influence of the individual himself or herself for that year. In the other 3 years, the latter had occupied the primary position.

2. In terms of actual choices, schools, peers, and clergy were chosen as most important relatively rarely. None of these three were chosen as most important more than 16% of the time in any given year. Family scores went from a clear first choice for the youngest group to a low score for college students, and individual scores were a mirror image of the family scores.

A more detailed summary of the actual choices taken for given age periods reveals the following relatively stable situations:

1. Clergy maintained their low position of 4% or less for all ages and all years.

2. Similarly, schools were chosen as the most important influence within a relatively stable range from 2% to 16% of the time.

3. In the 2 years they were on the questionnaire, peers were picked as most important either 9% or 15% of the time.

4. On the other hand, there was a major change in the percentage of times families were seen as most important, moving from between 69% and 77% for elementary-age students to between 10% and 14% for college-age students (at the secondary level, the range was between 30% and 48%).

5. Finally, the switch for individual influence was essentially the mirror image of that of the family, with a range between 11% and 19% for elementary, 28% to 51% for secondary, and 62% to 81% for college-age respondents.

To summarize the results of the data on most important influence, generally the results replicate, with some refinements, the basic data presented earlier, stressing the relative importance of the family or the individual, depending on the age period being rated. Clearly, the results serve to underline the dichotomy between the perceived importance of various authorities and the individual himself or herself as sources of influence for young people of different ages. However, even this dichotomy must be viewed within the context of the large percentage of adolescents who see authority figures as being of some real importance to their own moral development.

**Discussion**

The most important finding is undoubtedly the score of 1.85, the average rating given by the respondents in all three age groups over the past 15 years to the three authority figures of family, school, and clergy. This score indicates that, on average, adolescents themselves, ranging in age from middle school age to col-
college age, believe that it is of relatively moderate importance (1.85 being only 7.5% less than an average moderate score of 2.00) to such young people to be guided by some authority figure at some point in their development. The variation from this overall mean rating of 1.85 over the 15 years in which data were collected was conceptually negligible, moving from a low mean rating of 1.80 in 1978 to a high mean rating of 1.92 in 1993. Similarly, the variation between groups of respondents was quite small, regardless of their age, with all the differences between younger and older adolescents being in the range of .10 to .20. Finally, gender differences were also in this same range for both overall authority score and differences for each particular influence, including peers and the individual himself or herself.

The similarity of the respondents' answers across the years, regardless of age and gender, did not hold up when differences were considered among authorities or for different ages of young person being influenced. As expected, authorities were perceived as less important to the older individuals; the drop-off was a substantial 29.1%, from a mean score of 2.13 at elementary age to a mean score of 1.51 at college age. The variation across different influences was even greater when either absolute scores were compared (i.e., contrasting the ratings of individual influences) or the analysis was performed on the three questions that asked the respondent to make comparative statements. (To enable a more systematic analysis of all the material, I consider only the former scores further.) Thus, family influence was considered to be 52.4% more important than clergy and 16.8% more important than schools in terms of absolute scores on the aforementioned 3-point scale. In addition, just as extent of perceived appropriate influence decreased with age, so did the variation among influences. Thus, there was a difference between perceived importance of family and clergy of over 1 whole point at the elementary level, but of only about ¼ of 1 point at the college level. The respondents seem to be saying that the nature of the outside influence becomes relatively less consequential with age and that any influence itself is less consequential. It is particularly interesting to note that although the amount of perceived influence decreased by .62 points, the increase in perceived influence of the individual himself or herself increased only .32 points. Because the perceived influence of peers actually decreased over the age span (a negligible .03), the informants felt no need to balance the amount of influence on a given individual over different age periods.

Clearly, it is most reasonable to interpret the data as indicating that the respondents believed there is a general lessening of outside impact on the person as he or she ages. In this context, it is especially noteworthy that even the smallest influence—clergy—at even the oldest age was seen as having a not-insignificant influence—1.26 on the 3-point scale, well above an average score of only a little influence.

In general, data from the informants from the Catholic college were separated from the rest of the results, a treatment justified in terms of the distinctive-
ness of this particular subgroup. Still, in retrospect, the results of that subgroup were not all that different from those of the remaining sample. On the single most important measure—total authority—these students were only 16.8% higher than the average for the rest of the sample, only 19.3% higher than that for all college students for the past 15 years, and only 13.1% higher than the average for other college students in 1993. These differences, though not trivial, are not overwhelming either.

In the introduction to this article, I provided a context for the extensive data analysis that followed. The focus was on the growing emphasis in the society at large on the merits of values education, primarily as it has come to exist in the schools, but not limited to that institution. However, the mainly qualitative data supporting that analysis of society came from individual adult respondents and experts, as well as mainstream social and political groups, also consisting of mature adults. I then briefly reviewed some developmental models, all of which seemed to imply that adolescents would be the least likely age group to support the value of institutional support for moral development. In the absence of any comparable data on other age groups, either younger or older, nothing can yet be said about the relative importance adolescents place on institutional support in their own moral development as opposed to how important other age groups see such support. Nevertheless, on an absolute scale, it is clear that adolescents—defined in this study as young people ranging in age from seventh graders to college seniors—all believe that institutional support of the moral development of young people is of substantial importance and probably of much more importance than the developmental models would have predicted.

The developmental theories are challenged, or at least refined, in other ways by the data at hand. First, in general, there was relatively little difference in the ratings of influences by the adolescents, who themselves represent a rather considerable age span. Thus, although there were consistent, statistically significant differences between the precollege and the college-age students on each of the possible influences, those differences were of rather small magnitude. In fact, the difference between any two grade levels on any influence was never more than .31 on the 3-point scale, or about 10% of the possible difference.

Second, there was no simple pattern in the differences that do exist. It is true that both average clergy and school ratings were lower for the older adolescents, as most theoretical models would predict. However, family ratings were actually significantly higher for the older adolescents, a finding hard to understand in light of current developmental models. In that same context, the significant increase in the influence accorded to the individual by the older adolescents fits all the models, but the lack of any systematic change at all for peers makes little sense.

Finally, this same inconsistent support for the different theoretical models exists when comparisons are made among overall scores for the various influences. Thus, the finding that the individual influence score (2.52) was highest lends important support for the models, although the margin of difference over
the second choice, family, was only .31, or 14.0%. However, both popular opinion and theoretical models suggest that peers would be the next important influence, and the facts are that the overall average scores for both family (2.21) and school (1.89) were higher than the average score for peers (1.83). That clergy (1.45) received the lowest average score once again supports the various models or, at least, is not inconsistent with any of them.

Given the nature of the study and the kind of data that were collected, it is hard to support alternative theoretical explanations. In fact, it is easier to note the kinds of explanations that do not work than to provide convincing evidence to support those that do. Nevertheless, some broad, if rather atheoretical, conclusions, both positive and negative, are possible.

First, there is little reason to conclude that adolescents are strongly influenced by their immediate surroundings. At least, this is the case if one defines immediate surroundings in terms of a comparison of scores across the different years of administering the test. Thus, although the overall authority score did increase statistically significantly over the 15 years in which the questionnaire was administered, the actual amount of the increase was only 6.7%. The individual influence score made no systematic changes at all, and the difference between the highest and lowest scores for a given year was only 5.3%. Peer scores changed only .02 between 1988 and 1993, the only 2 years in which it was administered.

In an analogous fashion, little insight stands to be gained by examining gender differences. To be sure, there were consistent differences—the female respondents consistently rated authority figures higher than the male respondents did—but once again, the differences were rather minimal (never higher than 8.3%). In fact, there was the same amount of difference in the ratings of peers and the individual, again favoring the female respondents. It is hard to make sense out of such paradoxical results beyond noting that females are more likely to want any kind of input, even from themselves. Still, I wish to emphasize the lack of substantial differences rather than the presence of statistically significant ones that seem quite inconsistent.

One final possibility exists to explain the results: the religious factor. The degree of religiousness that individuals profess was powerfully correlated with the measure of overall authority, \( r = .326, p < .001 \). Still, the amount of variance thereby accounted for was 10.3%. And even the correlation between religiousness and clergy influence was only .415, accounting for 17.2% of the variance. Family and school were significantly, and quite trivially, correlated with religiousness (.169 and .074, respectively). As might be expected, both peers and individual scores were negatively related to religiousness, but the amounts were not significant, let alone substantial (−.044 and −.016, respectively). Even the fact that the students from the Catholic college showed consistently different results from the rest of the sample is by no means conclusive; the differences were never more than 20%, and often considerably less. Moreover, it is by no means certain that those results demonstrated only the impact of religiousness.
In summary, the data clearly point to a rather surprising homogeneity among the adolescent respondents, regardless of gender, age, and religiousness. None of those variables seemed to affect the basic tendencies of the population in any important way. Nor was there much change at all in the 15 years of the study. Group tendencies remained remarkably constant, sometimes reflecting professional and amateur wisdom and often quite at variance with traditional thinking. Perhaps the most important question for future research is the degree to which the results reflect human, as opposed to merely adolescent, attitudes.

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