Histories of Adolescence and Affect: Setting an Agenda

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Abstract

What did adolescence feel like in the past? This article explores the historical relationships between adolescence and affect – feeling, emotion and lived intensities – in order to explore this question. Drawing from a range of examples, it argues for a systematic consideration of the relationships between lived experience and broad historical shifts, in order to ascertain the ways individual affective lives have been shaped by changes in work, forms of leisure and sexual norms. It is then suggested that this systematic approach can be applied to other aspects of young people’s lives as well. This is an argument to take feeling seriously and thereby take historical work on histories of adolescence in some new directions.

Introduction

What did adolescence feel like in the past? This question is not often asked by historians, although there is a burgeoning interest in cultural histories of young people’s lives. At the same time, increasing numbers of scholars – not just in history but also in psychology, literary studies, sociology, gender studies and anthropology – are concerned with a turn to affect. For some time now, questions about the visceral, embodied quality of social relationships have supplemented an earlier focus on representations.

This new interest in affect is especially relevant for the history of young people, where researchers seek to de-centre adult writings on youth and closely examine young citizens’ own perspectives. Maynes, for instance, articulates the need to move beyond histories ‘of the ways in which adults tried to shape or characterize the young’. A revisiting of affect offers one way to bring youthful voices to the forefront, challenging the power given to adults’ characterisations. This article considers how an attention to affect might come together with cultural histories of adolescence and allow us to delve more deeply into youthful experience. How has feeling both expressed and structured the intimate aspects of young lives in particular times and places?

As a concept, affect is both useful and wide-ranging. Sometimes the term is employed synonymously with ‘emotion’, or stretched to denote a terrain of ‘moods and emotions’. Some scholars widen the mood/emotion pairing to include passion and sentiment; others add anger, fear, happiness, joy, disgust, embarrassment, shame and grief. Intensity of feeling is a key element of affect; Shouse suggests affect is a ‘non-conscious experience of intensity’. It is also interactive. Often, affective intensities are given form as subjects affect and are affected by other bodies. As I will use the term here, ‘affect’ refers to feeling in its broadest sense; it encompasses the full gamut of emotions and sensations in particular social and historical settings.

What is the relationship between affect and the historiography of adolescence? Book indexes give us a sense of the existing terrain. In the indexes of volumes on adolescence, we see broad themes – youth, sexuality, marriage, for instance – but sensation, fun, pleasure, anxiety and misery rarely feature in their own right. Why is this? It is partly a matter of organisation. Historical studies of adolescence are usually arranged around time periods, places and modes of social organisation – work, education and popular culture – rather than the intensities of lived
experience as such. There are some notable exceptions, especially for girls. For instance, Langhamer focuses on leisure, pleasure and courtship during the middle of the 20th century, while Piess explores the enticements of the city: entertainment, make-up and heterosocial interaction. It is harder to find studies that address affect in boys’ lives. It is as though historians have internalised the assumption that boys and men rarely express their feelings. Still, we can mine the existing literature for examples that help us to think systematically about the significance of affect in both boys’ and girls’ histories.

As we do so, we might consider the relationships between feeling, social structures and historical shifts. How has affect been rooted in the material conditions of everyday life? Marxist theorist Raymond Williams suggested that ‘economic conditions formed the reality grasped through the imagination’, and explored ‘structures of feeling’: the ways embodied human perception shape and are shaped by social institutions. In this view, structures of feeling are ‘expressed and embodied’. The following discussion takes three of the existing themes in histories of adolescence – (1) work, taking Williams’ writing as a cue; (2) leisure and (3) sexuality – and uses them as an entry point to a consideration of adolescent affect and its intersections with ideology and material circumstances.

**Work**

Feeling has been central to adolescents’ work lives. The disciplines of the workplace, and the fleeting moments in between work duties, affect the body and drive the felt experience of labour. Downey’s case study of messenger boys illustrates this point, even though affect is not an organising principle of his work. In cities between the mid-19th century and the mid-20th, fleets of messengers – telegraph employees and those hired by a range of retail businesses – were the cogs ‘in the wheels of a big machine’. The structure of their work, and its ‘quasi militaristic’ nature – boys were often known by number and wore cadet-style uniforms – shaped their affective experiences. Boys lined up on hard chairs in their employers’ uncomfortable waiting rooms awaiting assignments, shuttled from there to the corners of the cities on foot or bicycle, and those who worked after dark were especially prone to fatigue. Conversely, the uniforms that regimented messengers’ bodies were also the tickets to a range of pleasures: circuses, fairs, travelling shows, rides and special events.

The case study of the messenger boy has a broader significance. It gestures towards the ways technology, the organisation of labour, gender and space have all shaped adolescents’ affective lives: regimentation, long tired nights, the possibility of fun and thrills. There are other examples too. The department stores rapidly expanded in the world’s cities during the late 19th century, and vast numbers of young women filled the sales jobs that demanded a particular bodily disposition. Female sales assistants were required to ‘conform to genteel conventions in their dress and manners’, arranging and disciplining their bodies in prescribed ways. Long hours and lots of standing gave rise to sore backs and desperately aching feet. From the typewriter revolution at the turn of the 20th century, ‘[t]hose in stuffy rooms doing clerical work suffered from loss of appetite, lassitude, anxiety, fatigue, indigestion and backache’. Adolescent affect was – and indeed still is – economically and technologically mediated. Not merely an individual experience, it has reflected profound social changes.

Adolescents were valuable fodder for the factories of urban, industrialising economies. In 1890, New Zealand’s parliament launched an inquiry into labour practices in the country’s growing industrial sector, especially in respect of young workers. Its report contained many direct quotations from adolescents, including this one from an apprentice baker:
The ventilation was very bad. The room was underground, and there was only one grating to it. When you went down the first flight of steps there was another small flight, about seven steps, down to another bakehouse [...] Then there was another place where the butter would not get soft, but when the gas was turned out it was so dark you could not see your finger before you. When I went there my employer said I was to work from 7 in the morning till 7 at night, but the rest worked on and I worked on too. There were about six there younger than I was – about fifteen. There was no fixed time for meals, and we got our meals on the benches in the bakehouse.18

This lad’s account evokes the sights and smells of the workplace: darkness amid the stuffy rooms, hunger, and the exhaustion created by long hours. Where affective intensities were not expressly described, they can be read between the lines of the text. Girls told the same inquiry of dusty, dirty conditions and long hours on their feet: some began work at 9 and stood until close of business as late as 10 in the evening.

For rural workers, loneliness was a common response to social isolation. Simonton reprints the letter a young English servant sent home to her parents in 1783:

I wish you would write a Little ofenr for I have no body to speak to and I can not wright so often as i would because my place is so heavy and I have not time to wright I have nobody to do nothing for Me and I have not mended but three pairs of stockings since I have been at my place I hope these Lins will meet you alle in good health as I am at present bless God for it for I conclude with my duty to you my Love brothers, sisters.19

In an example from rural New Zealand, the 20–year-old recent English immigrant Percy Ottywell was also often lonely, but he did experience momentary kindness:

[The owner] has shown me more kindness than I had believed it would ever be my lot to receive from any man in this country, or any other. True I was in great trouble at the time he gave me the situation but I shall never be able to fully describe the sympathy and trust and encouragement I have had at the hands of this good kind man. I have occupied the place now 3 weeks to the apparent satisfaction of my employer, who pays me a visit every week. I live in a small hut and cook my own meals. I am quite alone, and when I first came I thought the loneliness at night was terrible, but I have got used to it now. I do not see a soul, for days together sometimes.20

Workplace solitude was the cause of loneliness for both Simonton’s servant and Ottywell, and both had to negotiate feeling as best they could. The English lass sought comfort through correspondence, while the young New Zealander reconciled his isolation by looking forward to his employer’s weekly visits and acclimatising to the quietness (‘I have got used to it now’). By writing about their feelings, these two isolated workers found ways to cope.

As these examples show, historically specific work practices have given rise to various forms of affect. Adolescents comprised an important labour pool, and American commentators told of the need to channel youthful desires for play and reverie into the disciplined work required in capitalist society.21 Young female labour was a central feature of the industrial revolution, and girls were the most represented group in the early factories.22 Conversely, as messenger boys, male youths were the conduits of information in the cities. In rural areas, adolescents were valuable paid and unpaid labourers on family farms, and toiled for other employers too. We might ask whether rural adolescents had different experiences of sociability, company and happiness than their urban counterparts. Location shaped affect.
Leisure was another site of affective connection and experience, and it too was structured by broader social shifts. A number of scholars have observed that the state often assumed the right to direct young people’s bodies and imposed, in Daley’s words, ‘corporeal regulation’. Sleight tells of state-directed enjoyment in Melbourne, Australia, during the years before the First World War. Cavalcades and processions marshalled young people’s bodies in the service of nation and militarism; girls dressed in white and performed manoeuvres emphasising grace and order, while boys dressed as sailors or marched in khaki. Bodies and feelings were regimented on such occasions. In the lead up to war, young people were expected to play out increasingly militaristic agendas, to perform embodiment in ways that accorded with adult priorities. During the 1930s and 1940s, a time of ‘tumultuous uncertainty’, several British world governments – those in the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand – directed leisure in order to improve national fitness. Physical education in schools was followed by exercise programmes for the young workers who filled the factories and department stores. Governments helped to shape bodily dispositions and the forms of affect that accompanied exercise itself: in Macdonald’s words, ‘plung[ing] into the cool water of the pool or river’, the ‘feel of sun on bare skin, to sweat and shiver’. Could ideology be pleasurable? Sleight is reluctant to admit to this possibility, although young Melbourne parade participants may have felt proud as they marched before an approving public. Emotions could be both guided and genuine. Writing about state-sanctioned leisure in the New Zealand context, Daley suggests some activities, such as school-based physical education, were opportunities for fun as well as ideological reinforcement. Young people, she suspects, got on with enjoying themselves in state-approved ways – even though this did not preclude their involvement in unapproved activities as well. Not always did the state direct leisure. In Germany at the turn of the 20th century, the Wandervogel was a reaction against militarism and industrialism, organised by young people themselves. Freedom was the watchword, and adolescents hiked and camped in the countryside, well away from ‘academic duties and the discipline of everyday life’ and into ‘an atmosphere of adventure’. Then fresh air, escape and companionship were unconfined by the discipline of schools and industrial plants. As a result, some adults suggested the movement encouraged out-of-control behaviour and sexual promiscuity. To study affect is to analyse power. The state, schooling, workplaces – and leisure itself – have been sites for both the exercise of power and resistance to it. These processes, in turn, have been bound up with feeling: a sense of escape and relaxation, enjoyable adult-sanctioned activities (as well as those not approved of), the opportunity to create new forms of leisure and pleasure. Sources are important here. Sometimes youth histories are represented by adults’ records and voices, and what results is the history of adult preoccupations. In the context of the USA and the British commonwealth during the mid-20th century, we read about adults’ worries about the ‘Teds’ with their thuggery and displays of cowardice underneath their ‘bravado’ and ‘gay dog’ clothes, and a concern that teenage girls would be seduced by ‘crooners’ and pursue bad boys in leather – Elvis Presley and the rest. But what of adolescents’ own relationships to affect? As Maynes points out, we can read against the grain, search out young people’s own words, and look for the ‘subjective dimensions’ of agency. When we do this, we move away from a sole focus on prescriptive ideologies. During the 1910s and 1920s, the ‘flapper’ cut ties with the Victorian world of chaperones and restrictive clothing, and she took up a range of interests: drinking, smoking, dancing, cinema-going, sunbathing and sex. Flapper fashions – cloche hats and long, loose dresses – allowed new forms of movement, and these garments felt quite different to wear than the corsets and...
heavy fabrics of earlier years. The following decade, the 1930s, was the time of the ‘bright young people’. Taylor describes a party with drinks dispensed ‘to a perspiring mob of boys and girls in rather too elaborate fancy dress […] a hollow-eyed girl in a tutu and an opera hat who is singing a song with the refrain “It’s terribly thrilling to be wicked”’. Not everyone shared the same experiences. For others, the Great Depression ushered in years of joblessness and hardship. By the 1950s, the press courted adolescents as a ‘leisure class’. Weight documents the British ‘mods’ during the 1960s, young denizens of the ‘neon-lit world of the city’ who sought out ‘more fun, sex and money’ and ‘better education, job satisfaction and homes’ than their parents. Working class lads saved hard, bought suits made from one-off designs and expected others would copy their lead. As always, specific dispositions to pleasure reflected wider social changes: growing numbers of teenagers in the cities during the post-war years, and substantial increases in incomes in that age bracket.

Even small amounts of discretionary spending could afford momentary escapes from everyday drudgery. Community dances attracted young people across the income strata. The cinema also offered pleasurable diversions. As one young female attendee noted: ‘Our homes weren’t very comfortable … you’d be taken out of your, well it was a bit of a miserable environment, for two or three hours, go to this lovely palace and sit in a comfortable seat’. A 16-year-old garment worker told an interviewer: ‘I go to the theater quite often, and like those plays that make you cry a great deal’. The city could be a ‘hotbed of passion’ for adolescents – many commentators argued there were as many ‘bad girls’ references to ‘steadies’ and ‘lady friends’ conjure up another rich realm of affect: sexuality. As Cahn suggests in her work on the southern United States during the mid-20th century, historians might profitably ask ‘how adolescents felt, understood, and acted on the desires we define as sexual’. Sexuality – especially young women’s – was (and is) carefully policed by adults. Parental authority played a role, as did the gendered ideologies on which parents drew. Teachers oversaw gender segregation in schools, and tacitly checked students’ sexuality. Those in state care were accountable to warders and medical staff for their sexual past and present, ‘literally and figuratively probed … for their stories of early experience’. Elsewhere, though, enjoyment could be had away from adult oversight. Numerous late-19th-century Australian girls were ‘larrikins’, members of street gangs who exhibited ‘sexuality, toughness and sass’. During the First World War, there were reports of British girls flocking to military camps to flirt with soldiers, and some ‘were alleged to have behaved outrageously’. Female sexuality, then, has long been experienced as both oppressive and pleasurable – it was both controlled by young women and something they did not always have control over.

Adolescents’ increasing earning power leads to greater sexual freedoms. Indeed, urbanisation offered new opportunities and a seductive hyperstimulus: the theatres, dance palaces and cafés were places for the young to enjoy. Some even went ‘slumming’, venturing into darkened night spots in search of bohemian intimacies. In early 20th century New York, Piess writes, female factory, shop and department store workers mingled with young men in the dance halls and sometimes made ‘frank overtures to men whom they desire to attract’. The city could be a ‘hotbed of passion’ for adolescents – many commentators argued there were as many ‘bad girls’
as ‘bad boys’ – and the new citadels of consumer culture ‘offered a tempting world of pleasure and companionship beyond parental control’.53

Excessive stimulation posed a problem. By the 1940s, adults came to worry about the incitements of violent and sexualised comics and cheap novels that told of ‘delinquent daughters’ and ‘thrill-hungry teen-agers’.54 These decades were not without their contradictions. The 1950s saw increasing tensions between the rising glorification of sex in music and the movies on the one hand, and demands for young women to maintain their virginity on the other.55 Shame affected some of those who did not conform. Brookes writes of the shame of illegitimacy for young New Zealand women, suggesting they ‘bore this shame in their bodies, and rarely articulated it. They tried to hide it from their families and their communities, and took desperate measures to deal with the shameful evidence of their sexual “misconduct”’.56 Many were sent away from their families to other towns to have their babies and a few committed infanticide. As these examples show, sexuality could be the source of a wide gamut of affective responses: the thrill of transgression, the pleasure of an encounter, a sense of conflict when negotiating contradictory social norms, the shame of family and community censure.

For those attracted to their opposite-sex counterparts, mid-century adolescent affect was profoundly shaped by two contradictory currents: new urban pleasures on the one hand and adult expectations – with the occasional moral panic – on the other. In comparison, some homoerotically inclined youth felt a deep sense of shame in a disapproving world and a few rarely experienced their sexuality positively.57 Others, though, built more emotionally fulfilling worlds for themselves. During the early 20th century, many North American boys migrated from the rural areas to the cities and headed for the YMCA hostels. As Gustav-Wrathall points out, these could be spaces of muscles, companionship and sex.58 In Sydney, Australia, during the late 1920s, one lad came to enjoy the pleasures of the city:

[On the tram] I remember sitting alone outside and the conductor started to play with me and I think he was more excited than I was. Of course after he shot his bolt and I did too I missed my stop and had to walk quite a distance to the store. I think from then on I was mad about uniforms and tram conductors. He was young and attractive – I didn’t like anyone old […] I thought all this was quite natural. If you liked something, there was nothing really wrong with it.59

For this young fellow, the city could be a space of eroticism, enjoyment and self-discovery. The same was true for many others – ‘thrills’ were had, sometimes for the exchange of money, other times freely traded.60 Pleasure and danger – the latter involving sexual violence or the threat of arrest – often intersected in a world of illegal contact.61

As we look carefully at historical experiences and constructions of affect and sexuality, we see the continuous intertwining of the represented body on the one hand – the adolescent body as an object of social concern – and the material, experienced body on the other.62 The ways adolescent bodies have felt, of course, partly reflects the social context of their time: ideologies of respectability and shamefulness; the pleasures afforded by the dance hall, the cinema and the comic book; state institutions; the categories that organise sexual experience (‘bad boy’, ‘bad girl’, ‘homosexuality’). As Cook demonstrates in her exploration of sex education in Edwardian England, people often ‘feel at ease’ with the social rules most readily at hand.63 Others, meanwhile, find pleasure in transgressing – and thereby pushing – accepted social boundaries. Young people’s sexuality is both an ‘embodied emotional and sensory experience’, in Cook’s words, and a perception and negotiation of social norms.64
Conclusion

Affect, like adolescence itself, has a rich social history. In this article, I have suggested that the shifts that underpinned the very experience of adolescence itself—new technologies, modes of work and leisure, ideologies of respectability—also shaped the affective qualities of a given time and place. We can see these relationships in the three spheres of experience examined here: work, leisure and sexuality. Work in factories and offices engendered a range of physical responses, from aching limbs and fatigue to the pleasures of sociability. Adolescents played a pivotal role in these new citadels of capitalism; their bodies and emotions made class relations tangible. Their labour was a crucial input in rural work too, where loneliness replaced the bodily discipline of urban occupations. Whether state-directed or spontaneous, socially allowed or forbidden, leisure time gave rise to specific affective moments: the satisfactions of exercise and exertion, the tickle of the sun on skin, the comfort of a cinema seat, the emotion generated by on-screen drama. Sexuality was also a meeting point for expectations and experience, social shifts and individual negotiations. To borrow Raymond Williams’ words, these examples illustrate the ‘felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time’.

To look at histories of adolescence and affect is to notice the continuous intertwining of the ideological and the material, time and space, pleasure and abjection, individual experience and wider contexts. There is a preponderance of adult comments on young people’s behaviours and beliefs, and a cataloguing of the ways adults steered childhood emotions towards maturity, but it is worth searching out adolescents’ own responses to the world. Sometimes these experiences can be deduced from adult accounts, and sometimes the sources reveal young people’s own testimony. Maynes suggests young people’s everyday actions can ‘embody historical agency’, and it is worth considering the extent to which adolescents’ affective engagements drive historical change as well as reflect it. Did the Wandervogel, for instance, help to create new ways of experiencing bodies in space? Did the ‘mod’ manage to redefine the meaning of style, at least in part?

Adolescence is an important object of study. Young people are associated with the cutting edge of social change and have often been quick to embrace the new. Affect is an important ingredient here. Not only was the flapper a symbol of the 1920s, but her enjoyment of a range of sensations—smoking, sunbathing and sex—signalled new modes of sociability. Historians might search for feeling more systematically than we have to date. While I have focussed on instances of affect within only three key spheres—work, leisure and sexuality—the scope for historical inquiry is vast. Studies of crime and violence are worth exploring, as are experiences of poverty and wealth, religious commitment, education, racism, disability and health, among others. To what extent did each of these spheres, and overlaps between them, incorporate affective components both specific to adolescence and reflective of the broader society? Visual histories of affect might also yield interesting findings: how do photographs and drawings—both of and by young people—suggest historically specific forms of affect? There is a great deal of potential yet to be fulfilled, as we learn more about what adolescence felt like in the past.

Short Biography

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Notes

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2 Maynes, *Age as a Category*, 117.


7 See, for instance, Savage, *Teenage*; Downey, *Telegraph Messenger Boys*.


10 Matthews, *Change and Theory*, 182.


13 Dyhouse, *Girl Trouble*, 86.


16 Savage, *Teenage*, ch.7.


18 Sweating Commission, H5, 26.


20 Cited in Brickell, *Same Sex Desire*, 163.

21 Savage, *Teenage*, 100.

22 Maynes, *Age as a Category*, 115.


24 Sleight, *Young People*, 198.


29 Savage, *Teenage*, 105-106.


32 Maynes, *Age as a Category*, 119.

33 Bland, *Modern Women on Trial*, 3; Dyhouse, *Girl Trouble*, 76; see also Zeitz, *Flapper*.

34 On clothing and adolescent girls, see Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox*, ch. 2.


36 Weight, *Mod*, 32; 51.

37 Weight, *Mod*, 23.

38 Savage, *Teenage*, ch.9.


40 Cited in Piess, *Cheap Amusements*, 140.

41 Cited in Piess, *Cheap Amusements*, 151.

45 Gleason, ‘Discipling the Student Body’, 209.
46 Myers, ‘Sex, Gender and the History of the Adolescent Body’, 96; see also Kunzel, Fallen Women, passim.
47 Bellanta, Larrikins, 33; see also Bellanta, ‘Larrikin Girl’, passim.
48 Dyhouse, Girl Trouble, 72.
49 Myers, ‘Sex, Gender’, 96.
51 Heap, Slumming, 171.
55 Nielsen and Rudberg, ‘Fun in Gender’, 108.
58 Gustav-Wrathall, Take the Young Stranger By the Hand, 166–168.
60 Houlbrook, Queer London, 170.
61 Houlbrook, Queer London, 183; Robertson, ‘Boys, of Course’, passim.
62 Myers, ‘Sex, Gender and the History of the Adolescent Body’, 97.
64 Cook, ‘Emotion, Bodies, Sexuality’, 479.
67 Olsen, Juvenile Nation, 137.

Bibliography


