

Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xv
1. Contextual and Methodological Considerations	i
2. Contemporary Youth Concerns in Historical Perspective	26
3. North American Indian Perspectives on Human Development	46
4. Menstruation, Cosmology, and Feminism	85
5. Historical Overview of Coming-of-Age Practices	123
6. The Apache Sunrise Dance	192
7. Interpretation of the Apache Sunrise Dance	259
8. Contemporary Navajo, Lakota, and Ojibwa Puberty Customs	302
9. Broader Perspectives on Coming-of-Age	339
Notes	359
References	367
Index	399

Illustrations

Photographs

Following page 300

1. Apache initiate during sitting or kneeling (*niztah*) phase
2. Apache initiate during lying (*nizti*) phase
3. Candy being poured over the head of Apache initiate (*sha nat dihl*)
4. Apache initiate being painted on the third morning
5. Apache initiate having her face wiped by her godmother after being painted
6. Apache initiate with partner after being painted on the third morning
7. The author with friend Sadie Kniffin at Sunrise Dance at San Carlos
8. Elizabeth Compton visiting with initiate and other girls
9. Corn batter placed in the ground in preparation for all-night baking
10. Navajo initiate having her hair combed in ritual manner
11. Navajo initiate being massaged and shaped by her mentor

Tables

1. Beliefs about Pubescent Girls Held by North American Indians 72
2. The Ritual Process Paradigm, Psychosocial Conceptions, and Sunrise Dance Applications 206
3. Sequence of Events of the Sunrise Dance 210
4. Past Characteristics of the Sunrise Dance 284
5. Difficult Components of the Sunrise Dance 295
6. Gratifying Aspects of the Sunrise Dance 296

Preface

We were three days into the four-day ceremony. It was Sunday morning. I could feel the anticipation and excitement mount as the morning's events continued to unfold. There were the faithful who had been present from the onset—the girl and her family, her clan and extended family members, her co-sponsors (i.e., godmother and godfather) and their families, and a few other helpers and interested persons like myself. In addition, there were two hundred or so community members in attendance to observe the amazing events of this third morning. In spite of the early hour, the crowd was charged and alert with a shared energy—the Mountain Spirit dancers had finished painting the girl with the white clay solution, and this act had enraptured us. I surveyed the gathering casually; then I returned my gaze to the girl and was taken aback by a new image that met my eyes. No longer a girl, she was now an old woman. A transformation had occurred—a process that began a few days earlier and gradually had been building toward this moment. She was covered with white paint from head to toe—her buckskin dress, her feathers and all of her adornments, her hair, and her face. Every part of her was now covered with the solution that the Mountain Spirit dancers and her godfather had painted on her just minutes before. The weight of that paint must have compelled her to bend over or stoop somewhat. It was this posture—along with the cane that had been her constant companion up to this point on the third day—that gave the appearance of an old woman. She was no longer a girl, but a woman advanced in years. At that moment, the pieces fell into place for me—this is what it is all about—longevity—having a long life—a good life—living long enough to have gray hair and to need a cane. All the good things life

X PREFACE

has to offer people were now possible for this girl. She had the hope of a bright and promising future. As one grandmother cried to me on one of these occasions, “She is new again—born again.” The crowd shared this realization. We were aware that we had just observed something truly astounding, beyond our capacity of understanding. Even though many of us had observed this same transformation weekend after weekend with different girls, each time it was if it had taken place for the first time.

This event, the Sunrise Dance, occurred among the San Carlos Apaches, but the theme of transformation of a girl into woman—into something qualitatively different from her earlier self—is common in North American Indian puberty ceremonies. It is believed that the quality of pubescence lends itself to the potential for girls to possess great power and to serve as those who have the capacity to bless others, to give life to others—to bring renewal, impart hope, and ensure the continuance of all of life and creation. I also observed these events among the Mescalero Apaches and the Navajos, and read numerous similar accounts among various North American Indian cultures.

As a developmental psychologist who specializes in adolescence, I was trained to possess the traits of an unbiased, aloof social scientist. Instead, I was amazed and humbled on my journey to understanding these unique cultural events of North American Indians. I had never encountered any cultural act whereby a pubescent girl is believed to be empowered to such a degree that she holds the potential to bring good things to others and to the Earth. Further, it is believed that this empowerment occurs by virtue of a developmental event, menarche, which predisposes her to become intimately connected to the spiritual realm and legendary figures of her culture’s oral traditions. The proper performance of rituals is believed to complete the transformation at this critical juncture of development.

In my university class on adolescent development I teach that puberty is a highly transitional phase of the life span and that the human organism has not experienced change of this magnitude since infancy and will never again undergo such rapid change in the life span. It is known that hormones drive the maturational processes of adolescence and that the impacts extend beyond the biological realm to intellectual, cognitive, emotional, social, and other domains of development. Further, it

PREFACE xi

is known that times of great change are critical periods of the life span. Periods of transition bring the potential for optimal outcomes for which all persons hope, but they also bring the risk that development can go awry. This is a fact of which North American Indians possessed implicit understanding, and one to which they gave expression in their puberty and coming-of-age rituals and ceremonies for both girls and boys. The research findings presented in this book have prompted me to conclude that North American Indian cultures had remarkable sensitivity to the realities of the transitional phase of adolescence, perhaps before similar realizations occurred among Europeans. While ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle recognized a stage of youth, and 18th-century writer Jean Jacques Rousseau demarcated stages of human development, it was not until the late 19th century that Western society incorporated their understanding of the unique needs of adolescents into educational and social interventions and, subsequently, the scientific study of adolescence was ushered in by G. Stanley Hall (1904).

In critical periods of development, one needs to “strike while the iron is hot.” North American Indian cultures seem to have recognized such opportunities to maximize life potentials emerging from the critical point of pubescence. As I delved into the historical, anthropological, and Indigenous-based literatures, it became apparent that most North American Indian cultures had some form of coming-of-age observances for boys and girls. Girls’ events were frequently linked to menarche and more public in nature—perhaps more ceremonial—but for boys as well, some kind of mentoring accompanied by physical challenges and a vision quest frequently occurred. These rituals served various functions, including the preparation of youths for their adult lives and instruction on their expected roles. As well, spiritual protection was always regarded as a necessity for success in life, and adolescence was a prime opportunity to acquire a personal protector in the form of a spirit helper that would accompany the individual throughout his or her life span.

This is a book about puberty according to its sociocultural expressions. Of specific interest is North American Indians’ conceptions of the transition from childhood into adulthood and associated cultural expressions to recognize and celebrate this event. The female coming-of-age is most closely examined, for reasons delineated in chapter 1. To bring con-

xii PREFACE

text and meaning to the topic, Indigenous perspectives on adolescence are presented, with comparable and complementary contributions from Western psychological and anthropological views. An attempt is made to integrate varying strands of knowledge that originate from very different worldviews in order to enlighten readers on important cultural expressions of the past that continue in the present.

There is lamenting of a loss of ritual and tradition among the melting pot of the broader, non-Native society in North America. The degree to which this connects to the problems of contemporary adolescents is unknown, but that such a connection exists is a reasonable speculation. A common response of non-Natives who attend North American Indian puberty ceremonies as well as various other types of ceremonies is a feeling of loss that their own culture does not offer such rich, life-affirming events. P. E. Goddard (1909) points to this response most aptly (ignoring the choice of his words reflective of his era): “Where one finds so much of rich art remaining under such adverse circumstances, he wonders how much of a similar or superior sort has forever perished through the indifference of man to any other art, literature, or religion than his own” (p. 394).

A few conclusions may be drawn from Goddard’s remarks. First, many North American Indian cultures have retained ceremonial practices of rich, artistic forms in spite of the deleterious impacts of forced assimilation and colonization, the devastation of disease and warfare, and the perpetuation of derogatory prejudices and stereotypes from Western (i.e., European and European American) society. Second, the long-standing attitudes of preeminence that have dominated Western thinking regarding its own cultural superiority are drawn into question when it is observed that they have lost many of their own rich expressions of rites of passage. There are multifaceted reasons for this loss; society has certainly changed from earlier times, including a growing reliance on technology and less attention to community and ritual activities. The absence of ritual activity is apparently felt by European Americans I encounter who express regret for their own culture’s forgetting of meaningful, ceremonial rites of passage. Indeed, some white mothers have told me of celebrations they create to acknowledge and affirm their daughters at menarche, such as a special mother-daughter bonding event

PREFACE xiii

that might include making an adult-like purchase for their daughters, such as an expensive piece of jewelry. In general, my motivation for writing this book was to bring recognition to these life-affirming rituals of North American Indian cultures, which continue to impress me as a developmental psychologist and a woman. It is hoped that readers will be enlightened, enriched, and intellectually stimulated through exposure to the concepts and practices presented in this book.

C H A P T E R O N E

Contextual and Methodological Considerations



According to the beliefs of many North American Indian cultures, the transition from childhood to adulthood is regarded as a pivotal and empowering, as well as a potentially vulnerable phase of the life span. There are innumerable illustrations cross-culturally of ritual practices that occur at and around the physiological event of puberty, and for girls, especially at menarche. Whether coming-of-age rituals and ceremonies are temporally linked to menarche (a clear-cut marker for girls) or occur over a range of years, the rituals that make up these events possess strong sociocultural salience. In essence, biological processes provide the impetus for coming-of-age ceremonies, but of primary interest in this book are the complex meanings of rituals as they pertain to beliefs about the optimal development of North American Indian girls. Coming-of-age practices are embedded in broader belief systems of cosmological constructions, which include origin stories, explanations for the cyclical nature of creation and patterns of life, and the complex relationships between humans and the spiritual realm. Not only is proper adherence to puberty customs believed to ensure the well-being and longevity of initiates, but those positive impacts are extended to her group and to all of creation. These and other underlying meanings and functions of both historical and contemporary coming-of-age customs are probed to acquire insights into North American Indian beliefs about pubescence,

2 CONTEXTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

adolescence, and the preparation of young people for adulthood. Of additional relevance to a broad understanding of coming-of-age in Native North America are perceptions of menstruation and menstrual customs, as well as attitudes and practices concerning women.

Conceptually, coming-of-age ceremonies are one expression of rites of passage, which, in a general sense, provide psychological comfort and reduction of anxiety at unstable, transitional times of life as well as offering assurances for the unknown future. Additionally, rites of passage serve to formalize the incorporation of new roles and statuses as the individual enters a new phase of the life span. Opportunities are provided to reinforce social connections and to acquire and express socially appropriate behaviors toward others. In essence, rites of passages serve to reinforce the customs, beliefs, values, and mores of a culture and, of particular relevance to coming-of-age rites among North American Indians, to facilitate connection to the spiritual realm. The spiritual significance of these events drives all ritual expressions and serves as the overarching factor that binds and integrates the numerous rituals into the totality of a coherent and holistic rite of passage.

In a pragmatic sense, cultural practices are more likely to endure when they serve functions for individuals and societies. It is evident that the functions of coming-of-age rites among North American Indians are multifaceted. For the female initiates, puberty ceremonies are designed to advance their optimal development and to secure strength and protection for the future. For instance, an aim of these ceremonies is to assign a socially appropriate identity within the context of connection to others. Identity ascription is a salient component of puberty rites, and in some cultures an identity is ascribed that reflects a primary female supernatural being of the initiate's culture. This personage becomes a significant role model for the initiate, as well as for the adult women of her culture. Character development of the young person is also emphasized according to the acquisition of various desired traits, such as endurance, honor, responsibility, and maturity. Various rituals at puberty also are included to have a physical impact on the initiate, such as to impress on her a tall and well-proportioned body and physical beauty. Additionally, coming-of-age rites are believed to serve protective functions from potential future harm or evil. In essence, over the course of coming-of-age events,

CONTEXTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS 3

rituals are believed to serve as mechanisms for the acquisition of desired personality, character, and physical traits in young women, as well as spiritually empowering them according to the beliefs of their cultures.

The optimal development of young people is certainly an inherent goal of coming-of-age rites. Furthermore, it is anticipated that these individuals will ultimately become contributing members of their social groups, and well-rounded individuals are always welcome participants in a society. In chapter 3 it is shown that North American Indian cultures possess well-articulated beliefs about the particular qualities of the developmental stage of pubescence, as well as other stages of the life span.¹ Girls and boys are thought to be especially impressionable in the transition between childhood and adulthood, and various rituals are observed to maximize the acquisition of knowledge and skills by pubescent-age youth and to facilitate the shaping of young persons into responsible members of society. Adults instruct pubescent young people according to expectations for their demeanor, behavior, and responsibilities now that they are no longer children. In societies that depend on the contributions of both men and women for survival, it is a necessity that the young comprehend expected adult roles and be reinforced for proper role performance. For instance, in the past, many cultures held special celebrations at the time of the young person's successful performance of their first adult task, such as a girl's completion of a complex piece of handiwork or a boy's first success in hunting large game (see chapter 5). While adoption of expected roles for physical survival of the group may have been more important in the past than in the present, coming-of-age rituals continue to emphasize role acquisition.

In North American Indian cultures, it is believed that girls are in special or sacred states at pubescence necessitating the expressions of particular behaviors on their parts, as well as mandating the cooperation and participation of their families, kin networks, and communities in coming-of-age events. Many North American Indian cultures of the past and some in the present day incorporate rituals that require girls at menarche to engage in acts of benevolence (e.g., blessing others) and to serve as mediators for prayer requests brought to them. It is the perceived power of menstruation and menstrual fluid, especially the particular quality of the earliest menstrual cycles, that serves to empower initiates. Due to the

4 CONTEXTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

sensitivity of this stage of life, the continuance of the group and even the entire human race is deemed dependent on proper adherence to puberty customs. It would be erroneous to conclude that coming-of-age ceremonies at puberty are mere fertility rites. These and related ideas are more carefully explicated in chapters 3 and 4.

It is particularly noteworthy that the rite of passage at and around the time of puberty is not only a ceremony of transition from childhood to adulthood but also a transition to the spiritual realm, including newly acquired access to privileged knowledge and secrets (Wyatt, 1998a). In some cases, pubescence is regarded as the first time the young person possesses enough strength to be indoctrinated in the spiritual mechanisms of their culture. The vision quest experience, which sometimes coincides with puberty, is one obvious illustration of spiritual transcendence (it is discussed more fully in chapter 5). The spiritual implications of coming-of-age ceremonies also extend to the future well-being of initiates according to perceptions that a long and harmonious life can now be secured. Essentially, the spiritual significance of a wide variety of female coming-of-age rites cannot be understated.

Mechanisms of Impact in Coming-of-Age Ceremonies

It is apparent that coming-of-age ceremonies are regarded as life-enhancing events for initiates as well as for others. In this respect, it can be asked, What mechanisms of change or impact operate in formalized rites of passage at puberty? In the field of adolescent psychology, researchers and practitioners alike are currently espousing interest in positive youth development, which addresses identifying, understanding, and promoting factors that offer protection to youth and contribute to desirable outcomes in development. Protective factors are defined as “those personal, social, and institutional resources that can promote successful adolescent development or buffer the risk factors that might otherwise compromise development” (Jessor, 1993, p. 121). In short, protective factors mediate risk factors to enhance the likelihood of resilient and adaptive outcomes in development. The present work contends that the protective functions of coming-of-age ceremonies facilitate the potential for socially desirable impacts on the development of initiates. This assertion is re-

CONTEXTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS 5

inforced throughout this book in review of the literature and reports of findings from fieldwork.

As will be discussed in chapter 2, some contemporary North American Indian youth experience high levels of poverty, substance abuse, violence, and other social and behavioral problems with corresponding hopelessness in their tribal communities. However, not all youth succumb to these risk factors, and it is reasonable to consider what might make the difference for them. It is known that, in general, a variety of personal trait, familial, and social support factors protect against risk. In more specific consideration of North American Indian coming-of-age ceremonies, it is suggested that operative protective factors encompass three broad domains of activity: the engagement of young people in meaningful tasks and responsibilities; the provision of social support and affirmation; and explicit cultural socialization. Ultimately, the solidification of purpose and meaning in life and identity are derived as adolescent girls come to a greater understanding of themselves according to their placement in their cultures and the broader society.

In the coming-of-age ceremonies addressed in this book, it is evident that young people are engaged in meaningful tasks and responsibilities. A contention by Reed Larson (2000) on the importance of initiative in positive youth development has some bearing on this discussion. Initiative is a necessity for membership in adult society, but an apparent lack of continuity in Western society relative to socialization of children for adult roles is regarded as a prohibiting factor in its development. Accepting Larson's arguments, initiative and positive youth development are then fostered through adolescent engagement in forms of adult-sponsored and community-endorsed activities. Further, social capital, which is understood as a force that builds cooperation, trust, understanding, and empathy (Newton, 1997), is derived. Those with the most social capital are said to be more deeply involved in their families, social networks, and communities (Coleman, 1988; Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995). Further, it is during adolescence that people are most likely to internalize the benefits of participation in adult-endorsed activities (M. K. Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, & Snyder, 1998).

While the writings of Larson and others centered on adolescents' involvement in conventional adult-sponsored structured activities (e.g.,

6 CONTEXTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

extracurricular activities at school), these arguments have applicability to the cross-cultural realm. North American Indian puberty ceremonies can be approached as adult-sponsored and culturally endorsed activities in which the values of the social networks and tribes of these young people are incorporated. Initiates learn of their place and value in the social order through engagement in adult-like tasks and responsibilities. While coming-of-age initiations are embedded in long-standing oral traditions, it is suggested that immersion in meaningful ritual activities are as relevant to contemporary North American Indian adolescents as they were to their ancestors.

Adolescent engagement in meaningful task performance operates in concert with a further protective function of North American Indian coming-of-age rites, namely, social support. Pubescent girls are engulfed in atmospheres of support and affirmation prior to, during, and after their actual ceremonies. The attention and social reinforcement linked to the rite of passage may endure for months or years after menarche. The female initiate is firmly fixed within the sanctuary of kin and community, and her place and importance are continually bolstered in numerous forms through rituals as well as in spontaneous social interaction. The outpouring of social support has been one of the most impressive components of North American Indian coming-of-age ceremonies that I have observed.

Additionally, female initiates undergo explicit socialization at their coming-of-age ceremonies according to the traditions, beliefs, values, and practices of their cultures. As will be discussed in later chapters, socialization occurs through direct instruction of initiates by medicine persons or spiritual advisers, adults, and elders. Enactments of meaningful rituals serve to reinforce oral traditions, expected task performance, and personal responsibility. The pubertal rite of passage is significant as a culminating event that augments lessons and tasks taught in childhood. Impressed on pubescent girls are the expected responsibilities that they will assume as adult women; and cultural lessons are emphasized by ritual role performance that occur over the course of the coming-of-age event, with the anticipation that such behaviors will continue from that point forward.

Through engagement in meaningful activities, the provision of so-

CONTEXTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS 7

cial support, and explicit cultural socialization, meaning and purpose in life are solidified. Taken together, the three operative mechanisms of change or impact at coming-of-age ceremonies serve to strengthen ethnic group identification, advance pride in culture, foster feelings of belonging, and promote understanding of traditions, beliefs, values, and practices. These and other ethnic outcomes encompass what Jean Phinney (1992, 1995) defined as ethnic identity. Further, for North American Indian adolescents, spirituality, as a component of culture, plays a strong role in ethnic identity formation, as asserted by Gattuso (1991): “religion is the cornerstone of American Indian identity” (p. 69). Ethnic identity is a component of one’s social identity relative to group membership. For ethnic adolescents it is thought to be a highly meaningful aspect of the self-concept, and one that is related to more desirable adjustment outcomes (Phinney, Lochner, & Murphy, 1990). Indeed, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (1996) stated that the failure to establish a meaningful identity and resulting identity confusion has been linked to various social and behavioral problems of some Aboriginal youth.

The rich array of rituals implicit in coming-of-age ceremonies appears to shape four outcomes of optimal identity formation as delineated by noted psychosocial theorist Erik Erikson (1968, 1987). First, optimal identity formation should be indicated according to a sense that one is becoming and feeling most like the self; in other words, a subjective sense of comfort is experienced. While some physical and psychological discomforts may be experienced during coming-of-age ceremonies, transition yields to transcendence through accomplishment of complex and challenging rituals; in this respect, see the discussion of the Dunham, Kidwell, and Wilson (1986) Ritual Process Paradigm in chapter 6. Second, optimal identity is characterized by a stronger sense of direction in life. Again, rituals serve as the channeling mechanisms for the advancement of purpose and direction in life. Third, there should be a perception that strands of sameness and continuity connect the self from the past to the present and to the anticipated future. Continuous socialization processes reinforce these strands of continuity, and ultimately the initiate begins to understand the purposes of the rituals according to the totality of the life span. Fourth, the optimal identity that is being formed is affirmed by a community of significant others. The social support and

8 CONTEXTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

affirmation that are experienced by the initiate compels the individual forward with confidence in a future that is relatively unknown at the present. The implications of coming-of-age ceremonies for identity formation are pervasive and receive continued discussion throughout this book.

Why Coming-of-Age, and Why Females?

What is known as coming-of-age is a pivotally important and significant phase in the life span. Many North American Indian groups regard the maturation of the child to an adult as a central developmental transition in the life span. Certainly this belief can be historically observed, and it is still overtly acknowledged in beliefs and practices by various Indigenous North American cultures. Performance of puberty customs, rituals, and ceremonies are frequently regarded as critical for lifelong success of young people. In my conversations with individuals from a variety of tribes—both those who continue to observe puberty customs and those who do not—this imperative seems to ring true. In Western theoretical thinking as well, the adolescent years are perceived to cover a highly transitional phase in the life span, and times of change introduce greater stress to the human organism. The transitional nature of adolescence is particularly profound, especially with respect to puberty (Flach, 1988; Petersen, Leffert, Graham, Alwin, & Ding, 1997; Schulenberg, Maggs, & Hurrelmann, 1997). The child has not experienced biological change of this magnitude since infancy, and the impacts reverberate into social and psychological domains (Petersen et al., 1997). Consider that adolescence is the only time in the life span after birth in which the rate of growth actually increases (Spear, 2000), and the individual gains about 50% of his or her adult weight (Rogol, Roemmich, & Clark, 2002)!

In additional examination of the unique developmental patterns of the years that encompass pubescence, it is interesting that an apparent long-standing and universal belief associates early adolescence with the “age of reason.” This phrase dates back to the ancient Greeks but is echoed in various forms across cultures and centuries. In essence, the age of reason signifies society’s expectation that during the transition between childhood and adulthood, or what today is called early ado-