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Introducing the Anthropology of Adolescence

Emily H. Emmott & Benjamin Theobald *UCL Anthropology, UCL*

Mark Dyble *University of Cambridge*

Adolescence is widely recognized as a key life stage, yet its meaning and experience remain under-explored due to the complex interplay between biological and social transformations. While researchers across fields such as psychology and public health increasingly frame adolescence as a 'critical period', anthropology offers distinctive insights that challenge simplistic and reductionist accounts. This special issue introduces the Anthropology of Adolescence, situating the discipline as an important contributor to the emerging interdisciplinary interest in adolescence. Drawing on a century of anthropological engagement, we emphasize adolescence not simply as a passage between childhood and adulthood, but as a dynamic biocultural stage through which broader social, political, and ecological processes can be understood. The contributions presented here span different forms of anthropology, employing varied methods from structured interviews and focus groups to multimodal ethnographic research. Together, they demonstrate the breadth of anthropological research, foregrounding themes such as spatiality, intersectionality, and socialization. In doing so, this issue illustrates why anthropology and adolescence go together, and how the discipline can enrich wider debates on this vital life stage.

Adolescence, often described as a key life stage, is a universal component of evolved human life histories embedded into our species' distinctive timeline of growth, reproduction, and ageing (Bogin 2003; Schlegel & Barry III 1991; Worthman & Trang 2018). Yet, for all its cross-cultural presence, its contours are anything but clear: the meaning of adolescence is rendered opaque by the simultaneous unfolding of biological transitions and social transformations (Reiches 2019), which not only complicate its definition but also produce substantial variation in how adolescence is experienced within and between populations. As editors of this special issue on the Anthropology of Adolescence, we have grappled with this in our own work, attempting to 'understand adolescence' from different anthropological perspectives. For example,

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Emmott, as an evolutionary anthropologist, works to understand cultural variations in how adolescents in England and Japan engage with their socio-ecology, challenging the idea of a universal developmental trajectory in adolescent identity development (Emmott *et al.* 2025). Theobald, as a social anthropologist, works with students at schools and universities in Thailand, with an emphasis on how younger generations revise and reshape the political, ethical, and religious ideals they encounter through their education (Theobald 2024). While we differ in our training, research methods, and our approach to studying adolescence, it is interesting to note that the implication of our research has been to challenge received wisdom about what adolescence is, and how it is lived.

Across disciplines, adolescents are variously treated as adults on the basis of 'reproductive maturity', or as children due to 'social immaturity'. When adolescence is defined as a distinct category, it is often bound by an age range spanning somewhere within ten to twenty-five years, despite the fact that the timing of biological and social transitions can vary substantially within and between populations (Bogin 2003; Schlegel & Barry III 1991). To an extent, this is understandable: empirical research demands boundaries to ensure analytical clarity and methodological feasibility. Yet, as discussed in Glass and Emmott (this issue), typical definitional boundaries of adolescence often rest on misconceptions; and current narratives of adolescence remain strongly shaped by biological determinism, confounded by a lack of cultural diversity (see also Abubakar *et al.* 2024). As Mary Bucholtz (2002) noted in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*, scholarship throughout much of the twentieth century tended to explore adolescence in relation to adulthood – for example, by examining how adolescents transition into adult roles – rather than focusing on adolescence in its own right. However, as Worthman and Trang (2018) emphasize in their review in *Nature*, there is good reason to view adolescence as a transformative, complex, biocultural life stage which deserves more attention.

It is in this context that we present this special issue on *The Anthropology of Adolescence*, with the hope of revealing both the commonalities and diversities of adolescent experiences across societies. We have put this issue together with the belief that, as anthropologists, we are in a position to make a unique contribution to the study of adolescence, building on over a century of anthropological research. Like past anthropological scholars of adolescence, much of the work published in this special issue is anchored to Margaret Mead's *Coming of age in Samoa* (Mead 1928), which explored the experience of adolescent girls in 1920s Samoa and directly challenged G. Stanley Hall's influential description of adolescence as a universal period of 'storm and stress' (Hall 1904). Many of us also draw on Victor Turner's concept of liminality as explored in *The Ritual Process* (Turner 1991 [1969]), interrogating adolescence as a distinct yet ambiguous and marginal life stage, 'betwixt and between' childhood and adulthood.

Over several decades, contemporary anthropologists have repeatedly demonstrated the value of cross-cultural scholarship on adolescence. For example, Schlegel and Barry III's (1991) analysis of the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample revealed substantial variation in the timing, experience, and social significance of adolescence, while also highlighting recurring features such as the significance of courtships/partnerships and the introduction to new social roles and responsibilities. In *Adolescence in Pacific Island societies* edited by Herdt and Leavitt (1998), adolescence is comparatively examined across various Pacific Islander communities, exploring complex topics which remain

relevant in 2025 – such as issues of antisocial behaviour among adolescent boys (Leavitt 1998) and gender dynamics between adolescent girls and men (Cantrell 1998). Deborah Durham's (2004) ethnographic study of 1990s Botswana further demonstrated how discourses around youth can illuminate broader social dynamics, revealing adolescence as a lens through which to understand shifting cultural, political, and generational tensions.

However, as we approach nearly a century since Mead's *Coming of age in Samoa* was first published, the anthropology of adolescence continues to be peripheral – both within anthropology, as well as among adolescence studies more generally. As Herdt and Leavitt (1998) point out, anthropological interest in understanding adolescence was limited between the 1950s and 1980s (but see Durham 2004), and after a short burst of interest in the 1990s/early 2000s, scholarship on adolescence has remained disappointingly marginal. Further, while often insightful, anthropology is not always heard. A case in point is developmental psychologist/psychoanalyst Erik Erikson's *Childhood and society* (Erikson 1950) where a period of identity crisis was presented as inescapable among humans despite Mead's warnings several decades earlier. Erikson's idea has been highly influential, leading to developmental models which continue to present identity confusion followed by identity commitment as an optimal developmental trajectory – contrary to anthropological evidence (Emmott *et al.* 2025). What is most disappointing about this history is that Erikson was amenable to anthropological inquiry and recognized the importance of culture (Syed & Fish 2018). In fact, his ideas around adolescence were based on participant observations of Sioux pastoralists and Yurok fishers (Native Americans), and it is clear from his writings that he paid close attention to history and local context. However, the scholarship that followed had limited engagement with anthropological evidence which challenged the homogeneity of so-called 'primitive populations' (such as Benedict 1935); and ironically, conclusions drawn from limited comparative work between White Americans and two Native American tribes evolved into universalist claims. Had anthropology been more vocal, perhaps, psychologists would have come to different conclusions, which could have led to a more nuanced future for the study of adolescent identity development.

But we sense a change in wind direction, partly driven by the advances in neuroscience of adolescence reframing this life stage as a 'critical period' (e.g., Blakemore & Mills 2014) while health, public health, and policy researchers present adolescence as a window of opportunity (e.g., Sawyer, Azzopardi, Wickremarathne & Patton 2018). In recent years, the anthropology of adolescence has expanded through increased biological, evolutionary, and biocultural inquiry. For example, Worthman and Trang (2018) argue that adolescence is a key phase for the *biological embedding of culture*, where sociocultural ecologies shape developmental processes. They show how global shifts in education, labour, and lifestyles have introduced novel mismatches between biological maturation and social expectations, altering the timing and structure of adolescence in some industrialized societies. More recently, Lewis (2022) demonstrates how biological indicators such as growth, pubertal development, and pathologies are linked to shifting social roles in adolescence – expanding opportunities for the bioarchaeological study of adolescence. As anthropologists, whatever our epistemological approach or methodological training, we are united in challenging simplistic explanations of adolescence through engaging with its diversity. This is exactly why anthropology and adolescence go together: as a discipline grounded in

understanding complexity, what could be more rewarding than grappling with the richness of adolescence.

This special issue on adolescence

This special issue has emerged from a knowledge-exchange workshop on adolescence hosted at the Royal Anthropological Institute in June 2023. At the workshop, scholars from different sub-disciplines of anthropology presented their working papers to foster conversation, exchange ideas, and begin building a network of like-minded anthropologists. Building on this momentum, the contributions in this issue remain true to the original aim of the workshop by presenting a range of papers from the broad field of anthropology. In doing so, while not exhaustive, we illustrate the diversity of research currently being undertaken in the discipline. Our hope is that this special issue serves as a practical resource for current and future anthropologists to draw upon, not only in engaging with the anthropology of adolescence, but also in demonstrating to others (including funders!) the distinctive value of an anthropological perspective on this life stage.

The underpinning theme of this issue is multiplicity. Acknowledging the relativity of age (Durham 2004), we avoid a strict age-based definition of adolescence, instead including work that ranges from secondary school kids (e.g., Fagan Robinson, this issue) to unmarried adults (e.g., Ishungisa *et al.*, this issue), allowing authors to define adolescence in ways most meaningful to their community/research. We also present studies from a wide geographical spread, spanning Peru (Giattino), England (Fagan Robinson), Milan (Grassi), the Republic of Congo (Lew-Levy *et al.*), Tanzania (Ishungisa *et al.*), Malaysia, and Indonesia (Allerton). Readers may notice the diversity in methods and writing styles, reflecting the variety of practices between sub-disciplines of anthropology. In our view, this crucially demonstrates the strength of anthropology, and in particular our ability to conduct different types of research around a unifying topic. Importantly, this issue challenges the binary stereotype of social anthropology as qualitative and biological anthropology as quantitative. Indeed, all biological and evolutionary anthropologists who have contributed to this issue present qualitative or mixed-methods research, reflecting the methodological diversity emerging in our field.

Below, we provide brief summaries of the contributions to this special issue on *The Anthropology of Adolescence*. While readers will draw their own conclusions, we believe this issue moves beyond a simplistic framing of adolescence as liminal; instead, foregrounding themes such as spatiality (Allerton, Giattino), intersectionality (Giattino, Grassi), and socialization (Lew-Levy *et al.*, Ishungisa *et al.*). Positioned mid-issue, Glass and Emmott provide a roadmap for integrating these varied approaches within a biocultural framework.

Catherine Allerton: Coming of age in- and out-of-place: frictions of adolescent mobility in island Southeast Asia

Catherine Allerton leverages experience in two field sites to compare how spatiality and mobility inform the 'transitional' character of adolescence. She presents her research in Manggarai, Indonesia, with a group of adolescents from native-born families, with material from Sabah, Malaysia, where her young interlocutors were generally from migrant families. Allerton considers how differential levels of freedom when it came to moving around their environment affected adolescents' ideas and experiences around 'coming of age', with a particular focus on how restrictions to mobility – afforded by

gender, kinship, and border infrastructure – can reshape the meaning of the coming of age trope.

Angela Giattino: Intercultural expectations and global ambitions: the spatial and temporal dimensions of Indigenous Amazonian adolescence

This article challenges the idea that adolescence is a life stage exclusively characterized by its temporal location upon the life course. Giattino argues that an understanding of adolescence must also account for the spatial dimension in considering how circumstances borne out of geography may shape both adolescents' ambitions and the expectations adults hold for them. She addresses these ideas through an exploration of her fieldwork with indigenous Amazonian teenagers in a Peruvian city. By expanding upon notions of ethnic identity and interculturality, her analysis contributes to contemporary debates on ambition, as she illustrates how adolescents themselves, and the adults around them, imagine their potential futures.

Paolo Grassi: Fluctuating futures: coming of age in the biggest social housing neighbourhood in Milan

Paolo Grassi's article presents ethnographic research carried out in San Siro, Milan, with a group of adolescents largely from migrant backgrounds. Grassi frames his analysis by focusing upon an event in which a group of young rap artists living in San Siro came to public attention. He examines how this – largely negative – attention was used as an impetus for change in institutional policy stances towards San Siro, while also considering how the fallout from the rap artists' newfound infamy was understood by the adolescents themselves. He notes that adolescents' emic notions of their activity were founded in intersectionality, and argues for the utility of intersectionality as a concept for reading the complexity of adolescent lives in San Siro.

Kelly Fagan Robinson: Disclosure, disbelief, enclosure: listening with precarious kids in London

Kelly Fagan Robinson investigates how secondary school-aged 'kids' who are excluded from mainstream education in North London, England, navigate systems that demand personal disclosures yet routinely dismiss or misinterpret them. Drawing on her past experiences and ethnographic research in an 'alternative provision' setting, she demonstrates how mismatched communicative expectations produce disbelief, diagnostic delay, and forms of educational enclosure. Robinson outlines how young people's aspirations are often rendered structurally illegible, not because they fail to aspire, but because their ways of expressing need and ambition clash with institutional norms. She advances the concept of 'poverty of pathway' to challenge the familiar trope of 'poverty of aspiration', arguing that adolescents' futures are curtailed less by lack of desire than by systemic barriers that hinder recognition and progression.

Delaney Glass and Emily H. Emmott: Biocultural synthesis of adolescence: a roadmap to advance the field

Glass and Emmott's position paper sets out a programmatic agenda for re-centring adolescence within biocultural anthropology. They argue that adolescence, spanning ages 10–24, has been neglected compared to childhood despite its dynamic interplay

of biological and cultural transitions. Drawing on evolutionary and biocultural perspectives, they highlight adolescence as a period of heightened plasticity where biology and culture co-produce developmental pathways. Their roadmap identifies three opportunities: to challenge entrenched assumptions (such as adolescence as necessarily about independence, recklessness, or storm-and-stress), to embrace diversity by moving beyond Western middle-class framings and engaging majority world contexts, and to innovate biocultural methods that capture embodiment, socioecological determinants, and cultural variation. By integrating evolutionary theory with anthropological critique, the article offers a clear framework for advancing biocultural research on adolescence.

Sheina Lew-Levy et al.: BaYaka forager and Bantu fisher-farmer adolescent engagement with intensifying market integration in the Republic of the Congo
Lew-Levy and colleagues examine how adolescents in BaYaka forager and Bantu fisher-farmer communities orient themselves towards market economies in the Congo Basin. Working with participants across three villages with differing levels of access to wage labour and market goods, they combine quantitative data on adolescent labour and consumption with qualitative interviews capturing young people's own perspectives. Their analysis demonstrates that market integration does not exert uniform effects: adolescent practices are refracted through local socialization, resource availability, and cultural values around autonomy and self-reliance. In some contexts, adolescents are reshaping norms around money sharing, while in others they navigate expectations of family pooling or individual control over income. By foregrounding adolescent agency, the authors show that BaYaka and Bantu youth are not passive recipients of economic change but active participants in reconfiguring social and economic life under intensifying market integration.

Alexander M. Ishungisa et al.: What do other men think? Understanding (mis)perceptions of peer gender role ideology among young Tanzanian men
Ishungisa and colleagues investigate how young men in a semi-urban Tanzanian community perceive and misperceive their peers' beliefs about gender roles. Building on prior survey evidence that men tend to overestimate peer support for inequitable gender norms, the authors use focus groups and participant observation to explore the mechanisms behind these misperceptions. Framing their analysis within evolutionary theory and cultural transmission, they highlight how conformity and peer influence shape the uptake of gender ideologies among young men. Their findings suggest that rapid cultural change – driven by urbanization, globalization, and exposure to external agencies – may introduce diversity and uncertainty into prevailing beliefs; and that young men may intentionally obscure behaviours deemed supportive of women to portray ideals of masculine strength. Overall, Ishungisa *et al.* illuminate the mechanisms of social learning around gender norms in late adolescence/early adulthood in this community.

Next steps for the anthropology of adolescence

It is important to acknowledge that this issue is a small snapshot of the anthropology of adolescence. Notably, we are missing in-depth analyses of how adolescence interacts with labour, economic activity, as well as full accounts of how adolescents may come to participate in social and political movements. We are also under-represented in the

diverse range of work carried out across biological anthropology. While the articles presented here effectively outline the state of the art when it comes to anthropological contributions to the study of adolescent lives, it is revealing that all continue to trade in the subversion of assumed characteristics of adolescence, much as Mead did in one of anthropology's earliest engagements with the subject. As suggested by several of the authors in this issue, future work in this area should strive to contribute to policy decisions and institutional frameworks alongside cognate disciplines.

For example, Grassi presents a case of what happens when adolescent activity is met with institutionalized fear and aggression – in his example, the output of young rap artists in his field site in Milan. He finds that these fears were ultimately founded within a faulty perception of what the adolescents saw themselves as doing. Identifying these disparities in understanding provides potential avenues for further anthropological research on adolescence. As Allerton points out in her article, anthropology has proved especially apt at identifying tropes – such as the entire notion of 'coming of age' – that may lead to caricatured imaginings of adolescent lives. As both authors contend, these caricatures can prove especially problematic in the hands of decision-makers with a real stake in the lives of teenagers.

The articles in this issue make an excellent case for the use of anthropological methods in studies that refute superficial understandings of adolescent lives. As Fagan Robinson and Glass and Emmott both note in their articles, the sustained engagement and participatory methods offer a route to foregrounding adolescent perspectives in research, policy, and practice. Working with teenagers in any context presents a unique set of ethical and methodological challenges, and it is vital that anthropological approaches continue to innovate in order to do justice to our young interlocutors in the same fashion as we would expect to achieve with adults.

Moving forward, future directions for the anthropology of adolescence may lie in both inquiry and application. On the side of inquiry, there is scope to extend comparative and longitudinal approaches that situate adolescence within shifting socio-ecologies, rather than treating it as a universal life stage. Our work should continue to foreground adolescent voices, while also exploring how categories such as gender, class, ethnicity, and mobility intersect in shaping adolescent lives. Biocultural methods might be expanded to capture embodiment and socio-ecological determinants, and canonical concepts such as liminality perhaps revisited with attention to contemporary contexts such as precarity, migration, and digital socialization. At the same time, application may involve finding ways to bring anthropological insights into dialogue with fields such as psychology, neuroscience, education, public health, and policy. Doing so could help ensure that evidence of cultural variability is not sidelined. Anthropologists might look to represent diverse voices via interdisciplinary collaborations, contribute to policy debates, and help foster conditions in which adolescent perspectives are taken seriously. In this way, anthropology could move from a position of primarily contesting reductive framings from the sidelines to that of influence, contributing to a broader understanding of adolescence that is attentive to variation and complexity.

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Introduction à l'anthropologie de l'adolescence

Résumé

Bien qu'il soit largement admis que l'adolescence constitue une étape cruciale de la vie, sa signification et son vécu restent peu explorés en raison d'interactions complexes entre les transformations biologiques et sociales qui l'accompagnent. Alors que les chercheurs de divers domaines tels que la psychologie et la santé publique qualifient de plus en plus l'adolescence de « période critique », l'anthropologie en offre une vision différente, à rebours des récits simplistes et réducteurs. Le présent numéro spécial est une introduction à l'anthropologie de l'adolescence, qui met en avant la contribution importante de la discipline aux études interdisciplinaires émergentes sur l'adolescence. Les auteurs s'appuient sur un siècle de travaux anthropologiques pour souligner que l'adolescence n'est pas uniquement un passage entre l'enfance et l'âge adulte : elle constitue aussi une étape bioculturelle dynamique qui permet de comprendre des processus sociaux, politiques et écologiques plus larges. Les articles présentés ici couvrent différentes formes d'anthropologie et reposent sur l'emploi de méthodes variées comprenant aussi bien des entretiens structurés et des groupes de discussion que des approches de recherche ethnographique

multimodales. À eux tous, ils montrent l'ampleur de la recherche et mettent en avant des thèmes tels que la spatialité, l'intersectionnalité et la socialisation. Ce numéro spécial permet de mieux comprendre en quoi anthropologie et adolescence vont de pair, et comment cette discipline peut enrichir des débats plus larges sur cet âge crucial de la vie.

Emily Emmott (corresponding author) is a human behavioural ecologist and evolutionary social scientist interested in how social and physical environments impact human development and behaviour.

University College London, Department of Anthropology, 14 Taviton Street, London WC1H 0BW, UK. emily.emmott@ucl.ac.uk

Benjamin Theobald is Post-Doctoral Research Assistant at UCL. His research interests are ethics, education, and youth activism in Thailand.

University College London, Department of Anthropology, 14 Taviton Street, London WC1H 0BW, UK.

Mark Dyble is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Cambridge. His interests include understanding both human evolution and variation in behaviour and biology across human populations, and also understanding the causes and consequences of variation in social organization and social behaviour across mammals more generally.

Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge, Downing Street, Cambridge CB2 3DZ, UK. md479@cam.ac.uk