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**Adolescents and Risk**

***Behavior, Functions, and Protective Factors***

Silvia Bonino • Elena Cattelino • Silvia Ciairano

# Adolescents and Risk

## Behavior, Functions, and Protective Factors

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## FOREWORD

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Over the past several decades, the field of adolescent health and development has undergone a profound and pervasive transformation in the knowledge and understanding of young lives. Popular myths about adolescents - that they are hapless victims of “raging hormones” or risk-takers who see themselves as invulnerable - have been laid to rest. But even more important has been the emergence of a new, scientific perspective about this stage of life. It is a perspective that recognizes that adolescents are active participants in the shaping of their own development; that the influence of context - family, peers, school, media, neighborhood, workplace - is as important in determining the life course as are the attributes of the individual and, indeed, that it is the interaction between context and individual attributes that is really crucial; that there is remarkable diversity in the pathways that can be taken by youth as they traverse between late childhood and young adulthood; and that the adolescent life-stage is, itself, an extended one - a full decade of the life trajectory with very different tasks, opportunities, and challenges in the later years than in the earlier years. It is this new, scientific perspective that so thoroughly informs the present volume by Silvia Bonino, Elena Cattelino, and Silvia Ciairano.

The volume is an impressive contribution to understanding risk behavior among contemporary Italian adolescents, but it goes far beyond that to advance understanding of adolescent behavior and development as a whole. In this regard, it has immediate relevance for American developmental science as well. The reliance of the authors on a theoretical framework that engages both individual and context; their assessment of the multiple contexts in the ecology of daily adolescent life; their insistence that risk behavior - as with all behavior - is meaningful, purposive, and instrumental; and their focus on multiple types of adolescent risk behavior and on their covariation as a life style or a way of being in the world - all of these together give the volume generality beyond youth in Italy and provide a window on adolescence that enables us to look beyond risk behavior alone.

With regard to its particular focus on adolescent risk behavior, the vol-

ume is remarkably informative and useful for both scientist and practitioner alike. The data are based on large samples of youth, the analytical methodology is sound, and the presentation of findings is very accessible, relying throughout on graphic representation rather than statistical tables. The chapters deal with each of the key types of risk behavior that are of concern at this developmental stage - drug and alcohol use, delinquency, early sexual experience, risky driving, and unhealthy eating behavior. They show the linkages among them, elaborate the functions served by the various types of risk behavior or the meanings they may have for the adolescent, and examine how they vary with age, gender, and other demographic characteristics.

Important and useful as such descriptive knowledge is, the major contribution of the volume clearly lies in its demonstration of the influential role the theoretical risk factors and protective factors play in adolescent risk behavior involvement. In this regard, the research findings not only strengthen the theory, but they serve as an important guide to the design of intervention efforts to prevent or reduce adolescent involvement in risk behavior.

One comes away from reading this book with a sense of optimism about the usefulness of the knowledge it provides. The emphasis of the authors on the need to strengthen protective factors that can promote positive youth development, and on the need to provide opportunities for behavior that can serve the same purposes that risk behavior does but without compromising health and development, is salutary. This, indeed, is the key challenge for all contemporary societies to accomplish. By meeting that challenge, societies would give young people the kind of protection they probably need most - the protection that comes from a strong sense that they have a viable stake in the future.

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## PREFACE

To all the girls and boys, teachers and principals who, through their receptiveness, enthusiasm, and honesty, made this study possible.

Even the most personal ideas are the fruit of many people's input, whether those people are aware of it or not. This is true all the more so in a study as broad as the one presented here, the authors of which are indebted to the contribution of a great number of people who, in different ways and in different places, have over the years collaborated on this project and still today work on its continuation. It has been an exciting, if at times difficult and exhausting, adventure. For this reason, our acknowledgments are not merely a cold formality but a sincere recognition of those who have been involved in this challenge. Although we are limited by space and cannot here recognize everyone, we would like to mention the people and institutions that have provided the most significant contributions.

Without Richard Jessor's (University of Colorado, Boulder, USA) confidence in our research team, nothing could have been accomplished. To him, we owe an enormous debt of gratitude for having believed in this project. Adam Frączek (University of Warsaw, Poland), who was the first to work in Europe with Jessor's questionnaire and who shared his research process with us, also played a vital role. In more recent years, Sandy Jackson (University of Groningen, the Netherlands) was a patient and thought-provoking interlocutor as well as a tireless organizer; unfortunately, his untimely passing recently brought an end to our collaboration. Michel Born (University of Liège, Belgium) also accompanied us over the course of our research with his receptiveness and open mind.

Nor can we forget the large group of European researchers from the European Association for Research on Adolescence (EARA) whose congresses have served as a platform for the presentation and discussion of this study and some of its results (Liège, Belgium, 1966; Budapest, Hungary, 1998; Jena, Germany, 2000; Oxford, England, 2002; Porto, Portugal, 2004). The congresses, held by the Developmental Division of the Italian Psychological Association (AIP) (Parma, 1999; Alghero, 2000; Palermo, 2001; Bellaria, 2002; Bari, 2003;

Sciacca, 2004) and by the Interuniversity Center for Research on the Origins and Development of Prosocial and Antisocial Motivation (Rome, 1999; Florence, 2000, 2002; Rome, 2003), also provided us with valuable opportunities for exchange with other Italian researchers.

As research cannot be carried out without funding, we are particularly grateful to the institutions that financed and supported this long and broad-reaching study: the J. Jacobs Foundation (Zürich), the Regional Administration of Piemonte (Council for Health, Council for Health Activities, Council for Health Education and Promotion), the Regional Administration of Aosta Valley (Council of Education and Culture, Council of Health), Ministry of University and Research (MIUR, previously MURST, cofinancing 1998 and 2000), National Council for Research (CNR, 1998, 1999), and the European Union (General Directorate XII, Science, Research and Development section - TMR Project "Marie Curie").

A long succession of people, who we are unable to name here, have participated in this research project over the years, including scholarship holders, fellows, technicians, interns, and doctoral and undergraduate students. Our closest collaborators (Tatiana Begotti, Gabriella Borca, and Emanuela Calandri) appear as coauthors in various publications cited in this text. We would also like to recognize the valuable contribution of Manuela Bina, Fabrizia Giannotta, Federica Graziano, Roberta Molinar, Giorgia Molinengo, Daniela Morero, Emanuela Rabaglietti, and Antonella Roggero.

A special thanks to Renato Miceli (Psychology Department, University of Torino, Italy) for his patient and competent statistical consultation.

But our greatest thanks go to all the boys and girls, their teachers and principals who through their receptiveness, enthusiasm, and honesty made this study possible. To them we dedicate this volume, and it is our hope that it may be of use to them in their personal and professional lives.

As it is the fruit of a common effort, the book appears with the names of all three authors. However, we would like to specify that chapters 1, 2, and 8 were written by Silvia Bonino; chapters 3, 4, and 5 by Elena Cattelino; and chapters 6 and 7 by Silvia Ciairano.

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# Risk Behavior in Adolescence

It depends a lot on the context... what matters it's your intentions when you do a certain thing... what I mean is, it depends on how you personally experience something.

*[Girl, science lyceum, third year]*

## 1.1 Adolescents and Adolescence

In the most recent psychological literature, the representation of adolescence as an inevitable condition of hardship and suffering has been abandoned although in the mass media this portrayal of adolescents, rooted in nineteenth-century romantic tradition, continues to enjoy widespread popularity. Meanwhile, psychology has also abandoned the idea that adolescence is an absolute process that, due to the fact that it is linked to physiological maturation and the problems that derive from it, it is essentially identical in different historical periods and across different cultures (Koops 1996).

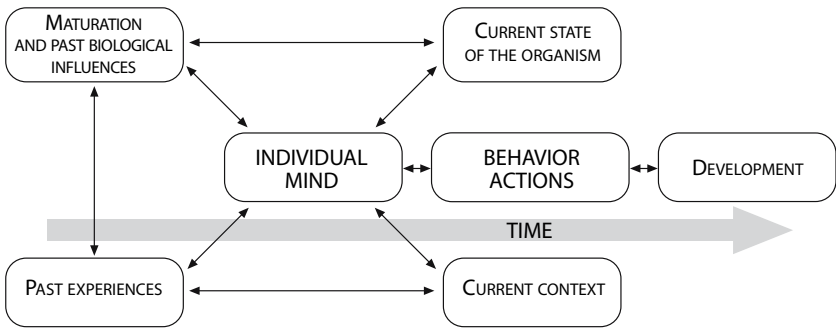
This new vision is the result not only of specific studies on adolescence but of a different way of conceiving human development as a whole. Today, there is consensus in the belief that human development should be viewed from a perspective that considers the entire life cycle: changes and development are not limited to the initial period of life (referred to, in fact, as the developmental phase) in contrast with a period of stability in adulthood and one of decline in old age. Today, we are aware that as our psychological functions continually evolve throughout our lifetime, both change and development affect the entire length of our existence (Baltes et al. 1998). From this perspective, adolescence is neither the conclusion to the developmental phase nor a period of instability that precedes the stability of adulthood. On the contrary, many other times of transition occur over the course of the life cycle that can be difficult and problematic whether encountered in adulthood, maturity, or old age. The adolescent crisis is therefore neither the only nor the most important in a person's life. Moreover, when referring to crisis, at whatever time it occurs in a person's life, we recognize it as a dynamic, positive time of reorganization and a turning point in the process of an individual's development. As a consequence, the term crisis has lost its negative and dramatic connotation, and in the literature on adolescence, it is usually referred to in quotation marks.

In the life-cycle perspective, the temporal dimension plays a central role,

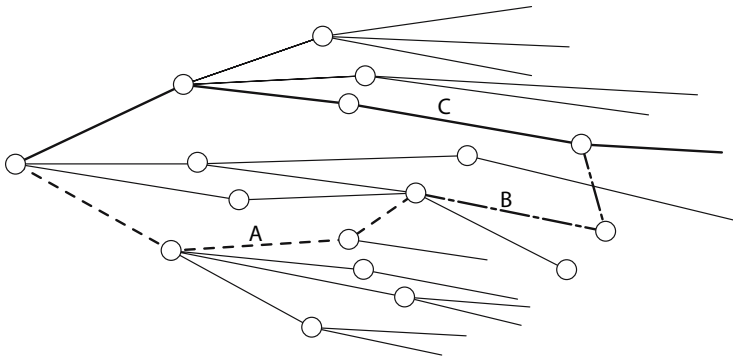
as it is throughout the entire lifetime that the interaction between an individual and his or her environment takes place in an incessant flow in which the past is bound to the present and the future. Through this perspective, our attention is no longer focused solely on the past, as was often the case in adolescent and developmental psychology in general; it was believed that the past, constituted by one's first childhood experiences, was capable of strictly determining both one's present and future. It was, in fact, the events and conflicts of childhood - which re-emerged due to the adolescent crisis - that were examined in order to comprehend adolescence. Attention is now focused primarily on the present, the characteristics and specific qualities of which introduce new elements, both negative and positive, that can profoundly affect the development trajectory undertaken (Rutter and Rutter 1992). Therefore, the idea that an influence is much stronger the earlier it occurs has also been discredited, as we have now recognized that development depends both on the type of experience and the ability of each individual to interpret and re-elaborate it in relation to their present experience (Schaffer 2000). The future also gains significance because, although it does not yet exist, it is nevertheless "present" in an individual's mental representations. In adolescence above all, the future, due to cognitive development, becomes an increasingly relevant dimension able to motivate complex plans of action and personal achievement. In short, the present and future development of the adolescent is not imprisoned in his or her past (Ford and Lerner 1992).

At the same time, in contemporary psychology, there is a growing awareness that development is not a linear process and that set paths of development - the same for every individual - do not exist. Development does not occur on a single required route but, rather, across any number of possible, highly individualized, and differentiated paths, which depend on a complex interaction over time between an individual and the context of his or her life. On one hand, individuals continuously affect the world inside and around them thanks to their own unique cognitive abilities affected by changes linked to both biological maturation processes and to experiences that conduct them through life. On the other hand, they are affected by their environment or context, constituted by a plurality of factors of a physical, historical, or cultural type, that they constantly modify and interpret (Fig. 1.1). In this systemic vision, developmental trajectories are highly irregular and cannot be predicted in a deterministic way. This is because of the fact that, depending on the conditions of the system, small influences can in time produce major effects (according to the well-known "butterfly effect") while, on the contrary, major influences can have only minor effects (van Geert 1994) (Fig. 1.2).

The adoption of this holistic, interactionistic, and constructivistic approach, which sees paths of development as probabilistic, is increasingly common in contemporary developmental psychology. The approach also seems to be more consistent with the evolution of other sciences and is the only one that is able to examine and comprehend the complexity of human behavior and development throughout the entire life cycle in relation to different contexts. In this



**Fig. 1.1.** Schematic display of how the individual's mind, over time, acts as a filter to the constant interaction between maturation and experience and is the central variable. Individuals' behavior and actions have a decisive influence on their own development in both neurophysiological terms, as the neuron connections and plastic changes in the brain depend in large part on the type of stimulation the brain is subjected to, and in psychological terms, as experiences and learning can either allow for or prevent future learning (also see Fig. 1.2).



**Fig. 1.2.** Schematic representation of possible individual development paths. The turning points, identified by circles, represent times when choices are made; here, the development path can take different directions, often with lasting effects. Over time, paths that were initially quite similar can have very different outcomes while some trajectories do not lead to developments. Some events, as well as some choices, preclude certain paths in favor of others. For example, having brothers or sisters opens a developmental path that is different than that of an only child. Different, more or less tortuous developmental paths can also lead to the same outcome. For example, an adolescent can build a sufficiently autonomous identity either across a very linear, intentional path or in a more accidental way. While getting back on a given track after a deviation is possible, it may require a great deal of time and effort. For example, the choice to leave secondary school initially leads the adolescent toward a certain path (A) that is based on work and blocks access to some professions because of a lack of academic qualifications. Successive events may cause the individual to choose to return to school, returning, although on a longer trajectory (B), to an objective and path (C) that had previously been barred.

model, individuals and their environment, or context, are considered inseparable elements, forming an integrated, dynamic system and influencing one another reciprocally (Magnusson and Stattin 1998). The relationship between the individual and environmental variables is examined through the changes the individual undergoes over time. Also emphasized is individual action and the formative role it plays, which is completely unique due to the specific cognitive capabilities of humans.

Adolescence is seen in a different light through this new perspective. Most importantly, this perspective recognizes that this period of development is not the same for all adolescents, as was the common conception when the problems of adolescence were considered to be the necessary consequence of physiological development and sexual maturation in particular. From that perspective, only gender differences in adolescent development were acknowledged. Beyond differences between boys and girls, adolescence was described as a largely similar experience that did not differ based on culture, life context, opportunities offered by the individual's environment (most importantly, those related to family and school), or individual differences. Missing from that view was the concept that sexual maturation is an important, even critical, event because of the social and psychological effects it has on adolescents and for the profound structural changes it imposes. Adolescents in Western society today find themselves with adult bodies capable of procreating while at the same time they still have many years ahead before they can achieve stable, generative relationships - an often confusing, ambiguous, and conflictual future objective in a society characterized by a wide range of varied and contradictory behavior models.

On a cognitive level as well, the development of formal reasoning, a characteristic of the last of Piaget's stages, is not the necessary result of neurophysiological maturation; maturation alone, at any age, cannot determine but only makes possible the acquisition of certain cognitive capacities. Abstract reasoning abilities, therefore, are achieved within an appropriate environmental context, which in Western cultures is the school. Here, students use the tools of reading and writing in a systematic way, the means by which higher cognitive capabilities are acquired. Also in this context, the adolescent's developmental process may unfold in a variety of ways. This is contrary to the once commonly held view of development in terms of a rigid stage model where the appearance of hypothetical, deductive reasoning was the consequence of neurophysiological development and thus characteristic of all adolescents. On the contrary, in Western culture where there is a period of mandatory schooling, developmental paths are quite varied in relation not only to family background but to different opportunities and types of schools. Piaget himself (1972) pointed out that in adults, the achievement of formal reasoning is not uniform across different areas of cognitive functioning but is, rather, related to professional specialization; therefore, some significant horizontal *décalages* can also exist. When we consider that mediation and cognitive re-elaboration also play an important part in affective and social experiences, it is clear how differ-

ences and lack of uniformity in cognitive development are connected to different levels of self-awareness, different ways of resolving problems, different ways of expressing emotion, different social competencies, different abilities to plan for the future and set goals, and different representations of identity.

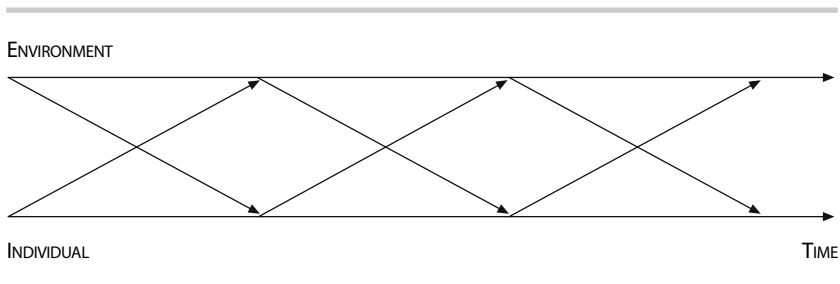
For all these reasons, adolescence cannot be described as a uniform experience (Zazzo 1966). Major differences exist between individual developmental paths, although, in Western society, adolescence is increasingly characterized by a sort of “in-between” state where boys and girls are sexually and cognitively adults but do not yet participate in life as adults. As Margaret Mead (1928) pointed out almost a century ago, adolescence does not exist in primitive societies where the social organization is simple, highly stable over time, and ruled by unchanging, undisputed, social norms. In these cultures, puberty signals the passage, often marked by a ritual, from childhood to adulthood and an official entrance into working life and marriage. Adolescence in Western society, on the other hand, is an increasingly lengthy period of transition. Children in these cultures grow up in a highly complex social context in which the entrance into adulthood is postponed to an increasingly late age and there is no single set of norms or values. The greater opportunities offered by Western culture in terms of individual freedom and personal achievement, combined with the lack of clear points of reference, make this “in-between” age, in which adolescents are not yet full participants in society, problematic on one hand while, on the other hand, it consents the development and elaboration of values and personal objectives. Today, even more so than in the past, adolescence is a time full of opportunities, challenges, and risks. However, along with greater individual freedom and increased social resources, adolescents are also faced with rapidly changing models, values, lifestyles, and professional and family roles, which require a greater degree of autonomy and decision-making abilities.

However, although the unique quality of the social environment is stressed in the interactionistic model, the roles of environment and socialization processes are not overemphasized at the expense of the ever-important role of the individual. In reality, there is a mutual and reciprocal interaction between individual and environment (Fig. 1.3). Conceptions that focus on the determinism of the environment, such as those commonly reflected in the media, are now considered outdated. While these conceptions lead to the assumption that adolescents in Western society inevitably suffer due to the social conditions in which they live - and in particular due to the inadequacies of school and transformations of family - in reality, adolescent developmental paths are actually quite varied and prevalently nonproblematic (de Vit and van der Veer 1991). Individual developmental paths are determined by a complex interaction between the individual, who is equipped with certain capabilities and personal characteristics, and the individual's unique social context, which, apart from some basic similarities, differs widely from that of other adolescents. In short, interactionistic and constructivistic models in modern psychology do not explain adolescent development in terms of physiological growth or through environmental influence but, rather, through the interaction between indi-



vidual and environment. Due to the specific cognitive capabilities each individual possesses, that individual plays an active role in this interaction.

This perspective has directed a great deal of attention in recent years to cross-cultural comparisons, particularly in areas where major changes have occurred due to immigration, for instance, or the collapse of the communist regime in eastern Europe (Noack et al. 1995; Crockett and Silbereisen 2000a). These studies offer interesting insight into the complexity and variety of adolescent developmental trajectories and are also useful in understanding adolescence in situations of less rapid and less dramatic change.



**Fig. 1.3.** Schematic representation of the continuous reciprocal interactions between individual and environment over time. The relationship between reciprocal influences represented here as equivalent is never so in reality. Over the course of development, the change in cognitive capacities and the potential for autonomous action modify the way in which the individual and environment interact. It is precisely for this reason that adolescents perceive an increase in their ability to influence the environment with which they interact.

## 1.2 Development as Action in Context

Within the framework of this systemic, interactionistic, and constructivistic conception, some authors have defined development as “action in context” in order to stress the importance of the individual’s actions when interacting with an environment that offers limits and restrictions as well as opportunities and resources (Silbereisen et al. 1986; Silbereisen and Noack 1988; Silbereisen and Todt 1994a). This conception, which is becoming prevalent in contemporary psychology, views individuals not as mere reactive organisms moulded by the events of their environment or moved by internal instincts but, rather, as active subjects capable of self-organization, self-regulation, and self-reflection. The ability to exercise broad forms of control on one’s thought processes, motivation, affectivity, and action allows adolescents to be active builders of their own environment and not simply “products” of it; therefore, they are able to influence nature and the course of their existence (Bandura 1986, 1997).

Action can be defined as intentional, voluntary behavior subjected to per-

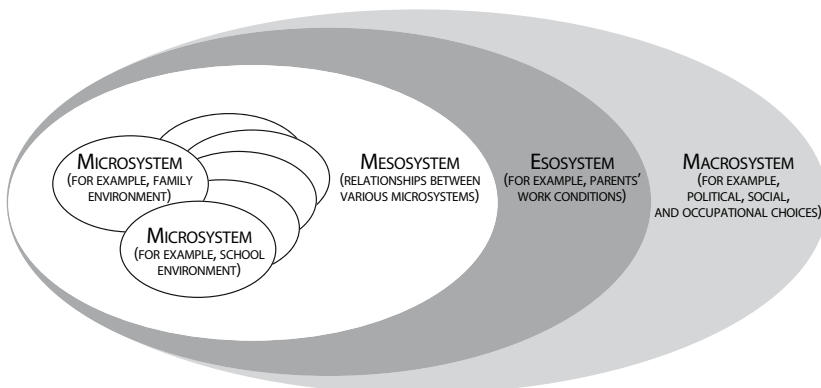
sonal control, albeit to widely varying degrees. Actions are based on a system of values, beliefs, norms, goals, evaluations, and meanings that the individual formulates within the context of a certain culture. These actions are put into effect in order to reach certain objectives, resolve certain problems, affirm the values that are important to the individual, and make plans that are significant for the individual's identity (Brandstädter 1997). From this interpretation, behavior is defined as actions that, as opposed to reflexes or automatic reactions, imply a decision and a choice: an individual may act in a certain way but could have acted differently. In short, the concept of action refers back to the combination of symbolic systems that humans utilize to construct their identities and their relationships to the world. The individual's mind knows and interprets reality by using and constructing symbols and signs within a certain cultural system; in this process of mediation, cognitive, emotional, affective, and social spheres are closely connected and interact reciprocally (Bruner 1986). An action based on these processes is not a simple response to environmental stimulus or a biologically determined, automatic reflex; it is, on the contrary, significant, intentional, and reflexive and serves a specific purpose. The action, in short, refers back to a system of the Self that integrates and coordinates its functions in its relationship with the world in order to create the best-possible relationship, to lend meaning to experiences, and to guarantee a sense of unity and continuity. It is worth noting that in the last decades, neurophysiology - an entirely different theoretical perspective - has also focused a great deal of attention to complex, goal-oriented behavior in the framework of studies on executive functions and on the activity of the frontal lobe of the cerebral cortex (Dubois 1995).

The individual always acts within a precise context. On one hand, there is the environmental context filled with both resources and limitations. It can be defined as the immediate environment in which the individual is in direct contact: family, school, neighborhood, and peer groups are examples of these immediate environments. They represent, according to Bronfenbrenner (1979; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998), "microsystems" within the ecological environment in which each of us is immersed (Fig. 1.4). On the other hand, there is the individual with his or her own physical characteristics and personal history, which form a framework of possibilities and personal limitations. Thanks to their unique cognitive capabilities - it is precisely during adolescence that the development of formal reasoning is made possible - individuals constantly elaborate stimuli, evaluate their experiences, attribute meaning to themselves and the world, make plans for the future, and develop self-reflect. All of this is manifested in precise actions that are not determined by biological factors, environmental stimuli, or personal background. Consequently, the actions of adolescents are not meaningless and are not the result of simple environmental pressures; they are self-regulated, they have aims, and they are carried out in order to meet these aims to express certain values and convictions, to resolve problems, and to construct an identity. In other words, the majority of adolescent behavior results from a choice between various alternatives, is

based on beliefs and values, and is regulated by a personal control that is related to the rules of society.

Because they have a return effect, which can be either positive or negative on both the individual who carries them out and the environmental context, these actions are capable of directing the course of development. As a result, development is based not only on the interaction between individual and environment but also on the interaction between these two aspects and the individual's actions. Development is defined as "action in context" precisely for this reason: to underline the fact that development is also a result of the individual's actions, which are intentional, oriented toward a particular objective, and seek to adjust objectives and individual potential to the requirements and opportunities of one's context. For example, an active, intelligent adolescent may find himself in a school that has very little to offer on a social and cultural level. His decision to continue in this school, to change school, or to drop out would have considerable consequences for his development both in the near and distant future.

By affirming that an individual action is intentional and directed toward an aim that has a particular meaning for the individual, we certainly do not intend to claim that the individual is always aware of all the elements involved in that decision. As individuals are unable to represent in a complete way both the complexity of the meaning, aims, and consequences of their actions and the interrelationship of the contextual and internal conditions that limit them, such awareness is always necessarily partial. The fact that the processes involved in intentional actions are never entirely conscious and can, on the contrary, be



**Fig. 1.4.** Different environments considered in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. With the term "ecology," the author refers to the environmental structures in which the individual lives and to which he or she is directly (microsystem and mesosystem) or indirectly (esosystem and macrosystem) tied.

in some cases almost totally unconscious, does not invalidate the affirmation that the majority of human actions are not at all reflexes or automatic reactions. Intention and willingness concern, indeed, the agency of a being, such as the human who is able to self-regulate and direct his or her behavior toward reaching meaningful goals (Silbereisen et al. 1986; Bandura 1997). In reality, there is a constant synergy between the conscious and unconscious, as the psychological phenomena that escape awareness are essential for the construction of the consciousness itself, for the self-regulation of actions, and the disclosure of intention. In other words, there is a reason for the existence of unconscious activity in terms of adjustment in the existence of an individual who is self-aware and self-regulated and whose actions are intentional.

An individual's degree of awareness changes constantly throughout development and is tied to the exercise of metacognitive reflection. Even though the gradual development of formal reasoning allows adolescents to achieve a higher degree of self-awareness, many limitations can be caused both during adolescence and after by a difficulty in decentralizing, by a lack of experience in exercising metacognition and by emotional interference. Due to its characteristics, action, as it is the product of "limited rationality," can provoke unexpected and unwanted effects. These experiences, although painful, serve as powerful stimuli to revise and readjust one's beliefs and objectives, leading individuals to seek a balanced relationship between potential and individual goals on one hand and opportunity and environmental limitations on the other (Brandstädter 1997). In this attempt, individuals are able to choose the "ecological niche" that best fits them.

The goals that propel actions are not necessarily rational in the common sense of the word; in fact, an action that seems absolutely irrational to others may make perfect sense to the individual. Returning to the previous example, the adolescent may choose to leave school indefinitely to achieve the objective of immediately pursuing a successful professional life. However, when analyzed objectively, these goals would prove to be unrealistic so that the adolescent's choice is, in fact, a losing choice.

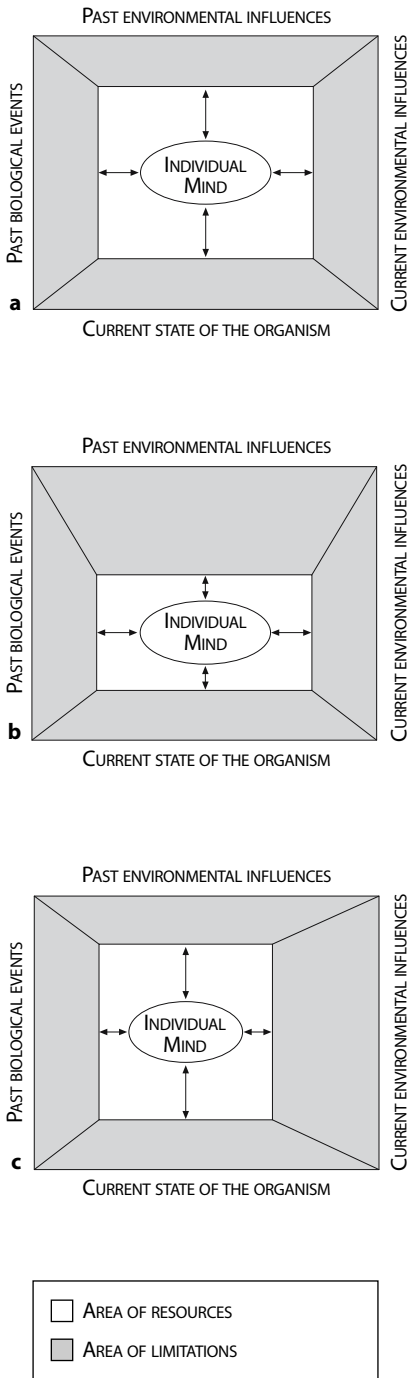
In a culture like today's, where our points of reference are more and more diversified, contradictory, and in constant evolution, it is to be expected that the process of "constructing meaning," while similar in people belonging to the same culture, is in reality widely varied, depending both on the individual and the cultural subgroup to which he or she belongs. In fact, the personal process of constructing meaning, which is the foundation of goal-oriented intentional actions, always occurs in relation to the social context in which the individual lives (Bruner 1990).

From what has been said up to now, it is clear that the action referred to is not omnipotent although at times individuals tend, quite childishly, to believe that it is so. As the control exercised by an individual - both by his or her own internal processes and his or her environment - is always partial, action is subject to obligations and limitations. However, within the range of these limitations, the action can make use of resources and opportunities that stem

from both the individual and his or her context (Fig. 1.5). In the example that was just made, the adolescent's decision is linked most importantly to limits and individual resources that stem from the individual's biological characteristics. These characteristics may be stable (such as intellectual capacity) or contingent (for example, a momentary situation such as an illness); they might stem from the individual's past (in which he or she may have had a successful or unsuccessful school experience and have developed capabilities or, rather, incompetence, on a cognitive, affective, or relational level) or from the individual's present reality (for example, a sense of self-efficacy). All of these variables do not, however, determine the individual's decision. A decision is the result of a personal evaluation, with varying degrees of awareness and freedom, based on what is most important to the individual, what his or her expectations are for the future, and how he or she feels these objectives can be achieved.

At the same time, the context in which the adolescent interacts is also relevant. Constraints and opportunities, not always balanced, are part of the context. Referring back again to the previous example of the student suffering in an unsatisfactory school environment, this adolescent's decision may be limited by his family's lack of financial means or by the fact that in the small town where he lives, not all types of schools are present. Other more dramatic examples might be adolescents who grow up in war-torn countries, in a period of major economic recession, or in a family where one of the parents has passed away. It is important, in any case, to remember that apart from the objective characteristics of the context, what actually makes the difference is each person's subjective representation of his or her environment, experience in that environment, and ability to confront it. In other words, there is no direct correspondence between the objective constraints and possibilities provided by one's environment (for example, a lower-than-average income) and what one personally experiences (feeling that he or she lacks resources for a successful future). Once again, what is important is the meaning that the individual attributes to his or her relationship with the world around him or her. The model of development as action in context can be considered "useful fiction" with a great deal of heuristic value (Silbereisen et al. 1986) because it recognizes the central role of the individual and his or her actions, which are meaningful and oriented toward different objectives although subject to numerous limitations.

The degree of complexity of actions carried out can also vary. At higher levels, we find long-term plans of action, such as deciding to enroll in a lyceum following middle school, for example, thus planning to pursue a university degree instead of joining the workforce immediately following secondary school. [In Italy, secondary school - which adolescents enter at 14 years - lasts five years, and at the end of this, they take a final examination. There are different paths for secondary school, with diverse specializations. Secondary schools can generally be divided into lyceums (classical, scientific, linguistic, psychopedagogic, artistic), technical institutes (for accountants, surveyors, industrial technicians), and professional institutes (with different specializations ranging from artisan or secretarial and tourism to social care). Lyceums



**Fig. 1.5.** Schematic representation of the area of resources and limitations. The figure shows how the individual must act within an area of opportunities and resources (both personal and contextual) surrounded by an area of limitations and obstacles. Panels **b, c** show how the size of this area can be different for every individual at a given moment in their development. The action of each, at a specific time of life, is carried out by drawing from certain personal or contextual resources while some other resources are unavailable. Panel **b** may represent an adolescent with a troubled, conflict-ridden family life during childhood, which in turn leads to greater limitations and less opportunity in the present. Panel **c** may be representative of an adolescent who attends a very unsatisfactory school. The opportunities and limits to the adolescent's development can increase, decrease, or disappear over time based on the actions of the individual. The individual can alter the dimensions of the area, although not without constraints, in the following ways: acting on the consequences of past environmental influences; acting on the current state of the organism; acting on the consequences of past biological events. For example, the use of psychoactive substances influences the present neurophysiological conditions, reducing the area of available resources and, as a consequence, causing greater limitations to cognitive elaboration. At the same time, this action also affects the adolescent's present environment due to the strain it causes in relationships with family members. Again, it is the individual's representations that mediate the action. These representations can change over time, contributing to the expansion or reduction of resources and obstacles that originate from past experiences. For example, a different representation of a long-past experience, re-elaborated through memory, can lead to a change in the emotional value placed on it and its potential to influence the present; memory is not a photographic reproduction of the past but, rather, a constant reconstruction (Schacter 1996). An example of this might be the different representation a woman can have of her ambivalent attachment to her mother, allowing her to be a good mother to her children despite a negative past experience.

offer a wider general education giving more emphasis to Italian and foreign literature, history, and philosophy; technical and professional institutes mostly emphasize practical subjects and focus on preparation that aims for a faster insertion into the workforce.] At an intermediate level, we find less-complex and less-lengthy sequences of action that can either facilitate a plan of action or make it more difficult. An example might be the decision to attend a language course to make better marks both in secondary school and at university. At a lower level, we find the single instrumental acts that can either facilitate or hinder the reaching of intermediate and long-term goals: for example, deciding whether or not to go out with friends in the evening when tired of studying but still having English homework to finish for the following day. These levels can be considered in a hierarchical sequence but in adolescence, there is actually a complex interrelationship between them. While on one hand the adolescent's newly acquired cognitive capacities make it possible to formulate long-term plans of action, the future often appears vague and distant and can hardly be considered important. At the same time, the effective capacity to postpone satisfaction conflicts with the trend - so strongly emphasized in Western culture - to favor immediate gratification.

As already noted, an action has the important consequence of producing changes both in an individual and in his or her surrounding environment. Precisely because of these changes, development itself is seen as a self-regulated process in which an individual's choices can either modify the course of developmental in a positive or negative way or else maintain the development path that has been undertaken. For example, an adolescent's decision, whatever the motivation may be, to do volunteer work might change his or her values and world view and seriously alter his or her future choices. Numerous studies have shown that competent adolescents who are able to plan for their future and make choices that will be useful for their future are better able to acquire and maintain social supports and to reach their objectives. The outcome for these adolescents is that in adulthood and with maturity, they achieve positive results that in turn build their self-esteem, triggering a virtuous cycle of success (Clausen 1991). Another case of adolescent action that has a profound influence on future development is the precocious assumption of an adult role. An example of this might be early initiation in the workforce or marriage at a young age, both of which often compromise personal and social development in the long term and limit richer or more advanced future achievements.

At the same time, an individual's actions also alter his or her social context. While in a more traditional perspective the environment's effect on the individual was particularly emphasized (for example, the influence of peer-group models on the behavior of adolescents), today it is recognized that individuals also exert an important influence on the environment in which they live. First of all, individuals select the environments with which they interact; for example, when they choose to spend time with a particular peer group or make friends with one person instead of another. Furthermore, their behavior within a certain environment alters the environment itself. For instance, a

particularly creative, extroverted adolescent who is able to involve a group of friends in various activities and to establish quality relationships with others in turn contributes to creating a positive environment that he or she benefits from. The ability to select and mould one's environment in such a way as to influence one's own development improves throughout childhood to adolescence (Lerner 1998). In fact, it is in this age group that individuals acquire the cognitive and relational capabilities that allow them to have a greater impact on themselves and their environment and, consequently, on their own development. Although enormous individual differences exist, it has been shown that some particular processes allow adolescents to exert such an influence: these processes have been identified as personal objectives, identity, a sense of self-efficacy, and ability to plan (Crockett and Silbereisen 2000a).

### **1.3 Developmental Tasks**

One of the most interesting aspects of the interaction between individual and context concerns the developmental tasks that, little by little, the individual is confronted with. As individuals progress gradually through the life cycle, they find that they have to resolve a series of specific tasks characteristic of each stage of existence. These tasks derive from an interaction between physiological maturation, new cognitive and relational capabilities, and individual aspirations, on the one hand, and the combination of influences, requirements, and societal norms, on the other hand. According to the definition by Havighurst (1952, 1953), who introduced this concept, overcoming the developmental tasks that characterize each stage of life leads to a state of well-being and a harmonious, well-adjusted relationship between the individual and his or her social context; heightened self-esteem; and a foundation laid to successfully reach the developmental tasks of future stages. One example of a developmental task that is characteristic of our society is learning to read and write in the early years of childhood.

With regard to adolescence, the general and universal developmental tasks are identified as follows (Palmonari 1997):

- Developmental tasks related to puberty and sexual maturation
- Developmental tasks related to the broadening of personal and social interests and the acquisition of hypothetical and deductive reasoning
- Developmental tasks related to identity construction and the reorganization of the concept of self

This description offers a general framework on which to base a more precise identification of the specific developmental tasks that adolescents are faced with at a given moment of their personal development. The primary developmental task that an adolescent must face in relation to sexual and cognitive development clearly rests in the formation of his or her own clear and distinct identity, which allows the individual to face the world in an autonomous, coherent, and responsible way. The ability to do so is rec-



ognized as an adult characteristic; thus, we consider adolescence to be terminated when these capabilities have been at least sufficiently acquired (Box 1.1). Today, there is consensus in the life-cycle perspective on the fact that identity development occurs throughout the entire existence of the individual and that it is therefore appropriate to discuss construction rather than acquisition of identity in adolescence. Even the concept of crisis between identity and role confusion, characteristic of Erikson's conception (1950, 1958), has been substituted by the more neutral concept of exploration (Marcia 1996). In fact, there is a growing awareness, which has matured based on empirical evidence, that for the majority of adolescents the development of identity does not involve particularly conflictual situations as much as times of exploration of varied length related to different areas that can be resolved or not through the construction of various aspects relevant to individual identity. Identity is no longer defined as a single construction but as a dynamic, complex, and not necessarily uniform system that is continuously reorganized by the individual.

As they originate from the confrontation between a precise social context and an individual at a precise moment of that individual's physical and psychological development, developmental tasks, especially in a rapidly changing society, are not unalterable over time. As both the requirements of society and the opportunities it offers have changed, being an adolescent today is quite different from being an adolescent at the beginning of the 20th century. Even tasks

### Box 1.1. Developmental Tasks in Adolescence

In 1953, Havighurst identified the following developmental tasks typically accomplished during adolescence:

- Establish new and more mature relationships with peers of both genders
- Prepare for marriage and family life
- Develop intellectual competencies and knowledge necessary for civic competence
- Have a desire to be and to behave in a socially responsible way
- Acquire a system of values and an ethical conscience that guide behavior
- Gain emotional independence from parents and other adults
- Aim and prepare for an occupation or profession
- Acquire a masculine or feminine social role
- Accept one's own body and use it effectively.

This list clearly shows that developmental tasks depend both on historical period and social context. In fact, the above-listed developmental tasks relate to white, middle-class North American adolescents in the 1950s. Since that time, attempts have been made to redefine and update the developmental tasks while the concept has been criticized for its generic nature and for lack of empirical criteria for evaluation (Koops 1996). Instead of attempting to make an exhaustive list of developmental tasks, which would inevitably be incomplete and his-

that can be considered universal, such as the ability to establish heterosexual relationships, can vary widely within the same Western society in relation to the specific family, school, and social contexts that the adolescent has been raised in. This developmental task is carried out in different ways in European society, depending on the educational background of the family and the different school paths, within the different national cultures (for example, the Nordic as opposed to the Mediterranean model). Both the moment (for example, age of leaving the family home, age of maternity and paternity) and the way in which certain tasks are carried out (for example, marriage, living together, stable relationship without living together, no stable relationship) can vary greatly.

In particular, it has been noted that the additional requirements placed by today's society on adolescents are both more complex and less clearly defined. One example is the ambiguity of professional and personal goals to be achieved in a society that is filled with contrasting values and in which professional profiles change rapidly. This lack of clarity is combined with the requirement to make a precise decision about the type of school to attend, a decision that can have major consequences on the adolescent's future.

In other words, the universal task of constructing an identity and, consequently, of gaining autonomy and adult responsibilities can occur in very different ways depending on the individual and his or her context. An individualized developmental path is defined based on the different developmental tasks and the different solutions that each individual chooses. It has been shown

**Box 1.1.**

torically dated, it would be better not to reify developmental tasks but to apply the notion to analyze the different and multiple problems that every adolescent, boy or girl, must face and overcome in order to construct an identity and gain autonomy from adults (Palmonari 1997), both on an individual as well as an interpersonal and institutional level. It is the construction of an autonomous adult identity that can truly be considered the fundamental developmental task of adolescence. This task, however, can be carried out in different ways based on the historical setting and specific sociocultural context that the individual belongs to. In Western culture, adolescents are given the opportunity to develop their identity in a condition of "social suspension," meaning that while they already have many of the characteristics of adults, they are free from the responsibilities of adulthood. While this state of suspended social status may cause some difficulty for adolescents - as it can signify a lack of participation in society, marginalization, and separation in a world of school and leisure time - it also allows adolescents to use their personal resources in the process of constructing their identity and forming new relationships with the world around them without rush. The literature indicates that assuming adult roles precociously in adolescence, for example by entering the workforce, often compromises personal and social development in the long-term and can place limitations on more advanced future achievements.

that having the opportunity to face demanding developmental tasks in a sequence and not at the same time serves as an important protective factor (Coleman 1989). The majority of adolescents do well when facing even complex developmental tasks because they are able to confront them one at a time. When adolescents are requested to confront many tasks at the same time, they can have serious difficulties. For example, an adolescent may successfully confront the tasks that involve exploration of the social world outside the family and be progressing in the ability to establish significant friendships. The next task to overcome would be preparing to enter the workforce. If a tragic event, such as the death of the family breadwinner, forces the adolescent to start working prematurely, the demands of this task could make resolving the first task more difficult, and the adolescent could suffer as a result.

The concept of developmental tasks allows us to identify the social expectations that apply to adolescents. These expectations form a point of reference for the development of an adolescent's individual objectives. As we have seen, these objectives in turn guide the actions of that adolescent. It is based on developmental tasks that adolescents carry out self-regulated actions aimed at achieving personally significant objectives. From this it can be inferred that it is necessary to go beyond the exterior appearance of behavior to comprehend which objectives the adolescent aims to reach with a particular action in relation to one or more of the developmental tasks characteristic of his or her culture or social context. This means that types of behavior that appear similar may have very different motivations. For example, some students who are still dependent on their parents and eager to seek their approval may work hard in school mainly to please their parents while for others, working hard in school may be a way to reach greater autonomy from their parents through the academic success. On the contrary, very different types of behavior can also have similar objectives; for example, while dangerous behavior such as using drugs can serve the objective of affirming one's self and identity, this objective can also be reached through socially productive behavior such as, for example, working to help others.

#### **1.4 Risk and Well-Being**

The various individual paths to development during adolescence are therefore the result of actions oriented toward objectives that have a specific meaning for each individual adolescent. The adolescent, with his or her own unique biological characteristics and history, responds differently to the developmental tasks posed by the particular context in which he or she lives. The action carried out in turn has an influence on both the individual and his or her context. These different developmental paths, although quite varied, are not as pervasively problematic and maladjusted as is often thought. As already noted, empiric research has demonstrated that the situation is quite the opposite; only a minority of adolescents experience major difficulties while the

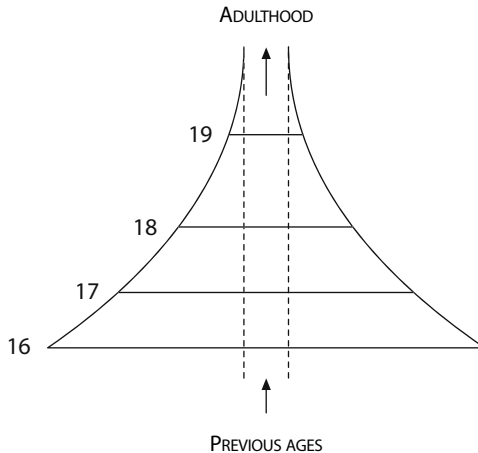
majority make the transition from youth to adulthood without seriously jeopardizing their health and well-being (Koops 1996). Adolescence is undoubtedly a time of transition that, along with a certain degree of continuity with the past, also presents strong discontinuity. It is often these elements of discontinuity, which are certainly numerous compared to previous ages, that attract the attention of many parents, teachers, and adults, giving the impression that the condition of adolescents is generally one of suffering and danger. Examples of this discontinuity apply not only to the physical appearance and physiological and sexual maturation of adolescents, but also to the way they think, the way they behave, and the way they interact with adults and their peers. The mass media, trying to capture the attention of an audience who has become used to all the "noise," emphasizes the most shocking, negative events involving adolescents, contributing to creating the erroneous impression that a very large number of adolescents are involved in risky or criminal activities. Based on a common error in judgment caused by the availability heuristic, we tend to believe that those types of behavior we hear talked about the most, and that we remember most easily, are the ones that occur most frequently. For this reason, many adults lack the more realistic view of adolescence as a time when the majority of boys and girls are gradually constructing, through often trying personal elaboration, a balanced and differentiated relationship between themselves and the world around them (Verhofstadt-Denève et al. 1996). Once again, it is important to remember that development, throughout the entire life cycle, experiences times of imbalance from which a new, more differentiated, and more complex psychological organization emerges; it is this, in fact, that distinguishes development from simple change.

It is important to note that our vision of adolescence began to change when all adolescents began to be studied and not only those suffering from various pathologies or involved in delinquency or drug abuse. The methodological error of moving from an analysis of a pathological condition to explain normal behavior occurred in the past not only with adolescence. Just consider for example how, for years, the normal behavior of children was interpreted based on models drawn from studies of pathological behavior in adults who were asked to reconstruct backward the phases of their own development based on their memories. While for the study of infancy and childhood these conceptions have become obsolete, for adolescence, they have persisted more easily as, indeed, at this age, a significant number of adolescents show problematic or risky behavior that can surprise, disturb, or worry adults (Jessor and Jessor 1977). The visibility and exaggeration of many types of adolescent behavior has led us to confuse normal development in which this conduct is transitory, with pathological development in which, on the contrary, these types of behavior persist over time. Thus, it was erroneously believed that all these adolescents could be grouped together and that the behavior of normal adolescents could be interpreted based on that of pathological adolescents. Today, it is evident to all scholars that the development of all adolescents cannot be explained through an analysis of only those developmental trajec-

ries that have led to a failure (Jessor et al. 1991), as the processes involved are different. We will return to this topic shortly (Fig. 1.6).

The challenge of development is experienced in adolescence jointly with the adolescent's parents, peers, and teachers within a precise community; therefore, it is an undertaking that involves not only adolescents but many other people and social contexts that constitute the fabric within which growth is achieved. In this sense, adolescence is an effort that involves not only the family but also the school and even the community that the adolescent belongs to, despite the fact that this community is not always aware of the role it plays and often considers the adolescent more as a foreign or damaged element than a vital part of the social fabric (Box 1.2).

It is precisely this relationship between the adolescent and his or her context that must be referred to in order to comprehend risk behavior in adolescence. These are types of behavior that appear at this age and that can, in a



**Fig. 1.6.** A dual trend can be found in some types of risk behavior, such as deviant behavior (discussed in detail in Chap. 5). This type of conduct is more common in adolescents between the ages of 16 and 17 and tends to decrease with age in the great majority of adolescents. For this reason, they have been defined as “desistent.” For these adolescents, deviant behavior can perform, in Western society today, functions related to identity development and social participation, such as transgression, self-experimentation, and the sharing of actions and emotions with friends. Some adolescents, mostly boys, continue, however, to manifest deviant behavior even in the later years of adolescence and into adulthood. These subjects have been defined as “persistent” (Moffitt 1993; Moffitt et al. 2001); not only were they deviant at 16-17 years of age, but their behavior was already irregular at earlier ages. In these adolescents, deviant behavior does not perform the functions mentioned above but is related to other processes and has other origins. An analysis restricted to only these adolescents would not allow comprehension of deviant behavior of the large majority of adolescents and would risk offering a wrong explanation of the motivations behind these adolescents' behavior.

direct or indirect way, jeopardize social and psychological well-being as well as physical health in the present and future. Thus, a little girl who had always up to that moment obediently followed the dietary habits of the family, might suddenly decide to refuse these habits in exchange for a dangerous diet or unhealthy eating habits. Other adolescents show curiosity and interest in psychoactive substances and begin to experiment with their use. This use can then stabilize, becoming a habit that carries over into adulthood, such as cigarette smoking, for example, the harmful effects of which on one's physical health cannot be perceived in the short term. Other behavior that appears at this age, such as risky driving, for example, can have immediate negative effects on one's physical health and survival; in Italy, car accidents are the primary cause of death for young people. Still other behavior, such as precocious or unprotected sex, can involve psychological and social risks, such as early pregnancy or physical risks tied to sexually transmitted diseases. In the case of other behavior, such as vandalism or theft, the risks involved are mainly psychological and social, as it undermines the peaceful relationship between the individual and the society in which he or she lives. The majority of boys and girls give up in later years some of the risky behavior that emerged during adolescence: this is generally the case for marijuana use as well as many other types of deviant behavior (Jessor and Jessor 1977; Silbereisen et al. 1986; Silbereisen and Noack 1988).

The few examples stated here illustrate that these are different types of behavior that have, however, the common characteristic of being able to compromise the physical, psychological, and social well-being of the adolescent in the present as well as in the long term. In a more restrictive theoretical perspective than the one used today, based largely on the norms and expectations of society, this type of behavior was defined in the past as "problem behavior." Today, in a broader theoretical perspective that takes into consideration the physical, psychological, and social well-being of the adolescent, we commonly refer to risk behavior (Jessor 1998), as it can compromise both physical health and psychosocial well-being. These types of behavior vary widely and hence have often been examined separately in literature; smoking marijuana is not evidently the same as being involved in a sexual relationship. In reality, however, these types of behavior, although very different in the way they are carried out and in their consequences, are linked to common problems characteristic of adolescence. For this reason, in order to comprehend them, it is necessary to go beyond an analysis that is limited to each single, specific behavior. Instead, we must take a broader, more in-depth view of the interactions between various types of behavior, what they have in common, and what causes them to appear - often they are not isolated but associated in the form of a syndrome - at this time in the life of an individual (Jessor and Jessor 1977).

The widespread nature of risk behavior during adolescence in Western culture and the fact that many types tend to disappear or diminish successively in the majority of young people and adults clearly demonstrates that it is impossible to interpret them in terms of individual psychopathology, a theoretical