Adolescence and Reckless Driving: Critical Reflections

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Summary

Analysing the data of a previous study, the authors present a number of considerations on the problem of adolescent reckless driving, noting that quantitative studies furnish a sort of snapshot of adolescent risky behaviour but do not equip one to understand the psychological significance of the phenomenon. What they criticize is the psychological construct designated sensation seeking, understood as a personality trait specific to the adolescent and young adult population, and the construct concerned with self-regulatory efficacy, that is the inability to resist the pressures exerted by their peers to undertake dangerous actions. These constructs, which have been excessively generalized in psychological research, correspond to complex dynamics typical of an adolescence whose mental functioning is dissociated, that is belonging neither to the world of adults nor to that of children nor to that of adolescents, which brings the need for a range of experiences, some of which may be physically very dangerous, in the course of the subject s ongoing response to the problems of adolescence. This mental state belongs to a phase of life but also to a structural organization of the mind that can be reawakened in the course of an individual s life experience, which implies an intrapsychic dynamic that cannot be denied.
The psychological constructs utilized, though susceptible to criticism from a methodological point of view, are in fact meaningful in the field of studies in social psychology, but their extension to the functioning of the mind generally is inappropriate and represents a dangerous oversimplification. Generalizing the meaning of data obtained through quantitative tools to apply to the field of psychology as a whole can lead to a radical misunderstanding of the very meaning of psychology, with a return to the quest for general laws of psychic functioning through studies conceived in terms of a form of neo-positivist reductionism that risks flattening out complexity in an attempt to make it analysable.

Key words

adolescence, self-regulatory efficacy, risky behaviour, sensation seeking.

It is well known that in our country, as elsewhere, reckless behaviour, and in particular automobile accidents, are especially frequent among adolescents. In Italy young people (ages 15-29) account for one third of the total number of accident fatalities (300,000 from 1970 to today) (ISS, 2004). This phenomenon has generally been investigated by applying primarily quantitative methodologies analysing contextual factors linked to reckless driving and the individual traits that can support such behaviour. Studies

designed to highlight contextual factors in risky behaviour on the highway, thorough though they may be, provide a picture of the phenomenon, whose meanings, however, do not emerge. Even if we know that such factors as the type of vehicle used, the time of day, the presence or absence other passengers, drinking or drug use heighten the risk of reckless driving on the part of adolescents, this information can only confirm or deny in statistical terms what each of us knows from personal experience or general knowledge. Moreover, familiarity with these data seems to justify, and in a sense normalize, a reality that is disturbing precisely because it affects the adolescent and young adult population.

Studies investigating personal traits, such as cognitive egocentrism (Green et al., 2000), thrill seeking (Zuckerman, 1979), the tendency to violate socially accepted rules (Parker et al., 1995), or the ability to resist peer pressure (Caprara et al., 1999), apply concepts that we have enlisted to illustrate quantitative data obtained from an adolescent population. Such conceptual constructs, which are considered to be elements favoring or determining reckless behaviour at the wheel bring us closer to the subjective side of the problem, but do not help us to understand the phenomenon itself, which is fitted, in one way or another, to standardized models for explaining certain adolescent behaviours. These thus become generalizable rules, which are, however, meaningless at the psychodynamic level. Even the gender differentiation in reckless driving whereby males are distinctly prevalent, also in our own data though raising questions on the characteristics of psychological operations in the two genders, adds nothing to our understanding. It might seem, on the basis of a superficial consideration, that such reckless behaviours correspond to something no more precisely defined than as cognitive dysfunctions or to a widespread dysfunctional organization of the personality in a substantial segment of the adolescent and young adult population who would seem to be driven, almost against their will, to act against their own persons and those of others in the course of day-to-day life. This descriptive way of considering the problem risks labeling young people as socio-psychopaths, which, from another point of view, further banalizes, and thus renders meaningless, the problem of reckless behaviour. It is important, rather, to attempt to understand the deep motivations behind these destructive, as well as self-destructive, behaviours if one wishes to attempt to check or prevent a widespread phenomenon that expresses an intense subjective unease and a substantial difficulty in regulating affective states.

A great many considerations of this sort are possible. They seem sensible and have the ring of truth. If, however, they are to become scientific knowledge it will probably be necessary to combine the empirical data marshalled through the analysis of adolescent populations with a deeper psychological examination of individual cases. The latter ought to be based on a set of concepts that are, if not verifiable, at least widely accepted and subject to external as well as internal evaluation. Psychoanalytical concepts are, in fact, usually theoretical constructs that once separated from the interactive situation of the therapy that brought them to light have a limited but essential value. These are based on extracts from psychoanalytical experience and form a sufficient though not exhaustive basis from which to theorize what transpires between the analyst and the patient thus furnishing a language suited to their comprehension and to the potential for

communication with others who share analogous though differing experiences. If one manages to fit together empirical data from diverse contexts, for example regarding the Oedipus complex, avoiding the risk of improper extrapolations becomes more difficult when one applies sophisticated concepts necessary for ground-breaking research in specific areas but not readily transferred to other fields than it is when one looks to generic conceptual tools that are readily and broadly applicable.

The set of problems these considerations raise concern not the method followed to collect and analyse data, that is the validity or efficacy of the investigative tools, so much as the psychological construct investigated, which may not correspond to a real mental functioning. When it does, distinct sets of results can be pooled even if they have been gathered following disparate methodologies, since they correspond to a common psychic reality that represents the object studied from different vantage points.

Moreover, the deep comprehension experienced as genuine in the interpersonal relationship of therapy and valid for the individual and relationship in question, accords with the aim of clinical psychology, described by Lagache (1949). Here one seeks not signs or symptoms of illness but an understanding of certain aspects of the human being of his suffering, his unease and his disorders whether healthy or ill. Grounded in the in-depth study of individual cases, the examination of aspects and traits of personality, conflicts, anguish and defenses leads to the construction of case histories seen as dynamic processes. The clinical psychologist establishes a psychological profile of the subject examined as the present result of the particular history pieced together in the course of that relationship and formulates an appraisal of his potentialities and his susceptibility to change. The scientific worth of the clinical method lies in the fact that its considerations are firmly anchored to individual cases, facts or relationships that can subsequently be verified and generalized by different methods. Paradoxically, a single well-designed experiment may suffice to establish a law even in the natural sciences world.

In our case, therefore, clinical observations on adolescents at risk can be generalized within the framework of the psychological study of adolescence and can help make psychological sense of descriptive data collected through quantitative methods provided that they deal with real mental functions and psychological constructs.

Adolescence has traditionally been defined as a phase in the life cycle extending from 12 to 18 years of age (Erikson, 1968), but we know how inappropriate such rigid temporal limits are, as these take account neither of the sociocultural and structural context of the family nor of the individual s psychic development. Nowadays this stage of life occupies a great deal of psychological space in the popular imagination and, as AriÅs (1960) maintains, we have moved from an era without adolescence to an era when adolescence is a privileged age. One hopes to enter it on time and to linger there at length, in calling attention to a marked slowing in the transition to adulthood.

The stages in the mental work every adolescent must perform essentially entail a waiting period, corresponding to preadolescence and the onset of puberty, a time of change marked by a dramatic physical transformation, and a psychological journey exemplified by disappointment in one s parents and the need to seek new sources of satisfaction on the outside, and by the phase of the discovery of one s own identity, of desires, of choices

and of renunciation apparently the most complex and difficult of phases. The journey ends at an age that varies from person to person and is accompanied by feelings of satisfaction or disappointment whose relative weight will lead to an idealization of adolescence or, conversely, the search for surrogate satisfactions whose inevitable inadequacy can find clinical expression in pathological behaviours or, in any event, signs of difficulty in leaving adolescence (Braconnier and Marcelli, 1990).

Whereas puberty can stand as the critical event that inaugurates adolescence, it would be mistaken to define its end in temporal terms, for some ties to childhood can persist into adulthood, and events in the course of one s life may rekindle psychological states, attitudes and behaviours identical or similar to those experienced in adolescence, without necessarily marking one as an eternal adolescent. Consequently, we cannot ignore the fact that adolescence is in itself a logical paradox, a proposition comprising an internal contradiction, and a paradoxical itinerary, at once terminable and interminable.

Adolescence, in fact, designates not only a phase in an individual s life cycle but also a persistent, though not always visible, structural organization of the mind. Characteristic of this organization are mental states markedly isolated one from the other and corresponding to the three communities (the world of children, the world of adults and the world of adolescents) between which a young person moves back and forth with the emergence and evolution of his internal structure, as though he were not anchored to any one place (Meltzer, 1978). A similar mental functioning, that could even recall the concept of dissociation as a simultaneous knowing and not knowing, a being here and not being here being me and not being me (Argentieri, 2006) creates confusion in the adolescent about his feelings toward himself and his objects, toward the significant persons in his life, concerning his awareness of what is happening in his internal world and in the external world and concerning his very identity, be it male or female. Further, the confusion of adolescents is also fostered by the difficulty of tolerating the suffering of depressive states induced by an awareness of envy, greed and violence against the beloved object in both the external and internal worlds (Harris, 1978).

Puberty, which marks the onset of adolescence, demands a profound revision of many balances, solutions and mechanisms that earlier development had shaped, modified and sometimes left behind, and sets in motion complex relational and psychological events that often find expression in behaviour that is seemingly incomprehensible, and may even be dangerous and irrational. This occurs, for example, in the case of the Oedipal conflict and the ambivalence it entails, a conflict that emerging sexuality reactivates and makes both attractive and dangerous. These striking and fundamental changes in mental life bring with them the need to deal with the anxiety of encountering what is new and to activate the work of mourning the loss of things familiar. The conflict presented by Freud in Mourning and Melancholia (1917) arises between the need to confront the reality of this loss and the impulse to deny it, activating defensive processes typically encountered in melancholia such as obsessive control, maniacal triumph, and the sadomasochistic humiliation of the object (Steiner 2005).

The adolescent finds himself needing to feel loved and protected by objects, and through relations with objects he must, at the same time, distance himself from. This regards, in

particular, his relations with his parents and the internal representations of them he is constructing. He fantasizes, and at the same time realizes, that he has disappointed and damaged them, but he is impelled to do so in order to feel their resistance. To him this reaction means a chance for the survival of the object and of his love for it despite these inevitable attacks, which he experiences as vital to the acquisition of autonomy. Violent feelings of loss, of guilt, and at times even of terror at sensing a total collapse of the world of internal and external relations are aroused by precisely this confusion between external reality and his internal world.

If the adolescent s confrontation with reality weathers these feelings of being diminished, neglected and disappointed, and perhaps a conviction that he is no longer loved, the phenomenon dreaded corresponds to his actual experience. The loss of love can thus be dealt with and perceived in its real dimensions, accompanied by a realistic quantity of guilt and, with this, a proportional decline in the idealization of the Self and of the object. Sometimes, however, his experience of these relationships has been deeply troubled and his ability to mourn losses has been impaired as, for example, in the case of many adopted youngsters, who experience these feelings toward their adoptive parents. The result may be a failed confrontation, and serious risks may emerge in the presence of real objects, the adoptive parents, still potentially capable of giving love but perceived as damaged and as persecutors. This psychological situation, especially important in his relationship with his parents, seems to entail a dynamic of damage to the

Self and/or to others in an unstable combination of guilt and persecution that represent the principle contents of the pain of adolescence.

One might ingenuously note the trust and even wonder a child feels before a parent driving a car, his admiration of the power of the vehicle and the parent who brings it to light and controls it. And the child emulates all these aspects when he plays with toy cars, exorcizing, through the collisions he provokes between them, some of the fears induced. Subsequent development will bring the opportunity to control, at least in part, all of these aspects and will reveal the desire to acquire these capabilities for himself. A bicycle, a motor scooter and the chance to drive a car mark important stages in growth, but are at the same time affected by the way this process unfolds. For example, the reactivation of the phenomena of the Oedipal situation may lead him to imitate, challenge and outdo his parents as drivers, and to try to beat them but at the same time feel responsible for, and guilty over, that challenge and his success. His need to challenge may also respond to a perception that the parents have no trust in his self-control. Such experiences may also bring the adolescent to a sort of passive compliance with the parents counsels of prudence. This imitative prudence may be weighted with a submission that is unable to find expression in acts of rebellion but may do so later in unexpected and dramatic acts of defiance, often enough permitted or facilitated by alcohol or drug consumption and at his peers urging. The traumas characteristic of the difficult process of adolescent growth can underlie behaviours of defiance but also pure acting, some of which, like driving dangerously, may be considered accidents and equated in quantitative studies with other, similar events without distinguishing their meanings

Within this general framework we would like to discuss two concepts already applied in investigating risky behaviour in adolescence (Smorti et al. 2009): self-regulatory efficacy and sensation seeking.

In general terms, the construct of self-efficacy corresponds to one s convictions as to one s own abilities to organize and execute the sequence of actions necessary to achieve particular results (Bandura 1997; Bandura et al. 2003). It has been applied to the various spheres of human activity familial, professional, social, etc. as an indicator of behaviour and as a cognitive function whose powers are susceptible to enhancement.

As applied to social relations, the concept of self-efficacy has acquired a more specific meaning (self- regulatory efficacy) denoting convictions as to one s capacity to resist peer pressure to engage in such risky behaviour as smoking, drinking and violating the highway code (Pastorelli and Picconi, 2001). This psychological construct incorporates cognitive, motivational and affective aspects and applies specifically to that phase of adolescence when the pressures exerted by his fellows within the group he belongs to can strongly condition a sense of self that is still not firmly anchored. The data collected previously have revealed that those male adolescents least able to apply self-regulatory efficacy are most strongly exposed to the risk of dangerous driving.

It is, on the other hand, precisely through belonging to a group of peers that young people can live out their own suffering and depressive experiences without running the risk of developing an extremely rigidly structured personality or meeting with psychopathological catastrophes (Meltzer 1978). Adolescent groups, whose workings are essentially depressive, are, in themselves, rather safe and are better able to foster development than puberal groups, unless adults impose restrictions that excessively reduce its living space, driving its members toward negativism.

The risk seems greater, again in terms of Meltzer s conception, when the adolescent finds himself, as he moves about between different worlds, anchored to the puberal group with its very primitive organization, its members identifications intertwined in such a way that through projection each member identifies with other members rather than with the group as a whole. This identification is based on mechanisms of splitting insomuch as each individual in the group plays a particular role in order to avoid suffering, which he expels to the outside, beyond the group. These roles, naturally, often change, and one individual may be aggressive one day and generous the next as another may be miserly one day and generous the next, but the roles continue to be passed around. The workings of this group are oriented toward a generally paranoid position, for as soon as the individual experiences a certain form of suffering he slides away to avoid depression and bonds more strongly with the group he belongs to.

In the light of these considerations the concept of self-regulatory efficacy may be associated with that of affective autonomy, understood as the capacity to self-regulate affects and emotions that one constructs in the course of development through interaction with one s primary caregivers but that is solidly acquired, in fortunate cases, only with adulthood. This implies a relative deficiency in regulatory self-efficacy in those subjects, males or females, who are still caught up in the complex dynamics of adolescent development.

The concept of sensation seeking (Zuckerman, 1979) denotes a trait defined by the seeking of new, different, complex and intense sensations and experiences and by the will to incur physical, social, legal and financial risks in order to amplify them. Subsequent research (Zuckerman, 1994) specified that subjects with these characteristics do not seek out risk for its own sake but, rather, underestimate it and accept it as the price to be paid in the course of those experiences. A multidimensional psychological construct is thus defined and taken to be a stable personality trait to be investigated in different socio-cultural contexts.

The attempt to generalize this concept has yielded studies of such social and demographic factors as gender, age, religion and culture of origin. The quest for exciting sensations is more frequent among males than females (Zuckerman 1994), as it is among youths between the ages of 10-14 and 20, whereas it decreases with age (Ball et al. 1984); it is more common in non-believers regardless of their religious background (Zuckerman e Neeb, 1980), and, in cultural terms, it is less marked in Asian countries than in the West (Zuckerman 1979). A positive correlation has also been detected in adolescents of both genders between this thrill seeking and situations entailing physical risk such as reckless driving and promiscuous or casual sex (Kraft and Rise 1994), drug abuse, and certain sports and social activities (gambling, travel in dangerous places, etc.). From a biological perspective, such risky behaviours can be correlated with a malfunction of the dopaminergic system attributed to a reduction in the levels of type B monoamino oxidase, which increases the availability of dopamine to the synapses and thus reduces the impulses that inhibit risk taking (Zuckerman 1994).

This sort of analysis of the phenomenon is as unsatisfactory as its quantitative measurements and adds nothing to the attempt to comprehend the significance of such a construct construed as a personality trait. Criticism has recently been levelled precisely at its usefulness in predicting health (Jackson and Maraun 1966, Clayton et al. 2007, Vallone et al. 2007, Stephenson et al. 2007), pointing out that only the adolescent/youth age group seems to conform to the pattern of risky behaviour described in the construct and only as regards the outset; at its multidimensional definition, whose relevance, it is now apparent, should be reconsidered; and at the notion that it constitutes a stable and universal personality trait. In other words, it would seem that this psychological construct has been wrongly generalized to the point of considering it a stable personality trait and endowing it with predictive value for adolescence through a cultural operation that extends to the young population as a whole a theoretical construction that only partially corresponds to limited aspects of real psychological operations. If this construct does have some validity in the psychosocial perspective from which it was formulated, we are now running the risk of an excessive superimposition of the social dimension and the psychological dimension whereby the intrapsychic dimension is in some sense negated.

In summary, nowadays in the field of psychological research we increasingly witness a generalization of constructs self- regulatory efficacy and sensation seeking for instance that are broadened illicitly to encompass the entire area considered to be the domain of psychology. These concepts, though open to methodological criticism, do nonetheless

have a value of their own within the field of research in social psychology, but their extension to the operation of the mind as a whole is inappropriate and represents a dangerous simplification, especially as regards adolescence. Generalizing the significance of data gathered by means of quantitative tools within the field of psychology can lead to a radical misunderstanding of the very meaning of psychology, with a return to nineteenth-century search for general laws of psychic operation on the basis of studies guided by a risky sort of neopositive reductionism that tends to flatten complexity in its attempt to make it susceptible to analysis.

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