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"This Place Is Not For Me". Place Identity And Personal Identity In Adolescence According To The Perspective Of Gestalt Psychology.

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Abstract
The notion of adolescence has not always existed; it is a product of our culture that emerged in the late 19th century. Always a predominantly negative picture of this period of life is drawn but adolescence it's almost a phase of existence in which personal limits are tested under the pressure of the desire to have ever new and exciting experiences and, in this way, those character and temperament traits typical of adults endowed with resourcefulness (typical of adult explorativeness) and the capacity for autonomous and responsible direction are defined and enhanced.
This complex process requires the presence of a frame of reference, called field or life environment, and so the aim of the article is to outline the process of formation and consolidation of self-structures, as a function of the environment (field), placing it within the theoretical framework of Gestalt psychology and examining the changes of brain structure in the adolescent.
Keywords: *identity, place identity, gestalt psychology, adolescence, field.*

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I. Introduction

The notion of adolescence has not always existed; it is a product of our culture that emerged in the late 19th century. Dostoevsky with his novel *The Adolescent*, (1875) outlines the elements that would later be recognized as characteristic of this phase: the totalization of ideals, introversion, reverie, lack of the capacity for productive work, the predominance of instincts, the propensity for easy falling in love, the search for originality combined with the search for models to imitate, and those sociopathic behaviors that often have the function of building the "peer group."

A predominantly negative picture of this period of life is drawn in this description, but adolescence is that phase of existence in which personal limits are tested under the pressure of the desire to have ever new and exciting experiences and, in this way, those character and temperament traits typical of adults endowed with resourcefulness (typical of adult explorativeness) and the capacity for autonomous and responsible direction are defined and enhanced.

For this complex process to take place and come to fruition, it requires the presence of a frame of reference, exemplified in the notion of field or life environment, which interacts dynamically with the processes of brain modification and growth, typical of the developmental period, that result in the production of the self.

The aim of the article, therefore, is to outline the process of formation and consolidation of the structure of the self, understood as a function of the environment (field), placing it within the theoretical framework of Gestalt psychology and examining the important changes that occur in brain structure, both from a physiological and functional point of view in the adolescent phase.

The development of the adolescent brain

Adolescence can be framed as period in which one is confronted with various challenges, accompanied and directed by the modification and growth of the brain structure not comparable to previous stages.

What takes place in fact is the maturation of areas that allow the appearance of the four mental characteristics typically recognized as belonging to it: novelty seeking, marked creative exploration, social involvement, and greater emotional intensity.

Humans at birth are endowed with the neuronal set-up necessary for life, but in any case, the evolution of the brain will be continuous and constant throughout existence. Thanks to MRI studies, it has been possible to

identify the full picture of age-specific changes occurring in different brain areas, as well as in the volume of gray and white matter. With reference to the latter, a remarkable increase following massive myelination of axons has been ascertained, whereas, on the contrary, there has been no similar phenomenon in the gray substance but rather a loss of density[1]; furthermore, the occurrence of a strengthening of the phenomenon of synaptogenesis with generation of new synapses has been ascertained[2].

Cortical development in this period is predominantly in the areas of the prefrontal cortex and other frontal regions regularly implicated in advanced cognitive functions as well as in the integration, synthesis, and regulation of behavior.

These brain areas are responsible for many important functions (termed executive functions): impulse control, emotional regulation, decision-making, logical and rational processes, and awareness of the consequences of one's actions. But they, not reaching full development until early adulthood, do not fully exert their inhibitory functions at that time.

Moreover, because of both environmental stimulation and dopamine production, there is also the development of subcortical areas, such as the amygdala and limbic system, which determine effects on the behavioral and emotional-affective system. Dopamine production is one of the fundamental mechanisms that manifests its effects during this period of life and provides the explanation for what generates typical behaviors. Adolescents in fact turn out to experience boredom frequently as a result of lower dopamine production, which, on the other hand, increases rapidly following particularly interesting and intense environmental stimulation.

As is easy to guess, this increased and sudden production of the neurotransmitter creates a feeling of well-being that encourages the pursuit and repetition of all those behaviors that induced it, also affecting mood and producing a state of general psychophysical well-being[3].

It also explains the reason for the occurrence of the typical reactivity to incentives which, accompanied by an immaturity in impulse control, gives rise to the particular conformation of behaviors characteristic of the phase. These behaviors thus have a biological basis traceable to the non-simultaneous development of the reward system and the control systems of the prefrontal cortex[4].

In a study carried out by four Italian researchers[5] it was highlighted how the ventral medial prefrontal cortex can be decisive in the construction of the model of the self, placing it also in relative mental time. In this sense, the study highlights how memories related to the self, which are necessary to maintain the sense of identity, depend on the function of the vmPFC, particularly Brodmann Area 10. Thanks to the activity of this area, it is not only possible to reflect on how one is in the present time, but also on the relative self-image in the past and the prospective self-image in the future.

Added to this is the further phenomenon of stabilization of dendritic spines, a phenomenon that would probably seem to result from the action of gonadal hormones[6], which produces as an effect the stabilization of experience-dependent learning.

Developmental changes typical of the adolescent phase also bear on the processing of social information and feedback conveyed by the environment: this process is termed "social reorientation "[7,8] and is associated with changes in the neural system that presides over the maturation of social cognition (change in the mode of affective response to the perceived experience of social rejection or acceptance) that result in a strengthening of the importance of engagement with peers as a motivational element in enhancing the learning and behavioral process.

Neuroimaging studies[9] have shown that social brain regions undergo important development in their structure. For example, while gray matter volume and cortical thickness in the Superior Posterior Temporal Sulcus and Dorsomedial Prefrontal Cortex decrease from infancy to the early twenties, in the Anterior Temporal Cortex cortical thickness and gray matter volume increases until adolescence. In addition, the amygdala, which has numerous connections with regions such as the Prefrontal and Anterior cingulate cortex that have regulatory functions, increases in volume by about 7 percent between late childhood and mid-adolescence, without going through noticeable changes after age 14[10].

Further studies[11] indicate that changes continue to occur in the late adolescent period in the occipital and temporal lobes, including various structures such as: the Superior Temporal Sulcus, the Facial Fusiform Area, and the Temporo-Parietal Junction. In general, all these changes result in an increase in brain volume.

Self-consciousness emerging from interaction with the world

Commonly in the human species, stimuli from the social environment undergo intense and primary neuronal processing, through which their primal identification and subsequent categorization can be integrated into a broad emotional and cognitive scenario.

The resulting social behavior goes through a common species-specific evolutionary trajectory, although it derives from very different contexts. What changes according to an evolutionary sense is both the motivation and the structure of the resulting social behavior.

In this sense, in the first phase of life the primary objective of motivation toward the other is the establishment of contact with the caregiving figure that produces (over time) the direction of the gaze, the

appearance of the smile and all those behaviors of orientation toward the other than oneself; later social behaviors will be based on the sharing of play in early childhood and then arrive at acceptance, identification and differentiation with and from the other in adolescence. All these experiences therefore allow for intersubjective exchange, fostering the gradual internalization of the importance of the other, structuring into a stable and enduring representation.

This relationship with the physical/social world and the personal psychological field connected to it is subject to incessant reformulations and rethinking, which contribute to the perception of an unstable and ever-changing sense of self.

Serving as a unifying backdrop is the physical environment within which life experience moves.

For the adolescent, the field, understood as the physical entity that guarantees the material background and as the "psychological" entity that determines its affective valence, acquires significance as a factor of security and personal definition. The places frequented enable the achievement of functions of (perceived) autonomy, self-regulation, escape, and socialization, and the attachment developed towards these places cooperates in the better definition of oneself and one's identity, favoring the execution of one of the developmental tasks[12] typical of adolescence, which is to become progressively independent of parental figures.

An important function performed by the field is to augment the process of emotional self-regulation, through which new emotional responses can be created and emotions modified continuously, responding adaptively to rapidly changing environmental and social stimuli[13]. In this process of self-regulation, both thoughts and feelings are used as well as environmental strategies defined through continuous interactions with places, whereby place-specific cognitive and emotional patterns are created that become the basis for self-regulation.

A prominent role within this process is played by favorite places which perform the function of providing refreshment, offering the possibility of overcoming worries by regaining the ability to concentrate and relax[14].

This phenomenon is illustrated by the notion of "attachment to places[15]" that is, the process through which people build affective and cognitive bonds with the places in which they live, which are then translated into specific behavioral patterns; these bonds produce a sense of well-being, security and correlate with positive emotions.

In adolescents through attachment to the physical context, a solidity in the process of identity construction is determined due to the good level of perceived safety, which encourages exploration and the perception of the possibility of control. In this sense, continued frequentation of physical places such as the school, the square, the sports center offers a unified horizon of significance to perceptions, behaviors and emotions that are immediately translatable and understandable because one knows the language in which they are expressed.

In fact, it is in all these places that those "optimal experiences[16]" take place that allow one to identify the elements of behavior and attitudes that, by determining well-being, will become an integral part of one's identity construction.

Place Identity, Self-Identity. The field as origin and development of the self.

The Gestalt theory perspectives accepts this vision of organism-environment interconnectedness and proposes a conception of the self in which it is described not as a fixed entity or as a psychic instance, but as a specific process: it is not Being but being-in-the-world. In this sense, the Self is depicted as an agent of contact with the environment (field) moment by moment and allows for exchange and creative adaptation.

To understand what is meant by the concept of "field", one of the foundational elements of Gestalt psychology theorizing, we must go back historically to the studies carried out by Kurt Lewin. The latter translates this concept from Faraday's and Maxwell's electromagnetic field theory[17] into the field of psychology, identifying it as that continuous space in which several opposing forces act simultaneously. Lewin further specified this notion by expanding it into its meaning of "life-space," by which he identified "the totality of facts that determines the behavior of an individual at a given time: the "totality of possible events"[18]. These facts or events would not be captured in their objective quality but processed in the essentially psychological and therefore subjective dimension of the individual.

In the Gestalt perspective this means that there is not THE field, but a field consisting of a given organism and its environment, which becomes its living space.

In this living space, where the complex interaction between the organism and the environment takes place, the self enables creative adaptation by consequently allowing development and growth.

"We speak of creative adaptation as the essential function of the self, or rather, the self is the system of creative adaptations"[19]. Through adaptation, the subject is transformed or becomes transformed in contact with the environment, and through creative capacity he or she becomes a creator of the world and transformer of it. The self therefore plays the important role of creating and discovering meanings.

The self develops this action through three functions:

- The "ES" function, which pertains to the sensory-body perception of internal and external stimulations. It is the set of internal drives, vital needs, organic excitations, memory traces belonging to the past and is related to the bodily dimension (Where am I, what am I doing? What do I feel?).
- The "I" function, that is, the definition of needs and one's identification with them. It is an active function of choice or rejection and calls into question one's responsibility in limiting or enhancing contact, manipulating the environment according to the felt awareness of needs or desires. It determines what to do, how and for how long to make contact.
- The "Personality" function, which concerns defining oneself in one's history, in the making. It concerns the subject's self-image and the system of attitudes used in interpersonal relationships: it is what enables each person to recognize himself or herself as responsible for what he or she feels. It is through personality that one defines one's sense of Identity, since this function is the architect of the unitary restructuring and reintegration of previous experiences.

Proshansky, an environmental psychologist, related the concept of identity to the environment in 1978, summarizing the notion of "place identity." "Place identity refers to those dimensions of the SELF that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment through a complex system of conscious and unconscious ideas, beliefs, preferences, feelings, values, and goals combined with behavioral tendencies and abilities relevant to that environment."[20]

Identity and its specific characteristics play a considerable role in experiencing discomfort and inadequacy or, conversely, well-being and serenity in one environment rather than another, and thus it is not simply a taste preference that determines this experience.

An interesting contribution with respect to the analysis of this phenomenon comes from the research on environmental preferences conducted by Fernando Dogana[21] in which he highlights a parallelism between preferred environment and personality traits. In particular, he focuses on the traits of those who prefer the sea to the mountains, whereby the former are distinguished as extroverted people, inclined to fun and interested in physical appearance and direct contact with nature; mountain admirers are configured as reflective, introverted people who tend to establish deep and lasting relationships. So, at the basis of the possible choice of the place in which to preferentially conduct one's existence would be elements deeply rooted in the individual himself and not determined exclusively by situational derivation.

The concept of "place identity," expressed by Environmental Psychology, comprehensively fixes this concordance, indicating those elements of overlap between self-image and meanings/values attributed to a physical environment.

Place identity is conceived as a substructure of the broader identity and consists of variegated consciousnesses about the physical world in which the individual lives, given by a set of memories, values, preferences, meanings and behaviors, and referring to the multiplicity of physical environments with which the existence of every human being comes into contact on a daily basis[22]. Serving as a backdrop to these awarenesses are the past experiences conducted in the places and living spaces used by the individual for the satisfaction of his or her psychological, social and physical needs.

Proshansky specifies the essential aspects of the concept, clarifying its characteristics. He sheds light on the fact that the physical environment within which the individual carries out his experiences is not "simply" recorded by them but that his needs, the fulfillment of which in large part depends on the opportunities present in this same environment, may find in it swinging opportunities to be fulfilled. From this the individual derives beliefs, perspectives and values, regarding what is "good" and less "good" in this living environment, which go on to define its essential contours by characterizing the structure of (place) identity.

Such identity is also directly linked to the "social" element, understood as the presence in the subject's life and environment of those significant people who, by their behavior, their "directives," direct perceptions regarding what is good or bad about the same environment.

Lastly, the author emphasizes that place identity is not a concept that, in terms of its form and characteristics, is stable and enduring, perfectly integrated into the broader identity of the individual since, just as this undergoes mutations (albeit minimal) as a function of the changing life experiences conducted, in the same way place identity comes to change because it is constructed in relation to specific physical and social contexts.

Proshansky describes three main functions performed by place identity:

Recognition: the first of the identified components bases its assumption on the experience previously conducted by the individual in different physical environments, which enables the identification of those aspects of the same based on which it is possible to understand whether a new place is dangerous or not. In this sense it enables the recognition in the environment of all those elements that can support the individual's sense of confidence and security.

Meaning: this function cooperates with and amplifies the action of the previous one and determines the possibility of identifying and understanding the functionality of an environment and the goals and objectives connected with it, creating in the individual a real signifying apparatus for evaluating contexts.

Expression: this function of place identity makes it possible to bridge any discrepancies felt by the individual between his or her needs and environmental conditions, intervening in external conditions to modify them by adapting them, in the best possible way. It also directs the choice of an environment in relation to one's personal characteristics.

Ultimately, these three functions seem to support Cooper's hypothesis[23], which asserts the existence of a dynamic functional relationship between the person and the environment whereby the environment is actively created by the person and in this the "nature of the self is revealed[23]" but the environment simultaneously sends "cues" back to the person that reinforce his or her personal identity, modifying it in some ways.

The construction of said identity of place begins in the first years of life, beginning with the first socializations that the child makes within his or her context of reference, which allow him or her to assimilate knowledge and patterns of behavior related to it, even if not consciously. From this it can be understood how the adult person is not directly aware of the set of feelings, memories and values that guide his or her ways of interacting with the environment, so he or she is exclusively aware of the sense of well-being (or discomfort) he or she feels in a given environment, in what types of living spaces he or she prefers to carry out his or her existence, with what type of lighting he or she feels most comfortable but cannot define the motivation for this, and nevertheless his or her behavior is continually shaped by them.

This phenomenon acquires particular significance during adolescence, a period within which the construction of a personal identity and the acquisition of the awareness of a capacity for action differentiated from that of the family meets its moment of maximum expression; this extremely complex process brings into play a continuous re-problematization and an incessant rethinking of the adolescent's relationship with both the physical and the psychological and social world[14].

The adolescent's living space is multifaceted and consists of the social and physical context and the emotions that the subject can experience there. In this sense, the possibility of building solid and lasting bonds, the perception of the continuity of the material background in which to move are those elements that guarantee possibilities for autonomy, socialization, the perception of security in exploration as well as the possibility of choosing moments of isolation that are functional for self-reflection. This consideration clarifies the importance of aspects related to the experience of the meaning attributed to places and identifies the possibility of adolescents' experiencing three types of relationship with the environment, depending on the type of affective involvement: "functional relationship," "sense of rootedness," and "sense of belonging[16]".

In the functional relationship, the place remains aseptic from an emotional point of view, determining no investment and neither configuring itself as an element of conferring identity. It is a "neutral" place to which a positive or negative evaluation is attributed depending on the greater or lesser presence of resources useful to the youth themselves.

The sense of rootedness defines the presence of a positive relationship with the place, which, however, is still poorly connoted emotionally and is included in the adolescent's typical consideration only through the establishment of familiarity with it. It is the background in which one is accustomed to living.

The sense of belonging is the only kind of experience that indicates the existence of both a positive relationship with the environment and the establishment of an intense and meaningful affective involvement: it is that place that becomes an important element in conferring identity.

Thus, it is clear how what is constituted as an important source of reference for identity is the environment in its affective and symbolic meaning in which the experiences that adolescents conduct, combined with the experimentation with the continuity of place, allow them to understand and perceive fragments of themselves, of their lives (past and future) regardless of the formal and material qualities of the landscape.
Thus place identity and place attachment bonding turn out to be interconnected.

Rose[24] highlights three conditions, whereby it is possible to identify oneself: with a place in that the individual feels a sense of belonging to it based on different motivations (emotional, cultural); against a place, almost as an enemy to be opposed to because it is too far removed from one's preferences and characteristics or finally not to identify at all because the place is deemed absolutely irrelevant to oneself.

II. Conclusions

Exploring the connection between the physical environment and the effects it has on human states of mind, behaviors and thoughts is the foundational element of environmental psychology. Robert Gifford, professor of psychology and environmental studies at the University of Victoria, argued in 2014 that every human experience is situated within a physical context from which it is not possible to disregard[25] as it is the signifying background of action and experience itself. This phenomenon is pregnant with meaning in adolescence, a period

when the developmental trajectory and the process of identity development and consolidation is strongly influenced by the place of living and the experiences that can be conducted there.

The relationship between adolescents and "their own landscape" is complex and is influenced by multiple elements; this landscape is essential in that in it they conduct those experiences that later take the form of memory that situates the adult individual within a precise history, situated in a precise place that is a source of important identifications. The grandparents' house, the school attended, the viewpoint of the first kiss, the corner store, leave powerful marks that will be an important and constant source of reference throughout life. A "secure" connection to one's land of reference, and an internalization of it, enhances relationship skills and openness to the other from oneself.

Data availability statement

Data sharing not applicable – no new data generated

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Compliance with Ethical Statement

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