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Lisa J. Crockett

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, ecrockett1@unl.edu

Ann C. Crouter

The Pennsylvania State University

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PATHWAYS THROUGH ADOLESCENCE

Individual Development in Relation to Social Contexts

Edited by

Lisa J. Crockett

Ann C. Crouter

The Pennsylvania State University



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Preface

Young adolescents face significant turning points. For many youth 10 to 15 years old, early adolescence offers opportunities to choose a path toward a productive and fulfilling life. For many others, it represents their last best chance to avoid a diminished future.

—Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989, p. 8)

The choices that adolescents make about peer relations, risky behavior, investment in school, and income-producing activities set the stage for subsequent development in later adolescence and into adulthood. Moreover, at the aggregate level, these choices have tremendous implications for the quality of life in such key social contexts as families, schools, neighborhoods, and communities. Thus, the pathways that young people follow through adolescence and beyond affect us all. Adolescents' choices, however, are not made in a vacuum; these social contexts provide opportunities—or obstacles—that influence the probability that adolescents will choose certain pathways and not others. Therefore, understanding these critical choices, and the ways in which they affect and are affected by social contexts, is of great importance both for developmental research and scholarship and for the creation of effective programs and policies focused on youth.

In October 1992, an interdisciplinary group of scholars convened at the Pennsylvania State University to discuss these issues, share findings and methodological approaches, and consider the implications of the various findings for programs and policies. Entitled “The Impact of Social Contexts on Adolescent Trajectories,” the conference was organized to address two cutting-edge issues in the field of adolescence: (a) the emergence and crys-

tallization in early adolescence of behavioral trajectories that, if maintained, could affect development throughout adolescence and into adulthood; and (b) the role of the adolescent's social contexts in establishing and maintaining these trajectories. Recognizing that adolescents participate in an array of social contexts on a daily basis, we were especially interested in how the interrelations among these contexts might influence adolescents' behavioral trajectories, or pathways. Because some of the behaviors in which adolescents engage (e.g., substance use, delinquency, sexual activity, academic involvement, prosocial behavior) can have an important impact on their future lives, we saw early adolescence as a key developmental transition—a time in which pathways begin to take shape. Ultimately, our goal was to integrate emerging perspectives on trajectories with information on adolescents' social contexts in order to explore the processes underlying healthy and less healthy pathways of development. In addition, we were interested in identifying the implications of these issues for policies and programs focused on youth.

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Many people contributed to making this volume a reality. First and foremost, we thank the authors of the chapters and commentaries for their excellent ideas, their openness to feedback, and the enthusiasm with which they responded to the conference discussion. We are also indebted to Bea Mandel, who handled all the logistics of the conference smoothly and professionally. Without her skillful facilitation, the conference would not have been the stimulating and enjoyable session that it was. In addition, we have benefited greatly from the skillful clerical assistance of Linda Greenawalt, Sandy Fenush, and Donna Ballock.

We appreciate the generous support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and of the perspectives of David Hamburg, Elena Nightingale, Vivien Stewart, and Ruby Takanishi from the Carnegie Corporation, who, in their

response to the proposal for the PRIDE Project, helped push our thinking about early adolescence. We also thank Anne Petersen, Susan McHale, and Kathy Fennelly for their leadership on the PRIDE Project and their support of the conference and the creation of this volume. Finally, we thank each other, our families, and our friends—all of whom have been sources of intellectual ideas and social support during the preparation of this volume.

—L. J. Crockett

—A. C. Crouter