Contributions of Anthropology to the Study of Adolescence

Alice Schlegel
University of Arizona

Bonnie L. Hewlett
University of Washington

Adolescence researchers can turn to anthropology to learn the methods of ethnography and cultural comparisons, and they can mine its large database of information on cultures worldwide. But anthropology's single most important contribution is the concept of culture, the mosaic of a group's learned and shared, or at least understood, beliefs, practices, and modes of expression. Although there have been several notable anthropological studies of adolescence in the last decade, in general adolescence has been understudied in the fields of anthropology, and anthropology has been underrepresented in the fields of adolescence research. This article reviews work done by anthropologists that contributes directly to the study of adolescence.

The core concept of anthropology is culture, a people's learned and shared, or at least understood, values, behavior patterns, beliefs, ways of expressing emotions and creativity, and practices. Lip service is often given to cultural influences, but the contribution of anthropology to the study of adolescence goes much deeper than that. Anthropologists pioneered ethnographic research based on long-term stays in a society, and familiarity with a culture makes possible the interpretation of behaviors, motives, and emotions of its adolescents. The vast body of existing ethnographic literature provides a huge database of information on the range of variability of human behavior, and anthropologists have devised methods for using these data. These can lead to explanations that sometimes reinforce, sometimes contradict, the assumptions and knowledge based on research in the West. While a comprehensive review of anthropological literature on adolescence would be beyond the scope of this article, it offers guideposts to those who wish to incorporate anthropological insights, methods, and findings into their own research.

BACKGROUND

Anthropology has a long history of research on childhood, but there is relatively little literature, in comparison, on adolescence. Socialization was seen as a feature of childhood, which ended at puberty;

adolescence, when acknowledged at all, was neglected. Even Mead's (1928) widely read book *Coming of Age in Samoa* did not inspire followers among fellow anthropologists, although there were important exceptions like Wilson's (1951/1963) study of Nyakyusa adolescent boys and youths of Tanzania and Elwin's (1947) study of adolescence in a tribal group of central India, the Gond. Schlegel's (1973) study of Hopi Indian adolescent girls and Kendis and Kendis (1976) on boys in American Chinatowns came just before a revived interest in the subject.

Anthropologists began to take another look at adolescence in the mid- to late 1970s, when two large projects were inaugurated. The Harvard Adolescence Project, under the direction of John and Beatrice Whiting, resulted in several case studies published in the 1980s, and the major report of the Adolescent Socialization Project, under the direction of Alice Schlegel and psychologist Herbert Barry, was published in 1991. Several other case studies of adolescents also appeared in the 1980s, the best known being on the Sambia (a pseudonym) of New Guinea (Herdt, 1981). Some anthropologists in the 1980s and early 1990s looked at adolescents in minority populations or cultures making the transition to modern life, such as Brown (1986) on the Aguaruna and Kirkpatrick (1987) on the Marquesans.

Although this article concentrates on cultural anthropology, contributions of other subfields should also be recognized. Linguistic anthropology illuminates adolescents' use of language in their cultural setting, such as Mendoza-Denton (2008) on Latinas of the San Francisco Bay area. Archeological materials, human remains, and artifacts are limited in what they can tell us about age stages, but one study

of the prehistoric Hohokam of central Arizona (McGuire, 1987) found that adolescent girls and boys were decorated with much more shell jewelry at burial than were other people. The meaning is unclear, but possibly adolescents held a particular status in that culture, or their deaths were of special cultural significance. Biological anthropology adds the cultural dimension to biological development, as in ways development is affected by material-cultural features like diet or social features like family organization. Bogin's (1999) study of human growth is a classic, and Worthman (1998) contributes a biosocial perspective to the study of adolescence in Pacific Island societies.

Cultural anthropology has one foot in the humanities while the other remains firmly rooted in the social sciences. As a discipline concerning human life, it strives for *Verstehen*, understanding the lived experience of others through detailed descriptions and analyses of what they say and do and how they themselves interpret their actions and their world. We call this the "emic" approach, a neologism borrowed from the linguistic term *phonemics*, or the study of meaningful sounds as products created by those who utter them. Like the native speaker of a language, in theory only the native member of a culture can attest to the validity of an emic interpretation. However, the native members do not always agree, or there may be ritual or other specialists whose cultural knowledge is greater than, or may contradict, the knowledge of other members. Memory is fallible; people change their minds; and responses can be directed by the way questions are asked. There are also factors affecting a culture that its members may not be aware of, but which the outside observer can identify. Thus, a purely emic approach is a Platonic idea rather than an on-the-ground reality.

The "etic" approach, like phonetics in linguistics, relies on the concepts and categories of the observer, and its goal in cultural anthropology is to explain behavior, beliefs, and expressive culture like ritual, arts, and games through a stated or implied cause–effect model. This social science approach can be used for single-case studies or comparisons, and it may employ ordinal or interval data in its explanations, even though nominal data are the most common bases for interpretations and explanations. These explanations might very well differ from those of the natives in the culture or cultures under study.

Emic and *etic* should not be conflated with *qualitative* and *quantitative*. The first pair refers to an approach, while the second pair refers to the nature of the data used. Unlike qualitative and quantitative data, which are usually clearly distinguishable, emic and etic ethnographic approaches operate on a sliding scale (cf. Jessor, Colby, & Shweder, 1996). An emic ethnography that presents the experiences of adolescents in their own voices, as narratives or responses to an interviewer without much interpretation, can bring to the reader a mirror image of the feelings and emotions of the respondents. When written as narrative nonfiction, emic studies can have the vividness of a novel. Such a study almost by definition is qualitative. One avowedly emic study of adolescents from a human developmental perspective is based on interviews with Brazilian street children by Diversi, Moraesfilho, and Morelli (1999).

An etic study generally tries to explain not only how but also why the culture, or some feature of it, is as it is. This has been the most widely used approach in anthropological ethnographies, which generally rely on qualitative data. Quantitative data are very useful when they are available: time or money budgets, time-allocation reports, and information on beliefs, values, and emotions gained through objective techniques like card-sorting or forced-decision tests supplement the qualitative data gained through participation, observation, and interviews on selected topics or questions of general interest. They provide a corrective to researcher biases and suggest topics for further investigation. The pitfalls of relying too heavily on quantitative data, particularly those provided by respondents in questionnaires or various kinds of tests, are counteracted when these are administered by researchers who have come to know the culture in action and can assess the results in light of observed everyday behavior.

Research in one's own culture may seem simpler, although the ethnographer must be sensitive to subculture differences if the ethnic group or social class differs from that of the investigator. The danger here is taking what one observes for granted as universal or not open to question. (For example, the feminist literature of the 1970s and early 1980s took universal male dominance for granted, and it was not until ethnographies of sexually egalitarian cultures appeared that this universality was questioned.)

The most extreme etic studies objectify the culture or cultures for the purpose of analysis; the clearest example is the cross-cultural study that treats each culture as a unit of analysis and cultural practices or beliefs as variables. Samples are usually somewhere between roughly 50 and 200, and hypotheses are tested using statistical techniques. While this looks like purely quantitative research, the selection of variables and the interpretations of the findings

depend on a broad knowledge of world cultures. Statistical significance indicates correlations and implies cause–effect relations. Such studies can be enriched by the analysis of individual deviant cases.

Wherever research may fall on an emic–etic scale, the core method of anthropological research is immersion in the culture under study. This requires participating in the culture while at the same time retaining enough distance to assess and question the assumptions both of that culture's natives and of oneself. Knowledge of a range of cultures, generally gained through studying ethnographies, is a guard against parochialism.

ETHNOGRAPHIES OF ADOLESCENT LIFE

Anthropologically informed ethnographies, whether by anthropologists or others, set adolescence within the larger cultural context of relationships, beliefs, values, and emotions. Thus, we might learn from a missionary or trading-post manager—or an observer who simply records observations—that at certain ceremonies of the Hopi Indians of Arizona, teenage and younger girls receive kachina dolls, wooden figures carved in the form of supernatural beings called kachinas, and that these dolls were provided by the girls' fathers. What might appear on the surface to be a sweet gift affirming a father's love for his daughter turns out, on deeper investigation, to be something much more significant, a material embodiment of a wish or prayer for the girl's future fertility (Schlegel, 1989). To know what this means, we must know the symbolism of kachinas and the social and spiritual value placed on fertility and fatherhood. The meaning of fatherhood helps clarify the particular form of depression to which Hopi girls are prey, according to Hopi belief (Schlegel, 1973). The cultural context of social acts helps lead to an understanding of how part of a culture relates to other parts, as in a puzzle or mosaic, and how to interpret one piece in light of the whole.

Four major anthropological ethnographies, published between 1987 and 1989, came out of the Harvard Adolescence Project. These looked at adolescent life in cultures that only recently began the transition from traditional to modern lifeways. The field sites were an Inuit village in Canada (Condon, 1987), an Australian Aboriginal community (Burbank, 1988), two Ijo communities in Nigeria (Hollos & Leis, 1989), and a town in Morocco (Davis & Davis, 1989). Herdt and Leavitt (1998) published a collection of articles on adolescence in Pacific Island societies, and Schlegel (1995) was the guest editor of a special issue on adolescence of *Ethos*. Many of the anthropological

case studies published in the 1980s and 1990s are cited in a review article by Bucholtz (2002), a linguistic anthropologist.

A recent example of a case study is Hewlett's (2004) examination of grief, and the responses to the loss of important people, in the lives of adolescents in two kinds of communities in the Central African Republic: the camps of Aka hunters and gatherers and the horticultural villages of their near neighbors, Ngandu subsistence farmers. The Ngandu response to the death of a significant person emphasizes the loss of the benefits that person provided, such as food or other goods. The adolescents tell that their grief is assuaged when they are given goods, often articles belonging to the deceased person that are distributed after his or her death. The Aka response emphasizes sadness, and adolescents' grief is assuaged by the consolation provided by kin through talking to or holding the grieving adolescents.

There is no indication that the two groups of adolescents differ in their sadness or sense of desolation, but the ways they interpret these emotions and the ways they are consoled differ. Among the Ngundu, material goods are the currency of social interaction, and the giving of goods expresses material security, social support, and sometimes affection. Among the Aka, whose goods are minimal, support and affection are expressed in physical contact. This study is unique among studies of adolescent grief and mourning, which otherwise are set in Europe or America. It shows that ecological and cultural factors structure the responses to the loss of significant persons not only in the cultural customs surrounding death such funeral rituals, but also in how emotions are expressed and interpreted.

COMPARING CULTURES

Comparisons go beyond analyzing phenomena, such as how different aspects of a culture fit together, toward cause–effect explanations of them. *Systematic* comparisons attempt to identify and explain cultural similarities and differences, and anthropologists have used them since the inception of anthropology as a social science (Tylor, 1889). The underlying proposition is that similar conditions tend to promote similar responses. This is analogous to biological convergence, the similar adaptations by very different life forms to environments that set similar conditions for survival (although humans form a single species).

In a controlled comparison, two or a few groups, like two cultures or two communities of the same culture, are selected for similarities in all but the

independent and dependent variables. An example is Hewlett's (2004) comparing Aka and Nganda, which controlled for geographical location and familiarity with each other's culture, as the Ngandu and the Aka are close neighbors and frequently interact.

Another comparative method is the cross-cultural method. This uses a representative sample of cultures to test hypotheses about the associations between selected culture traits. Several samples exist, the most widely used being the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (Murdock & White, 1980), a representative sample of 186 preindustrial cultures, and the Human Relations Area Files Inc. Probability Sample, with 60 cultures (Lagace, 1979). New samples can be constructed for special purposes. Variables, most often in nominal or ordinal form, are coded from ethnographic data as present/absent or on a scale and analyzed statistically.

The art of cross-cultural research lies in what variables are selected and how much knowledge and understanding of cultures go into interpreting the findings.[1] This method was used in the Adolescent Socialization Project (Schlegel & Barry, 1991). The study found adolescence as a social stage to be universal, and it explored reasons for the similarities and differences in the ways adolescents behaved and were treated across the cultures in the sample.

In a further study, Schlegel (1991) found that only a minority of cultures in the sample valued virginity in brides, restricting the sexuality of adolescent girls (and indirectly boys, since adolescent boys do not usually have sexual access to adult women). Virginity is valued in societies, and in the property-owning classes of complex societies, in which property accompanies brides into their marital homes. This custom and the concurrent value on virginity is found along with private, that is, family-owned, property in preindustrial societies throughout Eurasia, in those classes that give dowry or indirect dowry along with their daughters—Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and North, South, and Southeast Asia, and in a few other societies with private property. Virginity is not usually valued in societies that give goods in exchange for a bride (bridewealth), as in most of Africa, unless carried along with conversion to Christianity or Islam, or where there is no cultural rule about the transfer of goods at marriage, as there is not in modern Western

nations or in foraging societies. The study examined what families stand to gain by the strict socialization and surveillance that goes into preserving a daughter's virginity, and why it is usually only important when families pay to give a bride and not to gain one. Thus, it is fair to say that the sexual revolution of the 20th century did not depend entirely on new methods of birth control or other technology, but could be understood in light of changes in the kinds of investments families made in their daughters and in the role and importance of the son-in-law.

THE RESEARCH CONTINUES

The later 1990s and the first years of the 21st century saw a steady increase in the number of publications on adolescence by anthropologists. Much of this work in the 1990s was heavily influenced by psychology and found a home in the body of research known as psychological anthropology.[2]

Other work dealt with adolescent culture (e.g., Amit-Talai & Wulff, 1995) and was influenced by sociological research into youth cultures and minority populations. Studies of youth cultures, many by researchers of disciplines other than anthropology, often try to recreate the adolescent experience through an emic approach that lets the voices of the adolescent respondents take center stage (cf. Diversi et al., 1999). With their focus on immediate experience and expression, they are part of the larger body of cultural studies that look at agency and the way individuals interpret and use their culture.

Ethnographies of adolescents within their cultural context continue to be produced by anthropologists. One such study, of adolescents in post-Soviet Russia (Markowitz, 2000), challenges the model of adolescence as a time of identity instability or experimentation. Another work that uses a representative sample of adolescents as its database considers the effects of the one-child policy in Dalien, northern China (Fong, 2004). This ethnography is noteworthy in that it combines intensive qualitative with extensive quantitative research methods.

INVESTIGATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

In recent years, many anthropologists have turned their attention from whole cultures, or particular aspects of these cultures, to current economic, political, or social problems faced by the people of the

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[1]Cross-cultural studies are often found in *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, the journal of the Society for Cross-Cultural Research. The center for this research is HRAF, associated with Yale University.

[2]Many of these publications are found in *Ethos: The Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology*. This society is a section of the American Anthropological Association.

cultures they have studied. If these people are exploited or politically oppressed, anthropologists often feel strongly motivated to expose these injustices, within their cultural contexts, through the means of their research and publications. This exposure of injustices can be called "investigative anthropology," analogous to the investigative journalism that exposes political and economic corruption and mismanagement and social injustices.

In line with this trend, considerable recent research on adolescence looks at problems associated with the globalization of capital and the poverty, social dislocation, and political upheaval that has in many cases attended it. These include investigations into adolescents as "child" soldiers (Rosen, 2005, 2007), as prostitutes in the domestic or international traffic in young bodies (Montgomery, 2000), or as refugees from nations in turmoil (Flores-Borquez, 2000). A problem faced by many immigrant adolescents is that they feel at home neither in the nation from which they came nor in that in which they are living. Hall (2002) discusses this issue for Sikh adolescents in Britain. In an effort to ease the cultural transition of migrants, Punjabi, the language of the region of India from which most Sikhs come, is incorporated into the curriculum of the local high schools. The effect is to emphasize the foreignness of the immigrants, just the opposite of what was intended.

There has been a growing body of ethnographic literature on homeless and abandoned children by scholars of different disciplines (e.g., Raffaelli & Larson, 1999). Many of the common beliefs about street children have been dispelled by detailed investigations of their lives. Street children (many of them adolescents) in Nepal, for example, begin work at an early age and are already quite familiar with the "street" when they decide to leave home. Over half of them in the study by Baker, Panter-Brick, and Todd (1997) maintain contacts with their homes and families. Hecht (1998), working in Brazil, discovered that street children (again, more often than not adolescents) were better fed than were their siblings at home, and that their numbers were overestimated. Trying to get them back in their homes was actually doing them a disservice.

AREAS WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Two areas of anthropological research on adolescence with particular implications for public policy are the areas of medical anthropology and anthropology and education. These are better thought of as

research areas than as "schools," as neither case contains a single overriding set of theories or methods. In both areas there is considerable overlap between cultural anthropologists and researchers in other subfields of the discipline.

Medical Anthropology

An extensive area of work in cultural anthropology today is medical anthropology, although not much of this focuses on adolescents (M. Nichter, personal communication, 2010). Some of the research that is on adolescents is done in collaboration with physical anthropologists (e.g., Worthman & Panter-Brick, 2008). Body image is the subject of investigations by Nichter (2000), who worked with American girls, and Anderson-Fey (2004), who studied girls in Belize. The literature on adolescents by medical anthropologists addresses features of their lives such as tobacco use, teenage pregnancy, sexuality, anorexia, and body image, all of the practices or self-concepts that can have negative medical or psychological effects.[3]

Anthropology and Education

Some studies in the body of work known as anthropology and education deal with curricula, pedagogy, and schooling per se, but many of them go beyond classroom concerns to look at the adolescents themselves. Linguistic anthropologists have examined adolescent identity and how it is formed and expressed in minority groups, such as Mendoza-Denton's (2008) study of Latinas, mentioned earlier; but the subjects of a study by Eckert (1989), also a linguistic anthropologist, were mainstream American high-school students in Michigan. The subtitle of her book, "Social categories and identity in the high school," describes her research. Most of the work in anthropology and education is situated in the United States, but some educational anthropologists have gone farther afield. Levinson's (2001) ethnography considers student culture and identity formation in a Mexican secondary school, and Stambach (2000), using secondary schools as her field sites, looks at experiences within and outside the classroom for Chagga adolescents of northern Tanzania.[4]

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[3]Articles in medical anthropology often appear in the *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, published by the American Anthropological Association on behalf of the Society for Medical Anthropology, a section of the Association, and in *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, inter alia.

[4]The single most important source of articles and references for anthropology and education is *The Anthropology & Education*

THE QUESTION OF ADOLESCENT IDENTITY

In the small, stable communities that characterized many traditional cultures, adolescent identity formation was more a task of dealing with biological and social changes and responding to both present exigencies and future expectations than a response to "who am I and where do I fit in?" This changed as societies underwent the major transformations concomitant with the Industrial Revolution. With increased pressures, new uncertainties, and, often, expanded opportunities, the way may be less clear to young people, and the various identities that adolescents develop may conflict.[5]

These choices, and how to interpret and respond to them, are exacerbated for adolescents whose lives are lived at the intersection of two cultures, like the immigrants and refugees discussed earlier. De Lucia, Police, De Nicolo, and Scattarella (2006) record the health problems of adolescent refugees from southeastern Europe whose self-image has been deformed by the reality of what they had faced. However, not all studies of adolescent identity deal with difficulties or crises. Shrake and Rhee (2007) found that a strong sense of ethnic identity in Korean American adolescents could support a positive self-image when integrated with a positive identification of the larger host society.

Identities can be expressed through the ways adolescents present themselves. These styles of self-presentation can coalesce into youth cultures, with their codified behaviors and preferences. One earlier view of youth cultures saw them as forms of resistance, particularly by minority or lower-class adolescents against a society that oppressed them. This was a theme in British sociology, particularly of the "Birmingham school," in the 1970s and 1980s (Wulff, 1995). That view has been considerably modified. Social identity is still viewed as a social construct, but one that affirms a place through the agency of adolescents rather than one that simply reflects resistance to an oppressive society. Anthropologically informed studies into the lives of adolescents have helped bring about this newer approach, as exemplified in Amit-Talai and Wulff (1995).

EVOLUTIONARY ANTHROPOLOGY

A growing area of research in cultural anthropology is the study of human evolution and the legacy of the past in understanding present-day biology and behavior. More than other fields in cultural anthropology, work on evolution and human development crosses not only subdisciplinary boundaries, by incorporating the work of biological anthropologists, but also disciplinary divisions. "Evo-devo" brings together anthropologists with psychologists, cognitive scientists, biologists, primatologists, animal behaviorists, and geneticists.

One analytical framework within evolutionary anthropology is life-history theory, which postulates that many of the biological features and behaviors of people as they go through life can be understood as effects of natural selection on growth and reproductive characteristics. Reproductive strategies, such as biases toward either quantity or quality of offspring, and reproductive characteristics, such as age of menarche, are shown to be selected for under different environmental conditions, among them the environment experienced earlier in childhood. Anthropologists Draper and Harpending (1982, 1988) connected the early environment to the timing of menarche, a topic carried further by Belsky, Steinberg, and Draper (1991). Environmental conditions that accelerate or slow biological adolescence include cultural factors, such as those related to the stability or fragility of marriages and the introduction of step-parents into the household (Flinn, Leone, & Quinlan, 1999; Quinlan, 2003).[6]

This area provides many opportunities for collaboration between anthropologists and developmental psychologists. For example, risk-taking is well established as a feature of adolescence based on research in Western cultures, and it has been linked to structural and hormonal changes in the developing brain. Is this true in other cultures with different ways of treating adolescents? Is it exaggerated in cultures that isolate adolescents from adult company much of the day and valorize peer relations, as in the United States? Can we posit reasons for the way human adolescence has evolved through comparison with the behavior and neuropsychology of adolescent primates of other species?

ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES BY DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGISTS

One cannot end this overview without recognizing that a number of developmental psychologists, since

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Quarterly, the journal of the Council on Anthropology and Education, a section of the American Anthropological Association.

[5]Articles on adolescent identity may be found in *The Anthropology & Education Quarterly*; other anthropological journals that may have articles on identity include *Ethos* and *Cultural Anthropology,* all publications of the American Anthropological Association.

[6]Among the journals in which one can find articles by anthropologists on life-history theory are *Evolution and Human Behavior, Evolutionary Anthropology,* and *Human Nature.*

Erikson's (1968) time, have done ethnographic studies in their own or other cultures with adolescents as their subjects or have collaborated with others doing ethnographic research on adolescence. Among more recent ones are Brown, Larson, and Saraswathi (2002), Larson, Verma, and Dworkin (2003), Dasen (2000), Saraswathi (1988 inter alia), Way and Chu (2004), and Markstrom (2008). An introduction to cultural approaches and methods used in cross-cultural psychology can be found in Berry, Poortinga, Segall, and Dasen (1992, Chap. 7). This would be useful to developmental specialists outside of anthropology who are interested in probing deeper into the cultural contexts of their adolescent subjects' lives.

CONCLUSION

One of anthropology's contributions to the study of adolescence is the large corpus of information on extinct or rapidly changing cultures, our links to other modes of life. As ethnographies of other cultures reveal, the modern adolescent is not the modal adolescent (cf. Arnett, 2008). Adolescence poses a similar set of issues across cultures: looking forward to adulthood while still dependent; unmated sexual responsiveness; and greater involvement with peers—these are among the most obvious common issues. However, there are different ways of dealing with them, and other cultures' responses can illuminate reasons for our own policies and practices and suggest ways in which these might be changed.

A second contribution is methodological. Anthropologists developed the method of participant-observation, the ability to enter into the lives of others while holding on to a certain degree of objectivity. Many anthropologists find it imperative to let some time lapse between the field experience and the write-up at home, so that the field notes can be better assessed and one can see the larger picture beyond the immediate experiences. Anthropologists also developed the cross-cultural comparative method. George Peter Murdock, and later cross-cultural researchers, refined it into the useful research tool it is today.

Perhaps the most important contribution of anthropology to the study of adolescence is the emphasis it puts on understanding cultures within which adolescents operate. This takes into account the cultural influences that were transmitted to them through deliberate socialization practices by family, school, religious bodies, among other institutions, and by informal socialization through family, neighborhoods, peers, the media, and other features of daily life. But adolescents are not just acted upon:

they are actors within their cultures, creating adolescent cultures, in virtually every society, that meet their present expressive needs and through which they can contribute to the cultural life of their communities (Schlegel, 2000). Culture is not just another variable in the mix: The formal and informal socialization practices that transmit culture to adolescents are essential factors in making them what they are.

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