





Vivian Seltzer has spent decades developing and testing a theory that she believes is “the first roadmap through adolescence.”

BY SAMUEL HUGHES

ALONE TOGETHER

And so they gather, these strange, familiar creatures in their ever-shifting habitat. Traveling in flocks and packs, they eye one another warily, constantly, checking out their plumage and song, finally turning to the puzzling creature reflected in the glass to gauge where in the pecking order they stand. And if that reflection falls short of what they had envisioned, if the collective gazes prove too withering, they fly off, by themselves, crests fallen ...

We know them, and yet we don't know them. Though they feed at our table, and accept our shelter, they ignore us as much as they can; we are, for all intents and purposes, irrelevant. Yet we regard them with powerful affection, as well as bemusement and exasperation. After all, we were once those strange birds, and we know how fickle, even cruel, the species can be. And while they may not realize it, or want to admit it, they are slowly evolving into something like us.

It is the adolescent dialectic, and it is an inexorable force.

“When adolescence starts, there’s an imperative that begins to operate,”

Vivian Center Seltzer SW’53, professor emerita of human development and behavior in the School of Social Policy and Practice (SP2), is saying. “It’s an imperative to be together—a growth-related imperative. And when they are together, then this whole big process goes into subliminal action. There’s a force that becomes ignited. That force is psychological growth, and it’s ignited by the electricity of the comparison behavior that goes on between them.”

Seltzer has been studying the vulnerable species known as the human adolescent for better than half a century now. Much of that time has been spent crafting a unique and cogent view of it, buttressed with research and clinical observation.

At the heart of her work is the theory of Dynamic Functional Interaction (DFI)—which spotlights the “central role of adolescent peer groups as a peer arena,” as she puts it, and the impact of that arena on adolescent social development. She has written three books on the subject, the most recent and accessible of which is last year’s *Peer-Impact Diagnosis and Therapy: A Handbook for Successful Practice with Adolescents* (NYU Press). It serves as a detailed guidebook and contour map to adolescents and their precarious habitat, the Peer Arena.

The DFI theory takes up where developmental psychologist Erik Erikson and social psychologist Leon Festinger left off, roughly half a century ago, in their respective examinations of adolescent identity-building and social comparison. On a visceral level (at least to this gut-tossed parent of two adolescents), the theory resonates. For those in the field—some of them, anyway—what sets it apart and makes it fresh is the quality of the synthesis, the thought behind the organizational framework, and the amount of research, not just on American adolescents but in places as far-flung as Costa Rica, Scotland, and the Philippines. *Peer-Impact Diagnosis and Therapy* also offers an exhaustive list of protocols for practitioners, including a step-by-step approach to the group-therapy treatment she developed called the Peer Arena Lens.

Unlike the prevailing view of adolescents individuating by rebelling against

parents, the DFI model posits that the “core of adolescent behavior” is created by “responses to psychological interactions with peers,” in Seltzer’s words. “Comparison dynamics, as adolescents assess and evaluate themselves in relation to their age-mates in order eventually to settle on the self they wish to have, forge the axis of the adolescent wheel.”

The *functional* part of the theory comes from her conviction that all gatherings are, at a deep, evolutionary level, functional. “They’re not just for fun and games, though they may appear so,” she says. “And they’re not to escape from all the libido that’s going around. They have a developmental reason.”

The setting for all this edgy, side-glancing development is the Peer Arena, which encompasses all of an adolescent’s peer groups, real and virtual. School constitutes a large part of that arena, but hardly all, especially with the explosive growth of texting, Facebook, and other virtual media. Furthermore, not all peers are created equal, especially in the later stages of adolescence. Nor do they have the same impact.

“The relationship in adolescence between kids is not friendship,” says Seltzer. “It is peership. It is growth-related. Parents want to teach kids about friendship, loyalty, all that kind of thing. But it’s not a time for loyalty. It’s a time for growth. You reach out for what you need. So if you’ve gotten enough in a close friendship with one kid, you’re going to drop that kid. And it’s not because you’re a dirty rotten kid and you’re dropping that [other] kid at all.”

The growth process requires “lots of inventory,” as Seltzer puts it, and there are many different kinds of comparisons—Upward, Downward, Similar Other, Range Establishment—with different functions and goals, including the self-explanatory Satiation of Comparison. She likens the accumulation of peer interactions to a library filled with reference materials and Internet access, all of which provide mountains of data.

“They do hundreds of comparisons, and they have a score for themselves,” she says. “Am I better than—?’ ‘Was I better than—?’ ‘Who’s on my level?’ ‘How does that feel?’ ‘How does it go over with the crowd?’

“And when they don’t score very well, it’s pretty hard. Nobody likes to really

feel bad, so they run away. They defend themselves against the pain of what they’re experiencing.”

The responses to pain take the form of what she terms defensive glitches.

“*Glitches* are really another word for what people can call *deviations*,” says Seltzer. “I like *glitch* because it’s reversible.”

William Fullard G’65 Gr’68, professor of psychology at Temple University, appreciates the elasticity of that diagnosis.

“As you know, we are a society that is very much concerned with pathology,” says Fullard, whose areas of expertise include adolescent development. “She sees these glitches not as pathologies, but really as adaptations, giving kids a chance to sort of undo things, and that this is simply part of the normal developmental process.”

While most glitch adolescents soldier on, suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous comparisons, many find ways to avoid peer gatherings altogether—skipping school, or staying there but checking out psychologically, or taking on all manner of destructive defensive behaviors. (Seltzer has compiled seven categories of glitches encompassing 13 specific types, ranging from Isolated Game-Player Loner, to Veiled Mission-Dedicated, to the more graspable False Façade.) While these defensive responses may temporarily ease the pain, they can also bring the adolescent’s development to a grinding halt—or at least slow it down, depending on “how early or at what point and in what manner they took flight.” As she notes in her 1989 book, *The Psychosocial Worlds of the Adolescent*, rejection from the group “means reduced access to the raw materials of development.”

Seltzer has a number of detailed case studies in *Peer-Impact Diagnosis and Therapy*, and the book offers insights and tips gleaned from her own private practice to help practitioners understand—and treat—their adolescent patients.

Leslie Stein, a clinical psychologist with a practice in the Philadelphia suburbs, recalls a girl she treated with a “major glitch.”

“She was school-phobic, and she was avoiding the Peer Arena altogether because of her discomfort within it,” says Stein. “She was terrified to immerse herself in any arena with peers, because of her



“The relationship in adolescence between kids is not friendship,” says Seltzer. “It is peership.”

tremendous feelings of self-consciousness—her anxiety on even entering the Peer Arena was such that she thought she was going to throw up, and she became obsessed with how embarrassing and humiliating it would be to throw up, and so she had to withdraw completely.

“Our primary work together was in getting her back into school no matter what, and talking through her fears of humiliation, embarrassment, shame, et cetera, and slowly but surely having that Peer Arena available to her, so she could see that she was not so different from kids her age. I remember thinking about how this was a defensive glitch, and how we needed to get her back to the arena to pick up on the work that had not been done.”

It’s not that the importance of peer interaction “is such a novel idea,” Stein adds. “But the way and depth with which Vivian explores that area of the adolescent world, the Peer Arena, is innovative and exciting—and makes developmental sense. I don’t think I’ve read anything that takes this one piece of adolescence and has given it as much thought and meticulous analysis. And it’s crucial to talking about it with the kid.”

Peter Capper, director of student support at the Crefeld School in Philadelphia, is a

“longstanding systemic therapist” who has been “immersed in the viscera of adolescent communities,” to use his pungent phrasing. He contacted Seltzer after reading *Peer-Impact Diagnosis and Therapy* (which he calls “wonderful”), and he doesn’t have to think very long to come up with an example of a glitch adolescent.

“I worked very closely with a False Façade kid,” he says. “He was an only child, with a lot of difficulty being connected to other kids, quite isolated, and acting like a pseudo adult. He seems to be resolving that now, and is becoming more social and more connected, and more rebellious with his parents—whom he had previously been very compliant and fused with. I read parts of the book out to him and to his parents—and yes, it resonated.”

Apart from Seltzer’s work, “there’s not very much theory that guides us on how to respond to the constant comparisons and evaluations by other kids—and how traumatic that is,” Capper adds. “There is something very refreshing about having a framework of how to make sense of the tremendous hyperactivity of teenagers’ relationships and the whole kind of feverish interaction that goes on between kids. And that idea is very, very helpful and illuminating, both for kids and for families.”

Like social psychologist Kurt Lewin, whose work she admires, Seltzer believes strongly in the continuous feedback loop between theory and research and practice.

“I was working out the theory all these years before I was ready to put it into practice mode,” she says. “I put the theory out, did all the research, then all the cross-cultural stuff. I had to do it. If I was going to take on the [family-centric] psychiatric world we’re all in, I had to have good evidence. And I personally have it.”

What Seltzer has at the moment is my digital recorder in her hand. She’s speaking into it—at my request—in order to make herself audible over the hiss of steaming milk and the throbbing of techno pop and the chatter and squawk of caffeinated youth. Though this bustling café near campus is probably not the ideal setting for an interview, it’s not slowing her down any. Her life’s work hasn’t received a huge amount of attention, and she is clearly eager, in a scholarly way, to talk about it.

Some academics become the story as much through quirks of personality as through their work. With Seltzer, it’s all about the work, which includes her deep

involvement in the University community. SP2 Dean Richard Gelles, who says that she “helped forge the dynamic aspect” of the school’s interdisciplinary teaching and scholarship, describes Seltzer as a “devoted University citizen.” Having chaired the Faculty Senate from 1996 to 1998 and served on scores of University committees and associations, Seltzer now chairs the Faculty Senate grievance committee, despite having retired in 2008. She is also chair-elect of the Penn Association of Senior and Emeritus Faculty.

Clearly, she knows how to navigate the academic Peer Arena. Just don’t go looking for any punchy quotes or anecdotes to confirm it.

“Vivian doesn’t actually inspire punchy quotes or anecdotes,” says Gelles. “Her strength is her unswerving strength.”

Among students, Seltzer has had a reputation for toughness—even arrogance, based on a very small sample size of comments on one of those rate-your-professors websites.

“She’s always been regarded as a tough and demanding teacher and mentor,” says Gelles. “She holds her colleagues to the same exacting standards. She’s uncompromising—and I mean this in a good and constructive way.”

Tough or not, Seltzer enjoys the adolescent species. She gets a kick out of talking about how her freshman students would often arrive thinking they were all grown up—and then, by the middle of the semester, they would sheepishly tell her, “I think I’m an adolescent.”

There are two distinct stages of growth within the DFI model (though each adolescent develops according to an internal schedule, which may or may not keep pace with the external schedules of physiology and age). Early adolescence is marked by a sense of “frameworklessness,” owing to the growing psychological distance from parents.

“When that hits, your previous view of the world, your parents’ view—which is like the frame of a picture—disintegrates,” says Seltzer. “It’s not a conscious thing. It’s something you know because you’re looking for answers, and you’re looking for new things, and your peers are very important. Your parents are unimportant. And so you’re sort of framework-less. You’re wafting around in the wind. But

you want to have something to hang onto. So you look to others—and there’s this comparison with a similar other. Who are most similar? Their peers.

“So they begin to cling to each other because it’s a port in the stormy seas,” she continues. “That’s why they are so important to one another, in seventh and eighth grades particularly. The teachers are totally unimportant; so is the subject matter, because they have to find where they are in relationship to these kids.”

While Stage 1 involves interacting with large numbers of peers, who offer a “supermarket of characteristics, talents, attitudes, opinions, and the like to select and try out,” Stage 2 requires far fewer peers, since many were already eliminated by the end of Stage 1. The simplest way to describe the two stages is that the first addresses the question “What can I be?” while Stage 2 deals with “What will I be?” There’s a good deal more to it than that, of course, including the development of abstract thinking about themselves and their future. “If they can’t abstract,” says Seltzer, “then they’re still in the first stage.”

Her model, she adds, “allows a practitioner to say, ‘This is what the kid is doing now. I now have a sequence of where they should be at every point. And I see that they’re coming along OK.’ It’s the first roadmap through adolescence that there is.”

The implications of that roadmap are considerable, and not just for the kids and parents of the middle class. In the Peer Arenas that most Penn students inhabit, comparative acts can be brutal on a psychological level. In other socioeconomic realms, the Peer Arena can literally be deadly.

Helen Rehr, professor emerita of community medicine at Mt. Sinai Medical Center in New York, has long admired Seltzer’s practice-informed theory, and thinks she is “bringing something very special” to the field. She would like to have Seltzer address the adolescent-treatment staff at Mt. Sinai, where a “very traditional approach to adolescence” still prevails.

“We’re still using basically an Eriksonian and Freudian approach to working with the kids,” one that focuses on the “parent-to-child relationship,” says Rehr, who emphasizes that it’s an “excellent” service. “What I thought Vivian could bring to Sinai was an element of looking at peer interaction,

particularly through the dynamics of the East Harlem area”—where the population is largely Hispanic and black—to complement the more traditional approach.

The adolescents, most of whom are referred by the local schools, arrive with “heavy abuse problems, sexual and physical, and also facing a lot of bereavement and death,” Rehr explains. “If we can get [the DFI approach] openly tested in a place like Sinai, and get Sinai and Vivian to write about the practice end, we may be able to push it to where it should go.”

As anyone who has read her books knows, Seltzer is willing to put the effort in.

“I have to laugh when she describes the number of interviews that she went through in developing these techniques, and the number of protocols she’s gotten, not just in this country but from all over the world,” says William Fullard. “In some ways, that is a very distinct departure. Most of our developmental literature is based on Western, home-reared children or Western college students. She’s also got a very interesting chapter on minorities. This is something else that most people don’t think about.”

Actually, Seltzer (who also has a chapter on gay adolescents) has data drawn from 4,000 Penn students as well as 6,000 protocols from adolescents in Scotland, Costa Rica, South Africa, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

“The statistically significant global findings supported my prior U.S. findings on adolescent peer comparison dynamics,” she writes in an email, “and provided the confidence of a more comprehensive lens to write my book introducing a model for practice with adolescents—though it cost me a publication gap in my vitae.

“I’ve worked on this for 25 years,” adds Seltzer, “and I want to tell you, in all humility, there’s nobody who’s put this kind of verification in. I must have needed a lot of reinforcement before I had the chutzpah to put out a practice model for therapy, because I was going to be coming up against a lot of people who weren’t going to like it—because it wasn’t the way they’d been practicing.”

Not long ago, Seltzer ran into one of her old classmates from North High School in Minneapolis. Though they hadn’t seen each other for decades, the woman had no trouble recalling Seltzer’s

observational style: “All the girls used to sit around talking about all this stuff, and you’d sit there quietly—and then just sum up what everyone was thinking.”

In those days she was Vivian Center, the youngest of four children, a precocious high achiever who often found herself in leadership positions in school. She was a year younger than most of the girls in her peer group, who were becoming obsessed with boys in a way she didn’t fully understand and occasionally resented. But she certainly had a feel for the group dynamics.

Though she spent a lot of time in the various groups that constituted her Peer Arena—one group was the Teddies, which gives a flavor of the era—she clearly didn’t suffer from the comparative acts. Perhaps because of that happy experience, she has continued to embrace the species.

“I always loved working with adolescents,” she says. “I was a counselor to them. I got my master’s at Penn in social work, and when I came here I wanted to work with juvenile delinquents. I was younger than most of the students at the time, and here I was, a little girl from Minnesota, working with big-time delinquents.

“And it was at that point—and in retrospect, I don’t think it was serendipitous—I suddenly began to look at adolescents and how many of them were always together. I reflected on my own adolescence, where we never went anywhere when we were less than 25 people. And I said to myself, ‘Wait a minute—there has got to be a reason for this. It doesn’t just happen. There’s something going on here.’”

The turning point came when she attended a talk by Jean Piaget, the Swiss psychologist and seminal theorist of cognitive development.

“He was fabulous,” she recalls. “And although he spoke French with a translator, it was as if he was speaking to each person. What he helped me understand was the way thought develops and how the way you can think at one age is different than the way you can think at another age. I said to myself, ‘How in the world can you treat behavior if you don’t understand development? How can you treat children if you don’t understand how they grow?’”

That talk led her to Bryn Mawr College and her doctoral work in child development and clinical evaluation. Her dissertation was on comparison behavior, heavily influenced by Leon Festinger, whose Social Comparison Theory argues that people evaluate themselves and their beliefs by comparing themselves to others. Those acts of comparison tend to be a lifelong process. But Seltzer suspected that the dynamics of adolescents’ comparative acts are different, since they serve as the very establishment of self.

“The key dynamic was social comparison,” she says. “I looked at typical actions of adolescents, and then I went into the social-psychology literature, and I looked up the social-psychological processes that I was interested in—and there was practically nothing on adolescents. But all of the various processes I was interested in were exactly the same processes that we saw at work in adolescents. So the birth of the theory of Dynamic Functional Interaction was in my taking concepts from two fields—adolescent psychology and social psychology—and blending them into a theory of adolescence.”

“Vivian treaded in areas where lots of us fear to step—that is, getting out of our particular niche,” says William Fullard. “Most of the social-psychology literature has to do with adults. I think she felt that some of the broader concepts in Festinger’s work could be applied to adolescents. They also needed to be taken in the context of three or four very broad categories that adolescents go through—physical, social, emotional, cognitive—and if you don’t look at all of these things in combination, you really can’t understand what’s going on. She succeeds in doing that. And I’m in awe at the amount of thought and experience that she brings to bear in developing this.”

Though the ingredients had been simmering in her head for some time, they all came together in one of those skyrocketing Maslow moments of self-actualization. Seltzer vividly recalls banging out her theory on a typewriter in the guest bedroom of her home in the Philadelphia suburb of Rydal.

“It was the keenest kind of thinking I could ever imagine having,” she says. “It just spilled out of me—the whole outline came out in that one sitting, and it went on, uninterrupted, for hours. When I

came to the end of it, I was at such an emotional high.”

In 1976 she joined the School of Social Work (now SP2), where she was to introduce the four domains of development to social-work students. After her Maslow Moment with DFI, it took her several more years to “really think it through” and do the research to back it up.

By then, in addition to her own clinical observations, she and her husband, Bill Seltzer C’49, had three children of their own. When her younger daughter came down one day and announced that she could now hold her head up with the other girls because she had finally snagged a date for the prom, Mom had a pretty good idea where in the development process she was.

Seltzer unveiled the DFI theory in her first book, *Adolescent Social Development: Dynamic Functional Interaction* (Lexington Books, 1982). Though it received some good reviews, its impact can’t have been helped by the fact that Lexington Books went out of business shortly after its publication. She fleshed out her theory further in *The Psychosocial Worlds of the Adolescent: Public and Private* (Wiley, 1989), which became part of the Wiley Series in Personality Processes. Last year she published *Peer-Impact Diagnosis and Therapy*. As the subtitle—*A Handbook for Successful Practice with Adolescents*—suggests, it offers a good deal of real-world guidance for those treating teenagers.

“I’m not a clinician,” says William Fullard. “But I have students who are. And when Vivian made a presentation earlier this year, two of the clinicians really lit up. When I talked to them afterwards—both of them ordered the book, by the way—they said, ‘This gives a new window on a way to think about treatment. And a new way to get information, as it were, unobtrusively.’”

“She has a capacity to have a window to the teenage soul,” says Peter Capper—which, he adds mischievously, “is quite remarkable for someone who is an academic” and no spring chicken.

“I looked at adolescence through the eyes of an adolescent,” says Seltzer, speaking over the raucous din of the off-campus café. “I think many theorists look at adolescence through the eyes of an adult. I guess I identified with adolescents. I like them so much.” ♦