7.7: Cognitive Development in Emerging and Early Adulthood

Learning Objectives: Cognitive Development in Emerging and Early Adulthood

- Distinguish between formal and postformal thought
- Describe dialectical thought
- Describe the changes in educational attainment and the costs of education
- Describe the benefits of education beyond high school
- Describe the stages in career development, millennial employment, and NEETS
- Describe sexism and how it affects hiring, employment, and education

Beyond Formal Operational Thought: Postformal Thought

As mentioned in chapter 6, according to Piaget’s theory adolescents acquire formal operational thought. The hallmark of this type of thinking is the ability to think abstractly or to consider possibilities and ideas about circumstances never directly experienced. Thinking abstractly is only one characteristic of adult thought, however. If you compare a 15 year-old with someone in their late 30s, you would probably find that the latter considers not only what is possible, but also what is likely. Why the change? The adult has gained experience and understands why possibilities do not always become realities. They learn to base decisions on what is realistic and practical, not idealistic, and can make adaptive choices. Adults are also not as influenced by what others think. This advanced type of thinking is referred to as Postformal Thought (Sinnott, 1998).

Dialectical Thought: In addition to moving toward more practical considerations, thinking in early adulthood may also become more flexible and balanced. Abstract ideas that the adolescent believes in firmly may become standards by which the adult evaluates reality. Adolescents tend to think in dichotomies; ideas are true or false; good or bad; and
there is no middle ground. However, with experience, the adult comes to recognize that there is some right and some wrong in each position, some good or some bad in a policy or approach, some truth and some falsity in a particular idea. This ability to bring together salient aspects of two opposing viewpoints or positions is referred to as dialectical thought and is considered one of the most advanced aspects of postformal thinking (Basseches, 1984). Such thinking is more realistic because very few positions, ideas, situations, or people are completely right or wrong. So, for example, parents who were considered angels or devils by the adolescent eventually become just people with strengths and weaknesses, endearing qualities, and faults to the adult.

Does everyone reach postformal or even formal operational thought? Formal operational thought involves being able to think abstractly; however, this ability does not apply to all situations or all adults. Formal operational thought is influenced by experience and education. Some adults lead lives in which they are not challenged to think abstractly about their world. Many adults do not receive any formal education and are not taught to think abstractly about situations they have never experienced. Further, they are also not exposed to conceptual tools used to formally analyze hypothetical situations. Those who do think abstractly, in fact, may be able to do so more easily in some subjects than others. For example, psychology majors may be able to think abstractly about psychology, but be unable to use abstract reasoning in physics or chemistry. Abstract reasoning in a particular field requires a knowledge base that we might not have in all areas. Consequently, our ability to think abstractly depends to a large extent on our experiences.