Positive Developments during the Transition to Adulthood

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Abstract

The transition into adulthood, that phase between childhood and adulthood that we traditionally term *adolescence*, has undergone a rapid evolution in meaning. Our concept of the definition of what makes an adolescent has certainly changed since the seminal work of Erik Erikson. The boundaries of adolescence have been pushed both earlier, with puberty rates falling in the past two decades for girls even younger than 10 and extending for serious brain researchers to ages 25 and even 30. With the definition of adolescence potentially expanding from 7- to 30-year-olds, an over 20-year age gap, it is no wonder that the unifying construct of adolescence is in trouble. This essay address the foundational research that laid the groundwork for our modern conception and understanding of emerging adulthood as differentiated from adolescence and full adulthood. It will review current thinking in this area and introduce a developmental process theory (DPT) that exposes the positives of our evolved definition of adulthood, as well as discuss avenues for further research and growth in this area.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

When considering the foundations of how we define adolescence through the life span, several key theorists inform how we approach the topic today. Research has evolved from G. Stanley Hall's view that adolescence was a time of "storm and stress" (Hall, 1904), to Erik Erikson's proposal of a human development model for the entire life span (Erikson, 1950), to James E. Marcia's expansion of Erikson's proposal to emphasize the importance of a coherent sense of identity and an engaged meaning-making process (Marcia, 1966). Though a popular criticism of youth today, the concept of a prolonged adolescence is not a new one. Daniel Levinson claimed it takes a young man about 15 years to fully immerge into an adult (Levinson, 1978), but it took another decade for developmental psychologists and other social scientists to distinguish the boundaries between adolescence and adulthood further by introducing the concept of emerging adulthood.

"EMERGING ADULTHOOD": BETWEEN ADOLESCENCE AND ADULTHOOD

Researchers have pointed to shifting educational, financial, and parenting priorities that have given rise to phase of late adolescence or "emerging adulthood" that occurs between ages 18 and 25 (Arnett, 2000). James E. Côté suggested that emerging adults are pursuing personal and individual fulfillment, and that the transition to adulthood is now more vague and insecure. He tackled this problem from a sociological perspective, suggesting that mass culture and profit-driven industries have promoted a culture of individualism (Côté, 2000), and that young people develop strategic identities in order to maximize their identity capital and make their goals easier to accomplish (Côté, 2010).

DEMOGRAPHICS OF EMERGING ADULTHOOD

The stage of "emerging adulthood" accounts for young people who are not considered adolescents but lack the traditional markers society places around adulthood such as workforce participation, independence from parents, committed romantic relationships and family building. For many, those milestones are pushed into the late 20s or 30s and beyond. Census data shows 98.1% of adolescents aged 12–17 are unmarried and 95.2% live with at least one parent (US Bureau of Census, 2015a). Of course, the demographics switch significantly in the age range of 30–34. By that age 64.2% have married, 78.7 have become parents, and only 6.4% attend school (US Bureau of Census, 2015b). Emerging adulthood and the phases that lead to the adult statistics are complex but show that before reaching age 30, young adults are consistently less committed to the significant relationship, parenting, and career.

SUBJECTIVITY OF ADULTHOOD

The Bureau of Census data only gives us a small picture of some of the criteria that answer the question, "Am I really an adult?" Research on emerging adulthood shows that even with all these milestones completed, many people still resist the "adult" label. Being an adult is as much a state of mind and self-identity as it is a clearly defined role in society. In his research on emerging adulthood, Arnett outlines the top criteria people use when determining whether they are willing to label themselves as an adult: accepting personal responsibility, making independent decisions and attaining financial independence (Arnett, 2000). Clearly, changing demographics are not the only reason young adults do not feel like they have established themselves psychologically.

What this exposes is that the life cycle in its phasic, age-graded way is very confusing and quite individualized. The formativeness of different phases has lost its clarity compared to when Erikson introduced his concepts in the 1950s as the options to be an adult have expanded, making it difficult to create descriptions and norms out of different phases. From positive psychology, the concept and acceptance of "emerging adulthood" has now normalized this delay of adulthood responsibilities. Many factors at play support this shift: impacts of labor market, difficulty of high school and college graduates to get jobs, parents' willingness to support children longer, as well as a reduced stigma around living with parents once the formal education period has ended. With these shifts comes an increased difficulty to keep normative life cycle models intact, even though there is a continuing interest by textbook authors and in some developmental research to keep a temporal and developmental order alive.

THE NEED FOR NEW THINKING

But what do we do when many of the traditional categories, such as identity formation and adult responsibility, do not clearly match the phasic and age-graded stages? The emerging adult does not yet have a firm identity, as such an identity tests itself in commitments and is not only a cognitive and affective set of internal priorities of the self, and the young adult stage of intimacy and committed love, so well described by Erikson, is very hard when all other aspects of adulthood are postponed. These problems of conceptualization are not only because of the extension of adolescence into the 20s, creating a hybrid construct, but it also reveals the problems of traditional stage theories. As cultural and societal norms have shifted, the stepwise progression has not been easily held up. Feminists in the 1990s critiqued Erikson for putting the adolescent identity stage before the young adult intimacy stage (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991). They argued that for many women, identity gets formed through intimate relationships and friendships. Erikson, of course, knew that as well, but his concept of identity was linked to autonomy, search, and self-discovery, and his ideal notion was that people need a sense of fidelity formed through positive identity before being able to truly give away part of the self in order to create ongoing and lasting intimacy. However, he was never quite able to convince those who had a very strong argument that identity can be shaped and discovered through the merging and differentiating of people (pairs or groups) trying to find themselves.

There is also the issue of social class and race as well as cultural contexts. Many of the emerging adulthood descriptions are class based, as they were in Erikson's time when the prolonged identity search, the protected time of

moratorium, was partly tied to the privilege of a college education. Arnett's analysis of national data to see if his emerging adult theory applied across social classes confirmed that. While there were many commonalities across emerging adults of all social classes, there were differences in the surveys of those in the lower classes who reported feeling more depressed and lacking access to financial support for education (Arnett, 2015).

In addition to education support, moving back home during the transition period between attending school and obtaining self-sustaining employment is only an option for emerging adults with families that have space in their home and enough financial resources to sustain another family member beyond adolescence. Certainly, unemployment is even harsher for young people of color, but it is not clear whether it is a phenomenon of emerging adulthood or one of adulthood without opportunities and the challenges of poverty. There has been some effort to explore the experience of emerging adulthood from a racial/ethnic minority perspective (Syed & Mitchell, 2013) but research is still limited in this area.

Given these difficulties in mapping progressions of psychosocial development that hold true for many people of a population, the general trend in psychology has been to dismiss stages of development. Following the Piaget years of cognitive development that shaped a whole generation of developmentalists from the 1960s to the 1990s and produced many stage theories of morality, social cognition, self and personality, the Vygotskian paradigm and other cultural psychologies emerged, some with a strong process orientation (zone of proximal development) without specific content and structure of normative accomplishment to be reached at specific ages and others plain hostile toward any developmental thinking that would generalize beyond the specific conditions of a culture or a group.

We are now in a "poststage period" of theorizing without being able to fully let go of what is clearly a relevant phenomenon with huge practical importance: The continued recognition that cognitive, emotional, relational, physical, brain, and other developments unfold, not all chaotically and individual by individual but with some systematicity. It is also hard to argue that such systematicity has some age chronological connections, at least at a correlational level (age/skills/capacities/propensities). Even if these maps are still controversial, it is hard to imagine a pediatrician to function without them (e.g., physical growth charts). Stages and phases are needed to simplify, to organize, and to create some yardsticks that can be used in education, health, and all professions. Yet they do not function well across cultures and in societies that allow for highly individualized choices and pathways. Take the example of motherhood and generativity: Having a baby and taking care of him or her when the mother is 13, 23, 33, 43, or even 53 (and in some exceptional cases, 63), covers a span of more than 50 years of development.

It is hard to imagine making a developmental stage out of generativity that corresponds with other dimensions of development, such as cognitive development, employability, and relational maturity (McAdams, de St Aubin, & Logan, 1993). This complexity, of course, is not settled by creating a new developmental stage with blurry boundaries in both directions of adolescence and adulthood. In the following section, we describe a new approach.

A NEW LOOK AT DEVELOPMENT: DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS THEORY (DPT) ALSO KNOWN AS THE CLOVER MODEL

The developmental process theory (DPT) or Clover Model assumes four domains, each reflecting a particular kind of development (Malti & Noam, 2008). These are the four leaves of the clover—action, assertion, belonging, and reflection. It is not hard to make out of the 4 dimensions 8, 10, or even 40 as the asset model of Peter Benson and his colleagues have done (Benson, 2003). Our goal was not to divide and subdivide but to seek the very minimum dimensions necessary to understand the needs and desires of children and adolescents and to provide them with the right support and learning opportunities that engage and satisfy these needs. What we found through research as well as clinical and classroom observations is that action, assertion, belonging, and reflection are those four dimensions. We call these dimensions and their interactions the Clover Model because they do not follow each other sequentially but are each present at all points of development. The leaves are not distinct entities; rather, they overlap like a Venn diagram.

  Every individual exercises aspects of each of these four developmental processes and needs to balance them, but each leaf takes prominence for specific age groups. People move along a continuum prioritizing the task of one leaf before another, but that priority does not mean that the other dimensions are not applicable. In early adolescence, for example, the belonging processes become essential. However, the physical needs of the action leaf, the issues of assertion (e.g., of will and trying to make an impact), and reflection about self and the world are also active. These establish a new balance with belonging as the preeminent developmental frame. This model preserves a developmental point of view while broadening the scope from a stagewise progression of sense-making (Piaget, 1972), or life tasks (Erikson, 1994), or a singular focus on relationships (Bowlby). Body, will, attachment, and cognition are in continuous exchange. They evolve together and apart, maintaining a tension between progression and regression.

ACTION

The child in early childhood is highly action-oriented, though this tends to be slightly more so for boys than girls. Young children are very concerned with their own perspective and with actively and physically engaging in the world. However, mastering impulses and emotions, and satisfying immediate needs exist lifelong. Many positive, athletic experiences, mindfulness, and so on are meaningful and pleasurable at all phases of life, but typically the coordination of body and impulses becomes more coordinated (updated) throughout childhood and adolescence.

ASSERTION

Exploring their world is paramount for children, and to do this, they assert themselves, their wants and needs, and interests (now more verbally than via action). They can appear oblivious to the needs of others because they do not yet have the capacity to fully coordinate multiple perspectives. Learning to do so will require asserting themselves and dealing with the reactions of others. Knowing a youth may be expecting hostility from others and understanding aggressiveness in terms of striving for assertion may help a mentor normalize a mentee's aggressiveness (Malti & Noam, 2009), and be more hopeful that the mentor can provide a corrective emotional experience. Again, assertiveness, also called *agency*, is a lifelong set of processes, accomplishments, and risks.

BELONGING

With a secure attachment, a youth will explore the world with relative ease, and if he or she has successfully achieved mastery during the industrious explorations of talents, interests, and skills of middle childhood, both of these experiences will dovetail with the emergence of the mutual-inclusive perspective-taking skills that typically appear during middle school (sometimes earlier for girls). The result is a concern for belonging and a sense of allegiance with like-minded and affirming peers. A sense of belonging becomes all important, such that peers take on magnified importance, sometimes trumping family connectedness as the youth's primary source of social affirmation. Of course, this can result in an overly conforming approach to relationships for beyond adolescence. Again, attachment and belonging issues exist from early childhood to death, but the form they take are different at different ages (e.g., being a son vs being a father).

REFLECTION

Teens who are able to take a perspective on their friendships, cultural groups, or families can begin to reflect on ways in which they differ from others, in values, potential, interests, and needs. A deeper degree of identity exploration can ensue with the full force of mutual-inclusive perspective taking being applied to self-discovery. Reflection, which is hampered by anxious attachment but helped by the security of solid attachment style, results in exploration beyond the comfortable boundaries of the collective views of peers, families, and other familiar people. Knowing this, a mentor can help the youth who wants (and now is able) to engage in deeper reflection to consider opportunities the youth has never considered. While we used to view this work as marking adolescence, we now know that creating meaning and identity happens throughout life.

  As should be clear from this brief overview, at each position on the Clover, other leaves can take prominence for a brief or extended period or in specific relationships or contexts, and the process of one leaf may be needed to bridge two others. For example, the transition from the belonging to reflection position may require an altogether new type of assertion to chart new educational territories or career terrain. Normative changes that occur from middle childhood to late adolescence mean that adolescents typically have different needs for belonging, assertion, action, and reflection than children. From a developmental perspective, it also means that significant relationships need to foster child and adolescent needs and thereby fill a unique function in the youth's life.

DPT AND EMERGING ADULTHOOD

We now want to explore how DPT expresses itself in the emerging adult years. We posit that the four Clover Model domains exist from the beginning of life until the end: it is the balance between them that changes. At different phases of life, an updating can and should happen for every domain. This rebalancing and updating is what we term *developmental process*. Much of this work is conceptual with clinical information and developmental observations as the basis. It also represents a heuristic to review selectively important literature on this developmental phase. Thus, we use our model to integrate existing literature that has grown impressively.

ACTION AND EMERGING ADULTHOOD

In emerging adults, an action orientation may manifest as struggles with self-management and impulse control. Studies have found that emotion regulation strategies are more limited for this age group than in older age

groups (Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2014). There is also an expectation that this age group will be more adventurous and risk-taking than other age groups. In fact, research on the association between sensation seeking and risk behaviors in emerging adults has found a connection between sensation seeking and various aspects of well-being among college-attending emerging adults (Ravert et al., 2013). Those who sought out high-intensity sensations were associated with low psychological well-being, where those emerging adults who were seeking novelty had positive associations with well-being and were not significantly associated with risky drinking, drug abuse, or sexual behavior (Ravert et al., 2013, p. 24).

The rise and ubiquity of social media and the instant gratification that having nearly every product, person, and idea at one's fingertips provides an easy vehicle for impulsive behavior focused on fast gratification. While the digital world creates great opportunities for emerging adults to find and share their voice, exposure to certain types of media can also have negative outcomes on this age group, including body image, sexual, and prosocial behavior (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013). At this age, there is also a strong drinking and drug abuse culture that can undermine young adults' ability to manage their lives. An unmoored sense of adult identity may contribute to increased substance abuse as well. Emerging adults who self-reported as "feeling in-between" positively correlated with substance-related problems (Smith, Bahar, Cleeland, & Davis, 2014).

Neuroscience research is supporting the view that the adolescent brain is not fully matured in the 20s and that reasoning and language skills are still developing. Furthermore, MRI studies have shown that impulsivity is higher and emotion control lower than in full adulthood (Johnson, Blum, & Giedd, 2009; Rubia et al., 2000).

ASSERTIVENESS AND EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Developing a strong sense of self and having the confidence to communicate that to others is an important component of emerging adulthood in Western societies. As relationships with family and friends mature, emerging adults have more opportunities at this time in life to express agency in their choices and interpersonal interactions (Bynner, 2005). As with our previous discussion of action orientation, technological advances and the globalization of the economy have given this rising generation of emerging adults more opportunities to choose than ever before. As Barry Schwartz examines in his book *The Paradox of Choice*, the vastness of today's choices can be as crippling as it is liberating, particularly for those who apply internal pressure to make the best choices, what Schwartz refers to as *maximizers* as opposed to *satisficers* (Schwartz, 2004).

BELONGING AND EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Research has shown that the formation of secure attachments in infancy can have an impact on brain development in early adulthood. In a 2015 paper, Christina Moutsiana, Tom Johnstone, and their team shared the findings of their 22-year longitudinal study, where they found a connection between insecure attachment style in infancy and greater amygdala volumes in early adulthood (Moutsiana *et al.*, 2015). The finding is notable because higher amygdala volume in the brain has been connected to anxiety, depression, and difficulty processing emotions (Baur, Hänggi, & Jäncke, 2012; Holmes *et al.*, 2012). The family relationship is not just critical because of its impact on brain development, emerging adults often return to the family after receiving education due to financial constraints and a more attachment orientation in modern families. One study found that "establishing nonconflictual relationships with parents was associated with markers of young adulthood status and attainment of developmental tasks," and positive, guilt-free relationships, specifically with the father that maintain a "close enough" distance are particularly effective in helping young adults find their independence (Shulman & Ben-Artzi, 2003, p. 225).

In addition to adjusting to a more adult relationship with parents, this phase is seen as a time to experiment with romantic relationships and gain experience before making a commitment. For many who experienced the divorces in their parents' generation, marriage is seen with skepticism and either unrealistic or something to be decided on after a long trial period. This age group also has a culture of sexual risk-taking, with one study finding as many as 40% of respondents reporting a recent casual sex partner at age 22 (Lyons, Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2015).

REFLECTION AND EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Reflecting and meaning-making are key components of the identity searching that takes place in emerging adulthood. The meaning-making system is not just formed in adolescence. It is often tied to occupation, which is a struggle when that occupation is still undefined for so many in that age group and job opportunities are limited.

For many, religion plays a role in the meaning-making process. In 2002, Arnett surveyed 140 emerging adults to better understand what role religion played in their process of meaning-making. He found that the influence of family socialization in religion faded with the passage of time, with many emerging adults priding themselves on their independence from their parent's belief system, viewing it as a good and necessary part of their development (Arnett & Jensen, 2002). The rejection of their parents' beliefs does not mean emerging adults are entirely faithless. They may pick and choose

the morals and ethics that appeal to them, viewing their beliefs as a personal, individual choice rather than participation in a collective organization. However, more research with larger samples is needed.

Identity is not just an individual process but also a collective concept with a cohort effect—what it means to be a "millennial," for example. Each generation forms templates of meaning, identity, and choice. Being indecisive about who you are is becoming the new norm for this age group. When Arnett, Ramos, and Jensen surveyed emerging adults ages 20–29 to better understand their ideological views, they found a distinct pull between the ethics of autonomy and community, which they relate to a "struggle, not yet fully articulated, over the ideological direction of their generation" (Arnett, Ramos, & Jensen, 2001, p. 78).

In summary, DPT can help organize the growing field of study regarding strengths and vulnerabilities in the emerging adult years. The extension of making firm life commitments into the third decade of life allows for more exploration and action orientation and the development of voice and choice during the 20s. The belonging needs are met in part by closer relationships with parents, often economically dependent and living in the same household, or establishing intimacy through groups and casual intimate encounters rather than through one-on-one committed relationships that lead to early establishments of families. Finally, the meaning-making related to establishing an identity is taking longer, moving from an adolescent task to one reaching well into young adulthood.

OUTLOOK

In this final section, we turn to the issue of positive development and mental health. DPT is more than a rewrite of stage theory to encompass a dynamic balance between the four adaptable elements that can become updated throughout life. What we have found is that a productive balance across domains is also a good description of positive mental health. A person who lives positively in his or her body, expresses wishes and desires without too much inhibition, is engaged in empathic and intimate relationships and has meaning in life, and has more than Freud's "love and work" or a positive sum of functional checklists that attest to mental health. What does that mean for the young adult?

Overcoming adolescent impulsivity and college drug and alcohol use is a good start. However, of course, having begun to embrace a healthy nutritional and exercise lifestyle that is prevention-oriented is also important. Beginning to express positions and perspectives as a participating and informed citizen is part of a productive emerging adulthood. Exploring and possibly committing to an intimate relationship, to rework the attachments

of the original family and to build lasting friendships mark real progress. Moreover, finally, to establish a more coherent meaning system and identity that give purpose to life is a very large task and a central accomplishment of the young adult years. It is important to further these strands of development and to research them to better understand and support the young people moving from one transitional period—adolescence—to the next one leading up to adulthood.

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