IS EMERGING ADULTHOOD A NEW DEVELOPMENTAL PHASE?

In 2000, Jeffrey Arnett, a developmental research psychologist, proposed a new phase of development that he called "emerging adulthood." He delineated developmental challenges centered on identity, role exploration, and subjective experience and linked his observations to changes in the demographics and culture of contemporary society. This proposal elicited an extraordinary response in the research community, but the reaction among psychoanalysts has been tepid at best: developmental phases have not been amended for almost a century, and in some schools the very notion of such phases has been discredited. Adult development has historically attracted mostly lifespan psychoanalysts, and the concept of identity has never achieved full psychoanalytic status. But both adulthood and identity merit psychoanalytic legitimacy: adulthood because it looms in the mind as a meaningful endpoint that shapes earlier stages, and identity because it is a complex, organizing aspect of self-representation. The concept of emerging adulthood, too, has sufficient validity and heuristic value to be considered a developmental phase, provided we loosen our fixed ideas about what constitutes "developmental" and take a fresh look at the sweep of human development as it is shaping up in a transformed world.

Keywords: emerging adulthood, Jeffrey Arnett, twenty-first-century culture, psychoanalytic theories of development, adolescence

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Standing too close to the great changes that have already taken place or are beginning to, and without a glimmering of the future that is being shaped, we ourselves are at a loss as to the significance of the impressions which press upon us and as to the value of the judgments which we form.

—Freud (1915, p. 275)

I offer here a psychoanalytic commentary on Jeffrey Arnett’s theory of emerging adulthood (2000), a construct that exploded onto the developmental research scene at the turn of the century. In Arnett’s work, the notion of individual adaptation is generalized to address the shaping of an entire generation entering adulthood in the context of their particular cultural circumstances. The generative impact of this idea on research and developmental thinking is all the more remarkable because, historically, many generations in the passage from late adolescence to adulthood have been characterized and bequeathed widely recognized monikers (the beat generation, hippies, yuppies, and so on) by society. These popular signifiers have traditionally identified the zeitgeist of a given generation as it approaches maturity, in the context of the sociocultural changes that shape it and are, in turn, shaped by it. But Arnett added a new and controversial twist to this observation by insisting that the cohort he studied represented the first edition of a new developmental phase that would be repeated in subsequent generations. This assertion grants the current transition a new level of importance, unmatched since the concept of an adolescent phase was introduced over a century ago (Hall 1904), and poses a challenge to developmental thinkers from a range of disciplines, including psychoanalysis.

Inevitably, any discussion of the remarkable success of Arnett’s ideas from a psychoanalytic viewpoint must include a number of topics that have in varying degree been marginalized in psychoanalytic theory, notably developmental stages, adaptation, culture, adult development, and identity. As I will show, each of these topics has its own problematic history in the evolution of North American psychoanalysis; some have been consistently neglected, while others have only recently been consigned to the dust heap. For example, the classical emphasis on progression through early developmental stages as foundational for adult personality organization has been replaced by nonlinear systems thinking among relational theorists (Seligman 2003), self psychologists (Coburn 2002; Shane 2005,
2006), intersubjectivists (Doctors 2002), infant researchers (Beebe and Lachmann 2003), and others, all of whom have more or less embraced a more fluid, idiosyncratic, and nonpredictive model of individual development. Further, the exploration of childhood underpinnings of adult psychopathology is no longer considered central to cure (Gilmore 2009; Govrin 2006; Seligman 2003). The interface of mind and culture has never occupied a principal role in psychoanalytic thinking, with the exception of a handful of more or less marginalized American analysts, including Rado, Kardiner, Fromm, Erikson, Horney, Sullivan, and Lear. Similarly, identity, a bridging concept that elevates culture to a pivotal role on a par with mental life, has never achieved full legitimacy in psychoanalysis, despite the renown of Erik Erikson¹ and its own hugely generative impact on developmental science. As a consequence, Arnett’s proposal of “the new developmental phase of emerging adulthood” presents an unwieldy, even indigestible, concept for consideration by the contemporary American psychoanalyst.

In what follows, I attempt to unpack emerging adulthood and assess its value to twenty-first-century psychoanalysts, in terms both of developmental theory and its inevitable reverberations in clinical work. I will first describe in greater detail the entity called “emerging adulthood” and attempt to answer a fundamental criticism: isn’t “emerging adulthood” just a pretentious nickname for a generation shaped by twenty-first-century technology that already has its share of sobriquets (millennials, Generation Me, Generation Media), or is it what Arnett suggests: a different order of transformation, a transformation of developmental progression with implications for adolescence, adulthood, and society? I will try throughout to support my belief that emerging adulthood should matter to psychoanalysis, even given the field’s present-day theoretical depreciation of developmental stages and its long-standing indifference to culture, identity, and adult development. My perspective is that of a modified ego psychological, developmental psychoanalyst; while remaining mindful of the ongoing potential for transformation (indeed, relying on it), I try to contextualize an individual life in a series of nested systems that informs my thinking: age; time of life based on contemporary expectations, biological parameters, and the patient’s own “internal time of life”;

¹As noted by Nancy Chodorow (2016), one of Erikson’s staunch admirers, “more than any other analyst [he] explored the clinical specificity of culture in the psyche and transformed our understanding of the psyche-culture nexus” (p. 201).
childhood history; family history (social, psychological, and psychiatric); cultural trends relevant to the patient’s surround; environmental provisions including privilege and access; and interpersonal and internal resources. I reject the notion of the adult as a “self-causing system” (Pine 1990, p. 60) because it suggests that the accomplishment of adulthood is unencumbered by society. I find that my orientation toward the age group under discussion has been significantly influenced by an immersion in the emerging adulthood literature, which has clarified my observations of the dilemmas and challenges these young people face in their relationship to individuation and “identity,” especially given their devaluation and distrust of the conventional milestones of adulthood. In short, I have grown ever more convinced that the concept of emerging adulthood characterizes a new phase of considerable duration at the threshold of adulthood, marked by what Abrams designates as the sine qua non for a developmental stage: “discontinuity” from earlier personality organization and radical “transformations of earlier achievements and modes of being” (Abrams 1983, p. 116). I justify this assertion because I believe that adolescence has also changed; given the pace of social change, identity consolidation during the psychosocial moratorium is neither promoted nor desirable, careers are not settled, autonomy is not secured by confidence in the self-as-agent, values are unstable and often reactive, and the establishment of sustained adult relationships is not a conscious goal. It is only upon entering the real world of the twenty-first century that the identity crisis comes to fruition, slowly revamping the “identities” of adolescence into a serviceable adult form. Thus, the adult personality organization crystallizes over an extended period and is substantively different from the mental life of nineteen- or twenty-year-olds who are not thinking toward future adulthood, are not directed by an autonomous superego, and, to put it simply, are not stable. As with adolescence a century ago, a full appreciation of this phase is likely to require multiple iterations in coming generations and deeper study to elucidate its intrapsychic processes; I believe it ultimately will change the way we think about how young people grow up.

\footnote{Such “entries” include college graduation or moving from a series of “McJobs” to a stable position with future growth potential.}
ARNETT'S PROPOSAL: EMERGING ADULTHOOD AS A DEVELOPMENTAL PHASE

Jeffrey Arnett formally described the “theory of emerging adulthood” in 2000; in the two decades that followed, developmental research psychology has produced a voluminous literature supporting his proposal that something different is happening at the entry to adulthood in contemporary society. The reliance on traditional sociological markers that have served for over a century—stable job, independent domicile, financial self-sufficiency, marriage and children—is out of sync with the pace, direction, and even values of twenty-first-century life. These so-called adult milestones are either diminished in significance or postponed at least until the close of the third decade and, with the exception of financial independence, have little resonance with subjective experience. Arnett’s argument consists of a few major points.

A generational shift. Arnett cited epidemiological data that had accumulated in the literature, documenting the delay in achieving adult markers. Young people return to their parental home in greater numbers, struggle to find careers or stable jobs, extend their education, rely on parental support, marry later, and have children later.3

A societal shift. Arnett recognized that the changes he observed occur in concert with remarkable social changes in postindustrial societies, producing similar transformations in young adult populations, widely known as millennials, across the globe, albeit with cultural distinctions. He knowingly contextualized his theory in this twenty-first-century cultural upheaval: the breakdown of defined pathways or “route-maps” (Arnett et al. 2011, p. 4) to the predictable status of adulthood, corresponding changes in gender roles, sexuality, and approach to work, the impact of globalization and instantaneous communication without geographic boundaries, and the shift in the economy from industrial to information technology. These events combined to create a “sociocultural ‘release’” from centuries-old traditions (Arnett et al. 2011, p. 4).

3For example, the achievement of all five markers by age twenty-five had declined since 1960, down from 44% among males and 68% of females to 13 % males and 25% females in 2000. The median age of marriage increased roughly seven years for both men and women in the years from 1956 to 2014. Similarly, child-bearing age drifted upward, such that the proportion of first births to women over thirty jumped 28% between 2000 and 2014 (from 16.5% to 21.1%) and first births to women aged thirty-five and over increased 23% (from 7.4 to 9.1%) (Mathews and Hamilton 2016).
Subjective conviction of adulthood. Arnett was especially interested in how this cohort thought about achieving adulthood and about adulthood as a state. With the single exception of financial independence, his young respondents rejected the importance of the other markers and linked adulthood to certain mental capacities: independent decision making and willingness to take responsibility. Interestingly, the overwhelming majority of his respondents endorsed the feeling of instability as their predominant state: they explicitly described feeling neither adult nor adolescent, neither young adult nor late or even postadolescent (Arnett and Taber 1994; Arum and Roksa 2011; Shulman and Ben-Artzi 2003).

Emerging adulthood as a developmental phase. Arnett argued that emerging adulthood represents a true developmental phase, one occurring in relation to a specific cultural turn: the circumstances of the contemporary era have stretched out the “winding road” to adulthood (Arnett 2004) to reveal a phase with its own dilemmas and unique challenges. The implication is that in the past either traditionally prescribed career paths forced premature closure and washed out the complex developmental steps required to prepare for adulthood, and/or that the present century poses unprecedented challenges to identity development, including a radically changed economy and disillusionment with adult institutions such as marriage and job longevity. Arnett insists this was not just a version of the “transitions to adulthood” described by psychoanalysts or a pathological extension of that process. The consensus among researchers is that emerging adults are not just becoming adults; rather, they are something in and of themselves (Syed 2015). Of note is that Arnett makes no claims to universality and readily acknowledges that emerging adulthood depends on a given country’s and cohort’s affluence, relation to globalization, and educational, and vocational opportunities.

In positioning the phenomenon of emerging adulthood as a new developmental phase, Arnett bucks two trends in the popular sociological literature and in developmental research about millennials (see, e.g., Twenge and Campbell 2009). Demurring from the tendency to see generational phenomena as transient, he explicitly distinguishes his “theory” (Arnett 2007) from the nicknames and harsher commentary on millennials found in the popular press and some scholarly literature (see especially any work by Twenge [e.g., 2013] and recent contributions by Turkle [e.g.,

4To psychoanalysts, these are the result of evolving ego autonomy and superego development in late adolescence and early adulthood.
2011); indeed, he insists that emerging adulthood is not specific to the millennial generation but rather is a new way of moving into adulthood in a radically changed culture. He also defies the trend in developmental literature away from the idea of stages in favor of process-oriented conceptualizations of human development, such as systems theory (see Arnett et al. 2011) and lifespan thinking (Gilleard and Higgs 2016; Hendry and Kloep 2011; Kloep and Hendry 2011). For Arnett and his adherents, to regard emerging adulthood with its five characteristic features as an indistinct and amorphous process continuous with adolescence diminishes its value as a singular phenomenon whose study has been a boon to developmental science.

THE CHANGING VIEW OF DEVELOPMENT IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

In regard to psychoanalytic developmental theory, Arnett tapped into a contemporary controversy about the relevance of developmental thinking and developmental stages and, more broadly, the validity of a developmental foundation for psychoanalytic approaches to personality and psychopathology.

It is widely recognized that there has never been a singular psychoanalytic developmental theory (Gilmore 2008, 2009; Gilmore and Meersand 2015; Govrin 2006). Every psychoanalytic school, especially every "grand" one proposing a general psychology (Govrin 2006), has its own baby with distinctive needs and predilections, but most of these schools have been curiously uninterested in following that baby forward into the vicissitudes of child development. It is mostly mainstream American ego psychology and Anna Freud–influenced British psychoanalysis that have documented development over the first two decades in detail, relying not only on clinical material but also on observation and research. Perhaps as a consequence, these related schools have been subject to considerable criticism, some well-deserved and some not (Chodorow 2016). The criticism most relevant to this topic is that such theories, grounded in the familiar stages of Freud’s psychosexual libidinal development, are not only proffered as rigidly predictive and normative (Corbett 2001; Coates 1997), but are distinctly outdated as systems-oriented approaches come to prevail (Galatzer-Levy 1995, 2002, 2009, 2014; Gilmore 2008; Mayes 2001). Stages are said to foretell what
will happen in a discontinuous, but nonetheless orderly, linear, and hierarchical sequence. Moreover, adherents of psychoanalytic stages of development have historically maintained the view that basic personality structure ensues from the expectable procession of stages that build on earlier achievements, thereby elevating childhood, especially the oedipal phase, to its preeminent place in the shaping of adult personality, and reinforcing uniformity and predetermination. In contrast, contemporary psychoanalytic theorists from mostly (but not exclusively) relational or interpersonal schools have embraced nonlinear dynamic systems thinking (Coates 1997; Corbett 2001; Galatzer-Levy 1995, 2009; Balsam and Harris 2012; Harrison 2014; Thelen and Smith 1994), which divests itself of the developmental tilt toward infancy (Mitchell 1984) and insists on unpredictability and indeterminacy.

All developmental theories, including these various psychoanalytic schools and many neighboring disciplines, must by definition rely on a motor that explains forward progression, according to their understanding of fundamental mechanisms of developmental momentum and the means and patterning of transformation (Mayes 1999). These are usually a combination of biological maturation, environmental provision and demands (including interpersonal and/or intersubjective nutriment and guidance), and the more expansive conceptualization of interacting systems. The relative weight given these potential forces is an important distinguishing feature of psychoanalytic schools and can be understood to establish a line between classical theories and contemporary ones (Govrin 2006) and between stage theories and lifespan or systems theories. Drive theory, ego psychology, Anna Freud’s followers, the British independent school, and even, to a limited degree, self psychology and attachment theory include at least a nod to the biological motor of transformation and maturation; the unfolding sequence of cognitive, hormonal, physical, motoric, and structural advances, in interaction with the environment, produces experience, which in turn shapes the direction of future growth. Alternatively, greater emphasis on “environment” encompasses an almost infinite range of factors, from in utero influences to interpersonal world to culture.

1 I believe, along with Chodorow (2016) and Marcus (1990), that modern ego psychological developmental conceptualizations are now less mired in this outdated model and more oriented toward a contemporary systems outlook, which incidentally has been present in our literature since the 1970s; but to some, even the mention of the oedipal phase, the jewel in the crown of classical theory, reflects an outdated approach.
Similar to the nature/nurture polarity, differences in emphasis among these elements carries considerable import for a given theory’s inclusiveness regarding factors influencing personality development in a cultural context. This is especially the case with regard to adult development, since the biological motor has presumably declined.6

Nonlinear dynamic systems thinking is increasingly integrated into a range of theories, despite its features that would seem contradictory to traditional ideas; as noted earlier, contemporary infant observers, intersubjectivists, self psychologists, and relationalists all endorse variants of the basic nonpredictive, multifactorial model. But while the recognition of complexity and the role of concurrent systems in shaping development and personality structure has a long if underappreciated history in mainstream developmental psychoanalysis (Abrams 1983; Demos 1989; Galatzer-Levy 1976, 1997, 2016; Gilmore and Meersand 2014; Spruiell 1993), most of these thinkers have left existing developmental theory out to dry, as it were, since the work of revamping it has been largely neglected. This leaves the question of adult development in a somewhat compromised position in most psychoanalytic camps, even those embracing systems theory, and makes Arnett’s theory curiously untethered to a conceptual frame in which to examine it: early adult development and its powerful midwife, contemporary culture, are either underacknowledged or undertheorized.

**CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT**

*There is no such thing as human nature independent of culture.*
—CLIFFORD GEERTZ (1973, p. 49)

The role of culture, clearly a central player in Arnett’s theory, has received limited acknowledgment in both clinical and theoretical psychoanalysis as powerful contributing system (I. Bonovitz 2001; C. Bonovitz 2005; Eizirik 1997; for noteworthy exceptions in classical clinical papers, see Blum 1985 and Chused 1990). This neglect has had a far-reaching impact on our science. The marginalization of thinkers like Bowlby, Mahler, Sullivan, and Erikson has had the effect of shielding American and allied

6In fact, for some North American developmentalists, the absence of biological transformation precludes true adult development (Abrams 1990; Miller 2017). But new evidence of brain development through the twenties may require reevaluation of this idea.

7For example, Abrams (personal communication) embraces complexity and nonlinearity but does not recognize adult development.
British ego psychology from timely modifications through ideas highlighting the importance of the human environment, cultural objects, and society in mental life (Coates 2004). The psychoanalytic field’s notorious resistance to change (Chodorow 1989; Cooper 1984; Grinker 1977; Holzman and Aronson 1992), so salient when juxtaposed with studies of cultural transformations, creates a drag on the evolution of our capacity to understand variation and novelty. Our long history of pathologizing homosexuality is an infamous example of this rigidity, which today contributes to a highly conservative posture toward nonbinary, especially transgender, experience.

Common sense demands that culture be given its due in regard to developmental progression. To extend Geertz’s formulation beyond human nature to human development, there is “no such thing” as development without environmental input, limitations, and a powerful, pacing-setting cultural clock. Cultural expectations shape the meaning of “normal development” and the broad categories of age-stages (see below), such as childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, and cultural products infiltrate development, at times altering its course. Beginning at birth, culture in its myriad forms, such as language, value systems, and technology, is absorbed into the human psyche, serves as a filter for experience (Erikson 1956; Seligman and Shanok 1995), and shapes developmental transformation (C. Bonovitz 2005; Valsiner 2014).

As new capacities arise from the cultural/ontological interface, they may create momentary perturbations, but they soon become “common knowledge” as they are elaborated and integrated into developmental, educational, and popular thought and literature, thereby resetting the age-stages and expectations and to some extent revamping the shape of both prior and subsequent development. Since we know that after puberty there is a major

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6Culture is far more likely to be acknowledged in the contemporary relational literature, in the writings of third-wave feminist theorists, in the occasional technical/clinical paper from a range of schools, and of course in historical examinations of Freud and others.

7These cultural shifts have inspired a number of despairing psychoanalytic essays about the changing nature of developmental phases as containers of key sequential developmental challenges that must be mastered (Grignon 2013; Lemna 2013; Tylor 2017; Turkle 2011).

8Two time-honored psychoanalytic assumptions have impeded our full appreciation of cultural influences on development: (1) the implicit assumption of a “facilitating environment” (Winnicott 1965) or even just an “average acceptable environment” (Hartmann 1939); (2) the idea that, within the limitations of neurotic development, personal agency is the primary determinant of developmental outcome—the notion that the adult is a “self-causing system” (see Pine 1990, p. 60).
augmentation of the role of culture in shaping progression, it comes as no surprise that the interval between puberty and adulthood is the inflection point for new phases. Any such “new phase” of later development must be firmly contextualized in the culture in which it appears, and indeed adolescence and then emerging adulthood were linked to technological advances in society, associated educational opportunities, and sociocultural trends that created a transformative interface, rejiggering maturational timing and introducing new developmental tasks and challenges.\(^\text{11}\)

Culture-leaning developmental categorizations, like the traditional phase of adulthood, are termed age-stages; they explicitly acknowledge that society identifies categories of development by virtue of age, assumed capacities, and the applied cultural expectations.\(^\text{12}\) Age-stage theory encompasses both maturation and environment, and leaves it up to each culture to name its cohorts, establish expectations, and assign them a role in society. Arnett’s proposal of a new phase in the third decade may be more digestible if conceptualized as a novel age-stage, arising from the interface of contemporary human development and the particular circumstances of twenty-first-century technoculture. The special significance of this cultural moment derives from the combined impact of declining, centuries-old social institutions and a quantum shift in the demands of our fast-moving information technology culture. In comparing the recognition of emerging adulthood to that of adolescence (Hall 1904), Arnett hopes to replicate the process that made adolescence the designation not merely of a time of life but of a complex phase: developmental tasks and maturational changes “unveiled” by liberation from traditional cultural constraints and transformed by the ascendant culture achieve the status of a widely recognized period of development. Similar to adolescence in the last century, emerging adulthood is the product of changing requirements and defining features of adulthood in a new century. This is Arnett’s preferred formulation for the rise of emerging adulthood as a phenomenon and a concept.

\(^{11}\)Such advances scramble biological progression in many ways, ranging from the impact of diet on the timing of puberty to the effect of screen exposure on the emergence of entirely new developmental skill sets in very young children to the potential for posthuman hybridization of humans and machines.

\(^{12}\)Other examples are categories such as toddler, middle-schooler, and middle-aged; these identify developmental cohorts at a given period in a culture, positioning them in the social hierarchy and assessing them by the ambient social expectations, without insisting on sameness.
THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

The construct of adulthood is perhaps most readily recognized as a cultural creation by most developmental sciences. Here chronological age is obviously a factor in determining who qualifies; it is primarily an exclusionary baseline and/or is linked to culturally determined privileges, like voting or purchasing alcohol, which can endow it with personal as well as social significance. From the point at which the word adult entered the popular vernacular late in the nineteenth century (Hunter 2009), the definitions of adulthood emanating from the social sciences were supported by the relative stability of adult institutions like the nuclear family, parenthood, career path, religious observances, and community; in addition, adult roles were highly gendered and rigid (Silva 2012). As Arnett observed, the so-called traditional markers used to define adulthood in sociological literature have been cast aside by the rising generation, likely because they bear the imprint of their origins: twentieth-century gender stereotypes, social institutions, and career trajectories (Setterson and Ray 2011; Silva 2012). They have “institutionalized” the life course (Kohli 2007) in twentieth-century terms and are simply not endorsed by the generations reaching adulthood in the new century.

Adulthood in psychoanalytic theorizing has unfortunately been woefully neglected (Emde 1985; Michels 1993) or discounted (Abrams, personal communication), but luckily Arnett’s theory is not really about adulthood, despite its implications for adulthood (and for adolescence, for that matter). His “stage” is tucked between adolescence and adulthood, and despite his rejection of the descriptor “transition to adulthood,” that formulation would at least place emerging adulthood in the familiar category explored at length in the literature by mid-twentieth-century adolescent specialists like Blos, Erikson, and Laufer (Miller 2017). Arnett’s objection defends the status of emerging adulthood as a phase in its own right; it is more than merely a state of “becoming” an adult. This distinction is concretely captured in the considerable difference of duration between “emerging adulthood” (a decade or so) and the “transition to adulthood” (four years at most). Duration is not inconsequential; according to those psychoanalytic developmental theorists, prolongation of the transition has ominous implications for the future (see, e.g., Blos 1954). It implies resistance to the pinnacle achievement of adolescent closure: the final reconfiguration of personality, crystallization of character, and consolidation of a stable
identity, which in turn create the core of the adult personality, including the adult neurosis. A brief survey of psychoanalytic views of the transition reveals five interrelated conceptualizations: (1) It is a period of self-reflection and self-awareness (Hauser and Smith 1991). (2) The personality consolidates through the establishment of homeostasis (patterned defenses, preferred beliefs and attitudes, autonomous and cohesive superego functioning). (3) Consolidation is hastened by the "second individuation" (Bloos 1967) from the family of origin, allowing the young person to invest in non incessuous objects and extricate guiding values, moral principles, and ideals from parental hegemony. (4) Erikson (1956) emphasized the importance of the consolidation of identity, broadly understood as the process that integrates multiple aspects of the contemporary self, the childhood self, family, family heritage, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and historical moment (to name only a few) into a cohesive identity that provides continuity, linking past, present, and future, and makes subjective sense. (5) The transition includes the expected settling of sexual identity and sexual object choice (Lauffer 1968), paving the way for intimate relationships.

As noted earlier, prolongation of this transition beyond the early twenties was thought to indicate psychopathology, variously conceptualized as "prolonged adolescence" (Bloos 1965) or an evolving borderline personality organization (Kernberg 1978). Designating this prolonged period as a new developmental phase implies that adolescence's end does not (and indeed should not) involve a crystallization of character, the establishment of fixed homeostatic defenses, or the consolidation of identity. On the contrary, an implication of the theory of emerging adulthood is that such "closure" forecloses the wide-open developmental opportunities and potential reconfigurations of the third decade.

**DEFINING FEATURES OF EMERGING ADULTHOOD**

Arnett and his followers are clearly not focused on the unconscious mind, evolving personality structure, or ego capacities per se. Instead, their focus is on reportable subjective experience, observed behavior, and epidemiological trends. Nonetheless, it is possible to juxtapose their ideas with the psychoanalytic conceptualizations of late adolescence and the transition to adulthood, a comparison that highlights radical differences in timing and process. Psychoanalytic developmental theory asserts that the crystallization of personality and identity formation, signaled by the
emergence of stable gender identity and sexual preferences, belief systems, moral standards, ambitions, work ethic, and reliable ways to manage anxiety, is the final achievement of adolescent development. It is that stage's main intrapsychic event and the driver of a relatively brief transition to adulthood. By contrast, the theory of emerging adulthood insists that these fruits of adolescent closure—"second individuation" and the potential for enduring intimate relationships outside the family of origin, intrapsychic consolidation and stabilization of defenses, identity resolution, and so on—have not been achieved as contemporary generations move into their twenties. Identity and many of its observable manifestations remain the developmental focus well into the third decade.

Arnett's five features of emerging adulthood are (1) identity (role) explorations, (2) instability, (3) self-focus, (4) feeling in-between, and (5) a widening of possibilities (Arnett 2004, p. 55). Most of these features are descriptive; they refer to circumstances and behaviors without reference to intrapsychic processes, however much they may represent their derivatives. It is primarily role exploration, the "heart of emerging adulthood" (Arnett 2000, p. 478) that most closely correlates with the process of identity formation and carries lasting implications for mental life. Both research and the popular press document how young people today arrive at their twenties not yet committed to identity components and overarching identities that they experience as subject to their conscious choice. The cultural climate has indeed penetrated this once silent process and has forced many of its components into conscious awareness. Today there is an implicit recognition of a greater degree of self-determination in many identity elements, once presumed nonnegotiable, including belief systems, self with others, group affiliations, career choices, race, gender, sexuality, and numerous others that figure into a coherent and consistent sense of self.13

IDENTITY FORMATION PAST AND PRESENT

Arnett's developmental features are descriptors of what is easily observable in the consulting room and at large: twenty-somethings seem suspended or unfocused, declare themselves not yet ready for adulthood, and

13Sociologists acknowledge this shift by describing late modernity's challenge to the traditional "institutionalization of the life course" (Gilteard and Higgs 2016) in favor of individualization.
feel overwhelmed by the prospect of boundless possibilities without anchors, such as fixed identity components, interpersonal commitments, traditions, job and educational trajectories, or family expectations. In my experience, they often struggle to integrate various nondissociated “selves” that have been fostered in different settings: for example, a twenty-four-year-old man who shuffles the roles of “good Catholic” son, philosophy major from an Ivy league school still studying the ancients, and rising talent representative of hip-hop artists. Arnett’s observations initiated extensive research that highlights how the consolidation of identity in the twenty-first century is not only delayed, but is fundamentally different from the process described by Erikson (1956). But neither developmental researchers nor psychoanalysts have fully grappled with the intrapsychic correlates of contemporary identity formation, its repercussions for adolescence, and its impact on the nature of the new adulthood.

Erikson (1956) described identity formation as a complex process that is a lifetime in the making, originating in infancy and gradually built up of experiences and identifications that accrue over the course of development. It is derived from two main sources, inner representations and external attributions, which are gradually forged into an amalgam of subjective, self-reflective experience—the self as subject—with the awareness of the self as object. The actuality of being, the “who” one is, provides the subjective elements of Erikson’s oft-repeated descriptors of identity: “selfsameness and continuity in time” (1959, p. 22). The self as object, the “what” one is, arises from family and the cultural milieu and ongoing input from the environment. The interface of these two sources, inside and outside, makes identity a quintessentially psychosocial entity that is the crowning achievement of the ego’s synthetic capacity.

Identity components are collected over the whole arc of the individual lifetime and are shuffled and reconfigured until stabilization occurs. Some of these components can be cast off as intolerable or alien, but many must be “overcome” or redefined by breaking away from traditional cultural stereotypes. Children of color, adoption, divorce, illegal immigrants, incarcerated criminals, celebrities, vast wealth, or poverty are shaped or constrained by such identity components, not just because of their role in limiting or expanding opportunities, but also because they have become aspects of ego identity woven into personality organization. All such components, even if discarded, contribute to and sustain the individual’s identity history, evolution, and multiplicity within a container of selfsameness.
In Erikson’s theory it is the maturational advances of adolescence—cognitive, socio-emotional and physical—that contribute to the process of individuation that Blos considered the core developmental achievement of adolescence. The synergy between evolving identity formation and the individuation from familial constraints on identity permits a greater conscious sense of agency and freedom to choose. The effect of adolescent developmental achievements is to allow a different perspective on the “givens” established in childhood and a new degree of emancipation from the limitations they impose, despite the ongoing complexity and strain of environmental identifiers, expectations, and prejudices. These developments set the stage for the consolidation of identity that takes the individual into adulthood.

This classical twentieth-century formulation, which places the major work of identity formation and its resolution in adolescence, fails to adequately describe today’s search for identity. As long-standing social institutions (such as marriage) and their associated roles have crumbled, as sanctified pathways to adulthood have all but disappeared, and as the idiosyncrasies of subculture and tradition have been eroded by globalization, full identity resolution in adolescence is today culturally unsupported and near impossible. To some social commentators, notably queer theorists, this is a welcome change, since the very idea of “identity resolution” is outdated; the institutional identifiers (Kohli 2007) that once defined one’s “place” have toppled and are neither mainstays of the social fabric nor adequate vessels to carry the individual through life. The mistrust of such identifiers goes deep into mental life to question the binary assumptions behind “stable gender identity,” fixed racial identity, ethnicity, unitary sexual orientation, and heteronormative tropes. In such a cultural climate, personal inclination and internal experience can escape not only family and cultural traditions, but also the limitations purportedly written into chromosomes, settled early in development, and/or thereafter imposed by the environment. Even the notion that adult identity is fixed by age thirty is no longer a self-evident truth, as alternatives to marriage, heteronormative sexuality, and kinship patterns proliferate, creating new portals to new ways of being throughout the life cycle. In the same vein, new career

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14Erikson’s theorizing of ongoing adult development was not completed and has been relatively neglected by psychoanalysts and personality researchers (Gilbeard and Higgs 2016).

15Census data show that today married households are in the minority and that myriad other forms of familial organizations are replacing them (Torkelson 2012).
opportunities in the wake of breakneck technological advances have completely revolutionized the available work options for adulthood. New and unprecedented professional identities abound, from the short-lived YouTube celebrity to the start-up billionaire; many of these are frankly inconceivable, not only to analog-parents but also to the rising generations—until they invent them. Arnett’s idea of liberation from “cultural constraints” that “widens possibilities” has at least two important correlates in the nature of identity development today: adolescence is only the first phase of identity exploration that now seems to require more time and immersion in contemporary culture to “figure out”; and personality consolidation, as sustained by stable self-representations, superego contents, successful sublimations, acceptable behaviors,10 and defenses against anxiety is now the accomplishment of the third decade.

The trends toward individualistic determination—of race, gender, sexual object, work, lifestyle, and the nature of adulthood—may be responsible for the narcissistic individualism critically ascribed to millennials (Twenge and Campbell 2009; Twenge 2013) but also reflects the liberating and affirming effect of new options and self-selected affiliations. The degree to which this array of options is both exciting and daunting to the emerging adult cohort is suggested by the rather mundane research finding that less than half of college seniors have career plans (https://www.mheducation.com/news-media/press-releases/2017-future-workforce-survey.html). They just don’t know what they want to be yet. More accurately stated, they don’t want to be any one thing; they want to do what comes next.

There is no denying that these new realities and sensibilities send a shot across the bow of classical psychoanalytic developmental theory regarding myriad aspects of identity development, threatening some of our time-honored principles. Even while the concept of identity may never have achieved full psychoanalytic legitimacy, many theorists endorse its explanatory power (Abend 1974; Kernberg 2006; Wallerstein 1998). Moreover, identity components are regularly incorporated into clinical discussions as stable aspects of adult personality that inform and set expectations: a patient is identified as male or female, gay or straight, black or white, married or single. Educational pedigrees and occupations have traditionally spoken legions, implicitly or explicitly, about affluence, privilege, intelligence, and their

10Note that risk behaviors now peak in the mid-twenties (Schwartz et al. 2015).
intrapsychic repercussions. The presumption that such predetermined component features of identity are fixed in the construction of personality like bricks set in mortar is no longer tenable.

Not only are elements of identity unmoored from traditional determinants; so also is the primary role of early experience in determining intrapsychic components diminished. For example, gender identity and sexual object choice, once thought to be established in early childhood, are in contemporary culture caught up in dynamic flux (Littman 2017; Turban and Kuroghlian 2018); people who identify as trans emerge de novo in their late teens or twenties, and a growing number choose to remain “in transition.” Other people change or widen their sexual preferences in their twenties, sometimes completely and permanently, and sometimes as a transient aspect of experimentation or response to new experience. Attributing such phenomena to peer pressure, cultural fads, or psychopathology may obscure the more complex etiology of identity, even while these factors no doubt contribute to the picture. Such changes are not necessarily traceable to childhood conflicts in a linear causal sense; no doubt they arise as a solution to internal conflict, but in the past such compromise formations were not understood to bend, discard, or reinvent basic identity components to serve new self-representations. The past has become a more unpredictable contribution, a shape-changer that “lives in the present” in unconscious fantasy (Shapiro and Inderbitzen 1989), in the range of self-representations, patterns of object relations, defensive structures, and a fluctuating moral compass, all of which now seem to shift and reconfigure in response to internal or social experience. In consequence, it appears that radical transformations in identity can be the result of later experience and not simply responses to earlier personal or social trauma. Dramatic changes ignite at the interface of individual development with contemporary culture and thus serve to generate tipping points for recombinations and new forms. These occurrences support the idea that identity consolidation remains in process through the twenties. Identity development is now, like everything developmental, “messy, fluid, and highly context-sensitive” (Thelen and Smith 1994, p. 215).

**BUT DOES THIS MAKE EMERGING ADULTHOOD A NEW DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE?**

Any psychoanalytic response to Arnett’s proposals regarding emerging adulthood must address the theoretical assumptions that have been
building blocks of our developmental theory, including the preferred model of developmental transformation, the usefulness and validity of developmental stages, their definitive role in establishing character structure, the strict requirement for bodily or cognitive change as the developmental driver, the conceptualization of identity development, and the impact of culture on developmental progression. As I have suggested, developmental psychoanalysts have relied on the biological driver as the crucial element that justifies designation of a development phase; many of the developmental tasks assigned to each stage are associated with these maturational advances,\textsuperscript{17} be they cognitive, physical, hormonal, or socio-emotional. Adulthood lacks such obvious programmed changes and similarly lacks the relatively uniform environmental experience of school progression that dominates childhood. As a consequence, adulthood is highly variable in its course; according to Michels (1993), the vast diversity of adult lives has contributed to the lack of interest in adult development among psychoanalysts. Sociological identifiers have gone unchallenged.

Psychoanalysts interested in emerging adulthood (Knight 2017; Knight and Miller 2017; Miller 2017) have highlighted new evidence of neuroanatomical changes (Zimmermann and Iwanski 2014), heightened neuroplasticity (Dougherty and Clarke 2018), and the emergence of specialized cognitions in the twenties. Such discoveries documenting brain changes during young adulthood are likely to accumulate as neuroimaging techniques improve, ultimately diminishing the specificity of the biological driver as a purely childhood phenomenon. If these admittedly lesser transformations are granted developmental importance, adulthood will more likely be characterized as “becoming” (Michels 1993) rather than a static achievement. However, the controversy over what is developmental and what is not, especially when based on the absolute criterion of a demonstrable biological driver, becomes increasingly irrelevant, not only as the technology for discovering neuroanatomical changes improves, but also in proportion to our reckoning with the power of culture. As I have noted, the less ambitious notion of developmental age-stages (Syed 2015) as a theoretical construct is a preferable alternative to relying on neurobiological changes, since it conforms to a given culture’s definition of cohorts, incorporates the social milieu’s expectations for a

\textsuperscript{17}For example, latency’s accelerated growth rate and cognitive/socio-emotional advances allow individuals in this stage to be educated, engage with the peer group, participate in competitive play, and develop hobbies and interests.
given level of maturation, defines who deviates, and influences the subjective meaning and intrapsychic experience of associated bio-psychosocial changes. This approach dispenses with predictive narratives and requires that we consider individuals as recognizable but unique examples of identified cohorts\(^8\) that are unabashedly cultural constructs. We know that both environmental provision and biological maturation can be rate-limiting and that their relative consistency within a culture (and in some instances, across cultures\(^9\)) yields the familiar attractor states variously called “school-age,” “tween,” or adolescent and that only a certain range of deviation is considered “within normal limits.” This position does not preclude the recognition that early development demonstrates the most dramatic and uniform acquisition of new structures and new functions, with a second upsurge of such changes at puberty; adulthood is a less standardized experience but has its own unifying elements, highly subject to culture. The application of the age-stage concept does not demand the renunciation of our familiar developmental ideas but insists on a more complex understanding of how humans develop in context. Not unimportantly, it allows for development to be considered part of the process of change in an adult psychoanalysis.

Reliance on biological/neuroanatomical evidence for emerging adulthood as a developmental phase, I would argue, avoids grappling with the real challenges the theory of emerging adulthood poses to traditional psychoanalytic theory. To name just a few: The theory requires a rethinking of the adolescent process. If the achievement of identity formation is now postponed until the third decade, then the conceptualizations of adolescent tasks and the end point of the adolescent process described in our literature must be reconsidered. The slowed pace and extended time frame of personality consolidation must have considerable reverberations in adolescence and in young adulthood. Moreover, an implication of the theory is that access to different ego states, including the virtual, cannot be explained away by pathological dissociative processes or defensive avoidance of reality; this fluidity may be both an adaptation to the requirements of contemporary society and a source of creativity. Finally, while adulthood has not received the same attention in our literature as

\(^8\)In my opinion, this is the only approach to developmental categorization that marries nonlinear dynamic systems theory to psychoanalytic theory.

\(^9\)The timing for the emergence of certain developmental accomplishments are fairly consistent across cultures: upright locomotion, speech, symbolic play, sexual function.
adolescence, the nature of adulthood must presumably be altered, not only by the insertion of a decade-long “emerging” but by the changed culture of twenty-first-century postindustrial society (which in turn feeds back into the process of emerging adulthood).

Again, Arnett singles out role exploration as the core challenge for the phase of emerging adulthood; it is the means by which this cohort learns to adapt to a society with unprecedented new job requirements, family configurations, and attitudes toward personal identity and all its components. But any suggestion that emerging adults’ “winding road” (Arnett 2004) will arrive at an adulthood resembling their parents’ version may be missing something important. Similarly, the sociological criticism that Arnett’s “stage” is merely a transient response to the loss of the old pathways to adulthood, with the implication that the transition will reequilibrate once new pathways arise (Arnett et al. 2011), may miss something important. Emerging adults are the vanguard generation of vast cultural changes evolving at unprecedented speed, changes that demand a paradigm shift in our conceptualization of the direction of human development, with a new premium on continuously renewable adaptation and a heretofore undesirable and even pathological flexibility in identity formation. It is conceivable that the search for identity may contract to its former time frame, but it is more likely that identity formation will remain fundamentally altered by the loosening of cultural constraints, the breakneck speed of technological advances, and the plasticity of roles available in the future. Twenty-first-century adulthood is likely to be not our familiar twentieth-century version, but rather one about which we have not yet even a glimmering.

**CONCLUSION**

The proposal of emerging adulthood as a new developmental stage follows a singular and singularly successful predecessor—adolescence, the new stage introduced at the beginning of the twentieth century. The interlude before adulthood has clearly been an active interface between ontogenesis and culture; in the case of adolescence, the added value in terms of our ability to understand our patients in this age group has been considerable. Based on simple descriptive criteria, emerging adulthood merits the designation “developmental phase” because it is qualitatively distinct from what comes before and after; and it signals a cohort “whose
qualitative similarities and differences serve as a conceptual landmark in trying to grasp the process” (Flavell 1963, p. 19)—in this case, the process of achieving adulthood in the present century. I have no doubt that emerging adults, as described in the voluminous literature dedicated to their study, exist as a cohort at this moment in our culture—that is, young people who are “milling about” (Tanner 2006, p. 43), without commitments, for a prolonged period between adolescence and adulthood, and with an unclear sense of who and what they are. They are a valid “age-stage” (Syed 2015). Developmental repercussions in both directions are inevitable, be they casualty or causal component of this new entity: for example, many late adolescents no longer manifest signs of intrapsychic consolidation of personality, including stabilization of defenses, superego content, interpersonal capacities, and overall selfsameness as they enter their twenties. They seem to be engaged in ongoing identity “tryouts.” On a behavioral level, they are not making the conscious choices that foreshadow the likely direction of their future adulthood, because what is coming up next—ten years of figuring it out—does not demand long-term commitments now and in fact may never do so.

The emerging adult extension does not comport with the classically described “adolescent transition,” not only regarding time frame but in more substantive ways that deserve psychoanalytic study. Today identity formation proceeds at a different pace, with a different level of self-consciousness, and perhaps with a different end point: the ubiquity of crafted identities, the deliberate shifts between self-presentation in different settings, and the self-conscious collection of “identity capital” on social media seem remarkable and new, and more suited to contemporary society. Even if providing little insight to unconscious intrapsychic identity formation, these outward manifestations must reflect a different internal process; they certainly suggest that the capacity to change is privileged over resolution and stabilization. Not surprisingly, despite all the apparent consciousness of emerging adults’ role exploration, there is an unplanned and associational quality to their wandering, as they move on to the next thing like an internet search to find themselves as their world transforms.

Finally, it is a forgone conclusion that adulthood will become more mediated and more seamlessly integrated with virtual reality and machines (Essig 2012), probably in ways unimaginable to the parent generation. The changes in attitudes toward the self and identity, reflected in “self-branding,” the exercise of choice in regard to gender, race, and sexuality,
the queer notion of “doing” identity rather than “being” it, and the domi-
nant presence of communication technology in our society all suggest
that deeper changes in self-development and adulthood are afoot.
Twentieth-century observers, who followed traditional career trajec-
tories and are at best digital immigrants, may be unable to fully grasp the value
of the meandering progression, the new meanings of privacy and of truth,
new types of relationships and ways of finding a mate, the new career
opportunities and professional competences, the freedom to choose, the
mutability of identity, and the ubiquity of social media and virtual reality
in this generation—much less confidently predict its evolution as the cen-
tury proceeds. Theirs is shaping up to be a radically new version of adult-
hood, which, while still tethered to a range of rate-limiting factors, is
marked by repeated self-invention, multiplicity, serendipity, and unprece-
dented twists and turns.

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