

Attachment in the Transition to Adulthood

A period of transition. In technological societies, the transition from adolescence to adulthood is a critical period of life with momentous implications for the rest of adult life and for one's children (Allen, 2008; Crittenden, 2015). The major changes of this period are to:

- (1) define oneself realistically (develop a realistic self-image) based on information from multiple sources;
- (2) select a partner with whom one will raise children;
- (3) transfer one's primary attachment from parents to a peer partner (often after a series of increasingly close love relationships with peers);
- (4) complete one's preparation for financial independence;
- (5) take responsibility for directing the continuing course of one's own development.

When emerging adults have babies before a life partner is selected, they must also:

- (6) manage the safe and loving rearing of the children.

Moreover, single parents often:

- (7) concurrently seek a sexual partner for themselves; this both takes time and focus away from raising children and also benefits the children when a stable step-parent joins the family.

To accomplish these tasks successfully, emerging adults need (a) access to relevant and undistorted information, (b) the ability to integrate information to reach sound, context-defined conclusions, and (c) the habit of comparing conclusions to outcomes so as to revise one's conclusions and behavior when things don't turn out as expected. In addition, it is helpful to have (d) access to trusted and reliable attachment figures, usually one's parents, who support the young adult's increasing self-reliance while guiding them gently as new situations are approached.

Past experience, reflective integration, and the neurology of the brain. The hallmark of adulthood is the ability to reflect and integrate information which functions to increase the adaptiveness of one's behavior. Based on cortical maturation of the brain, generalized (abstract) reflective capacity begins in mid-adolescence and continues to mature until the thirties (Eagleman, 2013). A particular limitation of cortical functioning during adolescence and the transition to adulthood is the limited ability of emerging adults to conceptualize and organize one's behavior around long-term consequences based on the immaturity of the cortex (Grisso, 2003). This leads to greater risk-taking in this age period than among adults (Crone, et al, 2016). Reflective integration uses past experience, together with information about the self and the current context, to predict future outcomes, depending upon different responses that one might make. Initially (in early adolescence), predictions are relatively absolute, as if they pertained under most or even all conditions. With increased maturation, experience, and repeated use of reflective integration, the predictions become more nuanced, differentiated, and accurate to contextual variation.

An important aspect of reflective integration is the quality of the predictive information to be integrated. The most useful information is that which means what it appears to mean. Unfortunately, children who have experienced danger often have experienced misleading information from parents and have almost always learned to exaggerate or minimize their

response. One outcome of such transformed information is misperception of current conditions (Clark, 2016); such misperception either over- or under-estimates the current threat. Either error increases the risk of actual danger.

A particular challenge for formerly endangered young adults is having an accurate self-representation; if their self-representation is distorted, they will be likely to misconstrue their competence to face current and future conditions adaptively. In that case, they might not take preventive actions when they could do so or might imagine that they could behave more adaptively than they actually can. Either error increases the risk of actual danger.

If, based on early childhood experience, the mind has transformed information (by minimizing, exaggerating, or changing it), the integrated outcome of reflection might be distorted or misleading – except in contexts similar to the childhood context. In some extreme cases, the emerging adult may have given up trying to make personal sense of reality and, instead, defer to others. This tends to happen when the person grew up in dangerous and authoritarian settings and uses a protective strategy of relying on others' judgment, that is, an externally assembled self (A8, in the figures below). In such cases, the young adult's ideas may sound reflective – because he or she is repeating what a reflective authority figure has said – without the individual being able to apply the ideas independently to his or her own behavior.

In cases of childhood endangerment, the young adult must first correct his or her transformed information before applying integrative processes to the information. Failure to do so can lead to integrated misinformation. Such integrated misinformation can lead to very seriously maladaptive behavior such as that associated with the personality disorders, the psychoses, and psychopathy. Although the developmental roots of these disorders begin as early as infancy, they first become differentiated from other outcomes and diagnosable in the transition to adulthood. This is because they require the integrative cortical capacity that begins to mature in mid-adolescence. Needless to say, when endangered adolescents, especially those with active psychological traumas, are encouraged to engage in reflective integration before transformed feelings and cognitions have been corrected, there is a risk of inadvertently promoting maladaptation.

'Reorganization' generates and primes new pathways, but accessing those pathways in the presence of trauma-inducing stimuli can be a slow cortical process that might be pre-empted by the faster and older pre-cortical processes. There are several conditions that increase the probability that an early neural pathway will be reactivated. These include early formation, pre-cortical structure, intensity of associated danger or sexual event (particularly when associated with pain or fear), and frequency of previous reactivation. Consequently, enduring change is tied to being able to predict threats (so as to avoid them) and regulate contexts (so as to reduce threats and stimuli related to past threats).

Sexuality. It is during adolescence that young adults learn to manage their emerging sexuality. In most cases, this begins with strong sexual desire that, over time, becomes increasingly tied to attachment relationships, such that sexuality becomes a part of committed love relationships. Such relationships provide protection and comfort to the partners and enable adults to protect and

comfort their progeny (Menninger, et al., 1959).

Of course, this is not always the case. The more a child has been endangered, the greater the probability that this process will not be smooth or complete. Promiscuity, sexual abuse, and the use of sex when comfort is needed (that is, the substitution of available sex for unavailable comfort) or inhibition of sexual desire and sexual behavior are all problems that at-risk adolescents may experience.

Changing attachment figures. During the transition to adulthood, emerging adults transfer their primary attachment from their parents to a peer romantic partner. This process has its emotional up and downs for everyone: parents, young adults, and romantic partners. To successfully negotiate these changes in relationships, young adults will need a safe and stable context in which they can make and learn from mistakes, talk with others without judgment about their experiences, and learn to negotiate differences.

Relationships with siblings offer emerging adults several important advantages. They are a peer interactant who can discuss family relationships with the emerging adult, based on their shared knowledge, from different perspectives, of their family. They also function as a self-substitute, permitting the emerging adult to observe what might happen if he or she responded similarly to the sibling. As their parents age, siblings become able to share the tasks of caring for their parents and, ultimately, they become to each other the only people with whom they can discuss their shared past knowledgably. The transition to adulthood can be made easier if sibling relationships become more independent of parental relationships.

Out-of-home placement. Adolescents in out-of-home placement or institutional settings face particular challenges because they have been endangered (and thus often distort information), they often lack a trusted and protective childhood attachment figure to whom they can turn (indeed they are often prohibited from seeing their parents because they are neither protective nor comforting), and often their alternate attachment figures (in care or institutional settings) are uncomfortable with their making (the inevitable) mistakes (i.e. violating the rules). These situations can result in premature bolting into adult romantic relationships or failure to challenge professional alternate attachment figures.

Individual differences in attachment strategies. Emerging young adults have some strategic options that were not available at younger ages. With the possibility of reflective integration, some adolescents will review and reconsider their past experience, their own behavior, and ways to change those aspects of their behavior and their contributions to relationships. To the extent that they are able to discover their own psychological transformations, they may begin the process of 'earning' psychological balance (Type B). Especially in cases of risk, this process usually takes several years and usually requires a relatively safe context with relatively few substantial threats (particularly their childhood threats) and tolerance for missteps.

Alternatively, the same reflective capacity can be used to construct highly deceptive self-protective strategies. Within Type A, this includes delusional idealization (A7) of dangerous attachment figures and construction of an externally assembled self (A8). The former leaves

young adults vulnerable to selecting dangerous partners or, in moments of perceived threat, becoming dangerous to others. The latter refers to the absence of an authentic inner self and its replacement by the ideas of powerful other people; it is one possible outcome of multiple foster placements, treatment by too many therapists, and institutional placements, particularly restrictive placements. Both Type A strategies, focus on obedience to others and idealization of others, while finding the self responsible for problems. Within Type C, it includes menacing threats to others (C7) and pervasive fear of others (C8). Because all of these strategies can include violence, behavior alone cannot differentiate them. Both Type C strategies, blame other for problems and find the self to be the innocent victim of others' misdeeds. In both the A7-7 and C7-8 strategies, self-other relationships are dichotomized unrealistically and irrational forms of thinking are used to maintain the dichotomy. Finally, in early adulthood, these strategies can be integrated into a psychopathic strategy (A7-8C7-8).

Figure 1: The strategies available and forming in the transition to adulthood, together with the underlying information processing.

These strategies have differential risk. Earned balance has quite low risk for maladaptive behaviour. Nevertheless, because it is constructed over top of a past of transformed information and an anxious protective strategy, there is always the chance that a threat, similar to childhood threats, will occur unexpectedly. In such cases, the individual might revert to the old childhood strategy. Of course, given the threat, it might be temporarily adaptive – or it might repeat the problems of childhood.

In the figure below, the space between the two black lines indicates some risk for maladaptive behaviour and a restricted range of contexts where the protective attachment strategy is adaptive.

The strategies below the bottom black line indicate very high risk of maladaptive behaviour and a very narrow range of contexts where the individual and others can be safe. The further toward the bottom of the circle the individual's strategy is, the more likely it is that an institutional setting will be required. The presence of psychological traumas and depression, intrusions of forbidden negative affect, and disorientation all increase the risk of maladaptive behaviour.

Figure 2: Protective attachment strategies in the transition to adulthood, showing the risk for maladaptive behaviour.

Opportunity and risk. For young adults coming from high risk backgrounds, the period between 16 and 25 years of age is crucial. It is their best opportunity to turn their lives around and create a safer future for themselves and their children than they experienced in their childhood. The brain maturation that occurs in this period permits thoughtful young adults to override the brain

development that occurred during childhood. Doing so, however, requires thoughtful reflection on their experience and long periods of learning to change the implicit reflexive responses they learned while growing up. Without a great deal of thought and practice, new mental and behavioral patterns will not take hold. Being a member of a group or community that shares similar goals can help emerging adults to reify their intentions; for many emerging adults this is a transitional process that supports their increasing separation from their parents around goals and values that have personal meaning for the young adult.

Of course, the nature of the group matters greatly, with gangs and cults serving the same function but in potentially dangerous ways.; such groups tend to function more in the protective and comforting roles than as ways to explore one's personal values Moreover, if the adolescent or young adult feels threatened, it is unlikely that they will be able to engage thoughtfully in this process. That is, a safe and supportive environment best supports developmental change in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. On the other hand, if emerging adults' developmental needs (including safety, support, and opportunities to practice new responses) are not met, they and their children may suffer greatly, possibly even until their children themselves reach adulthood. Because their parents are often unable to support them appropriately, an acquired adult attachment figure (e.g., a teacher, foster carer, co-worker, etc.) may be selected to fulfill aspects of this role. That is the advantage – and risk - of these final years of development: emerging adults can change their human and geographic context, choosing a developmental niche that supports – or thwarts – adaptive development.