

**Seeking Understanding of the Young Adult and
their Experience of Psychodynamic Psychotherapy**

A Hermeneutic Literature Review

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signature

Jackie Petter

Date

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Abstract

The young adult is at a developmental juncture, metaphorically standing on a threshold. Having recently departed the structured environment of school and possibly simultaneously, home, they are stepping out into the world full of hopes and dreams. For many, this time can be overwhelming and confusing, and for some, this results in anxiety, depression or other psychological disorders and they may seek support and sustenance from family, friends or psychotherapy.

This dissertation is a hermeneutic review of the literature and other text, seeking understanding of the developmental phase and psychotherapeutic experience of the young adult. I incorporate my reflections on my work with young adult clients and my experience of being a mother to young adult children. Theoretical contributions from Klein, Winnicott, Colarusso, Mahler and Kohut are discussed in relation to the importance of early and on-going sustaining relationships for healthy psychological growth and development through to young adulthood.

The research reveals the phase of young adulthood to be an exploratory period as the young adult is moving towards a firmer self-identity and is also developing an increasing capacity for interpersonal connection and intimacy. These dual developmental processes are explored through the lens of Erikson's psychosocial stage theory and other more contemporary literature. The influence of the cultural and contextual environment on developmental growth is also considered.

The findings in this study advance understanding of the developmental tasks and experiences of the young adult and these are further discussed in relation to the young adult's experience of psychodynamic psychotherapy.

Chapter 1 Introduction

This dissertation explores the question,

How can a richer understanding of the young adult client better inform psychodynamic psychotherapy practice with this client group?

My interest in deepening my understanding of the young adult developed during my time as an intern psychotherapist at a university student counselling facility. I have since commenced my own psychotherapy practice, principally with young adult clients and this period has also coincided with my own children moving through adolescence and into this developmental phase. I notice social and psychological behaviours that are quite distinctly different from the earlier adolescent phase and most importantly I observe that these young people do not seem ready, or willing, to identify themselves as fully-fledged adults.

Typically the young adult student I met in my student counselling office presented with issues or concerns that seemed relevant to their life stage: relationship ruptures, the stress of tertiary study and the burden of juggling their own finances and living arrangements. They were struggling to cope with their new life where the structures and supports they previously relied on had diminished or completely disappeared. They felt unable to find the new skills or modes of operating necessary to help them cope with this transitional period. Often these students already had their feelings and behaviours pathologised by well meaning medical staff and they had received diagnoses and commensurate antidepressant or anxiety medications. In their view this proved that these anxious and depressing feelings were beyond their control. They had been referred to counselling and in their mind, something was wrong - they no longer felt 'normal'.

It seems important to stress that young adult clients, like all psychotherapy clients, present with a myriad of issues, and some may be very deeply affected by abuse, neglect and consequential trauma. In researching and attempting some understanding of the young adult client, I wish to acknowledge that all clients have their unique histories and traumas and these must be at the forefront of the psychotherapy work. However, in this dissertation I am attempting to identify common developmental and relational themes in order to better understand the idiosyncrasies of this young adult developmental phase, as I believe this will allow for a more contextual understanding.

I now see young adult clients in a private practice setting. Many of them also present with depression and anxiety and speak of stress and overload related to the contemporary pressures of this time in their lives. However, I have become aware that no matter what presenting issue brings the young adult client to therapy, there are always particular internal processes and external stressors, specific characteristics that seem to be associated with this particular developmental stage. As they struggle with their newly attained independence and an increasing focus on their future livelihoods these clients appear to be psychologically and emotionally much different than the adolescent (Harper, 1981). My countertransference when sitting with young adults informs me of their mix of feelings. I notice I frequently feel very maternal in my response to my clients' dominant states of overwhelm and confusion and their feelings of fear, loneliness, sadness and grief. As I attempt to make sense of my clients by way of a psychodynamic formulation I wonder about their early relationships and preparedness for this time in their lives. I also wonder about their current life situation and the impact of the layers of societal and cultural systems within which they live. This dissertation offers an opportunity to study the experience of being a young adult in today's complex social environment. Further, it is an attempt to gain some understanding of what it means to be a young adult engaged in psychotherapy and, if possible, how this experience may be better tailored to suit.

As I commence this study I sense a need to be cautious in my approach to this subject should I be perceived by the subject of this dissertation as seeking to become 'an expert' on their age and stage of life; one that I am now way beyond myself. I refer here to Winnicott who, when writing about adolescence, stated,

One thing must be recognized at the start by those who explore in this area of psychology is the fact that the adolescent boy or girl does not want to be understood. Adults must hide among themselves what they come to understand of adolescence. (1965a, p. 79)

I consider that Winnicott's insightful statement remains relevant to the adjunct life stage of young adulthood, just beyond adolescence. It seems that this too is very much a period of exploration and a time of intense personal discovery. The young adult, like the adolescent, does not want to have his or her living experience generalised, categorised and presented by some 'adult expert' as a statement of fact. My own children warn me of this. Arnett (2006) portrays this age period as having some distinct and common patterns that can be studied and described, but holds that the young adulthood is to be recognised and respected as being extraordinarily complex and diverse.

This dissertation is a qualitative inquiry using the methodological approach of hermeneutics to review the literature relating to the developmental phase known as young adulthood. It seeks to better understand this distinct client group and their experience of psychodynamic psychotherapy. This interpretive methodology was chosen as it offers the opportunity to seek out the layers of meaning through which the world of the young adult is experienced (McLeod, 2001). Hermeneutics uses the lived experience of people as a tool for better understanding the social, cultural, political and historical context in which those experiences occur (Polit & Hungler, 1997). It acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher and the consequent frame of reference the researcher brings, which influences both the choice of topic and the research literature used. Indeed, Smythe and Spence (2012) state "...the starting place when examining the meaning of a literature review is the reviewer" (p.16).

A preliminary research search reveals that 'young adulthood', the phase that typically occurs somewhere between the late teens through to the mid to late twenties (Escoll, 1987; Palmstierna & Werbart, 2013) is not commonly written about, researched or frequently acknowledged in academic literature. Most certainly, this is the case when one compares this stage with other life phases such as infancy, childhood, or adolescence. This is perhaps somewhat surprising in 2015, when one considers that across all Westernised and post-industrial countries this is a unique period during the human life cycle where vitality and relative freedom leads to exploration and experimentation (Arnett, 2000). The young adult departs the structured environment of compulsory schooling and possibly simultaneously, home, and moves out into the world full of their (and frequently others) hopes, dreams and expectations. It is traditionally a time of new endeavours, for example, study, career and intimate relationships. It is also a time when there is some expectation of experimentation and many high-risk behaviours peak, for example, high substance use, risky and experimental sex, reckless driving (Arnett, 2000) and in Aotearoa New Zealand the rates of suicide and intentional self-harm are at their highest (Ministry of Health - Manatu Hauora, 2012).

Young adulthood – a developmental phase

Young adulthood is, perhaps, a developmental juncture where, according to Erik Erikson's epigenetic process (Erikson, 1965), the young person emerges out of a phase of identity formation and moves towards a need for intimacy whilst skirting the dangerous pitfalls of self-absorption, loss and isolation. Other psychoanalytic writers describe a transitional time of consolidation and integration of the ego capacities

(Escoll, 1987), an establishment of sexual identity (Blos, 1977) and “the third individuation” involving intrapsychic separation from parents (Colarusso, 1991) as possible precursors to successful young adulthood. More contemporary writers such as Palmstierna and Werbart (2013) and Arnett (2000) view this developmental phase as an increasingly extended time period, with intrapsychic forces, lingering parental constraints, environmental stresses, and societal expectations all adding complexity (Harper, 1981).

For many, this seems to be a time of flux and fragility, and some at this developmental juncture become overwhelmed and lost. It is if they are standing on the threshold of their adult life, “looking back with some regret and mourning over earlier departed adolescence and childhood, yet looking ahead to the adult years not yet fully within reach” (Escoll, 1987, p. 8). Whilst I am concerned about over-pathologising, equally it may be tempting to dismiss many of the problems that are seen in young adults as being transitory or just a stage of life where some stress and chaos is considered ‘normal’. Therefore, I wonder if the young adult is at a particularly fertile and receptive time for psychotherapy, principally for a psychotherapy that offers a structured, stable and non-judgmental relationship through which some deeper understanding of themselves can be safely revealed and the turmoil of this time in their lives be more easily borne.

Young adults engaged in psychotherapy

I am aware of a particular intensity and engagement in the therapeutic relationship with my young adult clients. However, when discussing client concerns and challenges with my clinical supervisors I have frequently been reminded the “this is a difficult age group to undertake therapy with”. Further, the literature relating to practicing therapy with this group frequently discusses the perceived difficulties with engaging young adults in on-going therapy. Palmstierna and Werbart (2013) suggest the developmental tasks of young adulthood, such as being more action-oriented than reflexive, and being “occupied by conflicts regarding dependency and intimacy” (p.22) may directly clash with the process of therapy. Practical difficulties such as their more likely transience and income restrictions are also offered as barriers to effective on-going therapy (Abend, 1987).

I notice I respond to these so called ‘difficulties and challenges’ of working with young adult clients with some indignation and defence. Maybe my need to focus my gaze more directly on this client group is my maternal response, being a mother and

psychotherapist, to young adults. I have a genuine interest and a sincere enjoyment, in working with this client group. However, I wonder if the young adult client requires a particular attitude and approach by the psychotherapist, one that better understands and respects the idiosyncrasies of this distinct developmental phase.

In summary, this dissertation is an opportunity to identify and increase my understanding of, and empathy with, my young adult clients. As a result of this, my hope is that I will be more aware of how to offer a positive, respectful and enriching psychotherapy experience that is best suited to them at this distinct time in their lives.

Definition of terms

Young Adulthood

For the purpose of this dissertation I am defining the stage of young adulthood as being around 18 years of age to mid twenties. Much of the literature referred to in this dissertation concurs with this age range. This phase commences with leaving secondary schooling and commencing tertiary study or first full time employment. The developmental milestones that signal moving out of young adulthood into middle or full adulthood are not so well defined.

Emerging Adulthood

Proposed by Jeffrey Arnett (Arnett, 2000) as the period of development that focuses on ages 18-25. He argues that the phrasing ‘emerging adulthood’ captures the dynamic, explorative, and unstable quality of the period and infers the young person is ‘gradually making their way to adulthood’ but not yet arrived, as he considers the term ‘young adult’ implies. Arnett views ‘young adulthood’ as a subsequent phase, signaling the beginning of adulthood proper. Jeffrey Arnett is regarded as a preeminent researcher, writer and editor on adolescence and emerging adulthood.

This dissertation uses both of the terms ‘young adult’ and ‘emerging adult’ in reference to the same distinct developmental phase.

Dissertation Outline

Chapter one, the introduction, describes my interest in the topic. This chapter also introduces and provides some context around development of the research question.

What is it that I want to know and why do I want to know it?

Chapter two, outlines the dissertation **methodology** and the reasons for choosing this research approach. I explain the ontological and epistemological underpinnings, and the rationale for choosing a hermeneutic literature review as the methodology. I also discuss the **method** used to identify the relevant sources. I outline the decisions around the inclusion and exclusion criteria and include a summary of the literature search process.

Chapter three, introduces the developmental concept of **young adulthood**, the history, some discussion on the cultural context, and how it is understood by society and the individual today.

Chapter four, considers the psychodynamics of the young adult by exploring **psychoanalytic developmental perspectives** and theory.

Chapter five, examines the development of **self-identity and self-in-relationship** focusing on Erik Erikson's theories of identity formation and attainment of intimacy as central developmental tasks of the young adult.

Chapter six is the **discussion** of the main ideas drawn from the previous chapters with reference to the research question and additional literature pertaining to implications for clinical practice with young adults. This chapter includes reflections on the limitations the study and concluding comments.

Chapter 2 Methodology and Method

Introduction

The previous chapter introduced my interest in this dissertation topic and outlined how this led to the formulation of my research question - *how can a richer understanding of the young adult client better inform psychodynamic psychotherapy with this client group?* This chapter will describe and consider the rationale for the research methodology and the method used in this dissertation.

According to Crotty (1998) the purpose of the research, the consequent research question and the researcher's theoretical perspective guides the choice of methodology and method. In this research I am firstly attempting to understand what it is to be a contemporary young adult. What is going on in their lives that may cause the emotional states of overwhelm, confusion, fear, loneliness, disillusionment and at times sadness and grief, and may consequently trigger a need for psychotherapy? Secondly, my hope is that this richer appreciation of what it means to be a young adult will guide my additional inquiry, which seeks to better understand their psychotherapy experience and how it might be enhanced. It is this attempt 'to understand' that directs me to a qualitative research methodology and to the theoretical perspective of interpretivism, which emerged as a philosophical stance and an alternative research approach to positivism in attempting to explain human and social reality (Crotty, 1998).

Epistemological principles underpinning this research

Epistemology is the philosophical theory of knowledge (Thompson & Harper, 2012). It refers to the way knowledge about the world is gained and what kinds of knowledge are possible and legitimate (Crotty, 1998; McLeod, 2001). Qualitative research approaches enable understanding of experience and processes. This compares to quantitative research which seeks to establish causal relationships or measure the size or effect of something of interest (Thompson & Harper, 2012). McLeod (2001), states "the primary aim of qualitative research is to develop an understanding of how the world is constructed" (p.2). It is therefore much more likely to address questions related to how aspects of social life are constructed and reconstructed (Thompson & Harper, 2012) such as what it is like to be a young adult engaged in psychodynamic psychotherapy.

The constructionist epistemological view is that meaningful reality is constructed through the interaction of human beings and their world. Humans engage with a reality and attempt to make sense of it (Crotty, 1998). This view considers the world to be diverse and complex with social, personal and relational perspectives. A contrasting epistemology is objectivism, which tends to be located in a positivist, empirical approach to research. The objectivist stance is that truth and meaning resides in objects and a carefully formulated scientific approach can reveal objective truth and meaning (Crotty, 1998). This methodological approach supposes that *knowledge* of typical human behaviour can be predicted and revealed, independent of any reference to the researcher or interpreter. Most of the research and literature consulted in this dissertation are qualitative inquiries based on interpretation and seeking an *understanding* of young adults, their interactions and behaviour. The kind of ‘truth’ that I am attempting with this study acknowledges that there is no absolute account of reality but rather a deep, insightful and complex understanding (Schwandt, 1999).

Seeking understanding through hermeneutic interpretation

The adoption of a hermeneutic social constructionist approach to psychotherapy research is viewed as a positive and hopeful methodology that enriches and extends understanding of the text (McLeod, 2001; Smythe & Spence, 2012). ‘Text’ in this context is considered to mean “the primary model for the object of interpretation” (Schwandt, 1999, p. 454) and can include anything (for example, social interaction by way of conversation, social customs by way of stories and poems, social changes by way of commentary or research reports) that is ‘readable’. This dissertation is based on a hermeneutic research methodology as described by Smythe and Spence (2012) as it allows for the interpretation of the “dynamic and contextual nature of understanding” (p. 13) in a manner congruent to the philosophy and writings of the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer [1900-2002].

The hermeneutic paradigm seeks understanding through interpretation and Schwandt (1999) also draws on Gadamer to explain the complexity of this process as going beyond the individual self. He considers we must acknowledge that as interpreters of understanding we are situated within a tradition and are inseparable from our history and culture. “We are always in and of the world” (Schwandt, 1999, p. 453) and we carry with us understandings derived from previous experiences (Smythe & Spence, 2012). Ontological hermeneutics is based on the principle that the core being of a person is inured by the individual’s historical circumstances, and their social context (Garratt,

2014). As I read and reflect on the research material, I acknowledge that I am unable to be a detached observer. The values and traditions of my training in psychodynamic psychotherapy are undoubtedly present. My client work with young adults and my day to day life with my own children, guide, challenge and inspire me as I consider this time in their lives.

Schwandt (1999) further reasons that understanding can be conceived of as relational and existential, generated somewhere in between familiarity and strangeness.

Thus it seems that it is only the person who is awake to this living-in between that can have new experiences and learn from them. Hence, understanding requires an openness to experience, a willingness to engage in dialogue with that which challenges our self-understanding (Schwandt, 1999, p. 458).

I am struck by how this state of uncertainty pertaining to self-understanding seems to parallel the developmental state of being a young adult. This phase of the human life cycle is often referred to as a developmental juncture, a transitory time where familiar support structures have diminished and the future seems uncertain and confusing. Therefore, it seems that a hermeneutic approach to seeking understanding is a good fit as it allows for uncertainty, a “call to thinking” (Smythe & Spence, 2012, p. 21) and then a gradual building of a new aspect of understanding. It is an appropriate methodology to use to wonder about the intriguing nature of human beings and to accept that there will still be much unknown (Smythe, 2011).

Limitation of a hermeneutic approach

A hermeneutic approach requires the researcher to become a subjective participant in the research process (Smythe & Spence, 2012). This type of methodology is critiqued as limited as it moves away from the objective stance required for empirical research (Evans & Pearson, 2001). However this research approach is possibly more honest in that it acknowledges that the observer/researcher is not detached. Smythe and Spence (2012) challenge the notion of a detached observer, noting that people always bring knowledge and bias to any dialogue. In fact, Smythe and Spence (2012) consider that recognising and stating our ‘prejudice’ and non-objective position as we dialogue with the literature and other sources, is fundamental to the creation of new understanding.

A hermeneutic literature review

The research method used in this dissertation is a literature review conducted in a manner that is congruent with the previously described hermeneutic methodology (Smythe & Spence, 2012). A *systematic* literature review is a comprehensive and systematic approach consisting of strict protocols to ensure that all available literature on the topic is identified, critically appraised and synthesized (Aveyard, 2007). It is a rational, standardized and rigorous exercise, demonstrating objectivity and transparency and is commonly used to inform evidence-based practice based on randomized controlled trials in healthcare and science (Jesson, Matheson, & Lacey, 2011). However, these features do not sit so comfortably in the qualitative, interpretative paradigm often preferred by psychoanalytic and psychodynamic researchers and used in this research. Randomised controlled trials and strict scientific methods are not the common models in the psychoanalytic/psychodynamic community which instead tends to value a more subjective and relational approach to research of psychoanalytic theory and therapies (McWilliams, 2013). McWilliams explains:

...psychoanalytic therapies are inherently difficult to investigate empirically. Psychoanalytic therapists tend to emphasize an extensive collaborative effort to understand the meaning of any pattern that interferes with personal growth and life satisfaction. We respect the inevitable complexity of psychological suffering, the uniqueness of each patient [and] the value of a stance of not knowing...(p.921).

Using the method of the hermeneutic literature review, this dissertation attempts to provoke thinking and enhance understanding around the subjective experience of being a young adult first and foremost, and secondly, being a young adult engaged in psychodynamic psychotherapy. If a key purpose of the literature is to arouse thinking then a method that allows for consideration of a broad and diverse range of text is required (Smythe & Spence, 2012). Restricting the literature to only that which is based on tightly controlled, evidenced based research may remove the prompts that encourage new ways of thinking and expanding understanding.

Method

Aveyard (2014) states that whilst a literature review may not meet the strict criteria for a 'systematic review', the literature search and review must still be undertaken systematically and rigorously, "to the level of detail that is possible within the constraints of the study" (p.197). I used systematic strategies to identify relevant academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles and possible theses and dissertations.

(The database search process is described in more detail in Table 1). I also extended the research by using an open, intuitive approach to uncover additional germane text.

Research and discussion related to human development can be organised in many ways. As this dissertation is being prepared in partial fulfilment of the Masters in Psychotherapy, I am placing emphasis on psychoanalytic/psychodynamic perspectives on development although not wholly limited to these views. The constructionist epistemology guiding this research considers that meaningful reality is formed by an individual's interaction with their personal, social and relational world. Therefore a developmental discussion that gives consideration to these diverse and complex influences is called for. In line with this constructionist, hermeneutic methodology, which aims to open and extend thinking by offering fresh, creative and possibly even surprising insight, I have also sought traditional and contemporary psychological and sociological views that expand and enhance the psychoanalytic and psychodynamic research. To do this I have researched other forms of literature and other media, including radio interviews, TED talks, fiction, movies and newspaper columns and articles from the public domain to inform my thinking.

The hermeneutic literature review research process

As I have searched for literature that I considered relevant and evocative to my study, I have kept in mind several hallmarks that Smythe and Spence (2012) outline as identifiers of a legitimate hermeneutic literature review. I have searched for a broad range of literature and other sources that “spans across time, discipline, genres and culture...its purpose is to call ‘thinking’” (ibid p.22). I have become a ‘thinking’ partner with the sources by staying attuned and engaged in an open way that has allowed for different and surprising thoughts to emerge. During this process some sources, articles and theorists have emerged as important (“inclining towards” (ibid. p. 17)) and provided a foundation for my thinking, and others less so. I have found it useful to take time over this process. I read and then stepped away and spent time with my young adult clients or my own children, which has allowed time for thoughts to percolate and form, and then gone back to the reading, sometimes with altered or expanded thoughts or views. At times this has been an astonishing process as these new thoughts have come at unexpected times, for example, in a half awake state during the middle of the night or when out walking my dogs. I relate to the description of a “restless to and fro” (Heidegger, 1959, p.75, as cited in Smythe and Spence, 2012) of the play between my

“already-there understandings and those that may be seen or unseen in the text” (ibid p.16).

Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2013) consider the moving back and forth between “the parts and the whole” (p. 132) in the process of understanding can be described as the hermeneutic circle. If this approach is taken, a literature review does not have to start by identifying all of the potentially relevant texts. Instead a thorough reading of some sources will facilitate a search for further relevant texts. I found this became a very organic process, as I began my search and gravitated towards some sources and not others. My starting point was the AUT Library databases.

Database search process

Table 1 Search terms

Search Terms	Results No. Hits	Relevant Articles
PEP: Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing		
“young adult*” AND development*	1668	Too many
“young adult* development*”	18	10
“young adult*” AND “psycho* psychotherap*”	266	17 refined by date
“young adult* identity”	61	5
OVID PsycARTICLES		
“young adult development” OR “emerging adult development”	58	3
“young adult* development*”	125	10
“young adult*” AND “psycho* psychotherap*”	168	13
“young adult*” AND “self identity”	218	6
OVID PsycINFO		
“young adult* development*”	127	15
“young adult* development” OR “emerging adult development”	109	18 some repeats
“young adult*” AND “psycho* psychotherap*”	69	15
“young adult*” AND “self identity”	61	5

Other Sources

My search commenced by accessing the AUT Library Databases as detailed in Table 1 and through this process I found a small number of key articles and authors whose material provided an initial platform for my research. Where there were other common articles and books cited in these articles I attempted to obtain these. I found the AUT

library catalogue and a manual search of the shelves revealed some relevant texts. As already noted, other forms of media have also proved to be valuable sources of information, particularly current sociological commentary. I kept a journal to jot down snippets of conversations or observations during the research process. I found that I developed a kind of ‘radar’ for anything remotely related to young adulthood. An example of this is perhaps an article in the sports pages of the newspaper about a young adult All Black rugby player and his developing maturity as he settled into the team environment. True to the hermeneutic process, this type of material seemed to bring my topic to life and provided context as I re-read some of the key articles and texts.

Inclusions and Exclusions

Table 1 describes the main search terms I used across two separate searches. In the first instance I was specifically interested in what was researched, written and understood about the young adult developmental phase. Only a few articles directly addressed this topic singularly. Much research and many journal articles combine teen or adolescence and young adulthood developmental phases, which is too broad and contrary to my intention of specifically understanding the phase beyond adolescence. Many articles consider the developmental phase in connection with specific criteria, such as; risk taking, reckless behaviours, self-harm or disabilities, and usually these sources were too narrow in focus for this dissertation. Perhaps understandably, I was drawn to psychoanalytic developmental theorists. As my dissertation found a direction I used the databases again to search for information to further illuminate the specific young adult developmental tasks of identity formation and developing a capacity for intimacy.

My second search category related to research and articles linking young adults and their experience of psychotherapy. Whilst I found a reasonable database response to this connected subject, the literature is dominated by United States College research and I was mindful to search for a broader range of sources.

Summary

In this chapter I have outlined the aims of this research, the constructionist epistemological principles underpinning the research and the rationale for using a hermeneutic methodology to seek understanding through interpretation. I have discussed the method used for searching and identifying relevant sources of literature and other text.

The next chapter introduces the developmental concept of young adulthood and explores how it is understood socially and culturally today.

Chapter 3 Young Adulthood

Introduction

In this chapter I introduce the social and cultural phenomenon of young adulthood. I begin by reviewing the historical context and then consider how society and the individual understand what it means to be a young adult today. A discussion on the importance of the cultural context concludes the chapter.

Recognising ‘young adulthood’

Adolescence...

It is broadly accepted that up until recent human history there were only two defined stages of life – childhood and adulthood (Berger, 2011; Sachs, 2013). The intermediate stages of adolescence and young adulthood have largely been constructed and defined in response to changing social and economic conditions, particularly in Western industrialised cultures. As economies shifted away from agriculture in response to the Industrial Revolution, protective child labour laws were gradually introduced and younger teenagers no longer entered the workforce. Compulsory public schooling became widespread and the unique characteristics of the distinct phase of adolescence became acknowledged as a discrete developmental life stage (Arnett, 2000; Berger, 2011).

Initially adolescence was seen as a relatively brief phase in a person’s life and the Great Depression and age of eligibility to engage in military service during the World Wars prevented any extension. The focus on the war effort, with young people either entering the military or remaining at home, meant the call to adulthood and adult responsibilities came abruptly for most (Arnett, 2010). Following the Second World War most industrialised countries experienced an economic boom with the creation of stable and easy to find, relatively high paying, industrial based employment. Adolescents left high school, found work and quickly became initiated as adults, celebrated by the rituals of the ‘age of consent’ - 21st birthdays, eligibility to vote in elections, to drink alcohol and gamble (Arnett, 2010).

The 1960s was considered a fertile period for theorising adolescence and recognising ‘the teenager’, although the actual lived experience of adolescents appears to have changed substantially from that time (Arnett, 2004; Briggs, 2008). Whilst the age range

of adolescence today is generally considered to be from around ten years to eighteen/twenty years (Arnett, 2000; Sachs, 2013) it is also acknowledged that this adolescent period now consists of two phases: an earlier period of intense physical, cognitive and emotional growth known as puberty and then a long transition “age between” into adulthood possibly lasting from mid teens to mid twenties (Briggs, 2008).

For a significant portion of the 20th century it was thought that life-course transition experiences were quite rigid and defined. However, the second half of the 20th century saw a decline of the social markers that are associated with the transition to adulthood blurring the line between adolescence and adulthood (Côté, 2000). Researchers agree that the period of transition to adulthood has lengthened (Arnett, 2010; Berger, 2011; Briggs, 2008; Côté, 2000). It is this second transitional period which has been redefined by many as the separate stage of ‘young adulthood’ (Colarusso, 1991; Grant & Potenza, 2010; Sachs, 2013), a period of ‘youth’ (Côté, 2000) or ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett, 2000).

...to young (emerging) adulthood – a distinctly different phase.

The “age of feeling in-between” (Arnett, 2010), the “age between” (Briggs, 2008), “twixters”, “adultescents” or “boomerang generation” (Sachs, 2013) are all descriptors aimed at defining the transitional experience of many young people as they move from adolescence to adulthood. Just as the construct of adolescence emerged out of a cultural and socioeconomic shift in society in the early 20th century, so the ‘invention’ of the distinct period of young/emerging adulthood has grown from similar profound social changes in the later part of the 20th century.

Significant social phenomena that have appeared to a greater or lesser extent in all industrialised countries over the last 50 years have been credited with influencing the advent of young adulthood as a distinctly separate developmental phase (Patterson, 2012; Sachs, 2013). Some of these phenomena are:

1. The availability of birth control and an increasing acceptance of sex outside of marriage. This has led to a postponement of marriage and parenthood and also to the possibility of having many romantic and sexual partners before considering a lasting commitment (Arnett, 2004). In Aotearoa New Zealand in 2011 the average age of marriage was aged 28.2 years for women and 29.9 years for men. This compares with aged 20.8 years for women and 23 years for men in 1971 (Statistics New Zealand -Tatauranga Aotearoa, Retrieved August 2015).

2. Higher education and the increase in the number of years young people study. This is partly a response to a shift away from manufacturing and labouring jobs towards post-industrial, technical and service oriented careers requiring a more skilled and highly educated work force. This comes at a cost with many young adults accumulating significant debt whilst engaged in tertiary study (Arnett, 2006; Patterson, 2012; Sachs, 2013).
3. A fulfilling career is expected and sought from an early age. Consequently, experimentation and changes in career direction whilst seeking the ‘right’ job is common. Job permanence and employee loyalty is no longer necessarily expected (Sachs, 2013).
4. The role of women particularly in Western industrialised countries has changed dramatically over the last 50 years. Women now participate in higher education and work in demanding careers in numbers at least equal to men. The consequence being that marriage and parenting is further deferred or not considered at all (Arnett, 2004; Patterson, 2012; Sachs, 2013).
5. The change in the meaning of adulthood has occurred. In earlier decades marriage and becoming a parent were definitive markers of adulthood (Patterson, 2012). Whilst most young adults still want a relationship, children, a house and a career, they are more likely to put off enduring commitments until their late 20s or early 30s (Arnett, 2010; Sachs, 2013).

Young adulthood – an unpredictable and exploratory phase

In many post-industrial societies the transition into full adulthood has become less distinct, more ambiguous and possibly more difficult to achieve. Whilst the traditional markers of full adulthood tended to include moving out of home, finishing education, training or apprenticeship, entering the workforce, marrying and starting a family (Sachs, 2013) these days it seems virtually impossible to generalise about what typifies this period of life. To a large degree the variability in the way people consider their transition into adulthood is culturally and socio-economically defined (Thomson et al., 2004). Arnett (2000) describes emerging adulthood as the only period in life where nothing is normative demographically. He states, “the demographic diversity and unpredictability of emerging adulthood is a reflection of its experimental and exploratory quality of the period” (p.471). For example, in Westernised cultures, whilst many eighteen and nineteen year olds leave home, it is also now more common for young people to live longer with their family or to come and go from their family home

(known as ‘boomerang children’ (Patterson, 2012)) largely due to financial constraints. Those who do leave home live in diverse residential situations – university hostels, flatting with groups or cohabiting with romantic partners and volatility and change is common.

Globalisation, consumerism and technological advances have characterised the early part of the 21st century leading to a society that places greater emphasis on personal autonomy and individuality. The social and institutional structures that once both supported and restricted people have weakened. This leaves greater freedom and the necessity to rely on one’s own resources – for better or worse. Briggs (2008) explains,

On the ‘downside’ there is an exposure to the fragmentation of the cultural environment...in the absence of a bedrock of certainty and predictability, anxiety and a fear of loss of control are heightened. There is in this sense an encounter with loss – loss of a sense of a centre and of a past in which there are certainties of tradition (p.15)

He uses the metaphor of a journey on a train compared to a journey in a car as a useful way to think about the psychosocial changes for young people that have occurred over the last fifty years in many industrialised societies. The train ride, with the ‘community’ of other passengers, the predictable stops along the way and the planned destination, offers an image analogous to the journey of adolescence and the transition into adulthood fifty years ago. Whereas, today’s mode of travel through this stage of life is more akin to a car journey, possibly a fast car. Whilst this mode of transport offers relative freedom and control over the journey, it also emphasises the independence and autonomy of the driver. In this image there is much more choice of routes and destinations but also less of a collective sense of travelling with others.

Reflection

I believe this metaphor provides a helpful image to assist in conveying my experience as a young adult in the early 1980’s and comparing this to my daughters’ experience today. After leaving school and working for a year in a highly structured government department I left home to attend university in Canterbury. This job was a set prerequisite for my university course and was relatively easily obtained through my parents’ having a contact in our local community. My university degree was a prescribed set of papers with very little choice of options; certainly compared to the range of possible papers offered by universities today. University bursaries and government grants paid for all course fees and university hostel living costs. I recall that

there was even a little bit extra available for my personal expenses. I did not need to work for money during term time and vacation jobs relevant to my university training seemed easy to obtain. I remember having plenty of time to be involved in extracurricular activities – clubs, sports, political groups and activities etc. Our social life consisted of a few beers at the local university pub on Friday evening or parties at student flats. Beer, some cardboard-boxed wine and occasional marijuana smoking were the only stimulants. Our flat meals were simple, consisting of cheap fatty red meat and lots of potatoes. I phoned home from the pay phone in the university foyer once a fortnight and flew home at minimal expense by waiting at the airport for a ‘standby seat’ during university breaks. Friendship groups and romantic relationships consisted of flatmates and other university peers. Our means of communication seem rather quaint now, but I still have some of the letters we wrote to each other during university breaks.

As I reflect on this time I notice how uncomplicated it seems. Choice in any aspect of my life at this time was relatively limited and yet I did not appear to notice its absence. I followed a ‘well lit’, well-trodden pathway and mostly I believe I felt safe, positive and reasonably unburdened. I quickly became independent of my family but always had a strong sense of ‘where they were’. I was very engaged in, my then, present life and I had no real vision for my future, just a strong sense that I would obtain a good job and travel overseas before having a family of my own.

My children are attempting to follow a similar pathway. They too have left home for university courses in other cities and many aspects of their daily young adult lives remind me of my own. However, they appear to be confronted with what seems like almost unlimited choice and opportunity in university courses and possible career options. They feel the burden of mounting student loan debt, as they work one or two days per week during term time and they struggle to find well-paid jobs in vacation time. Their flats are expensive and yet cold, dark and overcrowded. Their friendship groups seem vast and they are constantly connected through many forms of social media. Romantic relationships are frequently considered ‘complicated’ and they have expectations of a lifestyle that includes good food, partying, travel and well paid future careers.

To me, their young adult life seems far more complex and overwhelming than mine. I know that at times, they feel this too. However, I recognise that this is my critique and comparison from a position of an experience they have not known. I believe they have

grown up in a time and an environment that has gradually prepared them for their current young adult lives and they know no different. It seems very important to keep this in mind when sitting with my young adult clients. Yes, their life may seem comparatively complicated, busy and at times volatile, but for most young adults this is viewed as an explorative and exciting time and, if they are well prepared and can find support when needed, most cope very well.

What does it mean to be a young adult? Developmental tasks and features

Western, post-industrialised society's view

Much of the theory around developmental tasks has its roots in psychoanalytic stage theories and Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (Burt & Masten, 2010). Entry into adulthood has been historically studied in terms of transition events, such as finishing education and obtaining full-time work, entering marriage, and becoming a parent (Arnett & Galambos, 2003).

Interestingly, when young Americans have been surveyed about their conceptions of the transition to adulthood the above mentioned developmental tasks of work, marriage and parenting have ended up low on the list (Arnett & Galambos, 2003). Instead, the top criteria have tended to "represent process rather than discrete events – character qualities monitored and measured by the individual rather than roles established and sanctioned by society" (Arnett & Galambos, 2003, p. 91). The top three criteria reflect the Westernised value of individualism and point to a primary focus on achieving self-sufficiency. They are: accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent (Arnett & Galambos, 2003).

More contemporary ideas about developmental tasks consider that societies create a series of graded expectations relating to age and then judge successful adaptation based on the mastery of these criteria (Burt & Masten, 2010). Developmental tasks usually reflect both the universal features of human development as well as unique community, cultural or historical perspectives. For example, Burt and Masten (2010) list the developmental tasks fitting a more Western influenced cultural paradigm for the individual moving into young adulthood as: forming a cohesive sense of self, forming close romantic relationships, and work competence.

Cultural variations

As has been noted, the Western value of individualism appears to be predominant in research and literature regarding the phenomenon of young adulthood. However, I consider that the significance of culture, and context by way of socioeconomic status and life circumstances, in the conception of this phase of young adulthood are of particular relevance in the contemporary multicultural society of Aotearoa New Zealand. This is further addressed in more detail in the sub-chapter Cultural considerations and complexities below.

The young adult's view

Jeffrey Arnett's research

Seeking to further understand a subjective view of this stage of development Arnett (2004) conducted research with emerging adults over a ten year period in the United States, asking them what it means to be an emerging adult. He concludes that despite differences in social backgrounds and likely economic prospects, there are five broad characteristics that distinguish the emerging adult from the adolescent and the more mature adult. They are:

1. The age of *identity* explorations. At this stage young people are most likely to be exploring possibilities in a variety of areas in their lives, most particularly, love and work. Typically emerging adults are more independent of their family and yet not fully committed to adult responsibilities and as such they have an opportunity to try out different ways of living, working and loving. In the course of exploring these possibilities they learn more about who they are and what they stand for, what they are good at, or not. Influenced by Erik Erikson's extensive writing on youth and identity, identity formation has historically been associated with the period of adolescence (Roazen, 1976). However, Arnett (2004) discovered that identity issues came up consistently in his interviews with young adults. Of particular interest is that recent psychosocial approaches to understanding biographies of young people emphasise the tension between individualized and relational aspects of identity (Briggs, 2008; Thomson et al., 2004).
2. The age of *instability*. Explorations and shifting choices in love and work can make this an unstable period. On the way to a master plan there can be many revisions. Whilst the anxieties of adolescence may have subsided, instability can be a new source of disruption at this stage.

3. The *self-focused* age. There appears to be a developmental change in social cognition as emerging adults seem less egocentric than adolescents and are far more considerate of others' feelings – maybe even their parents. This phenomenon is also evidenced in neuropsychological studies (Blakemore, 2015). However, emerging adulthood is still seen as a distinctly self-focused time, in that there are usually few obligations or commitments, possibly no one to answer to, and increasing autonomy. Linked with identity formation, self-focus during this time is considered to be healthy and only temporary, as the emerging adult ponders who they are. Self-focus allows for development of self-sufficiency and skills for daily living. Arnett (2006) makes the point that whilst this may be the 'freest' time of one's life it is also a time where one can spend a considerable amount of time alone, which can be personally challenging. The view is that attainment of self-sufficiency supposedly signals arrival at the door of adulthood. Then, ideally, individuals can begin to view themselves as 'other-focused' by focussing on intimate relationships and possibly, parenthood.
4. The age of *feeling in-between*. When asked if they have reached adulthood, approximately 60% of the 18-25 year olds replied an ambiguous "yes and no" reflecting their feeling of being caught 'in-between' (Arnett, 2004).
5. The age of *possibilities*. Despite this transitional period of young adulthood being challenging, at times bewildering and even distressing for some, research conducted in the United States uncovered feelings of optimism about their future, in the vast majority of emerging adult respondents. They have plans, but these plans are malleable and can be changed when things do not work out as young adults have so few obligations at this stage in their lives (Patterson, 2012). Even young adults whose backgrounds and current lives are difficult, have expectations "that they will eventually get to where they want to be" (Arnett, 2006, p. 13). Whilst there is recognition that the impact of their early developmental environment and family influences may be carried with them, young adulthood represents a time for some who have experienced difficult childhoods to finally break away and attempt some control over their own lives.

Reflection

Perhaps it is necessary to be mindful of preserving the 'idealising' of this time of open possibilities and dreams. The young adult has usually not yet had the lived experience of the repetition of disappointment or does not have a full (if any)

understanding of how early trauma or neglect may further affect their adult lives. At this time it is less likely that their high hopes have not yet been firmly tested against reality. How important is it in the therapeutic encounter to consider the preservation of this optimistic ‘illusion’ and allow for the opportunity of a positive, hopeful and resilient life ahead? Or, perhaps the young adult who retains this optimistic attitude is less likely to seek out and engage in any psychotherapy anyway?

Thompson et al. research

In their research exploring young peoples’ understandings of adulthood and citizenship responsibilities, Thomson et al. (2004) discuss the uncertainty of the pathways into adulthood in the United Kingdom. They advise that traditional routes have all but disappeared or become extended in ways that create an ambiguous relationship to adulthood for young people. Whilst this research draws some similar conclusions to Arnett’s United States based research, the researchers advise that it is increasingly unclear what young people define as becoming an adult. They conclude that the transition to adulthood is fragmented and structured by social class with a relatively accelerated transition for those with few economic resources compared to an extended transition for the middle class. Adopting a longitudinal, qualitative, biographical approach they followed 100 young people (aged 15-21 years at the start of the study) through the transition to adulthood, collecting, comparing and interpreting their changing accounts of their subjective experiences of moving into adulthood over a two and a half year period. Analysis of their data revealed two distinct threads:

1. A ‘relational’ understanding of adulthood – “locating oneself in sets of interlocking relationships in the different areas of ones’ activities” (Thomson et al., 2004, p. 224). This includes, taking care and responsibility for others, thinking about parenthood and ‘giving up’ the frivolities of youth to settle down.
2. An ‘individualised’ notion of adulthood – a process of increasing choice and autonomy and decreasing dependence. This is seen as evolving over time and “being related primarily to a range of emotional and practical competences” (Thomson et al., 2004, p. 224).

The biographies of the young adults studied by Thomson et al. (2004) showed that alongside what could be described as the more narcissistic individualised notion of self, is also a growing relational capacity to consider the needs and feelings of others. This is a thought-provoking study that appears to confirm that young adulthood is a time of

flux and change. The authors understand these notions of self during this time are discursive positions, not set in concrete, that young people can move in and out of over time. Additionally this research points to how transitions to adulthood are likely to be structured by social class, gender and economic resources.

Cultural considerations and complexities

As universality is one of the main criteria required to satisfy the definition of a developmental phase there is some debate about whether young adulthood can be considered a discrete developmental stage (Arnett, 2000). According to Arnett (2000) it is a period of life that is culturally constructed and is not universal and immutable. It appears that the phenomenon of young adulthood is not recognised in all cultures (Sachs, 2013), particularly cultures that are less industrialised and those that continue to be rooted in traditional, collectivist values. The individualism-collectivism dimension is identified as one of the major aspects of culture and possibly one of the most important ways cultures differ from each other (Shkodriani & Gibbon, 1995). Therefore, even if the phase of young adulthood is understood and acknowledged by cultures or subcultural ethnic groups that emphasise belonging and collectivism over autonomy and individualism, the psychological developmental task of achieving a coherent *identity* may not be viewed as being as salient, or have the same emphasis, as it appears to in Westernised cultures.

For example, researchers engaged in the development of a multi-dimensional model to assess Maori identity and cultural engagement advise that seeking to understand Maori identity as a cultural and ethnic group is a formidable challenge (Houkamau & Sibley, 2010). Individual young adult Maori may be attempting to achieve the socially prescribed young adult developmental tasks of the dominant Westernised, post-industrial New Zealand culture, in addition to considering their level of identification and engagement as Maori (Houkamau & Sibley, 2010). This is discussed in more detail in this dissertation in chapter five.

A study examining the markers of transitioning to adulthood in Chinese culture, found that the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours revealed in the top three selected criteria may be interpreted as being ambiguous and therefore require further examination in light of the culture in which they are embedded (Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004). If we view these top selected criteria from a Western perspective they appear to place emphasis on personal identity values. For example, an item such as “learn to always have good

control of your emotions” on the face of it seems personal and individualistic. However this may be interpreted as being highly valued in Chinese adulthood as it helps conformity and integration with others and adheres to the Confucian doctrine, which places great importance on these attributes (Nelson et al., 2004). Collectivism is related to solidarity, concern for others and integration with others, and in the Confucian-grounded Chinese culture, the needs and views of the family are generally emphasised over the individual (Nelson et al., 2004). Other criteria that scored highly included “become less self-oriented, develop greater consideration for others” and “capable of supporting parents financially” which appear to be directly reflective of a collectivistic culture and a commitment to others (Nelson et al., 2004).

The authors of the study considered that the results provided “evidence that culture does indeed influence the beliefs and behaviours of emerging adults” (Nelson et al., 2004, p. 35) and that the influence of culture is not always obvious or straightforward. I recognise this situation as a source of enormous conflict for many young adults in Aotearoa New Zealand today who are caught in-between the traditional values of their indigenous birth culture and the predominant Western and post-industrial societal developmental task expectations. In her 2008 research of the identity ‘crisis’ that many of the Pacific people face in Aotearoa New Zealand, Mila-Schaaf (2013) notes that 58 percent of the Pacific people in New Zealand are now New Zealand born and these are predominantly children, adolescents and young adults. Whilst adolescence appears to be a well-defined developmental phase in Pacific Island societies (Herdt & Leavitt, 1998), it seems that the phase of young adulthood is unacknowledged or less understood. In New Zealand, these young people are literally the ‘in-betweeners’ or ‘go-betweeners’ as they attempt to ‘fit in’ to the local culture, conform to their traditional and family expectations and act as interpreters of the ‘new’ customs and language to their older family members. In addition, by virtue of growing up in New Zealand, many have lost confidence in speaking their language and accessing the “cultural capital required to be symbolically recognised as ‘Pacific’ by other Pacific people (Mila-Schaaf, 2013, p. 60). This research presents a compelling view that these factors may be directly impacting on the mental health of the young Pacific people living in New Zealand today.

This is also evident in New Zealand research exploring the lived experiences of Muslim immigrant youth, aged 16 to 27 years (Stuart & Ward, 2011). This study found they attempted to balance multiple identities, retaining religious and cultural elements in the definition of self whilst attempting to integrate into the wider community. Many

Muslim young adults appear to work very hard to blend their identities and their lifestyle becomes a dynamic hybridisation of Western and Eastern cultures influence in the hope that they can minimise difference (Stuart & Ward, 2011). This can be a particularly complex, and frequently stressful, way to live. During my time as a student counsellor I became aware of many Muslim students who were struggling to find a way to harmonise the often-conflicting demands of culture and family.

The phase of young adulthood may be acknowledged in different ways in different cultures. For the Oriya Hindu women in the temple town of Bhubaneswar, India, young adulthood is the third of five distinct phases of life. It is initiated via marriage and her role as ‘new’ son’s wife or junior wife (Menon, 2011). The goal of the phase of young adulthood is assimilation, which is characterised by consummation of the marriage and service (seva) to her husband’s family. In this part of the Hindu culture during the early years of adulthood there appears to be little opportunity to experience self-definition or independence, instead the cultural emphasis is on achieving conformity to “widely shared Hindu meanings about relationship between superiors and subordinates” (Menon, 2011, p. 35).

Culture does not only mean difference by country or ethnicity. It can also refer to cultural difference by virtue of religious beliefs or community lifestyles. Young adults growing up in a minority or subculture such as a religious group like the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (the Mormon church) can be subject to the same, and also different, rites of passage or transitional roles affecting their construction of this time in their lives (Nelson, 2003). The young adults of the Mormon church are influenced by the larger society in which they live and so receive dual, and possibly conflicting, messages with “an emphasis on individualism and self-reliance, on the one hand, and the need to focus on others and be part of the group, on the other hand” (Nelson, 2003, p. 45).

Summary

This chapter has explored the historical context of the emergence of the concept of young adulthood, identifying that this phase of the human life cycle seems to be a recently recognised social phenomenon in industrialised and post-industrialised cultures. Society has developmental task expectations of young adults and research with young adults themselves reveals this as an unstable life stage with a strong focus on exploring issues around identity, independence, separating from family relationships

and at the same time moving towards the possibility of new relationships and new ways of relating. Young adulthood may be viewed as a culturally constructed life phase and as such the influence of culture and context are important elements in attempting any understanding of what it means to be a young adult.

The following chapter considers developmental theory and attempts some understanding of the psychodynamics of being a young adult through consideration of psychoanalytic developmental perspectives and theory.

Chapter 4 Developmental Perspectives

Introduction

The previous chapter discussed how the phenomenon of young adulthood evolved as a recognised developmental phase during the twentieth century. The chapter further considered the societal and young adult subjective views on what it means to be a young adult today and acknowledged that there are cultural and contextual complexities. Young adulthood is revealed to be a time of exploration where issues pertaining to separating from family and evolving self-identity are being faced along with a surge towards new interpersonal and intimate experiences.

The objective of this chapter is to consider the psychodynamics of the young adult by exploring psychoanalytic developmental perspectives and theory. However, whilst many preeminent psychoanalytic theorists have a developmental theory only a few identify or detail the specific phase of young adult development. Nonetheless, I hope that exploring some of this theory may help me to understand what is going on at this developmental time of life that might lead to the particular emotional states of overwhelm, confusion, fear, loss, grief, loneliness and disillusionment that I frequently encounter when working with this young adult client group.

A self-definition/relatedness matrix

Whilst there appears to be a predominant emphasis on self-definition or individualism in Western culture, Blatt (2008) notes that the establishment of an individual's healthy personality requires two fundamental processes. Blatt states that "a differentiated, integrated, realistic, essentially positive sense of self (an identity)" and "meaningful mutually satisfying, reciprocal interpersonal relationships" (pg. 15) are polarities of experience which provide the building blocks of both individual and societal development.

I find this notion of a fundamental 'polarity' to be a particularly relevant and useful way of thinking about the young adults' emotional states. As the previous chapter indicates, the young adult seems to be at developmental crossroads and is considered to be the 'age in-between'. They are distancing themselves from the secure institutions of childhood and adolescence, and moving from an identity based on identifications with important others (parents, whanau, school friends) towards a new intrapsychic structure

which is likely to be based on a synthesis of all their earlier identifications (Kroger, 2000). As they attempt to build and maintain their own identity, relationships and beliefs it seems that their journey of personal discovery can lead to confusion, overwhelm, and even grief, as a rift between the old external voices and the new internal voice develops (Taylor, 2008). It is during this young adult period that the individual is attempting to redefine his or her capacity for satisfying adult interpersonal relationships whilst simultaneously developing an increasingly integrated self-definition or identity - “a self-in-relation” (Blatt, 2008, p. 109).

Psychodynamic theory considerations

Theories emphasising separation and individuation

Blatt (2008) informs that many traditional developmental theories predominantly view psychological development from the Western perspective, as a process of separation and individuation, with individuals striving for independence and self-definition. This perspective considers development as “a process through which innate capacities find optimal expression in attaining various levels of self-definition and of personal functioning” (Blatt, 2008, p. 72). The emphasis is on the centrality of intrapsychic ego maturation. Many of these theories are possibly influenced by the emergence of the pursuit of individual development and self-discovery during the historic period of Renaissance through to the Enlightenment and the ascent of science and personal freedom (Blatt, 2008).

Major highly regarded psychoanalytic contributors to these ‘separation’ theories include Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud, Margaret Mahler, Peter Blos and Erik Erikson (Blatt, 2008). Erikson’s epigenetic psychosocial model places particular emphasis on developing individuality and autonomous control throughout the different phases of infancy, childhood and adolescence (Erikson, 1965). This is discussed in more detail in chapter five.

Sigmund Freud understood that the process of “detachment from parental authority” (1953, p. 227) during adolescence is not only necessary and significant because it signifies a type of opposition which is needed for the progress of civilisation, but that this can also be a painful process for the individual. I find this pronouncement from Freud insightful and seemingly timeless, as it remains so very meaningful with respect to adolescence and young adulthood today. Detachment or separation from the parents and family is central to this phase of life and it seems that inevitably it is accompanied

by some difficulty and emotional pain. I do not think it is an exaggeration to suggest that most young adult clients that seek psychotherapy are struggling with the issue of separation to some degree.

The separation sought by the young adult may be premature and unsupported or misunderstood and insufficiently guided by the parents. It can be painful for both of the parties involved as they deal with issues of lost attachment and perceived rejection and accompanying feelings of loss, grief and guilt. Most young adults still seem to need a secure base to return to, a place to refuel, lick wounds, take refuge and then depart from, yet again. As I have witnessed with my own children, many young adults excitedly leave home to travel or study in other cities, only to find themselves struggling, perhaps with loneliness or finding that they are not yet properly equipped with the skills and experience to cope with independent domestic life.

This brings to mind the practicing sub-phase of the first separation-individuation process as theorised by Margaret Mahler, where the infant first develops an autonomous ego in close proximity to the mother and uses the mother as an anchor to return to for reassurance (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975). Of vital importance in this theory is the need for the mother figure to allow the infant this time to ‘practice’ their separation. It is the mother’s expectations, encouragement and confidence that influence the infant’s feeling of safety and their narcissistic investment in their own functioning. I consider that these sentences explaining Mahler’s theory could have been written with the words ‘young adult’ substituted for ‘infant’ and I believe they would equally convey the experience of many parents and young adults as the young adult attempts to leave home for the first time. Blos (1967) and (Colarusso, 1990) both extend Margaret Mahler’s (Mahler et al., 1975) theory of infant separation-individuation into later developmental elaborations of the self.

Theories emphasising relatedness

In contrast to earlier developmental theories with a more individualistic focus, many recent developmental theories, share the assumption that self-development is an inherently social process (Blatt, 2008). These theories place far greater recognition on the importance of connection and relatedness in understanding that personality development occurs in interaction with others (Blatt, 2008).

Many of these theories have emerged out of attachment theory (Holmes, 1993), a relational emphasis on psychoanalytic theory (Mitchell, 2000) and feminist and cross-cultural considerations (Blatt, 2008). These theories are more likely to be based on the romantic view, which values authenticity over logic, and sees humans as intrinsically good and capable but vulnerable to restriction and injury by circumstance and environment (Fonagy, 2001). They stress both the innate potential of the human to relate, but also its susceptibility to insensitive, neglectful and damaging caregiver relationships. Even in cultures that promote and celebrate individualistic selves it is usually recognised that the self develops in interaction with others (Miller & Mangelsdorf, 2005).

The theories of Winnicott, Klein, Colarusso and Kohut are discussed in more detail below. I consider that each of these theorists offer a way to think about the unconscious internal dynamics of the young adult in an attempt to better understand the dominant emotions that I notice are frequently present in young adult clients.

Psychodynamic theoretical considerations of the development of the young adult

D. W. Winnicott

Winnicott (1965a) wrote extensively about human growth and development, maturity and immaturity. He considered that there is no adult maturity apart from previous development. That is, there is complex and continuous development from birth (or earlier) to old age. Central to all his considerations of development is “the provision of the environment that is appropriate to the age [of the individual]” (Winnicott, 1965a, p. 21).

I am drawn to an approach Winnicott discusses in an essay on adolescent immaturity (1986a) where he states:

*As a psychotherapist I naturally find myself thinking in terms of:
The emotional development of the individual;
The role of the mother and of the parents;
The family as a natural development in terms of childhood needs;
The role of schools and other groupings seen as extensions of the family idea, and relief from set family patterns;
The special role of the family in its relation to the needs of adolescents [young adults];
The immaturity of adolescents [young adults];
The gradual attainment of maturity in the life of the adolescent [young adult];*

*The individual's attainment of identification with social groupings and with society, without too great a loss of personal spontaneity;
The structure of society...;
The abstraction of politics and economics and philosophy and culture...;
The world as a superimposition of a thousand million individual patterns, the one upon the other. (1986a, p. 150)*

I consider this to be a useful guide for this dissertation's consideration of the development of the young adult and as such I have inserted the words 'young adult' into the abridged version of Winnicott's list above. In this essay, Winnicott (1986a) contends that genetics determine a tendency to grow and mature but the emotional growth of the individual can only take place in relation to a good-enough facilitating environment, which he considers to be the essential base condition (*sine qua non*). This view recognises the extension of the line of influence beyond the mother, further out to family, social groups, society, politics and culture. Indeed, Winnicott (1986a) states "...there is no personal fulfilment without society, and no society apart from the collective growth processes of individuals that compose it" (p.153).

Winnicott's theory of healthy emotional maturity as a young adult

Winnicott's assertion is that 'emotional maturity' is synonymous with health and that to be a healthy adult a person must have passed through all the immature earlier stages (1965a). He expounded a key message:

The healthy adult has all the immaturities to fall back upon either for fun or in time of need, or in secret auto-erotic experience or in dreaming (p.88).

For this type of healthy emotional maturity to develop, Winnicott believed that it is most likely only the child's mother and subsequently their own family that can carry out the task of meeting the individual's needs (Winnicott, 1965a). Central to these needs are the understanding, support and acceptance of the child's initial dependence and then of their striving towards independence. The individual has a need for an ever-widening circle beyond the family for his or her care. Winnicott considered that the issue of whether developing creativity (aliveness) comes into being or does not come into being is directly related to the quality and quantity of environmental provision (1971). That provision includes encouragement towards extended social provision beyond the family to allow for his or her creativity and generosity to be deposited and experienced by others.

This movement towards independence, particularly in adolescence and into young adulthood, can sometimes involve some defiance and hostility, which Winnicott

described as ‘breaking through’ and then a return to dependence within the new wider external circle “...something that is symbolical of the lap from which the child has broken away” (1965a, p. 90). Winnicott considered that in order to achieve healthy emotional growth, the individual must be able to move in and out from dependence and independence (1965a).

Indeed, at the young adult stage this may even be in the form of actual moving in and out of the family home or ‘boomeranging’ as it has been colloquially described. The extent to which young adults are currently returning to live with their parents in Western culture is historically and socially unprecedented (Patterson, 2012). In my experience it is a phenomenon that seems reasonably well accepted by both parents and young adults. It seems that these days there is a less well-defined ‘leaving home’ point, such as marriage or career. Again I am reminded of Mahler’s theory of the infant practicing phase (Mahler et al., 1975). Understanding parental and family management is required for this type of ‘moving in and out’ of relationship with the family to prove successful for the adolescent and young adult. If a family base exists and remains available it can provide the individual with the on-going opportunity for essential personal development. However, if the family structure has ruptured and is not available then it may in some cases lead to premature emotional development and possibly precocious independence, which is counter to emotional health (Winnicott, 1965a).

Capacity to be alone

I have noticed that frequently when a young adult seeks psychotherapy it is because he or she is feeling lost and alone. There may have been a breakdown, actual or perceived, with their parents and family and frequently this has occurred, or possibly worsened, during their adolescent years. Having only recently left the structured environment of school and possibly home, they may not yet feel ready to face adult decisions and challenges alone. Winnicott’s view was that the capacity to be alone is one of the most important signs of maturity in emotional development (1958). His theory is that this capacity to be alone originates through infant ‘ego-relatedness’, where being alone is first experienced in the presence of another, usually the mother, who makes no demands. This can also be described using the language of Melanie Klein in that the capacity to bear being alone depends on the existence of a good internalised object, again, probably the mother (Winnicott, 1958). In time, the ego supportive environment is introjected and built into the personality and a state of personal aloneness can be tolerated and enjoyed (Jacobs, 1995).

I believe this theory has particular relevance for young adults who now face the liberty of life without school rules and home structure. As mentioned in chapter three, except for the elderly, young adults spend more time alone than any other age group and their pursuit of identity exploration is usually a very singular process (Arnett, 2000). I notice this with my own children. As adolescents they had groups of friends and rarely would they be without companionship or phone or computer contact with their 'tribe'. As young adults, they seem to have gradually distanced themselves from many of these group friendships, placing more emphasis on 'their own space' and seem less interested in constant companionship. Maybe it is inevitable that friendships and connections will change as school years end and further study or work requires more intense personal time commitment. However, my observation is that young adults seek out and value their 'aloneness' as they work on working out who they are.

The period of adolescence, with behaviours that may be challenging and hostile, and oscillate between defiant independence and regressive dependence, can present an enormous challenge to even the most stable and loving family environment. Winnicott (1986a) stressed that at this time when a child awkwardly emerges out of childhood and "gropes towards adult status" there is a need for "highly complex interweaving with the facilitating environment" (p.157).

I believe that the rebellion and challenging behaviours associated with adolescence as discussed by Winnicott, often extend into the period of young adulthood, particularly the start of young adulthood at around 18-20 years when relinquishing parental control appears to be imperative for many. In Winnicott's language, this is a time for the individual to repudiate 'the false solution' and seek to become real (Winnicott, 1965a). He further considered that it is by being allowed to be 'immature' at this time of life that creative and fresh ideas can emerge and idealism can properly exist.

I find society's perception of immaturity to be an interesting concept. It seems that in New Zealand we have some tolerance for less mature behaviour attributed to young adults. We 'tut-tut' at some students' antics such as burning couches or base-jumping off buildings but it seems there is a general acceptance that this type of more reckless, immature behaviour is a phase that is expected, and also expected to pass. What seems to be less acknowledged is the point that both Winnicott and Sigmund Freud make when they highlight the need for youthful opposition in order for creative and fresh ideas to emerge with the consequence of progress for civilisation (Freud, 1953;

Winnicott, 1965a). As a society, I wonder if we rely on young adults in particular, with their fresh enthusiasm and greater inclination for risk-taking, possibly construed as immature behaviour, to challenge and push the frontiers.

Melanie Klein

Integration of the ego

In the introduction to her book 'Inside Lives', Margot Waddell (Waddell, 2002) offers an explanation of her psychodynamic approach to understanding "how a person grows up" (p.1), rooted in Kleinian and post-Kleinian thought, as an attempt to "trace the unfolding of the inner story" (p.1). Waddell's discussion of the evolution of human growth and development is based on internal changing mental states, what she calls "states of mind" which are related to what Klein referred to as "positions" – for example, paranoid-schizoid position and depressive position (Klein, 1937, 1946). According to Waddell, it is the theories of Klein and Wilfred Bion that have led to thinking about

...the nature and meaning of human behaviour as it is affected by the changing predominance of different mental states and by the impact of those states on the developmental shifts appropriate to specific ages: for example infancy, latency, adolescence, adulthood. (Waddell, 2002, p. 6)

Whilst Waddell (2002) does not specifically identify a phase of young adulthood she uses Klein's theories to discuss the period of late adolescence moving into adulthood, describing it as a time where the aroused extremes of defensive splitting and projection so frequently evident in earlier adolescent years, give way to a more moderate introjective sense of self understanding. As a mother of four daughters who has experienced the parenting challenges of adolescence and lived to tell the tale, I can absolutely concur with this observation that significant changes in externalising behaviours occur as the adolescent matures.

Whilst Klein's stated intent was largely to validate and extend Freud's hypotheses (Mitchell & Black, 1995), she considered that the development of human qualities and characteristics was based more on relationship and interaction and less on Freud's proposed theories of instinctual drives and psycho-sexual staged development (Mitchell & Black, 1995; Waddell, 2002). I consider Klein's theories of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions offer a useful way to think about some of the more extreme and less predictable behaviour I have witnessed in my young adult clients. These theories

also help with understanding how some young adults might react to, and begin to come to terms with, the sadness and grief for a past that they now feel disillusioned by.

Projective processes

It was Klein (1946) who, based on her analytic work with young children, theorised that introjection, projection and splitting are used from the beginning of life as mechanisms to defend against persecutory anxiety. According to Klein, the earliest anxiety is felt as fear of annihilation and is attached to an object – the very first object being the mother’s breast, which in the baby’s phantasy is split into a gratifying good breast and a frustrating, bad breast. Splitting allows the bad object to be denied and kept widely apart from the good object. In Klein’s view it is actually an object relation, and therefore part of the ego, which is split off, denied and annihilated. The baby expels split off parts of the ego into the mother in hatred and in this way injures, controls and possesses the mother who now no longer “is felt to be a separate individual but is felt to be the bad self” (Klein, 1946, p. 101). However good parts of the self are also expelled and projected which is essential for the baby to develop good object relations and an integrated ego.

The degree to which an optimal balance can be achieved between introjection and projection in the early stages of development influences the on going “integration of the ego and the assimilation of internal objects” (Klein, 1946, p. 103). Although this paranoid-schizoid position is a natural and necessary state for the young infant (Waddell, 2002) it is still present to a lesser degree and in a less striking form throughout life’s stages (Klein, 1946). Klein considered that there is an inherent tendency toward integration in the infant when there is a sense of the whole object being neither good nor bad but understood as sometimes good and sometimes bad (Mitchell & Black, 1995). This phase of development is what Klein referred to as the depressive position (Klein, 1937, 1946). Segal (1974) explains that once ‘in the depressive position’, the basis for thinking about the other is influenced by the capacity for linking and abstraction rather than the disjointed and concrete thinking characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid position.

However, Klein considered that the state of relative mental health could be continually lost and regained during one’s life (Mitchell & Black, 1995). Late adolescence and young adulthood is a transition period, frequently involving change and upheaval. This time can test an individual’s capacity to tolerate unrealised opportunities, new

challenges and the realities of disappointment. Indeed, during difficult times of rejection, frustration or loss there may be temporary security in retreat into the splitting of the paranoid-schizoid position or the manic defenses as a means of avoiding anxieties rather than engaging with them (Mitchell & Black, 1995).

Klein's theory offers a way to think about some young adult clients who present with depression and who have very self-destructive behaviours. Klein linked depression to the depressive position and she understood the manic-depressive states as a reflection of childhood failure to establish good internal objects (Gabbard, 1994). For these individuals the depressive position has never been properly worked through in childhood and therefore they are desperately concerned that they may have destroyed the loved good objects within themselves by their innate destructiveness (Mitchell & Black, 1995). They then feel persecuted by the hated bad objects that remain. The individual employs manic defences in response to the pain produced by the 'pining' for the lost love object, which Klein called depressive anxiety (Mitchell & Black, 1995).

Manic defences are used to disavow the bad internal objects and deny dependency on the now lost love objects (parents). I notice that these depressed clients often speak with disdain of their parents and family. Statements like "they're useless parents" and "I've brought myself up anyway" come to mind. Who needs them anyway? These clients have a scornful, contemptuous attitude in an attempt to gain power over their helpless dependency and self-loathing and there is a wish to triumph over parents (Gabbard, 1994).

In my role as an intern psychotherapist at student counselling services I became aware that exam and assessment stress and relationship ruptures are sometimes triggers of unexpected, extreme behaviours that one might normally associate with the paranoid-schizoid position. As Waddell (2002) states, "there is often a bias towards the expulsion of the pain rather than containing it" (p. 146) which is evident in 'acting out'. Mitchell (1998) advises, that from time to time, we all use these mechanisms unconsciously to repudiate undesirable parts of reality. Young adulthood can be an unsettled, confusing, 'crazy-making' time, as new experiences and new relationships are negotiated, and when we are especially stressed we are all capable of regressing to these earlier patterns of defensive organisation.

Projection may also have a positive purpose, particularly for the adolescent, of allowing the individual to get rid of some of the painful and confusing feelings that are so

prevalent at this time in their life and also to investigate who he or she is by projecting aspects of themselves onto others. Waddell (2002) states “if there is a certain flexibility and fluidity in terms of the aspects of the self that are being projected, and then re-introjected, a degree of self-exploration can occur” (p.147). This more narcissistic state may enable an investigation and engagement with different groups and ways of being – a kind of ‘trying out’. Whilst this seems particularly relevant to the younger adolescent, it may also have a continuing role for the older adolescent/young adult as they move into new and unfamiliar life territory beyond the structures of school and immediate family.

Towards integration

As the individual seeks increased self-definition through late adolescence and early adulthood, Waddell (2002) notes that as well as less intense and extreme projection, there is also a growing capacity to introject the kinds of mental and emotional qualities needed for this phase of development. The introjective process involves relinquishing the external figures of past dependence and installing internal versions of them that can be used as comforting and inspiring resources as needed. This relinquishing of dependence on external attachment figures is central to the theory of a third separation-individuation process (Colarusso, 1990) which is discussed in more detail in the next section.

Klein viewed the capacity to live increasingly in the depressive position as a sign of developing maturity (Waddell, 2002) and that this is not measured in years of age. The depressive position is never fully worked through and situations of loss, or anxieties pertaining to guilt and ambivalence that “reawaken depressive experiences are always with us” (Segal, 1974, p. 80). Ideally, if in infancy a good internal object has been secured in the depressive position, situations of depressive anxiety will be worked through and lead to further enrichment (Segal, 1974). It is Klein’s contention that although there is a life-long oscillation between the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, it is the integrative process that enables the capacity to experience the other as genuinely other and to accept destructive impulses, as well as loving ones, towards the people we love that truly signals maturity.

I notice that this integrative process is of paramount importance to the young adult who is grieving for the idealised parents and family life they no longer have ready access to, or for the realisation that in actuality, family life was never that great. Often this is an

altered perspective that only comes to be realised once the young adult is living away from home. To realise that your parents are flawed, their behaviour not always exemplary and your upbringing far from perfect, can be difficult to bear.

Risk taking behaviour

In the more integrated, developmentally advanced depressive position the individual is usually more able to bear disappointment and intense emotional states. The alternative may be to continue to adopt a myriad of risk-taking behaviours, acting-out as a means to externalise or avoid engaging with painful emotions. This may be what is happening when one frequently witnesses young adult behavioural excesses such as binge consumption of alcohol and drugs, risky sexual activity, reckless driving or daredevil physical pursuits.

Risk-taking behaviour is complex and most likely requires a multifactorial consideration of the possible vulnerabilities of the young adult (Reynolds, Magidson, Mayes, & Lejuez, 2010). On the face of it, risk-taking in young adulthood may be about peer influence, impulsivity, instant gratification and sensation seeking, an inability to regulate, early experience of abuse or the absence of social control agents (parents/school environment). Alternatively, risk-taking may be more complex, involving seeking “an alteration of perception” (Briggs, 2008, p. 121) or “an act of violence against one’s subjectivity” (Briggs, 2008) – a means of expressing fury that separation from others is necessary and unavoidable at this life stage. Risk taking, in many of its forms, may offer a way to avoid the overwhelming uncomfortable feelings of vulnerability.

Colarusso - The third separation-individuation

I believe that Colarusso (1990) offers another useful lens for understanding young adults with his notion of a third separation-individuation. His view is that the young adult typically relinquishes dependence upon external figures, experiences greater intrapsychic separation and has an increased internal capacity for intimacy. Degrees of individuation have already occurred in other developmental phases and are always shaped by the same psychological constellation involving separation from family or other significant attachments. In this way separation-individuation can be viewed as a life-long process as every new aspect of independent living involves some threat of object loss.

The elaboration of the first separation-individuation is attributed to Margaret Mahler (Mahler et al., 1975) as occurring in stages during the first two years of an infant's life. It is responsible for the establishment of a stable sense of self and a capacity to relate to others with the attainment of object constancy signaling completion of this phase. The second individuation is theorised by Blos (1967) as occurring during adolescence with the objective being eventual psychological independence from the parents.

According to Colarusso (1990) the third individuation is marked by "an increased capacity for intrapsychic separation from infantile objects..." (p. 182), demonstrated by the young adult beginning to function with relative independence. At this time the individual may be living away from home for the first time, more likely to be working or studying independently at tertiary level, possibly engaging in active sexual lives and seeking an intimate life partner. This can involve an extensive period of transition as they move towards feeling fully intrapsychically anchored to their adult self. The cutting of childhood attachments and reduction in emotional and practical dependence on family can leave the young adult feeling "an intense normative loneliness" (p. 182) during this transition. Whilst this can be a time of great hope and expectation, it can also be a time of extreme distress and grief and requires an increased ability to mourn what is changing and being given up (Waddell, 2002).

As I sit with my young adult clients I frequently become aware of a mixture of intense feelings of bewilderment, disappointment and grief for the past and the recognition that a naïve state associated with this less complex time had gone. It seems that this separation-individuation transition time is a critical point in their lives where some reflection inevitably occurs as they attempt to move forward with more independence. I concur with Colarusso (1990) who considers that the young adult experiences an increase in narcissistic vulnerability and shattered omnipotence at this time when there is a growing realisation of an on-going struggle against the existential issues of aging, limited time and inevitable death both of themselves and important others.

As previously discussed, the capacity to bear the emotional states these challenges and disappointments evoke will ideally be gradually increasing as the individual moves into young adulthood. However this 're-balancing' may still be limited, resulting instead in a crisis that leads the young adult to psychotherapy. These clients may typically present with issues such as struggling to keep up with the demands of study, financial stress, or relationship breakdown. However it seems that frequently the real struggle may be

around the central challenges of the depressive position: how to grow and retain an internal caretaking presence whilst bearing the loss of the external; how to make sense of and deal with experience, good, bad or uncertain; and how to accept “the realistic estimation of the actual qualities of the other” (Waddell, 2002, p. 192).

Kohut - Development of structural integrity of the self

The self psychology developmental view of adolescent and young adult emotional maturity centres on self-object sustenance (Wolf, 1988). Self-object experiences are central to Heinz Kohut’s self psychology theory in that the emergence of the self requires the presence of others, called objects (people, symbols, experiences), who provide particular types of experiences that facilitate the emergence and maintenance of a structurally cohesive and robust self (Wolf, 1988). Kohut believed that developmental self-object needs for affirmation, admiration and support from others undergo change and maturation throughout one’s life and they are fundamental to healthy human development (Mitchell & Black, 1995). These experiences start with the need to have the mother, other family members and a familiar environment in close proximity and as age appropriate development of the self occurs the form of the self-object experience changes.

Wolf (1988) advances the question of whether changes in society and cultural ambiance, for example, a busier, more fractured home, more institutionalised child rearing practices and less time in an extended family environment, bears some responsibility for apparent increases in disorders of the self, like narcissism, depression, anxiety, eating disorders and substance abuse. Young adults frequently, and possibly increasingly, experience many such disorders.

Ideally the young adult is on their way to maintaining the structural integrity of their own self by using symbolic self-object experiences that are representations of the original positive self-evoking experiences (Wolf, 1988). The adolescent may replace the idealised parental imagoes with peer group self-object substitutes. Eventually, all going well, as the individual moves into adulthood they will create their own idealised set of values that will contain some aspects of the parental ideals along with some that are new and in harmony with current culture.

This takes time to establish and Wolf (1988) notes that the phases of adolescence and young adulthood are periods in life where there is ‘spare’ time and little requirement for responsibility to others. This may be felt by some as a period of uneasiness and

restlessness and a need ‘to be somebody now’ which can lead to the seeking out of an alter-ego/twinship self-object experience. However this type of self-object experience at this time may not always be an enriching one, as the likeness of the alter-ego can also confirm the vulnerable individual’s concerns about deficiencies and faults.

Today’s adolescents and young adults may be particularly vulnerable to this type of experience as many are bombarded daily with media/social media platforms promoting ‘the selfie’ and idealised and objectified manifestations of ‘perfection’. At the major developmental points in life there is a vulnerability of the self to being injured by inappropriate self-object experiences (Wolf, 1988).

Côté (2000) presents an interesting view of what he calls “late modern” society’s need for mass consumerism which in turn gives rise to mass insecurities. In this environment individuals are conditioned early in life to constantly monitor the social environment to ensure their appearance and behaviour conform in a world of constantly shifting demands and standards (Côté, 2000). At a time when the young adult is attempting to strengthen self-identity with less family guidance they may be “increasingly susceptible to influence by their peers and also to the media and everything the media represents, such as consumerism and narcissism” (Côté, 2000, p. 91).

Again, I am reminded of the feelings of overwhelm, bewilderment and fear which frequently seem prevalent with this young adult client group. At this developmental juncture there seems to be a strong tension between the more narcissistic ‘what’s in it for me?’ attitude and the, possibly conflicting, need to make new friends, fit in and to be able to consider others. It can be a confusing and lonely time. Maybe the possibility of narcissistic wounding and even ego fragmentation is avoided by hiding behind risky and damaging behaviours such as excessive drug and alcohol use, self-harm and an increasing obsession with physical appearance and overt expressions of sexuality. Or maybe it is just inevitable that there will be some wounding at this time and this is to be expected as part of identity formation and developing maturity?

Fundamental to this theory of self is an understanding that a person may shift backwards and forwards between two ever present dimensions of experience with others. In one dimension the other is deeply vital to the sustenance and development of the individual, particularly to their self-definition. In the other dimension the young adult relies on the need to view others as separate but connected in relationship – “for

loving, for exchange of ideas, for competition, and so on” (Mitchell & Black, 1995, p. 166).

This brings to mind my young adult children as they departed home for university study in other cities. They initially appeared to approach their new independence with some uncertainty and seemed to see-saw backwards and forwards. We appeared to be forgotten for days at a time as the excitement of a new autonomous life beckoned, and then needed again during the frequent phone calls and trips home for what might be thought of as ‘self-object top ups’.

Summary

In this chapter I have reviewed psychoanalytic developmental perspectives and theory seeking some insight into the unconscious dynamics of the young adult. By doing this I am attempting to better understand some of the predominant emotional states that I notice in my young adult clients. Whilst each of these theories offers slightly different insights and contributions with respect to the individual’s psychodynamic and psychological growth, they all value essential early, and on-going, sustaining relationships. In summary, Melanie Klein’s theories are based on attempting understanding of the internal world of the infant and how early relationships shape and affect an individual’s ability to grow. Winnicott considers the importance of the early and on-going facilitative environment on healthy growth and achievement of emotional maturity. Colarusso considers the specific intrapsychic effects of separating and individuating as a young adult and Kohut’s theory of self-psychology presents the idea that a healthy self must receive age appropriate self-object need experiences to sustain self-cohesion throughout life.

My objective in the next chapter is to consider in more detail, the young adult experience of identity formation and increasing self-definition and also the development of their capacity for relatedness and intimacy.

Chapter 5 Self-Identity and Self-in-Relationship

Introduction

In the previous chapter psychoanalytic developmental perspectives that may offer some insight into the psychodynamics of the young adult were considered. The developmental theories of Winnicott, Klein, Colarusso and Kohut propose some ideas about how healthy human psychological and emotional growth, up to and including young adulthood, may occur, and what type of environment may best facilitate this growth. These theories all consider a developmental trajectory towards independence, self-reliance and a relinquishing of the external figures of dependence, which in most cases commences in adolescence and gains pace through early adulthood. Importantly they also place great importance on the need for healthy relationship and sustaining environmental provision as platforms for growth at every stage of life.

My objective in this chapter is to consider in more detail, the young adult experience of identity formation and their development of the capacity for intimacy using Erik Erikson's psychosocial model of the human life cycle as a guide.

Young adults balancing interdependence and independence

My literature search around concepts of (self) identity and intimacy/relationship, confirmed that Erik Erikson is still considered an influential and widely respected theorist with regard to these concepts of psychological development (Arnett, 2010; Blatt, 2008; Hoover & Ericksen, 2004; Kernberg, 2006; Kroger, 2000; Stevens, 2008). As such I have used Erikson's theories of identity formation and attainment of the capacity for intimacy as the 'kicking off' point for my consideration of the complexity of the developmental growth and psychological organisation of the young adult.

There is a suggestion that more recently, concern with the development of *the self* has replaced the focus on the concept of identity, particularly in general psychoanalytic literature (Kernberg, 2006). However, I have found the concept of 'self-identity' allowed for broad research (not restricted to psychoanalytic literature) and discussion of the contemporary young adult for the purpose of this dissertation. Terminology around the notion of *identity* can be confusing, with descriptors such as *self*, *ego*, *self-identity*, *identity*, *I and me*, all being terms that are used by theorists, researchers and writers interested in human identity.

Erik Erikson (1968) viewed the achievement of self-identity in late adolescence as an integration and consolidation of identity elements through “selective repudiation and mutual assimilation of childhood identifications” (p. 159) and the subsequent recognition by the community and society “of a newly emerging individual” (p. 159). In other words self-identity involves self-discovery and a capacity for self-reflectivity and so it can be defined as an integration of individuality with social concerns (Blatt, 2008).

Erikson wrote of ‘beyond identity’, as the capacity for intimacy. (Erikson, 1968). He stated that “it is only when identity formation is well on its way that true intimacy... is possible” (Erikson, 1968, p. 135). Intimacy may be sought in friendships, love and sexual relationships and a central feature is the concept of shared identity or “finding oneself as one loses oneself in another” (Stevens, 2008, p. 52). In the model Erikson presents, identity is well on its way to establishment before the capacity for connection and relatedness through intimacy commences. Erikson (1980) noted that many psychotherapy patients that he considered “more pre-adult than post-adolescent... [break down over] an attempt to engage in intimate fellowship and competition or in sexual intimacy, fully reveal[ing] the latent weakness of identity” (p. 134).

I refer here to a dialectical model of personality development where, commencing in adolescence, various aspects of two developmental lines, one being self-definition (incorporating identity formation, separateness, autonomy, initiative and individuality) and the other interpersonal relatedness (incorporating submission, intimacy, love, sexuality reciprocity and intersubjectivity) start to merge and consolidate in late adolescence into “a self-in-relation” (Blatt, 2008, p. 109). The critical point in this model is the ‘merging’ of these two developmental sequences, which involves “self-identity developing out of a synthesis and integration of individuality with relatedness” (Blatt, 2008, p. 110). To my mind this dialectic provides a fuller description of the ego development of young adulthood, as it conveys the possibility of complexity and confusion inherent in balancing independence and interdependence.

As discussed in chapter three, the phenomenon of young adulthood has emerged as a distinct developmental phase over the last fifty years and appears to permit an extension of some of the developmental tasks previously associated with late adolescence. Young adults in post-industrial societies themselves describe this time in their lives as a transition ‘in-between time’, a time of identity exploration and self-focus and yet, importantly, moving towards being increasingly other-focused. It seems that there is a

dynamic tension created in attempting any kind of merger, or coming together, of these separate dimensions (self-definition/identity formation and interpersonal relatedness/intimacy) of a person's developmental experience. I have noticed that some young adults, particularly those who have only just left school or home, do not appear to be ready to incorporate these seemingly dialectical pathways into their ego development. Some may still be too concerned with the task of 'working out their own stuff' around separation and individuation to yet be aware of how they might be in relation to others. Others may prematurely consider themselves ready to move into new and more intimate relationships, before they have made any real advancement in exploring their own self-identity. It seems that the states of overwhelm and confusion and feelings of fear, loneliness and grief that I notice frequently bring the young adult client to psychotherapy, may be signs that they are not yet fully ready, or able, to merge these fundamental developmental dimensions.

Self-Identity exploration during young adulthood

Erik Erikson

Erik Erikson was considered an originator and psychoanalytic thinker who revolutionised both psychoanalytic and developmental ideas (Hoare, 2002). He is possibly best known for his conceptions of identity and the life cycle (Stevens, 2008) and many current influential developmental theorists continue to refer to his work (Arnett, 2004; Blatt, 2008; Colarusso, 1990; Kroger, 2000; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978). A theme of human development expressed by most theorists is that continuity and change are evident throughout a person's life (Berger, 2011). Whilst Erikson considered the fifth of his 'eight stages of man', identity versus role confusion, as being central to the period of development he termed 'adolescence', he acknowledged that psychosocial identity continues to evolve during all of adulthood. Hoare (2002) captures the essence of Erikson's thinking about psychosocial identity in his critique,

“it is capstone to youth and, as such, is both the springboard and the ongoing nutrient for the developmental terrain that follows” (p.31).

For Erikson, in the 1950's, the phase of 'youth' largely meant adolescence although much of his writing and discussion of this stage focuses on the “more or less sanctioned intermediary periods between childhood and adulthood” (Erikson, 1968, p. 156) and “sanctioned phase of delay in functioning as an adult” (Roazen, 1976, p. 87) which fits

well with the descriptor of young or emerging adult that I am using in this dissertation. In further support of the extension of identity development into young adulthood, Stark and Traxler (1974) note that the (United States of America) college atmosphere presents the tertiary-age individual (18-22 years) with an opportunity to examine him or her self within a variety of experiences, leading to a gradual identity crystallisation. Kroger (2000) and Arnett (2004) present several studies that point to low ‘identity-achieved’ status for older adolescents and those entering the young adult phase, suggesting considerable scope for on-going identity development.

What is identity?

Erikson considered “identity to be the partly conscious but predominantly unconscious sense of who one is as a person and as a contributor to the work of one’s society” (Hoare, 2002, p. 31). He also viewed youth as the time when an individual’s positive ego identity becomes established (Roazen, 1976). Erikson understood an individual’s actions or feelings at any one time as a combination of three interdependent and relative processes – the somatic, the ego and the societal (Stevens, 2008). “Identity formation begins where the usefulness of multiple identification ends” (Erikson, 1980, p. 122). Identity is built gradually, commencing with the integration of biology and the social influences of a range of adults, and in the process of children’s play.

Yet, the basic patterns of identity must emerge from (1) the selective affirmations and repudiation of an individual’s childhood identifications; and (2) the way in which the social process of the times identifies young individuals – at best recognising them as persons who had to become the way they are and who, being the way they are, can be trusted. (Erikson, 1982, p. 72)

The processes of identity development then, are *introjection* (the young child’s internalisations of representations, predominantly of the parents, but also other key figures), *identification* (with significant others as the child grows, in a sequence of progressive and changing manifestations of identity) and finally *identity formation* (expanding self awareness and a much more conscious exploration of self and one’s identification in society) (Stevens, 2008). In summary, Erikson’s theory of identity building involves the process of testing, selecting and integrating self-images derived from childhood psychosocial crises in the setting of the young person’s society and ideologies (Stark & Traxler, 1974).

A critique of Erikson’s theory of identity formation is that it is a normative view which is now out-dated in a postmodern society (Briggs, 2008). Instead, influenced by

globalisation and vast amounts of information via the internet, identity is now more likely to be differentiated, fluid and reflexive and changing over time in a continuous project of self (Thomson et al., 2004). However, Erikson placed great importance on the individual's identity formation being influenced by their interaction with society and social processes; "there is an implicit mutual contract between the individual and society" (Erikson, 1980, p. 127). Therefore, I consider that the view that in a postmodern society transitions to adulthood are increasingly differentiated and adult identity formation may be fragmented and elusive (Thomson et al., 2004) can still be well accommodated by Erikson's theory of identity.

One of the most striking, and enjoyable, factors about my work with young adult clients is the diversity. In my time practicing as a psychotherapist in both student counselling and private practice, I have worked with clients from many different ethnicities and social backgrounds. New Zealand is a country that welcomes multiple worldviews and is increasingly affected by globalisation. The traditional markers of the transition to adulthood (marriage, parenthood, careers) are changing and being influenced by this diversity. Undoubtedly the social and cultural matrix that affects these young adult clients as they explore their self-identity is more complex and differentiated. It seems that difference is the norm and yet I notice that there is also much that these young adult clients have in common. They are all attempting to make sense of this time in their lives and they have come to therapy when they have felt stuck or overwhelmed by the task. Frequently, I feel that my role is to sit alongside and to mentor or guide these clients as they pick their way through this complex maze.

Self-image

Erikson viewed the hard work of building one's own "adult" as the central task of the developmental period of the later part of adolescence. This is done through coming to know one's personal talents, interests, and ideological commitments and then working to mesh these into a self-image (Hoare, 2002). This self-image is a combination of what the young person sees in themselves and what their honed awareness tells them others judge and expect them to be (Stevens, 2008).

As I engage with this idea I wonder what self-image might mean to a young adult today. Visual self-images, and images generally are now everywhere. We are currently a very 'visual' society. Most phones and computers are equipped with photographic and movie cameras and are also able to deliver and receive images through the many platforms of

social media and media generally. This is the era of ‘the selfie’, the GoPro, Skype and Face-time. Never has it been easier to present yourself to possibly millions of others by way of video on You Tube or even internet pornography sites. The pressure to present oneself, face and body image in ‘poses’ is strong. One only needs to view the incessant traffic of Instagram and Facebook responses with comments such as ‘looking hot’, ‘great bod’, or worse still to receive no positive affirmations, to start wondering about the influence of these constant subtle, and frequently not so subtle, judgements and how these feed into self-image building. From a self-psychology perspective it seems the individual is seeking mirroring self-object experiences and where this is excessive it may indicate a deprivation of early infantile mirroring (Wolf, 1988).

Weekly columnist Verity Johnson, who reflects and writes on life and love from the perspective of a young adult, discusses how some reality television “encourages us to indulge our inner insecurity” (Johnson, 2015). She considers that many people who watch shows like *The Bachelor* or *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (shows that particularly target a young adult audience) do it in order to put down the show participants, as a means of keeping themselves feeling superior. They consider that there is no need to pretend to be nice, as we do not know these people personally. This perverse approach allows us to momentarily deny our vulnerabilities and insecurities by being critical and negative. I wonder if this is a new phenomenon or if it has always been present in more subtle forms. However these newer forms of technology seem to offer expanded opportunities to express our insecurities.

Moratorium

Erikson’s view is that the time between childhood and adulthood is when an individual’s positive ego identity becomes established in readiness for the tasks of adulthood (Erikson, 1956) in interaction with the social world (Erikson, 1982; Mitchell & Black, 1995). Erikson attempted to examine what individuals need during their “second phase of delay, [or] protracted adolescence” (Roazen, 1976, p. 87) on a cross-cultural basis and saw great value in the extension of the interval between youth and adulthood, which he called a “psychosocial moratorium” (Erikson, 1956, p. 59). In his view, a sanctioned phase of delay in functioning as an adult provides a time for a more mature identity foundation. For some individuals (Erikson particularly noted the highly gifted and creative) psychological and/or social factors may conspire to prolong identity resolution (Kroger, 2004).

Today post-industrial societies appear to offer many moratoria opportunities for young adults, such as tertiary study, apprenticeships, ‘gap year’ travel, internships, military training or voluntary work experiences (Berger, 2011). In Aotearoa New Zealand it is common for young adults to enrol in some form of tertiary training, university study or apprenticeship as soon as they leave school – or to at least feel like this is what they ‘should’ be doing at this time in their life. As discussed in the previous chapter, this stage of development is considered, in theory, as an extended exploratory phase with the rituals and responsibilities of full adulthood increasingly delayed. As Arnett (2004) advises, ideally at this time no firm commitment is necessary and enduring decisions are not yet required.

Yet, I wonder if contemporary society’s ‘moratorium’ is quite as Erikson envisioned. Erikson (1968) understood this to be a period characterised by “selective permissiveness” by society and “provocative playfulness on the part of youth” (p.157). Erikson considered that culture often institutionalised this psychosocial moratorium (Stevens, 2008) but perhaps the extent to which this is ‘formalised’ today risks robbing the young adult of the space they need at this time to allow experimentation with the different possibilities they may become. It seems that many individuals begin to feel the pressure of deciding what and where to study, or what job to do, during their adolescence and once secondary schooling is completed they move immediately to tertiary study and the quite possibly the bind of a very large financial debt in the form of a study loan. For others, cultural and economic factors may strongly influence whether it is possible to freely choose to postpone commitments. For these young adults, familial and cultural pressures to conform and commit to prescribed activities may be too strong and so they may feel that there is no real opportunity for a spacious exploration of roles, ideas and feelings that will benefit the fostering of an optimal sense of identity as conceived by Erikson. They may instead feel societal expectation as a restriction or burden possibly leading to premature identity definition and foreclosure.

Identity (role) confusion – identity crisis

The eight different phases of ego development as conceptualised by Erikson are part of an epigenetic process with different qualities of ego strength arising at different stages of a person’s life. At each stage, a potential ‘crisis’ indicates the necessity of a fundamental shift in perspective, which is essential for growth but can also leave the person vulnerable (Stevens, 2008). Erikson’s fifth sequential task of what he considered to be psychosocial development, is identity versus identity (role) confusion, with *fidelity*

emerging as the human strength or ego quality (Erikson, 1982). Erikson considered, *fidelity* particularly relevant and important at the stage of life that mediates childhood and adulthood as it signals

...not only a renewal on a higher level of the capacity to trust (and to trust oneself), but also the claim to be trustworthy, and to be able to commit one's loyalty to a cause of whatever ideological denomination. (Erikson, 1982, p. 60)

Central to the achievement of a solid identity is the necessity for the young adult to find the balance between what he or she perceives in themselves and what they perceive that others (for example, parents and broader society) judge and expect them to be (Roazen, 1976).

Erikson has been criticised for his tendency to overlook the negative in his consideration of the value of young people's experimentation and confusion (Roazen, 1976). He was sensitive to this criticism but maintained that "adolescence is not an affliction but a normative crisis" (Roazen, 1976, p. 90). He theorised that this is the time of life when people may experiment with different systems of thought or ideologies – the "search for something or somebody to be true to" (Roazen, 1976, p. 89) and he considered that it was not necessarily a good thing to firm up on a sense of identity too soon. Whilst a degree of crisis and identity confusion can arise during this stage, it is not necessarily always undesirable and it is at times of identity crisis that we may come to greater awareness of aspects of our identity (Stevens, 2008).

Exploring meaningful values and moral issues in young adulthood

From late adolescence through to young adulthood individuals have an increasing ability to reason abstractly and consider issues from a more autonomous perspective and they are more likely engaged in a search for meaningful values and roles in society (Kroger, 2000). I reflect on the young adults I interact with in my life and note that almost without exception they are clearly considering and forming their views and positions on matters of ideology, politics and personal values and morals. I notice that frequently with young adult clients, therapy sessions (perhaps like some family dinner times) become a space for exploring and wondering, for challenging and critiquing current world events and perceived social injustices. The recent terrorist attacks, particularly those perpetrated by al Qaeda and ISIS, are undoubtedly concerning for most people, but I notice that they seem to be deeply disturbing for some young adult

clients. This type of issue appears to evoke some deep existential anxiety and they need someone to share this with – ideally peers, or family around the dinner table.

I recall how intensely formative and energising this time of life was for me. My first job after leaving school at eighteen was working for a year for a government department in a strongly unionised team (a kind of a moratorium year before attending university). It was an election year and the talk at ‘smoko’ introduced me to socialist politics. I became aware of social inequality, feminism, racial tension and injustice in New Zealand, and apartheid in South Africa. I took my newly formed opinions home to my middle class parents and engaged in stimulating, ideological debate with them. As I reflect on this time now I can see how important it was to have a safe and containing environment, both at home and at work, to enable and support the formation of this new part of me. There was a sort of gentle mentoring occurring, which I was unaware of at the time.

Evolving theoretical views on moral development examine the individual’s formation of a worldview, that is, a set of cultural beliefs that explain what it means to be human, how human relations should be conducted and how human problems should be addressed (Jenson, 2011). Recent research on moral reasoning suggests the ethic of autonomy (the right to fulfil individual’s needs and desires) stays relatively stable across adolescence and into adulthood (Jenson, 2011), although in more collective cultures autonomous reasoning may somewhat decline over time or individual ethics are viewed differently. However, across both individualistic and collective cultures, the ethic of community (role-based duties to others, loyalty and concern with the customs, interest and welfare of groups) is shown to rise during childhood and into adolescence. By early adulthood, moral concepts that pertain to society as a whole are consistently considered important (Jenson, 2011). Hoare (2002) notes that Erikson ascribed ‘ethical sense’ to young adults and ‘ethical action’ to those in middle adulthood. His rationale is that care, by way of ethical action, can only be learned by doing and the young adult is not yet involved in the committed care of others. Erikson viewed the mature expressions of intimacy and generativity (care and contribution to society) as only being possible after a strong self-identity has been achieved (Blatt, 2008).

I think it is interesting to observe that today much ideological and political debate and positioning that young adults engage in occurs on-line, on social media platforms like

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, on-line media and blogs. I wonder if this has changed how an individual engages with, and becomes a participant, in issues of ideology and politics. It seems that most young adults in Aotearoa New Zealand today are high users of social media for both local and global social awareness and social connection. This type of media communication can be fast, flexible and influential and is now used by many as their primary source of news and current events (MacDonald, 2013). Does this promote increased engagement with issues or does it instead create overwhelm leading to disconnection and apathy or a sort of dilution of empathy with issues? For example, the Islamic extremist group, ISIS, is alleged to use high level production techniques on social media platforms to disseminate their message, particularly to young people at a time in their life when they may be more religiously idealistic and questioning of the values of western society (Mullen). While I can reflect on the safe and contained 'mentoring' I enjoyed as I started to engage with ideological and political issues, I wonder if the relative anonymity of social media (and possibly the reduction in family dinner table discussion) offers a similar conducive environment for broad, informed and safe debate?

Exploring sexual identity and gender identity

Whilst Erikson used the term *identity crisis* to describe the intricacies of the process through which young people construct their identity, other more recent researchers tend to use the term *exploration* (Arnett, 2010; Arseth, Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2009). In an attempt to consider the exploration and commitment dimensions of identity, James Marcia attributes differing statuses to differing degrees of identity formation (Arseth et al., 2009). This model considers *foreclosed* individuals to be prematurely committed, *diffused* individuals to be neither exploring nor committed, *moratorium* individuals to be in the process of exploration and *identity achieved* individuals to have experienced a phase of exploring several possibilities before committing to identity defining roles. Marcia's identity status model has been used in over twenty studies looking at the developmental features of identity during adolescence and beyond (Kroger, 2004). In these studies the *identity achieved* status was attributed to less than half of the twenty one to twenty two year old participants, providing some substantiation to the view that for many, identity exploration and formation continues well into early adulthood. In fact, I concur with Erikson, whose supposition was that identity concerns, whilst dominating adolescence and young adulthood, are constantly readdressed and probably strengthened throughout all of adulthood. "Identity formation

is a lifelong development largely unconscious to the individual and his society” (Erikson, 1980, p. 122).

Marcia’s identity status model comes to mind when attempting some understanding of the process of exploring one’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity, which for many begins in childhood or adolescence and yet depending on an individual’s circumstances, may become a critical issue as they enter young adulthood and are seeking to firm up their self-identity.

Both the Cass Model of Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation (Cass, 1979) and the Transgender Emergence Model developed by Rainbow Access Initiative (Rainbow Access Initiative, 2015) present identity formation relating to sexual orientation and gender as linear stage models commencing with awareness and confusion and moving through acceptance, exploration, possible transitioning, pride and integration. These models are based on viewing gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer as alternatives to what society generally considered ‘normal’ sexuality or gender.

Higa et al. (2014) offer recent United States research that may reflect a more up-to-date perspective on the consideration of one’s sexual and gender identity. 68 people aged 14 to 24 years participated in focus groups and individual interviews to examine the negative and positive factors associated with the psychological well being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning young people. These participants describe the need to be strategic in determining identity labels for themselves (to exercise personal control), to possibly have multiple identities and to use terms that reflect the complexity and fluidity of gender and sexual identity, such as ‘gender queer’ or ‘pansexual’. Whilst harassment and rejection is still experienced, there was also pride in being unique and it was generally considered more positive to identify as LGBTQ and to not have to conform to stereotyped gender roles (Higa et al., 2014).

This research alerted me to the dangers of making assumptions regarding the labels society often assign to individual and group identity. Although a label such as ‘lesbian’ or ‘transgender’ may represent and help to identify some common experiences, it does not account for the multiple factors that impact on an individual’s development. For example, an individual’s sexuality label may be recognised as a socially constructed facet of the particular society in which an individual lives, however, it neglects to consider individual agency in the formulation of the developmental process (Dahl & Galliher, 2012). Like other aspects of identity, the uniqueness of the individual’s

experience of their biology, personality, life situation, interpersonal influences and cultural norms shapes their resiliency, and their decision-making and actions, with respect to their sexual and gender identity (Dahl & Galliher, 2012). Increasingly in my work with young adults I have noticed reluctance or hesitation to have biographical details ‘pigeon-holed’ or categorised in any way. This seems to fit with the feeling of being ‘in-between’, at a stage of exploration or in a state of moratorium, when one just doesn’t want to be, or does not yet feel ready to be, committed to a particular label or identifier.

Exploring cultural identity formation

The indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand are Maori. Maori are today identified as culturally heterogeneous and it can not be assumed that all Maori wish to define their ethnic identity according to traditional constructs (Durie, 1995). Also, as values, aspirations and life circumstances change, Maori individuals may move in and out of engagement with their ethnicity and culture (Durie, 1995). The diversity of the Maori population today presents a challenge not only to policy makers seeking interventions to support Maori development (Houkamau & Sibley, 2010) but also to clinicians and therapists at grass roots level seeking to understand their client as well as possible. How are we to understand the lived experiences of Maori today? Durie (1995) cautions us to be aware that “imposed stereotypes create misleading impressions” (p. 465). A person’s self-identification and choice must be considered as we attempt to understand how a young adult Maori client may engage with their ethnicity and culture. Consideration of this complexity seems vitally important when one notes that young Maori are over represented in many negative social and mental health statistics.

Houkamau and Sibley (2010) have developed a multi-dimensional model of Maori identity based on qualitative and quantitative literature and research, assessed using focus groups and academic discussion. As a psychotherapist who is Pakeha I find this a helpful model as it heeds Mason Durie’s alert to consider Maori identity broadly. The degree to which young Maori actively identify with ‘being Maori’ is influenced by many factors including the degree of generational marginalisation, urbanisation, education and socio-economic status (Durie, 1995; Houkamau & Sibley, 2010). Some may struggle with seeing membership as Maori as a positive identity whilst others may embrace and actively express their unique Maori identity by acknowledging their whakapapa (geneology), tikanga (customs) and te reo (language). The Maori young adult may be grappling with multiple and conflicting dimensions of identity – including

concepts of spirituality, political consciousness, cultural efficacy – all the while attempting to merge personal self-definition/identity with an attempt to belong to a traditionally collective culture. Once again this highlights the possibility of conflicting emotions and overwhelm for the individual as they find themselves experiencing the push and pull of strengthening a self-identity together with identity in relation to the group, or possibly, many groups.

The complex interweaving of self-development, self-identity and culture is further compounded by migration and globalisation, which can add additional layers of complexity and confusion for the individuals who find themselves in a cross-cultural environment. As previously mentioned, young adults sometimes have an opportunity for a possible sanctioned moratorium, which may include an extended period of travel and work or study in another country. In 2012, 93,000 international students were registered at secondary and tertiary education institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2013). Most of these students are young adults and many are in Aotearoa New Zealand for several years. Some come voluntarily, however, others have been sent by family.

The degree of choice and an individual's intrapsychic ability to adjust to change and loss, determine the degree to which successful adaptation is made (Akhtar, 1995). Migrating from one country to another can have significant and lasting effects on an individual's identity requiring an eventual remodelling of identity to incorporate the new culture (Akhtar, 1995). As the young adult is at a time of intense identity formation, it may be that resolution of fragmented multi-cultural identities into a new combined identity is more easily achieved. Or, if the young adult has not yet fully achieved the intrapsychic capacity for separateness, migration or long-term travel abroad may be a very unsettling time.

I have seen a number of international students who commonly present as feeling 'homesick'. Drawing on Mahler's theory of separation-individuation (Mahler et al., 1975), Akhtar (1995) likens the new immigrant's attempts to settle and adjust in a new country to the infant, who through strengthening ego capacity, is seeking to establish optimal distance from the internal representation of the mother. I agree with Akhtar's thoughtful consideration that if the capacity for intrapsychic separateness already exists and if a 'good-enough holding environment' (Winnicott, 1965b), both within the family and the culture at large, is available and supportive (even from a physical distance), then

it is more likely that a harmonious integration of selective identifications with the new culture will successfully result in “the emergence of a new and hybrid identity” (Akhtar, 1995, p. 1076).

Identity through work (and love)

Does identity express itself through intimacy and generativity (love and work)? Does it do so differently at various stages of life? To this, Erikson simply wrote, “Yes” (Hoare, 2002, p. 31).

Kroger (2004) describes 18-22 year olds as most likely to actualise identity-defining decisions about work, intimate relationships, forming new ways of relating to family of origin and developing a set of meaningful values during this period.

Erikson considered that human beings need ‘the curative and the creative role of work’ to have psychosocial health (Roazen, 1976). Indeed, he was known to quote Freud, “lieben and arbeiten” (to love and to work) in response to questions about how to have ‘normal’ psychological health (Roazen, 1976). However, he also identified polarities in the process of identity formation where on the one hand there is a need for freedom to explore and experiment and on the other there is also a capacity, and perhaps a desire, for structure and discipline (Stevens, 2008). In this way the inability to settle easily on an occupational identity can be disturbing for young adults.

It is frequently not until the young adult stage that individuals properly consider work as an identity question. What do I want to do? What will I be good at? Although many young adults will have worked in part time jobs during school and tertiary education, there are some who find education difficult and consequently end up in low-paid and unrewarding jobs and some who nowadays become known as NEET’s (acronym for ‘not in employment, education or training’). In Aotearoa New Zealand the youth NEET rate as at June 2011 was 12.5 percent with slightly higher rates for 20-24 year olds probably reflecting their recent departure from education. This rate is calculated as the total number of youth who are NEET as a proportion of the total youth-specific working-age population and was first introduced as meaningful data in December 2011 (Statistics New Zealand -Tatauranga Aotearoa, Retrieved October 2015b). The official line is that young people (15-24 years) are usually the first to lose jobs and last to gain experience during economic crisis.

Young people’s disadvantages, disengagement and underutilisation in the labour market may incur lasting costs to the economy, to society, to the individual and to their families...Fears have been expressed that a ‘lost

generation' might be a legacy of the current worldwide crisis... (Statistics New Zealand -Tatauranga Aotearoa, Retrieved October 2015a, p. 6)

The recognition of the 'NEET phenomena' is relatively new and places a critical, and possibly judgemental, spotlight on young adults in particular.

I have included this explanation of NEET as I believe it demonstrates something of the additional pressures being faced by young adults today. It is the shift towards unpredictability and the need for young adults to be more adaptive, adjusting to different roles – a student, a part-time worker (possibly several part-time roles), part-time trainee, unpaid intern, unemployed – and yet still be able to maintain an active pursuit of their future work-defined identity, that seems to typify the transition to adulthood today. Increasingly, this is not a straightforward process and young people today need to be able to move between finite, time-limited and changing ideas of what they want to do and/or are able to do, in work. Briggs (2008) makes the point that the young adult needs to be able to cope with and mourn loss, as they “relinquish and realign” (p.185) their work identity and the associated social identity. He considers a flexible and receptive containment during infancy and adolescence is a prime requirement to assist with this capacity and to avoid losing a sense of self or to become rigidly stuck in one way of relating to the social world (Briggs, 2008).

Self-in-relationship, connectedness and intimacy in young adulthood

As the young adult emerges from the stage of exploring and defining self-identity there is an eagerness to “fuse his identity with that of others” (Erikson, 1965, p. 255).

The sixth of Erikson's eight psychosocial phases is defined by the developmental dichotomy of intimacy versus isolation with the achievement of *love* being the emerging quality of ego strength (Stevens, 2008). Theorists vary in their consideration of the developmental origin of the capacity for intimacy. Colarusso (1995) states that the full capacity for intimacy has its roots in the quality of the early parent-child and subsequent family relationships but it does not become “a sustainable capacity until young adulthood” (p.85). Harry Stack Sullivan concurs that qualities such as intimacy and closeness are probably founded in parental relationships but same-sex friendships in preadolescence provide a critical template for the development of late adolescent intimate relationships (Auslander & Rosenthal, 2010). The predominant view is that intimate relationships may be initially established in the very early bonds between mother and baby, however, the achievement of true intimacy is based on the

assuredness and stability of one's own well-grounded sense of ego identity (Erikson, 1968; Hoare, 2002; Kroger, 2000). If this sense of a stable identity has not been attained then a deep involvement with another person can put one's own individual identity at risk and in such situations relationships may seem superficial or difficult (Stevens, 2008).

The development of self-in-relationship and intimacy

Erikson considered the capacity for true and mutual intimacy with another can be in the form of friendship, erotic/sexual encounters or in joint inspiration and endeavour (1968). Therefore it seems important to consider the distinction between the establishment of close friendships in childhood and adolescence and the gradual move towards intimacy by way of the mutual trust and sharing in a relationship with a loved partner. As true intimacy includes the development of a healthy sense of sexuality, most cultures endorse the delaying of sexual behaviour until cognitive, emotional and physical maturity, which usually does not happen until late adolescence or early adulthood (Auslander & Rosenthal, 2010).

Erikson believed that adult intimacy is the capacity to experience another's needs and concerns as equally important to one's own, and to have developed the ethical strength to remain committed to such a relationship (1965). Colarusso (1995) supports this view and believes the successful resolution of the oedipal complex and adolescent sexual experimentation are part of the journey towards the capacity for intimacy, which can not be fully sustainable until young adulthood. In her role as a university counsellor, Miller noticed that conflicting feelings towards parents at this time of separation may signal unresolved oedipal issues for the young adult who is living away from home for the first time (1995). If the individual has not yet properly tolerated the oedipal situation and accepted the parents as a couple, then the undertaking of considering him or herself as a separate identity, with separate intimate capacity, may not be easily achieved. At this time, the denial of this reality comes under threat from both external and internal pressures, manifesting in various forms of emotional disturbance and may offer a new opportunity to finally work the oedipal conflict through (Miller, 1995).

It is during adolescence that the individual starts to desire and seek out participation in shared and collaborative experiences. Erikson observed that adolescents begin to look to commit themselves to a kind of group solidarity, the beginnings of an extension of identity to include a sense of 'we', which in his view, is needed when and if a person

moves towards parenthood (1983). Adolescents' developing feelings of intimacy may be described by some as 'puppy love', or infatuation with an idealised other (Blatt, 2008). The friendships and peer group relationships seem to enable the adolescent to experiment with different and broader expressions of identity, including non-familial affection and feelings of love (Kroger, 2000). Also, these relationships provide support and mirroring for the self as different behaviours are tried out.

By young adulthood, all going well, there is a growing capacity for mutual trust and sharing in a relationship with a loved partner (Erikson, 1965). Intimacy is characterised by the degree to which two people share personal knowledge, thoughts and feelings. It includes a sense of comfort with one's identity in order to be comfortable with the melding of identities that is part of becoming intimate (Szajnberg & Massie, 2003). Intimacy can be sought and enjoyed with both sexes and may not include sexual forms of self-expression (Kroger, 2000). However, in my experience, the inability to form an enduring intimate relationship with another at this stage of life can be very painful and lead to feelings of intense sadness and isolation and is frequently the catalyst for seeking psychotherapy.

The role of family

In contemporary Western culture and indeed in many more traditional cultures, the family unit is viewed as a primary mediator between the individual and the environment and has a direct influence on the emergence of a mature sense of identity and the capacity for intimacy during adolescence and young adulthood (Allison & Sabatelli, 1988). At this time, however, the relationship between the individual and family can come under immense pressure.

As I reflect on this point, I note that almost without exception, the young adult clients I have worked with have all had some difficulty with their efforts to gain a balance between their attempt to separate and yet remain in relationship with their family. Whilst this might not be considered by the client to be their primary presenting issue, to my mind, it is always subconsciously present and is frequently the central reason why they feel lost and alone. They are often grieving for the loss of this actual or perceived family relationship.

As mentioned in the previous chapter on psychoanalytic developmental perspectives, both adolescence and young adulthood can be theorised as life stages of separation-individuation (Blos, 1967; Colarusso, 1990). Allison and Sabatelli (1988) consider the

connection between the family and the individual development as these relate to the co-emergence of a mature sense of identity and the capacity for intimacy during adolescence and young adulthood. They state,

‘Good enough’ individuation refers to the individual’s age appropriate negotiation of the balance of separateness and connectedness in relation to the family” (Allison & Sabatelli, 1988, p. 2).

Individuation in adolescence is highlighted as part of the overarching developmental process that links adolescence and earlier and later psychosocial stages. Fundamental to this is the (st)age-appropriate “resolution of the on-going dialectic of separateness and connectedness” (Allison & Sabatelli, 1988, p. 3). Most importantly, as the individual seeks this optimal balance between self-as-individual and self-in-relationship-to-other(s) as they move through adolescence and into young adulthood, the family unit and the individual members of the family, particularly parents, need to reconsider and transform their own roles and understandings. This can be considered as a stage of development for the parents and family as well.

As a parent myself I am well aware of the tension that can develop between the many relationships in a family as the adolescent family members transition through this period. Confidence in one’s ability to be ‘the right kind of parent for this developmental stage’ is greatly tested as the adolescent child is involved in this dynamic dance between being totally disengaged and rejecting in one moment and then collapsing and requiring full, unconditional care – right now! I am reminded again of (and somewhat comforted by) Winnicott, who states that at this time of “murder” the best the parents can do

...is to survive, to survive intact, and without changing colour, without relinquishment of any important principle. That is not to say they may not themselves grow.”(Winnicott, 1986b, p. 159)

Allison and Sabatelli (1988) point to differing levels of differentiation to describe the family’s tolerance for the states of individuality and connectedness. They consider the level of family differentiation is a critical factor in mediating successful identity formation and capacity for intimacy beginning in adolescence and consolidating in young adulthood. In a poorly differentiated family system there is an inappropriate balance between the polarities of separateness and connectedness. This can be either too much connectedness at the expense of individuality (enmeshed) or, at the other extreme, too little connectedness at the expense of intimacy (disengaged) (Gladding, 2002).

Parents may be too involved in their adolescent's life ('helicopter parents' (Somers, 2010)), or invoke demands for loyalty and obligation, which may lead to the young adult feeling guilt and anxiety. In contrast, there may be neglect or rejection (adolescents left too much to their own devices), leading to premature autonomy. Autonomy may be what they are seeking but abrupt and unassisted separation at this stage does not lead to the achievement of mature individuation and healthy emotional interrelatedness. Instead, what is required is an understanding of the importance of the interdependence, the continuing but different level and role of relatedness, with the parental family system during adolescence and into adulthood (Allison & Sabatelli, 1988).

Allison and Sabatelli (1988) posit that identity formation and the capacity for intimacy are co-emergent aspects of a broader and continuing process of individuation rather than taking place in linear epigenetic stages as expressed in the Eriksonian model. There is a continual dialectical movement of developing and regressing identity and intimacy and recognition that the adolescent and young adult's continuing experience of intimate relationships with the parental family influences their on-going development, and possibly, vice-versa.

Again as a parent of young adults who are now moving through this phase of young adulthood, I can reflect on the familial interactions that have occurred. Our children have all approached their individuating slightly differently but there has always been a strong, continuing and gradually changing relationship with us, their parents. I believe that as they have moved towards their own autonomous professional identity and perhaps having entered into stable intimate relationships themselves, there has been a leap towards a more mature adult-peer relationship with us. It has felt vitally important to remain connected and be available to be part of this transformation (to be a secure base) and also to allow them to direct the restructuring of the relationship as much as possible. As parents of adolescents and young adults, we have had to learn to change too and assist this process with more openness, acceptance and flexibility. In line with the model Allison and Sabatelli (1988) have presented, the hope is that by resolving developmental issues involving relations with us, their family, they can then go on to have healthy mature intimate relations with other adults.

Premature intimacy

Allison and Sabatelli (1988) consider that if young adults attempt to leave their families while still emotionally dependent they risk being emotionally withdrawn from peer relationships or possibly leap into intense narcissistic relationships which will continue to stunt their own emerging identity. Indeed, Winnicott considered that we are letting down the adolescent or young adult who is not yet ready for the mature adult responsibilities of life such as world cruelty and suffering, and this includes sex prior to readiness for sex (1986b). His view was that if the adults abdicate their duty of care to the adolescent then they might become adult prematurely and “by false process” (Winnicott, 1986b, p. 164).

I understand and agree with this perspective and I have certainly witnessed temporarily stunted or early-foreclosed identity formation in young adult clients. I have also witnessed the pain and the difficulty as these young adults attempt to engage in intimate relationships but do not yet have the maturity to cope with the constellation of confusing emotions. However, not all family environments are conducive to flourishing healthy emotional growth and for many young adults, it is not until they physically depart the family environment that they are properly able to commence this important area of development. I have also seen how relationships with other young adults can provide mutual sustenance to the individuals in these relationships, for further identity growth alongside a developing capacity for intimacy. I believe this need to find some intimate nourishment is frequently what brings the young adult to therapy and the hope is that this is what they are able to find in the therapeutic relationship.

Summary

In this chapter I have used Erikson’s psychosocial model of the human life cycle as a guide in my attempt to consider the dual developmental processes of identity formation and the growing capacity for intimacy as they relate to the intrapsychic and interpersonal development of the young adult. I concur with Blatt’s theory that these two developmental processes merge during the life stage of young adulthood (Blatt, 2008). For the young adult who is not yet fully prepared for this intense phase of identity exploration intersecting with propulsion towards more intimate connection with others, it seems understandable that this time can be emotionally overwhelming and very challenging.

The next chapter will discuss the phenomenon of the young adult as revealed by the literature and discussed in this dissertation, in relation to the original research question: *how can a richer understanding of the young adult can better inform psychodynamic psychotherapy with this client group?*

Chapter 6 Discussion and implications for clinical practice

Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss the findings from chapters three, four and five in relation to my research question, *how can a richer understanding of the young adult client better inform psychodynamic psychotherapy with this client group?* I will begin by providing a brief review of these findings. It seems important to summarise, clarify and ‘flesh out’ the lived experience of being a young adult whilst acknowledging that these are generalisations and therefore cannot adequately convey the idiosyncrasies of the individual who may present for psychotherapy. Keeping this young adult formulation in mind I will refer to my clinical experience as a psychotherapist working with young adults and my personal experience as a mother of young adults, as I critique and consider some of the wider literature on practicing psychotherapy with young adults. I will incorporate my thoughts about how the psychotherapeutic experience may be better tailored to suit this client group.

Review and Summary – So, what’s it like to be a young adult?

- The distinct phase of young adulthood emerged in the later part of the 20th century in Western industrialised countries. To be a young adult today is to be heading beyond adolescence along the pathway to adulthood, however, the identifiable developmental tasks and markers have possibly become harder to recognise. It is, therefore, considered an exploratory phase of life, with considerable diversity of options leading to the possibility of the individual feeling uncertain, lost and overwhelmed.
- Society views young adults as moving towards full adulthood, and arrival at this stage of maturity is evidenced by the individual making independent decisions, accepting self-responsibility, working competently and forming romantic relationships.
- Young adults themselves, feel ‘in-between’ and in an unstable phase of life. They sense that they are moving away from the egocentric state of adolescence whilst still remaining relatively self-focussed as they explore and try out different ways of living, working and loving. This is a phase of life where they are frequently on their own and engaged in considering their ideological and

political views. Generally, they are relatively idealistic and optimistic about their future.

- The key developmental processes of young adulthood appear to be twofold. The young adult is attempting further individuation from their family and possibly other childhood/adolescent relationships as they move towards greater self-definition through a more defined identity. Possibly simultaneously, the individual is seeking increased interpersonal relatedness with particular emphasis on intimacy with a romantic partner, and reconnecting with family relationships in a more mature adult-peer form.
- The individual young adult will be exploring these issues of identity and relationship from the cultural and contextual environment of their upbringing. For some this can also involve attempting to fit in with an unfamiliar dominant culture.
- The parallel development, or maybe even a merger, of these two fundamental processes of relatedness and self-definition at this young adult stage can be overwhelming and disorienting. As a consequence of the intensity and complexity of this time, the young adult may feel confused, lost, alone and lonely, frightened, anxious and/or sad or depressed.

Young adults and psychotherapy

Ideally, the young adult will have received good enough ego nourishment and provision through his or her life to have enabled the emotional maturity required to negotiate the transition into adulthood. Also, ideally, they will still have a supportive and available secure base to return to if and when required.

In this dissertation I have focussed on seeking understanding of the developmental phase of the young adult. As highlighted in the summary above, this is a time of transition and considerable change, which young adults themselves view as exploratory and unstable. There is the potential for much emotional upheaval due to a distorted sense of stability and perhaps, frighteningly, this may lead to a fear of fragmentation or collapse (Briggs, 2008). At this point the young adult may personally seek, or be referred for, some psychotherapeutic support.

My experience as an intern psychotherapist in a student counselling clinic gave me the opportunity to work with a diverse range of clients who presented with a diverse range of issues. Assessment deadlines and exams frequently created stress, anxiety and even

panic attacks. Underlying issues with perfectionism, difficulty with planning, or perhaps a lack of focus and low motivation due to deeper intrapsychic issues with anxiety and depression were sometimes exposed. Family and romantic relationship connections and break-ups, coping with living in a flatting situation with other young adults, feeling lonely and unable to make friends, were also common troubles. These presenting problems often pointed to deeper issues relating to the young adult's struggle to develop longed-for social connection. They could also highlight a lack of family or friend support. Student counselling was seen by some as the opportunity to explore or confirm long-standing questions about sexual identity with the support of a safe and non-judgemental person. Issues with alcohol, drugs, sexual experiences and unplanned pregnancy were also common. A willing ear and some practical educative advice was sometimes all that was consciously sought, although this often led to a deeper level of care and support. For a few student clients, a fuller, on-going supportive relationship was sought and valued.

As I wonder about the young adult client's engagement with psychotherapy, I have my research question in mind, along with an increasing understanding of their developmental pull towards identity formation and an increasing capacity for intimacy. Most of these student clients came to only a few sessions, perhaps because they were seeking quick advice, advocacy or support, a metaphorical hug or a 'self-object hit'. For many at this stage of life, this is all they need and desire. A couple of sessions enable a quick emotional top-up and they can then move on with their lives. Possibly, the culture of the student counselling agency suggested to these clients that we offered only a few sessions and therefore, they only expected short-term counselling.

It has been in my private practice that I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to work with young adult clients for an extended period. These clients have predominantly presented with depression, self-harm, anxiety, low self-esteem, grief and/or difficulties with family and peer relationships and loneliness – a combination of intrapsychic and interpersonal presenting issues. Also at the developmental stage of young adulthood there is also a higher incidence of diagnosis of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, borderline personality problems, severe eating disorders and the highest rates of suicide (Barlow & Durand, 2002; Escoll, 1987).

Most young adult clients I see have been referred by family, friends or teachers and whilst some may have experienced counselling during their time at school or have come

into contact with community mental health services, most are unaware of the theoretical underpinnings and therapeutic approach of psychodynamic psychotherapy. Even if they do, it is perhaps not surprising that the prospect of engaging in long-term psychotherapy seems daunting. They are at a time in their lives when they are exploring, redefining and seeking out new life possibilities. The familiar containing structures of school and family are no longer available and perhaps for the first time they are feeling alone as they struggle with this time of change and instability. The self-reflection that is occurring is a new and possibly unsettling experience, of which they have no blueprint and perhaps no way of knowing how to share this with another in an intimate therapeutic setting. Long-term psychodynamic psychotherapy asks the client to primarily partake in what are also the two main developmental tasks of young adulthood – to seek a deeper understanding of oneself and to do this whilst engaging in an intimate relationship with another.

Psychotherapy with young adults – what works best?

By gaining a better understanding of who the young adult client is and what is going on for them, are we then able to offer a psychotherapy experience that is better tailored to suit? The research and literature pertaining to psychodynamic or psychoanalytic psychotherapy specifically with young adults is sparse (Edlund & Carlberg, 2014; Harper, 1981). However, a recent study conducted by Palmstierna and Werbart (2013) stands out as a comprehensive exploration of successful psychotherapies with young adults. Palmstierna and Werbart (2013) state, “psychotherapy with young adults confronts therapists with specific challenges” (p. 21) and in their view patient’s experiences offer valuable insight into the mechanisms of change. This research presents a study of the young adult participants’ view of positive therapeutic experience based on cases of long-term psychoanalytic psychotherapy drawn from the Young Adult Psychotherapy Project (YAPP) located in Sweden. I consider the results from this study provide a suitable platform for critique, discussion and further exploration of young adults engaged in psychotherapy.

This qualitative enquiry was based on eleven participants, aged 18-25. The mean duration of the participant’s therapy was 22 months for twice weekly therapy (approximately 176 sessions). Both patients and their therapists were interviewed at therapy termination and 1.5 years later. The interviews were analysed with grounded theory methodology and designated to codes and categories that reflected and identified factors contributing to positive change (Palmstierna & Werbart, 2013).

Palmstierna and Werbart (2013) record the key core category of success, corroborated and experienced by both the young adult patients and therapists, can be conceptualised as (1) *a growth-promoting and (2) secure relationship*.

How does this key core category of success specifically relate to working with young adult clients? After all, forming and maintaining a working alliance is considered an essential ingredient to all psychotherapy (Holmes, 2001). McWilliams (2004) confirms “empirical research identifies achievement of a sense of a comfortable collaboration between patient and clinician as critical to the effectiveness of treatment” (p.73). So, what might be the special qualities in the therapeutic work with the young adult client that enables these essential ingredients of *growth promotion and a secure relationship*?

A secure relationship

Coming forward to meet the young adult client

Lilliengren, Falkenstrom, Sandell, Mothander, and Werbart (2014) state that young adult clients’ secure attachment to the therapist is correlated with improvement and it predicts continued gains in on-going functioning. Palmstierna and Werbart (2013) conclude that a secure, mutual and creative relationship between client and therapist is a successful starting point. In addition, the patient appreciating the therapist’s way of working, the value of the therapeutic relationship and feeling safe due to continuity and the therapeutic frame underpin this measure of success. Also, where there were difficulties and obstacles in the therapy it was the working through of these obstacles that further contributed to rewarding therapy (Palmstierna & Werbart, 2013).

My initial reaction to this ‘starting point’ is “of course!” However as I reflect on my client work I admit that establishing a secure, mutual and creative relationship is probably the most challenging aspect of the therapy work with the young adult client. We are inviting a young person into a deep, reflective, intimate interpersonal relationship at a time in their lives when they are attempting to explore who they are and how this newly evolving self might engage in relationship with another. As already mentioned, it is perhaps, the overwhelming and confusing emotions relating to these dual tasks that bring them to therapy in the first place.

More often than not, these clients have ‘stumbled’ into therapy. Most likely referred by others, they may not know what psychodynamic psychotherapy is and they may be very ambivalent about being there. After three years of therapy with me, a young adult client

recently stated, “I’ve never really understood what this is all about, I just know that it is good for me to keep coming”. Walking through the psychotherapist’s door for the first time, and perhaps every time, is an immense act of faith on the part of the client. I notice that I am pulled to be more overtly welcoming, comforting and more educative with respect to how I work, than I might be with an older client. In the first few sessions I am inclined to seek to be more ‘in focus’, actually sit further forward in my chair and I am less likely to allow long silences. I feel that the client’s trepidation and uncertainty needs to be respected and possibly also acknowledged. Bury, Raval, and Lyon (2007) state,

young people experiencing the need to separate and become independent are likely, therefore, to experience particular difficulties and conflict in seeking help. This may need to be clearly acknowledged before effective engagement can begin (p.15).

The success or failure of therapy, from the viewpoint of the young adult can depend on the therapist’s personal response to them as individuals, being able to contain their anxieties, being present as a ‘real person’ and experiencing them as empathic (Bury et al., 2007). Often in these first few sessions with a new young adult client, I notice a call “to come and get me”. They seem to dart in and out of the relationship and I often feel as if I am chasing them around the room. The awkwardness and difficulty with engagement can continue for some time and remain present at the beginning of future sessions. This fear and ambivalence is better understood knowing that young adulthood is a transient developmental phase involving the complex dialectical themes of separation-individuation on the one hand and seeking relationship and intimacy on the other (Blatt, 2008; Briggs, 2008; Erikson, 1968).

During a recent discussion with visiting Professor Nobo Komiya from Japan about the similarities and differences in young adults from different cultures we began to consider why and how young adults engaged in psychotherapy. Professor Nobo had previously worked with Japanese young adults in a student counselling placement, and like me, he recalled being told by supervisors not to expect young adult clients to stay long in therapy. He makes the point that it is too simplistic to dismiss young adults as being difficult to engage in longer-term psychotherapy. Instead, he considers we need to make more effort to be empathic (Nobo Komiya, personal communication, September 17, 2015). I concur with his view that if we are able to empathise with, and convey this empathy, to our young adult clients, then surely we increase the chance of engaging, and keeping them engaged, in psychotherapy. This dissertation is an attempt to

understand the young adult better in the hope that increased understanding leads to the possibility of increased empathy. As well as an increased understanding, I find it vital to take notice of my countertransference, which signals the importance of understanding and meeting the young adult client's initial unease.

Frame and Boundaries

The young adult client needs to experience the therapist as professional and skilled and this is evidenced by a consistent, well adhered to, therapeutic frame (Palmstierna & Werbart, 2013). I can reflect on the 'push and pull' of endeavouring to secure the frame as I engage with my young adult clients. Having recently left the restrictions of school and home, the young adult feels relatively free of commitments and is exploring and learning to find his or her own boundaries. They may not have access to transport, work and study commitments can be variable and income is usually severely restricted. It seems like these factors provide a myriad of excuses as to why the young adult initially finds it difficult to commit to the required regularity of a weekly session.

Notwithstanding the practical difficulties in attending regular psychotherapy there is also the young adult's understandable apprehension with the idea of committing to a psychotherapeutic relationship. To my way of thinking this requires a therapist who can provide both firm boundaries and yet still be able to be flexible – to accommodate the dynamics of the sense of 'push and pull'. The young adult seems to need to 'test the water', and only dip the toes before there is any consideration of leaping in. Keeping in mind that some of these clients may not have experienced a secure and safe home base, they may need to discover that the therapist is consistently and reliably there for them before they feel able to commit to therapy. This can also vary depending of the degree of psychopathology and level of developmental attainment of the client. Whilst this settling-in period is occurring I usually text my young adult clients the day before a session to remind them I am looking forward to seeing them and I will always seek them out if they miss a session. Eventually, all going well, the frame can be gradually secured.

Holding

The more secure frame then usually enables the therapeutic space to become well respected, safe and holding. I am referring to 'holding' in the way that is attributed to Winnicott and his description of maternal care and the use of the word as a metaphor for an unobtrusive therapeutic space that holds the situation, gives support and keeps

contact with where the client is at (Jacobs, 1995; Ogden, 2004; Winnicott, 1965b). Ogden (2004) writes of Winnicott's experience of the client who fills the therapy with every detail his life, as if he "needs to be known in all his bits and pieces by one person, the analyst" (p. 1352). In this way Ogden describes 'holding' as "the provision of a psychological space that depends upon the analyst's being able to tolerate the feeling 'that no analytic work has been done'" (p. 1352).

This is a familiar evocation of some of my work with young adult clients. There are many sessions when it seems as if I am just there to listen, to mostly be quiet and yet to be most interested in their lives. I sometimes feel like this may be a method to lead me away from their deeper intrapsychic self. However, in many ways this is not too different from the dinner table conversations with my young adult children and I sense that this is a big part of the work with young adult clients. As they struggle with the sometimes-overwhelming issues around identity and relationship formation, they need someone to be truly present to them and to bear witness, particularly if this has not been provided adequately when younger. Ogden (2004) refers to this as the analyst performing a 'holding' function by being "that human place in which the patient is becoming whole" (p.1352).

Money

It is rare for a young adult client to be financially independent and in a position to pay full price for private psychotherapy in New Zealand. There may be an opportunity to work with the client in an agency setting such as student counselling or Youthline or they may qualify for some government financial assistance. However, I find that the reality is that most young adult clients can only pay a reduced rate or are dependent on their parents to pay the fee. I notice in my practice with young adult clients that this can create an on-going tension between my acceptance of the reality of their financial hardship and the need for the client to retain dignity and to fully value the therapy and the therapist. It also brings into sharp focus the many issues young adults may have with their parents.

Parents and the therapist as a parent

Recognising that young adulthood is a time of evolving self-identity and separating from the family, it is understandable that young adult wants to be acknowledged as independent with rights and privileges accorded as such. However, achieving financial independence when studying or on a work-training programme is difficult. When

parents are relied upon to pay for the psychotherapy sessions it can create a murky relationship between the three parties – therapist, client and parents. Parents may be worried or struggling to accept a young adult’s readiness for separation and therefore, expect some involvement in the therapy or direct communication with the therapist. In this situation I have found it important to set clear boundaries defining the therapeutic relationship. This may require a one-off session with all parties where we can openly discuss what is best for the young adult client. Much useful information can be garnered from the parents’ attitude and response to the possibility of allowing the young adult the autonomy and dignity in having a confidential therapy relationship.

Many young adults attribute the origin of their troubles to their problematic relationship with one or both parents (Werbert et al., 2011). As discussed throughout this dissertation, parents and family are relied upon to provide the good-enough facilitating environment (Winnicott, 1971) essential to the young adult’s healthy emotional maturity. Also, ideally all family members will have weathered the turbulence of the adolescent phase with a relationship intact. However, I notice that it is often when the individual reaches adolescence and young adulthood, particularly when attempting to separate, that they become aware of their parents as flawed, sometimes with many faults and behaviours unbecoming. The young adult may realise that their upbringing has been inadequate and understandably they feel angry, sad and grieving for a lost, perhaps idealised childhood and sometimes, also guilt, for feeling this way.

Research with young adults suggests that the object representation of the parents frequently improves as psychotherapy advances and these changes continue after termination (Werbert et al., 2011). It seems that in the therapeutic work some young adults are more able to develop a reflective attitude towards their parents and consider their parents’ problems as understandable from an historical perspective. They are beginning to think about both their own and their parents’ thoughts and emotions. This may be a consequence of the increasing psychological restructuring, separation and differentiation that is occurring at this developmental stage (Werbert et al., 2011). I notice that the mentalising and empathic capacity of the young adult clients I work with appears to grow over time. I am unsure whether this is a direct consequence of the therapy or an expected developmental change that perhaps the therapy encourages and expands. To my way of thinking this is possibly part of the integrative process that occurs in the depressive-position as theorised by Klein (1937, 1946) and discussed in

chapter three. It is hoped that the therapeutic endeavour with the young adult client fosters this increase in thinking and assists the capacity to accept reality.

Palmstierna and Werbart (2013) note that the young adult client frequently compares the therapist to their parents. In contrast to his or her own parents the therapist is considered pliable and responsive to their needs. Furthermore, being understood by someone who validates problems in their family is a relief. In this research the therapists themselves consider that they assume the role of a reliable parental figure and a model adult – being both firm and flexible when needed (Palmstierna & Werbart, 2013).

In late adolescence/early adulthood there is often a de-idealisation of the parents at just the time when the individual is attempting to make significant life decisions and they may seek out a teacher older sibling, wise peer or alternatively, the therapist. Wolf (1988) considers the idealising self-object transference is the “re-establishment of the need for an experience of merging with a calm, strong, wise and good self-object” (p. 126) in an attempt to satisfy distorted archaic needs.

When working with my young adult clients I am aware of a pull to be parental/maternal and it is not unusual to feel like I become the idealised parent. In my case I wonder how much of this maternal countertransference is coming from me and how much is elicited by the client. As a mother to young adults I consider that it is easy for me to transfer this maternal feeling to my clients. I notice that the feeling of being idealised can sometimes make me feel ill at ease, requiring exploration in clinical supervision.

There is also the possibility that the young adult may find engaging in a close therapeutic relationship with a therapist of a similar age or look to one’s parents troublesome (Lilliengren et al., 2014). However, idealisation or devaluation of the therapist at the developmental stage of young adulthood can be valuable, as the transference involved, negative or positive, may contribute to the working through of early developmental conflicts and those that emerge during late adolescence (Chused, 1987). The young adult is usually only just beginning to separate and recognition of this transference may present an opportunity to catch and explore issues whilst they are still fresh and close to the source.

A growth promoting relationship

A delicate balance

An understanding and affirming of the young adult as being in the process of separating from internal and external parental figures and also occupied by conflicts related to intimacy, are central to the establishment of the working relationship (Palmstierna & Werbart, 2013). There appears to be two main lines of therapy work with the young adult. The first involves strengthening identity formation by assisting the client to sort him or herself out from significant others, to help them to find their own way of thinking and be their own subject (Palmstierna & Werbart, 2013). The second involves paying attention to the young adult client's way of being in relationship – their possible acting out, attachment issues, shame and destructivity. The research by Palmstierna and Werbart (2013) indicates that young adult clients value being confronted and guided by the therapist as they sort out their issues and attempt to clear up the chaos in their life. In the same research, therapists describe helping the client put emotions into words, sort out thoughts, deal with shameful experiences and create a space for thinking and reflecting.

Whilst I agree that the young adult client values guidance, I am not so sure about confrontation. Finding the right balance is important to the therapeutic relationship and obviously this is different from client to client. However, confronting the young adult client in a demanding, authoritarian manner will cause them to feel intruded upon and disrespected, just as being aloof and unresponsive may cause them to feel uneasy and confused. Remembering that during this developmental phase the young adult is still attempting to claim greater self-definition, I notice in my young adult children an increased sensitivity to, and rejection of, anything that may be construed as advice in the form of “I know what's best for you”. This fits with the previously mentioned warning from Winnicott that the adolescent (and in my view, also the young adult) “does not want to be understood” (Winnicott, 1965b, p. 79). I consider that in fact they do very much want to be understood, but that this must be delivered in a way that is open, non-conclusive and even, deferential. Winnicott's statement recognises that from the perspective of a young adult, an older adult cannot possibly fully understand what it is like to be a young adult and so dare not think that they do. The adult (therapist) must approach in a manner that is experienced by the young adult as respectful of their developing, but not yet fully realised, potential.

The young adult may at times just need some gentle support and guidance. Often, the young adult client arrives in a state of overwhelm and confusion. I have noticed that the achievement and consolidation of emotional maturity is an unsteady, and sometimes lengthy, process. It seems important at these times to reach out by affirming these emotional states and at the same time to be aware of regulating the therapeutic distance. Perhaps what is needed most is someone to convey hope and some confidence in their ability to get through this tumultuous time. With young adult clients I frequently notice that my maternal feelings are evoked and metaphorically I feel as if I am called to wipe the tears, straighten the clothes, pat down the stray wisps of hair and then gently turn them around and send them back out the door.

Palmstierna and Werbart (2013), Escoll (1987) and (Wennberg, Werbart, & Schubert, 2006) suggest that the young adult is likely to be more focused on the real world and be action-oriented rather than reflective. I find this testimony is far too definite to describe any young adult I have known, especially those who make their way to psychotherapy. However, I agree that it can take time to set up the right therapeutic atmosphere for some young adults to feel comfortable with deeper introspection. In my experience and as the literature has shown, at this time in their life it is likely that young adults are exploring ideologies, politics and personal values (Erikson, 1968; Kroger, 2000).

Perhaps instead of deep personal introspection, they are seeking a place to sit (or to loll, as I find some young adult clients tend to do) in the company of a confidante - to wonder, to toss ideas around and to try to make some sense of their place in the world. Ideally, therapy provides a safe, and maybe even playful, oasis from the turmoil sometimes experienced at this time in their lives. A young adult client recently stated, "I can say anything I want to when I'm here with a feeling of not being judged". I am reminded of the metaphor of standing on the threshold looking out and not quite knowing which way to jump. Perhaps in the therapy we are holding open the space for the young adult to play with ideas and 'practice' different realities. In my work with my clients, and similarly in my role as a parent to young adults, I feel that often I am used primarily as a sounding board, a mentor or a wise guide and as someone who can respectfully assist with translating the confusion.

Container/contained

It is this role of translator that leads me to value the concept of container-contained as introduced by Wilfred Bion (Bion, 1962) in my work with young adults. I note that I

frequently discuss the concept of container/contained with my clinical supervisor. It is common for young adult clients to present with somatic complaints and a chaotic disposition, unable to think clearly and connect emotions to these external experiences.

This container-contained model describes the processing of emotional experience by way of using the therapist and therapeutic experience. As Biran (2015) explains, the young adult client brings what may be called “unthinkable elements” (p. 7) and the therapist, through their emotional presence and by means of their thinking (container), is able to translate these elements into thinkable elements (contained) that the client can then receive. The unthinkable elements are usually obscure, which the client cannot verbalise and they can take many forms such as psychosomatic ailments, sleep or eating disorders or other manifestations of anxiety (Biran, 2015). The therapist is performing the function of the mother who can, through a dreamlike state of reverie, receive and contain the emotional communication from the baby/client (Briggs, 2008). Biran (2015) describes the need for the therapist to be a “vacant container”, not full of theory and pre-conceived ideas, so that they can be free and available “to summon up the images the client evokes in her” (p. 8). Ogden (2004) states that the successful growth of the contained faculty is “reflected in the expansion of the range and depth of thoughts and feelings” (p. 1358) that the client is able to derive from their emotional experiences.

Obstacles and reality in therapy

Biran (2015) notes that for the container-contained relationship to operate successfully it must be recognised that a therapist (container)

“...cannot operate by itself; it needs a growing, developing contained – a contained that sometimes switches roles, containing the container through a fruitful dialogue...” (p.10).

This kind of growth cannot take place without the occasional setback and it is these difficult experiences and obstacles that slowly give rise to developmental growth and change (Biran, 2015).

The research by Palmstierna and Werbart (2013) highlights the value of experiencing and then overcoming obstacles in the therapy and the therapeutic relationship with young adult clients. In this research, clients expressed that they were initially disappointed that their desire for a ‘pretend mother’ who can give advice, or a therapist who can challenge the client more directly and even give homework, was not realised (Palmstierna & Werbart, 2013). The clients stated that they did not initially understand

that the therapist did not have all the answers and instead, they had to do some work (Palmstierna & Werbart, 2013). As these obstacles were realised and addressed, the therapeutic relationship strengthened.

These comments appear to highlight the importance of having time to work through the client's difficulties and overcome the obstacles in the therapy relationship – and this in itself is a positive growth experience. Palmstierna and Werbart (2013) note that their core category of psychotherapy success, of a *growth-promoting and secure relationship* is viewed as two positive separate experiences that reinforce each other in a positive feedback loop. As the therapeutic relationship strengthens, so too does the working through of the patient's difficulties and the patient's confidence in her own capacity, leading to further security in the relationship with the therapist and so on (Palmstierna & Werbart, 2013).

As I reflect on the issue of overcoming obstacles with my own children in mind, I am aware that they mostly feel safe and secure enough in their relationship with us as their parents to have up-front dialogue with us about the issues in their lives. I believe they are also able to let us know what they need from us and, most importantly, when we are not getting right. As parents, we learn much from this exchange and I believe it ultimately strengthens our relationship with them, and them with us. However, I think it is important to be aware that most of the young adult clients I see have not had this type of receptive relationship with their parents. As a consequence they are not initially confident in expressing their concerns about issues that occur in the therapy or in the relationship with me. As already discussed, they are more likely to discontinue with the therapy than to confront their dissatisfaction. It takes time to establish the trust needed to be able to weather obstacles and disruptions. However, if this trust can be established and a full mutative experience evoked, then it seems like such a gift to the therapeutic relationship and the therapeutic experience. For a mutative experience to occur it must involve, in the transference, intense feelings about the therapist, and the client must be able to associate these feelings and events to some early traumatic relationship (Wolf, 1988). The difference being that in this difficult or disruptive exchange with the therapist, no blame is attached to either party for the painful interaction. Instead, this can be understood and felt by the client as occurring naturally, and the relationship can survive and grow from this experience (Wolf, 1988).

Brief therapy with young adults

In her review of the four-session-limited, self-referred, psychodynamically-oriented Young People's Consultation Service (YPCS) based in London, Lyon (2004) considers that the clearly defined beginning and end of therapy is helpful, as it avoids overwhelming the young adult client. She views this brief therapy model as offering space to 'dip the toe' rather than committing to longer-term and deeper exploration, which the young adult client may not want or need. This model was set up in recognition of the need to provide more mental health services to specifically cover the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Searle, Lyon, Young, Wiseman, & Foster-Davis, 2011). This has happened as a consequence of neuroscience advances that indicate that a young person's cognitive development, incorporating increasing emotional maturity, self-image and judgement, continue until at least 25 years of age (Wallis, 2013).

However, more recent research on the brief therapy model of the YPCS concludes that the client needs to be reasonably proactive and the model does not suit young adults with more externalising behaviour problems and chaotic lifestyles (Searle et al., 2011). This same research notes that for brief therapy to be successful; the client should have a high motivation for change, there should be "circumscribed problem and a clear focus" (p.58) and the therapist requires particular skills. These skills include: a good understanding of pacing, limiting interpretations to avoid overwhelm, and keeping endings in mind from the beginning (Searle et al., 2011).

Young adults are frequently only offered limited therapy, for example, the student-counselling model. A restricted-session model is cheaper and therefore often considered a more realistic option for young adults due to limited financial resources. Also, Searle et al. (2011) considers brief therapy "can be attractive to young people because of the inherent therapeutic hope and lack of procrastination and pathologising" (p.59). This brings to mind the research by Arnett (2006) which highlight young adults themselves viewing this time in their life as being full of possibilities and dreams for the future. Essentially, most young adults are still hopeful and idealistic and it seems important to be mindful and supportive of this outlook.

I find myself thinking about some of the supervision advice I have been offered when a young adult client left after only a few sessions. Advice such as "this is a difficult age group to undertake therapy with" and "they don't want to commit to long-term therapy"

come to mind. I notice I feel irked, maybe because these statements seem to stereotype and dismiss young adults as a group not yet ready or willing to ‘properly’ participate in the psychotherapeutic endeavour. Yes, I have had young adult clients that have only stayed for a few sessions and I can accept that was all they wanted and needed at that time. Their therapy may well have been helpful to them, as perhaps only a brief intervention was called for - something similar to what my own children phone, or pop home for, from time to time.

It seems that most young adults recognise that they are standing at a developmental juncture, which can at times feel confusing and overwhelming. The young adult who has not had enough early environmental provision and now lacks a safe family base to come and go from is often the most fragile at this time. Engagement in psychodynamic psychotherapy can offer these lost young adults a stable, non-judgemental and hopefully transformative relational experience. Sadly, and understandably because of their difficulties with family relationships, these are often the clients who are the most ambivalent about entering into a long-term intimate therapeutic relationship. A brief therapy encounter may be all that they can bear at this overwhelming time and this may be just enough to sustain them for a while. The hope is that this experience may also give them a glimpse into the possibility of safely exploring a deeper understanding of themselves in the future.

Summary

I have started this chapter with a brief review of some of the interpretive understandings of what it is to be a contemporary young adult, as revealed in the previous chapters in this dissertation. I have then discussed the reasons why a young adult might seek out psychotherapy. Further, by considering some of the recent literature, and my own practice with young adults, I have attempted to understand how they experience the therapeutic space and therapeutic relationship. I have reflected on how this richer understanding of the young adult and their experience of psychotherapy might be incorporated into, and ideally enhance, the clinical work with this client group.

Limitations of this study and opportunities for further research

The first limitation is quite literally a limit – an actual scarcity of studies or literature, particularly psychoanalytic literature, on the topic of young adult development. Much of the information I initially uncovered viewed young adulthood as an extension of

adolescence or a fledgling adult state. Young adulthood is not a universally accepted phenomenon or concept. Much of the literature that recognises this distinct developmental phase originates in the United States and is based on research with college/university participants. Whilst I have attempted to look beyond this, and I have acknowledged that young adulthood should be viewed through a cultural lens, I consider that there is much opportunity for a deeper understanding of the young adult in different cultures and socio-economic contexts.

A further limitation is that I have purposely avoided literature that paints the young adult in a stereotypical light as I consider that this misses the essence of the young adults I interact with. For example, in this study I have mostly avoided studying the young adult in ways that make broad distinctions between genders. There is a body of literature that hypothesises that young adult males resolve identity before considering intimacy whilst female identity is more defined through attachment and threatened by separation (Besser & Blatt, 2007; Colarusso, 1995 ; Erikson, 1968). Some of this literature seemed out of date when considering the advances of feminism and the changing roles of females in post-industrial Western culture. Therefore an updated and deeper understanding of the influence of gender in young adult approaches to identity and intimacy would be of interest and value.

I am aware that there are recent advances in neurobiological and neuropsychological understanding of the young adult brain, offering evidence that brain development impacting emotional maturity continues well into the early twenties (Ernst & Fudge, 2010; Wallis, 2013). This is an increasingly large and exciting area of research that can potentially offer much to our understanding of the young adult. However, I consider it is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

A further limitation of this study is that I have only briefly touched on the influence of economic and the consequent sociological changes on young adults today, in comparison with previous generations. In most Western post-industrial economies it is increasingly accepted that younger adults are likely to be less well off than their parents as a result of patterns of wealth, incomes, taxes and government benefits (Daley, 2015). An increasingly mobile labour market is having a downward effect on wages and household incomes with the consequence that relative earning has decreased at the same time as asset prices (houses) and student debt have skyrocketed (Daley, 2015). The outcome of this may be the extension of the phase of young adulthood, as young adults

remain dependent on their parents for longer, perhaps with significant sociological and psychological affects on all parties.

Concluding thoughts

I consider myself very fortunate to have commenced my psychotherapy career as an intern psychotherapist at a university student counselling facility. This opportunity prompted a curiosity in young adulthood. Through the research and writing of this dissertation I have gained a greater appreciation and insight into what I now understand as a distinct developmental phase. Whilst there appears to be a paucity of literature on this topic I have attempted to uncover the unique features associated with this developmental juncture and I have then considered how this knowledge may usefully inform psychodynamic psychotherapy with the young adult client.

The research has revealed that this stage in an individual's life is sanctioned in Western, post-industrial cultures as exploratory; with the young adult feeling 'in-between', self-focussed and reasonably positive and idealistic. In chapter three the predominantly sociological literature supported my subjective experience that at this time in their lives the young adult is seeking increasing independence from their family whilst exploring new relationships and new ways of relating. This literature further confirmed that this phase in post-industrial societies is increasingly complex and unpredictable and it is perhaps understandable that young adults may at times feel anxious and unsure.

In chapter four, consideration of the psychoanalytic developmental theories of Winnicott, Colarusso, Mahler and Kohut opened up the space to think about the importance of early and on-going relationships and their influence in shaping the young adult's emotional maturity and developing ego strength. In chapter five I further explored the young adult's drive towards self-identity formation and their increasing capacity for intimate relationship, by drawing on Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial growth. I also reflected on how the changes in today's society such as the growth in social media, more global mobility, increased financial and family pressures and a greater acceptance of diversity, add to the complexity of this time.

Blatt's (2008) elaboration of the development of the individual's personality consisting of two separate dialectical lines of experience which come together during young adulthood fits with my own observations and conclusions that this can be a time of

emotional complexity. His description of a convergence of a line of self-definition and a line of relatedness offers me a way to consider the states of overwhelm and confusion that I frequently notice in my young adult clients. I believe that this model of a merger or synthesis of these two polarities of experience could provide a useful springboard for further exploration and understanding of this young adult phase.

In chapter six I further examined my research question of - *how can a richer understanding of the young adult client better inform psychodynamic psychotherapy with this client group?* I drew on research that critiqued young adults' views on successful psychotherapies and reflected on my work with young adult clients. I concluded that the most important element to successful growth promoting psychotherapy with young adults is the creation of a therapeutic environment that feels safe and secure. To do this the psychotherapist must recognise and respect that at this time in their lives the young adult is only just beginning to properly explore who they are and most importantly, how this newly evolving self might engage in relationship with another. Therefore, this requires a therapist who is prepared to come forward to the client, to stay 'in focus', to hold, to contain and sometimes be a cheerleader and mentor. Just as important is the fine clinical judgement required to see the client not just as a young adult but also as an individual who has their unique set of reasons for seeking out psychotherapy.

As I write these concluding comments I am thinking of some of my long-term young adult clients and of my own young adult children. In line with the conclusions of this research, I observe that all going reasonably well, this phase of young adulthood is an intense period of change and intrapsychic integration. It seems entirely understandable that the young adult may at times require some empathic support and encouragement as they negotiate their way through the developmental challenges. The young adult should be able to expect this sustenance from someone who has a genuine interest in their wellbeing – ideally their family and friends or, if needed, a psychotherapist who has some understanding of the idiosyncrasies of this phase of their life.

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