

**PSYCHOSOCIAL ASPECTS OF THE TRANSITION
FROM ADOLESCENCE TO ADULTHOOD
AND THEIR IMPORTANCE IN PREVENTING COLLEGE DROPOUT**

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Abstract

The purpose of this material is to provide explanations of a psychosocial nature about the possible causes of school dropout in the university environment starting from the psychosocial specifics of this period. The methodology used is that of an analytical synthesis of theories and empirical studies in the area of developmental psychology and social psychology, trying to offer specialists in the fields of education and socio-economics tools for in-depth knowledge of this population segment.

This article presents some aspects specific to the period of transition from adolescence to adulthood characterized by adaptation to new and diverse social roles, intellectual challenges and socio-economic and cultural contexts. The age range between 18 and 25 has been called by psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2000) emerging adulthood, a distinct period of development with specific psychological and social aspects. This is considered a critical period of life and one of the most dynamic stages in life because the maturation process is intensely influenced by the socio-cultural, economic context where psychological mechanisms are vulnerable. This process is a reality today, especially among young people in developed countries, but it can be considered a global process with local and regional accents depending on specific features.

Keywords: *transition, emerging maturity, identity, risk-taking, self-esteem, stress.*

Statistical relevance of a phenomenon

According to the latest data published by the European Commission (2022), Romania's tertiary education graduation rate remains the lowest of all EU countries. The long-term trend is not positive because in the last decade this figure has not improved. In order to understand this situation, we will bring to your attention some statistical indicators as they are presented in a report of the Romanian Ministry of Education: the number of enrolments in undergraduate

university programs, the average duration of attendance at higher education, the age structure of the students included in university education, the university dropout rate.

In the academic year 2020-2021 there was an increase compared to the previous year in the number of students enrolled in the undergraduate program, but there is a major difference compared to the year 2011-2012, in the last ten years the population of students from this cycle of studies decreasing by 121600. The decrease in the number of enrolments from one year to another was determined by several factors: the gradual decrease in the number of high school graduates who passed the baccalaureate exam; smaller number of people who choose to simultaneously follow more than one university study program (unlike previous years); the decrease in the number of people in the age group of 19-23 years, the increased rate of early leaving the pre-university educational system and the phenomenon of external migration, which affects the size of the cohort that can access this educational level. (Ministry of Education, 2022, p. 13).

Another important indicator in the analysis of this phenomenon is the average duration of attending higher education, which expresses the (average) number of years of higher education attended by a person of the age corresponding to this level of education (19-23 years). Thus, at the level of the 2020-2021 academic year, this duration was 1.5 years; by comparison, the average value of the indicator in the last ten years was 1.4 - 1.6 years, which shows that the early leaving rate of the higher education system has registered slight fluctuations in recent years. (Ministry of Education, 2022, p. 25).

Regarding the age structure of students enrolled in university education, the data indicate the highest specific enrolment rates at the ages of 19, 20 and 21. At the level of the 18-year-old age group, a low share of the participation rate is noted, most likely due to the tendency to postpone enrolment in a university study program, immediately after graduating from high school. The cause is represented by the relatively low passing rate of the baccalaureate exam, a fact that caused a delay of at least one year in access to university education for those who did not pass. Higher participation in undergraduate university education is noted among the female population for all ages compared to the male population. (Ministry of Education, 2021, p. 25).

The university dropout rate (calculated as difference between the effective numbers at the beginning and those at the end of the academic year), decreased by 1.1% at the level of undergraduate university education as a whole, respectively by 1.4% at the level of public education (Ministry of Education, 2021, p.28).

Under these conditions, the retention of students within the university programs, of the university education institutions to which they enrol and wish to obtain a graduation degree, constitutes a major educational and economic policy concern of higher education throughout the world, in the conditions in which the enrolment rate in higher education has increased, currently exceeding 50% in industrialized countries (Perkin 2007) and thus public spending on educational institutions and students (Borgen & Borgen, 2016).

The stage of university studies - a form of transition

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is also achieved in certain cases by completing university studies. The studies on the transition of students towards adulthood are part of the wider effort of psychosociologists to clarify the specific aspects of certain periods of transition at the level of the entire existential path of development, an interest that has grown along with the importance of learning throughout life (Gale & Parker, 2014). The stage of university studies begins with a period of adaptation that can be quite demanding, stressful both on a personal level (by leaving the family of origin, assuming financial and social autonomy), academically (by moving from an organized activity, controlled by an adult, to the independent organization of the learning activity, the resources it requires, to the challenges of teamwork), or socially (by establishing relationships with new colleagues/ friends, in a new locality, adaptation being all the more difficult for students from rural areas, from families where parents do not have higher education or similar experiences) (Briggs et al., 2012; Lowe & Cook, 2003, Sava et al., 2015).

The transition from the stage of pre-university education to student life is defined as the ability to "navigate" through the change that occurs in the transition from one education cycle to another, from one learning modality to another (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 736). Analysing how students adapt to the challenges of this period and observing the complexity and depth of the changes that occur, Gale & Parker (2014) identified three such processes with a transitional role towards balanced adaptation: change as an inductive transition that occurs slowly, gradually, in chronological order during the integration of the student in his new role, according to the regulations of the university institution, the change as a development process that implies the modification of the identity according to personal and professional maturation and evolution and the change as a personal experience that implies flexible adaptation in various learning /training contexts.

Studentship is the period in which countless possibilities open up to everyone, offering the feeling of relative independence from social roles, institutional expectations and normative

prescriptions, the young person wanting to experiment freely in various fields, socio-cultural, political, economic, demographic conditions, norms, the cultural and social stereotypes of the transition from adolescence to adulthood in each society, the resources available to a person/group to achieve this transition, the events to which he is exposed making it different from person to person. In other words, there is no standard route, for some young people this transition occurs earlier, the process being accelerated by faster integration into the labour market and obtaining financial independence, leaving the parental home and building socio-emotional autonomy.

The socio-demographic features of this transition have changed in recent decades, young people live with their parents for a long time after completing high school studies, there is a tendency to postpone the moment of professional employment, so the demographic status of a person is very difficult to predict just based on age. Young people on their way to adulthood engage in a wider range of activities than people of other age groups because they are eager to explore, to know themselves and because the demands of status and social role are less rigid, making their demographic status unpredictable.

The residential status of this category is changing because, once in college, away from the parental home, they will spend the next few years in various combined independent or shared living situations. For them, this is a period of semi-autonomy as they have many of the responsibilities of independent living. Others will leave the parental home not only to go to studies, but/or only to lead an independent life, that is, to live alone or together with peers, to manage their own money. A statistical illustration of residential dynamics at this age shows that approximately two-thirds experience a period of cohabitation with a romantic partner (Gagnon et al., 1995; Arnett, 2000), some staying at home while attending college or working, or a combination of the two. Only about 10% of men and 30% of women stay at home until marriage (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1994; Arnett, 2000). Despite this diversity, the unifying feature of young people in this period is mobility, with the highest rates of residential change of any age group.

The transition to adult life - a maturing issue

The transition of adolescents to adult life has become a problem of the postmodern society because it has been found that young people are stuck in a prolonged adolescence, after the end of compulsory education, a period in which they no longer assume the responsibilities specific to adults, maturing much later than previous generations, although they start the process earlier (Raiu, 2016). Completion of studies, leaving the parental home, obtaining a job

that offers financial stability, marriage, assuming the status of a parent, etc. were considered, until two decades ago, to be the socio-demographic criteria of maturation. Currently, the routes are very variable, flexible and nothing alike, especially when we talk about different socio-cultural spaces. Throughout Europe, it has been found that there are quite long transition periods, with many of the demographic events mentioned above appearing later or repeating themselves during this period (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010). The phenomenon was also observed in the USA (Arnett & Tanner, 2006) or in other countries of the world (Swanson, 2016).

The criteria by which the degree of maturity is assessed are not only of a social nature (marriage, completion of studies, full-time employment in a job, assuming the role of parents) but also of a psychological nature (responsible decisions, autonomy, financial independence), relationships as equals with adults/parents). Maturation is a fundamental process of ontogenesis that has several dimensions: biological, psychological, social, cultural and economic, acceleration, stagnation being determined by internal factors (genetic, physiological and psychological) and external (socio-cultural, economic, historical, political factors) (Muntean, 2006, p.24).

This situation shows the fact that these changes that occur between adolescence and adulthood are manifestations of a distinct stage of the life cycle, as some psychologists have noticed, called emerging adulthood (Jensen & Arnett, 2012; Schwartz et al. 2010; Swanson, 2016). The first psychologist to carefully analyse this approximate age range between 18-25 was Jeffrey Arnett (2000). He appreciated that it is a critical, unstable period of intense change and exploration, with its own demographic, subjective and identity characteristics. Although the experience of young people may be different according to national, regional, cultural, and socioeconomic particularities, it is increasingly present worldwide and is not a characteristic of developed countries. Arnett argues that this transitional stage is found mainly in industrialized countries, where access to education, to post-secondary, higher studies is unrestricted, which ensures a certain independence of the young person from the social and normative roles specific to adulthood. Moreover, in these countries in recent years, a phenomenon called "gap year" has been observed more and more frequently, i.e. the sabbatical or break year after completing high school studies, in which young people travel a good part of the time, get hired or work voluntary.

The most common reasons that determine such a decision are: the desire to suspend formal education or work activities, to gain a broader horizon on life, to experience different people, cultures and places, to acquire life skills personal, to improve their CV with a view to the possibility of accessing university studies or possibly, to look for a job, to earn money, to

contribute to society, to volunteer, helping people, to face a challenge, to have fun, or for religious reasons (Jones, 2004, p.37). Beyond these factors are researchers who consider that essentially these experiences play the role in the 'transition from childhood to specified identities' (Jones, 2004). At the beginning of his studies of this period, Arnett (1994) surveyed a group of college students about their conceptions of the transition to adulthood and their membership in adulthood. Analysis of the results indicated that only a small percentage of them (20%) considered themselves fully adults, while almost two-thirds rated themselves as adults only in some respects.

In their opinion, the main criteria for defining maturity are rather of an individual, personal nature, such as: responsibility for one's own actions and decisions, own opinions, independent of those of parents or members of the entourage, personal and independent decisions on one's own beliefs and values, relationships equal with parents. In contrast, the classic role transitions that measure maturity, such as completing studies, getting married and assuming the role of a parent, were approved in a much smaller proportion. Arnett concludes that students themselves are insecure about their status as adults perhaps because they start several social roles of transition to adulthood but do not complete them.

As a result, Arnett (2004) proposed five psychological aspects specific to emerging adulthood: "identity exploration", "experimentation", "feeling neither adolescent nor young", "negativity" and "self-focus". "Identity exploration" is a dimension characterized by young people exploring different ways of living as they decide how to define themselves. "Experimentation" corresponds to engaging in the exploration of many opportunities, "negativity" refers to the instability associated with developing maturity, accompanied by a sense of feeling overwhelmed and restless.

The penultimate dimension translates into a sense of uncertainty of young people as they gradually become adults, that is, they no longer feel like teenagers, but they do not yet perceive themselves as fully adults. The last dimension, 'self-focus', refers to how young people experience personal autonomy and freedom. Arnett completed this point of view with the four values, beliefs that determine the choices of young people at this stage: the value of attaining independence and self-sufficiency before making adult commitments; the goal of finding a so called soul mate in marriage who will complement one's own identity; the search for work that will be experienced as an expression of one's own identity; and a view of this period of life as one of self-focused fun (Arnett, et al., 2014, p.573), which indicates that this transitional stage actually has several insecurities and conditions of an internal nature, being one of searching for independence, identity and agency.

Exploring identity in emerging adulthood

As Arnett noted, the formation of identity is an important aspect of development in this period taking place on several levels: psychological (of self-identity), personal and social (Wood et al., 2018). These three levels are intensely activated during adolescence and emerging adulthood, and once they are integrated into a unified whole, they give a sense of stability, identity and self-esteem. The defining characteristic of the period is that of exploring identity in three domains: love, work, and worldview (Arnett, 2000). The formation of identity during the period of maturation is necessary because it contributes to the psychological development, especially the moral development of the future adult (Wood et al., 2018).

The problem of identity at the age of onset of maturation is not new, because an important predecessor, the psychologist Erik Erikson, described the period after the completion of compulsory schooling as, in fact, a prolonged stage of adolescence, a typical reality of industrialized societies in which the so-called psychosocial moratorium is specific (a process of exploring one's own identity). (Arnett, 2000). He considered that at the age of adolescence an intrapsychic conflict (of the 8 that characterizes the entire existential path) is characteristic between the clarity and the vagueness of the perception of the role, which causes an identity confusion to appear. Ego identity, as he calls it, refers to the conscious perception of the individual's uniqueness as well as the unconscious effort to achieve continuity of experience; an optimal identity perceived as a psychosocial sense of well-being. The clearest phenomena that accompany it are the feeling of comfort in one's own skin, "knowing where we are going" and recognition from those who matter to us. (Erikson, 1968, p.165).

The studies carried out as a result of the application of this theory (Adams & Fitch, 1983) highlighted the fact that approximately half of the adolescents kept a forced or diffuse identity status in both global and domain assessments until the end of high school, an important role for the development of identity in adolescence returning to the academic environment outside the family. These two researchers conducted longitudinal studies at 9–12-month intervals after entering college and found significant increases in the number of students moving into identity search. These results make it clear that although the process of identity formation begins in adolescence it is rarely completed by the end of high school.

Risk-taking in emerging adulthood

Another important aspect of this stage is the appearance of several risky behaviours in development; it is about the consumption of alcohol, prohibited substances and reckless driving that reach high levels between the ages of 20 and 21 (Shulman & Cauffman, 2014). Studies

have shown that a possible cause is related to the slow maturation of the prefrontal cortex and consequently the difficulties of cognitive control of these impulses (Knežević, 2018). Although the brain mechanisms that ensure this type of control seem to be almost formed (Steinberg, 2010), it is possible that in stressful and emotionally charged situations, cognitive control does not appear (Knežević, 2018). This way of reaction can be explained by the dual system model of L. Steinberg (2010) which states, based on advances in the field of applied neuroscience in developmental psychology, that these impulsive behaviors are based on two neurobiological systems located separately at the brain level and which have a different evolution; it is about a socio-emotional system located in the area of the limbic system and which is oriented towards the search for rewards and a system of a logical and rational nature that must ensure executive control, i.e. monitor and flexibly adapt behavior in accordance with internal goals and with external requirements (Knežević, 2018). This ability is dependent on the development of the prefrontal cortex and even if young people in the period of emerging adulthood can perform voluntary, controlled behaviors, often these are inconsistent and insufficiently appropriate to the context (Luna et al., 2010). Young people between the ages of 19 and 25 show impulsive behavioral tendencies (premature responses, lower accuracy, shorter reaction times) compared to those between the ages of 28 and 42 (Knežević & Marinković, 2017), which suggesting that response inhibition and performance monitoring do not fully develop until approximately 25 years of age (Knežević, 2018).

Transformations in the neurocerebral plane also have effects in terms of the ability to understand the states, emotions and actions of others. Thus, during this period metacognitive skills are developed, analysis in context important in adapting to the new social network made up of colleagues, friends and romantic partners.

Self-esteem

An important role in understanding the behavior of young people in this period is the way in which they subjectively evaluate themselves from the point of view of personal value. This is a general personality characteristic called self-esteem. Although the global level of self-esteem has been observed to be generally stable over time and across contexts (Trzesniewski et al., 2003), the student years are often times of questioning one's own worth.

A longitudinal study that examined the development of self-esteem across 4 years of college in a sample of 295 emerging adults (Chung et al., 2013) suggests that, on average, levels of self-esteem dropped considerably during the first semester, returned to previous levels

by the end of the first year, and then gradually increased over the next 3 years, resulting in a small but significant increase in average self-esteem over the course of college.

Students who achieved good grades in college showed greater increases in self-esteem. Conversely, those who entered college with unrealistic expectations about their academic performance tended to show lower growth, despite entering college with relatively high self-esteem. In terms of perceived change, 67% felt that their self-esteem increased during college, while 12% perceived that it decreased. Overall, the results of studies of this kind support the view that self-esteem, like other personality characteristics, can change systematically while showing continuity over time.

Stress during the period of emerging adulthood

Because it involves multiple transformations that can sometimes generate uncertainty, instability, this period is also marked by a lot of psychological suffering. Thus, epidemiological studies in the USA, for example, found that over a period of one year, most psychiatric disorders occur in people aged between 18 and 29 years, and in mood disorders, anxiety disorders and substance abuse substances, the prevalence is higher than at any other age period (Arnett, Žukauskienė, Sugimura, 2014).

The situation is no better for students either, a WHO global report on student mental health showed that 31.4% of first year students from 19 colleges in 8 countries (Australia, Belgium, Germany, Mexico, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Spain and the USA) tested positive over a 12-month period for at least one anxiety, mood or substance use disorder (Auerbach et al., 2018).

These disorders have their origin in chronic stress caused by major changes in the sphere of interpersonal, social, institutional, work, housing relationships, as well as smaller daily difficulties. Precisely for the fact that this age stage was conceptualized relatively recently, but also for the fact that there was a preconception according to which young people are generally the healthiest population segment, studies on psychological suffering for the subjects of this interval are not very extensive. The intense, challenging but sometimes confusing and stressful searches for identity produce instability and often lead to anxiety and depression.

Revelatory from this point of view is a large study carried out on a sample of 4816 people (50% women) from the general Spanish population, aged between 18 and 29 years. It assessed the relevance of stress, coping, coping styles, self-esteem, and perceived social support in the distress of emerging adult women and men. All participants were assessed using questionnaires and scales assessing psychological distress, stress, coping styles, self-esteem and social

support. Women scored higher than men on psychological distress caused by chronic stress, minor daily problems, emotional coping style, and social support. Men scored higher than women in the rational and detached coping styles but also in terms of self-esteem. Psychological distress was significantly predicted in women and men by a high level of emotional coping style, lower self-esteem, high number of life events, and lower social support. A statistically significant predictor in men was coping style, while in women it was high chronic stress (Matud, et al., 2020).

These four aspects briefly analysed above: the search for identity, the assumption of risk in the conditions of a rather fragile self-esteem, in certain cases and a stress determined by the multiple educational and existential challenges lead us to appreciate that, in addition to external factors, there are several aspects of a psychological nature that must be carefully analysed and, on a case-by-case basis, integrated into assistance programs dedicated to students in the risk group and as such in the situation of dropping out of university studies.

Conclusions

In the last ten years the population of undergraduate students decreased by 121.6 thousand people. On a general level, there is a tendency to postpone matriculation to a bachelor's degree program, immediately after high school graduation at the level of the 18-year-old age group. The early leaving rate of the higher education system registered slight fluctuations in the last university years. This fact is also due to psychosocial causes.

Thus, it has been observed that the "maturation timetable" has changed, the traditional criteria such as: completing studies, financial independence, leaving the parental home, marriage and assuming the status of parent are being achieved later than before a few decades ago. More and more young people are experimenting, exploring their own identity more deeply than they did in adolescence and then their parents did. There is a deinstitutionalization and an individualization of the course of life, young people wanting to stop following a pattern and write their own story.

The period of university studies coincides with an important stage in the psychosocial evolution of the human being, that of transition to maturity. 50 years ago, this transition was achieved very quickly, but now, there is a tendency to extend the interval until the attributes of social, demographic and psychological maturity are met.

That's why, in the last 20 years, the researchers' interest in what happens in this age range has increased and they discovered five specific psychological aspects: the exploration of identity, the tendency to experiment, the feeling of being neither a teenager, but neither young,

negativity and self-focus, also that young people are in search of independence, identity and personal power and that important for defining as an adult are internal, personal aspects rather than those agreed and prescribed by normative-social norms.

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