EDITORIAL

Toward a New Theory of Established Adulthood

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Abstract

In this introduction to the special issue of the Journal of Adult Development on Established Adulthood, we begin by providing a brief overview of the conceptualization of Established Adulthood. We then provide an overview of each paper included in the special issue, highlighting how this work contributes to the growing field of established adulthood by answering important questions and proposing new ones. Taken together, this collection of articles lay the groundwork for continued theorizing and research in a new, exciting, and flourishing area of developmental research.

Establishing a Field of Established Adulthood

Historically, developmental psychology primarily focused on child development. In recent years, however, there has been a growing interest in adult development. For example, Arnett (2000, 2015) conceptualized the period of emerging adulthood, drawing attention to development during the years spanning 18 to 29. Large longitudinal studies such as the midlife in the USA study (MIDUS) and midlife in Japan (MIDJA in Japan) studies focused researchers' attention on midlife (Brim et al., 2004; Ryff et al., 2008). Finally, increasing longevity has drawn researchers toward the study of older adulthood (Kunkel et al., 2014).

While adult development as a field seems to be expanding—evident in the very existence of this journal—there is still one period of the adult lifespan that has been under conceptualized and underexplored. This is the period of development from ages 30 to 45, which we have recently named *established adulthood* (Mehta et al., 2020). For as far back as human history stretches, people across the world have married, had children, and engaged in some form of work. However, demographic changes warrant this new conceptualization of established adulthood. The opportunities for education and exploration that dominate emerging adulthood, coupled with increased longevity, now means that most people in developed countries are not settling into careers, forming long-term romantic relationships, or having children until their 30 s and in some cases early 40 s. This means that established adulthood is a period of development during which there is a pile up of demands, leading to what we have coined the "career-and-care-crunch" (Mehta et al., 2020). Specifically, in established adulthood, people are likely to be deeply absorbed in their occupational responsibilities while also meeting the responsibilities of a romantic relationship, caring for children, friends, aging parents, family members, and pets, and engaging with their communities. The piling up of demands during established adulthood makes it one of the most challenging yet rewarding periods of the adult lifespan.

When we first conceptualized established adulthood, we did so with the hope that newly naming this period of development and highlighting its developmental uniqueness would promote new research on this formerly neglected period. This special issue is an important step toward that goal. Our call for papers resulted in 30 submitted letters of intent. Here, we present the eleven papers that made it through the peer review process. The topics of these papers explore a number of facets of established adulthood including parenting, smart phone use, religiosity, and gender roles to name a few. This introduction outlines some of the main themes of the papers included in the special issue.

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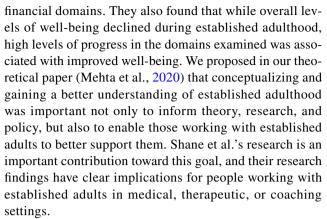2 Department of Psychology, Clark University, Worcester, USA

Establishing Adulthood

It was important to us that our conceptualization of established adulthood fit with a lifespan approach to developmental psychology. To this end, we view established adulthood as successive and iterative such that development occurring during established adulthood is at least in part influenced by development that occurred in earlier periods. Thus, variations in people's experience of established adulthood are likely to be connected to choices made during emerging adulthood, the preceding period of development that encompasses ages 18–29.

Reifman and Niehuis' (2023) review in the special issue makes explicit the potential for continuity from emerging adulthood to established adulthood. Specifically, their paper considers continuity and discontinuity from emerging adulthood to established adulthood in terms of Arnett's five features of emerging adulthood: identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood, and possibilities/optimism. In their review of existing research, they found evidence of both continuity and discontinuity in the five features. Likeliness of goal attainment, a component of possibilities/optimism, and feeling "in-between" showed continuity from emerging to established adulthood. Reifman and Niehuis suggest that feeling in between may continue into established adulthood because established adults are still accumulating experiences and wisdom. That is, they may not feel "wise" enough to be full adults, even though they have entered the work and family domains that provide a sense of being an adult. In contrast, discontinuity was evident in the areas of identity explorations, beliefs in one's ability to achieve a hoped-for self (a component of possibilities/optimism), and self-focus. The authors suggest that increases in other-focus during established adulthood may provide the foundation for generativity, as people move beyond caring for themselves and their family to caring for their communities and society at large. That there is both continuity and discontinuity between emerging and established adulthood highlights how established adulthood is a distinct period of development that, consistent with lifespan developmental theory, builds on the developmental processes and experiences that precede it.

In their paper, Shane et al. (2023) use MIDUS data to investigate progress in domains associated with adulthood, and how this progress is related to well-being. In support of Reifman and Niehuis' (2023) suggestion that established adults may have achieved developmental milestones in work and family domains, they found that established adults reported high levels of progress in work, romantic relationships, parent–child relationships, and health domains, and moderate levels of progress in prosocial and financial domains. They also found that while overall levels of well-being declined during established adulthood, high levels of progress in the domains examined was associated with improved well-being. We proposed in our theoretical paper (Mehta et al., 2020) that conceptualizing and gaining a better understanding of established adulthood was important not only to inform theory, research, and policy, but also to enable those working with established adults to better support them. Shane et al.'s research is an important contribution toward this goal, and their research findings have clear implications for people working with established adults in medical, therapeutic, or coaching settings.

Mehta's (2023) study provided qualitative insights into the "lived experience" of established adulthood and discovered themes consistent with the theory of established adulthood as well as some surprises. Consistent with the theory, participants described their current time of life as a time of feeling more completely adult, a time of rising stability, and a time of growing responsibilities and commitments, sometimes verging on overwhelming as they experience a "career-and-care-crunch." In addition, an important and novel finding in this paper is that there were a number of themes indicating increasing social cognitive development in established adulthood. Participants described shifting perceptions of time, specifically that it seems to go by faster now and it seems finite, in contrast to the assumption of a wide-open future they remember from emerging adulthood. Despite their role stability, they feel they are still growing psychologically and interpersonally: continuing to grow and learn, clarifying their beliefs and values, and gaining wisdom, self-confidence, and self-understanding. These social cognitive findings are exciting and other investigators will hopefully explore them further to see how widely they apply.

Connection and Disconnection

Feeling connected to others is another important component of well-being in established adulthood. This is the topic that Schmidt et al. (2023) address, exploring the associations between friendship and life satisfaction and loneliness in established adulthood and midlife (ages 45–65). While both groups reported similar levels of life satisfaction, the authors found that friendship is more central to midlife adults' lives than established adults' lives, and that loneliness is higher in established adulthood. This is somewhat surprising, given that established adulthood typically entails deep immersion in social roles and commitments. As such, it is a potentially important finding that merits further exploration in qualitative and mixed-methods studies, to explore the reasons behind established adults' loneliness. Perhaps the many task demands of the career-and-care-crunch give established

adults many social contacts but no time or space to develop them into friendships.

The study on motivations for solitude in established adulthood by Yuan and Grühn (2023) provides an interesting counterpoint to the Schmidt et al. (2023) study of loneliness. Because emerging adulthood is a self-focused time of life (Arnett, 2015), it is often a time when both solitude and loneliness are more common than in other phases of life (White et al., 2022). But how does this change in established adulthood, when so many new social obligations and roles are typically taken on? Yuan and Grühn (2023) provide data on how motivations for solitude change from emerging to established adulthood and beyond to midlife. The authors make an important distinction between *self-determined motivations* (seeking solitude in order to promote well-being and creativity) and *controlled motivations* (seeking solitude in order to escape aversive conditions). The results indicated that the preference for solitude rose substantially from emerging to established adulthood. That is, as established adults take on the roles and obligations that entail more time committed to others, they often yearn to have time to themselves, just as it diminishes. Controlled motivations for solitude peak in established adulthood (relative to emerging adulthood and midlife), and controlled motivations were associated with maladaptive outcomes across life phases. So, whatever the rewards may be of their new social role commitments, established adults may also find them confining and wish they had more solitary time as they did in emerging adulthood.

Even when established adults find solitary time, the ubiquity of smartphones may make it difficult to find a calm, undisturbed moment. Schuster et al. (2023) investigated smartphone use among established adults who self-identified as smartphone "over users." These established adults averaged of 215 min of smartphone use daily and primarily used their phones for social media, video conferencing, and texting. Even during leisure time, established adults often felt pressure to rapidly respond to work emails and reported having to set boundaries around work-related smartphone use during family time. That smartphones blur the lines between work and leisure time may contribute to the career-and-care-crunch. The crunch often requires established adults to manage boundaries between their work and home life (Mehta et al., 2020) and the around-the-clock access that cell phones provide may make it difficult to maintain these boundaries.

Role of Religion in Established Adulthood

Religion may be another pathway to feeling connected for established adults, in this case, a connection to a power greater than themselves. Three papers in the special issue focused on the role of religion in established adulthood.

Green and Chuang (2023) investigated how religiosity affected the developmental trajectories of Black Jamaican established adult women, and how religion influenced their current lives. They found that exposure to religion during childhood and adolescence led to the incorporation of religious values into Black Jamaican established adult women's lives, influencing how they coped with stressors, how they parented, how they related to family members (including romantic partners), and how they made sense of social issues. This research illustrates the influence that feeling connected to a higher power plays in established adults' lives. It also illustrates the iterative nature of development by which childhood experiences influence the lives of established adults.

Two other papers in the special issue examined the role of religion in development from emerging to established adulthood (Hwang et al., 2023; Silverstein et al., 2023). The two papers drew on the same dataset, the Longitudinal Study of Generations, spanning a 16-year period, from ages 18–29 to ages 34–45. The analysis by Hwang and colleagues (2023) reported a relation between religiosity and better mental health (higher psychological well-being and self-esteem, lower depression), whereas Silverstein and colleagues (2023) found a relation between religiosity and likelihood of marriage. Both findings have been reported often in the literature, but the longitudinal design allowed each study to provide new insights. Hwang and colleagues (2023) observed that mental health was better not only among the conventionally religious but among those who described themselves as spiritual-but-not-religious. This suggests that the benefits of believing may be accessible even to people who do not attend religious services or express their beliefs in conventional ways, a growing proportion of Americans as attendance at religious services declines. Silverstein and colleagues (2023) discerned a reciprocal relationship between religiosity and marriage over time; i.e., religiosity in emerging adulthood predicted marriage in established adulthood, and marrying by established adulthood then predicted a further rise in religiosity. Both relations were higher for men than women. This intriguing finding merits further exploration, including in qualitative studies that could shed light on how and why this pattern occurs.

Gender, Culture, and Historical Variations

Two of the papers in the special issue pertain to how gender roles and expectations shape the experience of established adulthood, and both of the papers present data from non-US samples. In Miski Aydin and colleagues' (2023) study of working Turkish mothers in established adulthood, "over-parenting" and reported family-to-work conflict were both related to lower well-being, consistent with the idea of a

career-and-care crunch in established adulthood. However, overparenting and family-to-work conflict were unrelated, perhaps because, as the authors insightfully observe, what is termed "overparenting" in the West may be a normative cultural expectation in Turkey and may, therefore, not provoke a feeling of "conflict." However, the Miski Aydin et al. (2023) sample was highly educated—over half were university graduates and over 30% had obtained a postgraduate degree—and all were employed full-time in addition to being mothers, so they should not be taken to be representative of women in Turkey more generally. An interesting comparison for future research would be to Turkish women who remain in more traditional roles.

The other non-US sample was from India, in Pandya and colleagues' (2023) qualitative study of established adults' views of gender roles and responsibilities. Both men and women in the study expressed the view that men and women have equal abilities for family roles as well as work roles. Nevertheless, both recognized that the career-and-care crunch of combined family and work responsibilities falls primarily on women, and seemed resigned to that fact. Like Miski Aydin et al.'s (2023) Turkish sample, Pandya et al.'s sample was far more highly educated than the Indian population generally, and most of the women were employed. Nevertheless, the results provide many provocative findings that merit further exploration in broader samples.

Historical events also shape the experience of established adulthood, as they do other life phases. The paper by Wang and colleagues (2023) provides an example of this, in examining financial status and well-being both before (2008) and after (2013) the "Great Recession" that began in late 2008. Established adulthood is typically a time of growing financial resources, as couples combine their finances and often rise in their occupations in both status and income. However, Wang and colleagues (2023) show how severely the Great Recession disrupted this pattern for the cohort of Americans who were in established adulthood at the time. Strikingly, the proportion of respondents reporting financial problems rose from 16% in 2008 to 72% in 2013. Furthermore, increased financial problems were related to corresponding increases in depressive symptoms and strained relations with their parents. It will be important in future research to carry this work forward and examine how, when, and whether the established adults who experience this kind of disruption are able to recover personally and financially.

Conclusion

We initially proposed the idea of established adulthood in order to encourage further and deeper investigation into this important and interesting period of the lifespan. The articles in this special issue provide a foundation upon which we can build this new, exciting, and flourishing area of developmental research. We hope that this special issue will inspire continued theorizing and research in this area. The study of established adulthood is in its infancy, and there is much more to be understood. Rapid changes in our economies, families, social contexts, along with changes relating to gender roles and gender identities mean that life tasks and experiences associated with established adulthood will continue to evolve, giving us lot to explore for decades to come.

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