

Rethinking Adult Development: Introduction to the Special Issue

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett
Clark University

Oliver Robinson
University of Greenwich

Margie E. Lachman
Brandeis University

This is the introduction for the special issue of *American Psychologist* titled “Rethinking Adult Development: New Ideas for New Times.” It highlights the main themes of the special issue and discusses the implications of current trends for future directions. Entry to adult family and work roles now comes later than ever before. More adults than in the past remain single, or coupled but “child-free,” and fertility rates have declined, so that caring for children no longer dominates the entirety of adult life. The “knowledge economy” of today takes greater educational preparation and skill development but makes work more cognitively challenging and potentially rewarding than in the past. Adults not only live longer than ever before but are healthier for longer. Likely future trends include greater presence and involvement of grandparents and great-grandparents in children’s lives and greater involvement in paid and unpaid work past age 60. Questions and challenges include continuing changes in the nature of family and work arrangements, as well as time devoted to electronic media use. Altogether, the study of adult development presents a great array of fascinating and important questions for psychological research with implications for interventions and policy.

Keywords: adults, aging, development

This is an auspicious time to focus on adult development. Family life is changing in unprecedented ways, as adults make the most of a wider range of choices for how to construct family life, from gay marriage to single motherhood to marriage without children, among many others. Work is more diverse, and in general jobs are less physically taxing and more cognitively challenging than ever before, presenting both the promise of engaging work and the peril of being unprepared for the rising skill demands of the modern workplace. The entry to stable adult responsibilities comes later than ever before in many countries, but adult development also lasts longer than ever, with adults in developed countries typically

having a life expectancy of at least 20 years beyond age 65. Together, these changes underscore the importance and necessity of developing new theories of adult development and related policies for the decades to come.

This special issue of *American Psychologist* aims to be a landmark contribution that sparks a reassessment and reconceptualization of adult development in light of its current changes and likely future. There were 129 letters of intent submitted in response to the call for proposals, an impressive indicator of enthusiasm for the idea of rethinking adult development. Thirty authors were approved to submit a full article, and following peer review 12 articles were accepted to appear in the special issue. Contributors were encouraged to think boldly and creatively in order to propose new ideas for how to rethink adult development for the next century. The primary goal of the special issue is to draw attention to many different aspects of adult development that are currently changing in fascinating and unprecedented ways and to present new theoretical ideas that will inspire the next generation of research and policy. This introduction presents the main themes covered in the articles of the special issue.

Editor’s note. This article is part of a special issue, “Rethinking Adult Development: New Ideas for New Times,” published in the May–June 2020 issue of *American Psychologist*. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, Margie E. Lachman, and Oliver Robinson served as guest editors of the special issue with Nancy Eisenberg as advisory editor.

Authors’ note.  Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, Department of Psychology, Clark University; Oliver Robinson, School of Human Sciences, University of Greenwich; Margie E. Lachman, Department of Psychology, Brandeis University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, Department of Psychology, Clark University, 950 Main Street, Worcester, MA 01610. E-mail: arnett@jeffreyarnett.com

Structural Changes Underlying the New Adulthood

A key reason for the necessity of rethinking adult development is that the demographics and structure of adult life



**Jeffrey Jensen
Arnett**

have changed so much in the past half century. The next sections present some of the most influential changes.

Changes in the Timing of Milestones of Entry to Adulthood

One of the most vivid indicators of how adult development has changed in recent decades is in the timing and sequencing of milestone events. Most notably, the events that have traditionally marked the transition to adulthood have come later than ever before across countries, including finishing education, obtaining stable work, marriage, and parenthood (Arnett, 2014). In the special issue, the article by Buhler and Nikitin (2020) shows how it is not just the timing of entry to adult family roles that has changed but the expectations for those roles. Analyzing the changes in the historical context of social roles through the past century, they conclude that rising affluence and individualism has resulted in a change of emphasis, especially in romantic relationships, from security and reliability to intimacy and self-realization.

Entry to stable work also comes later than ever before. Today's knowledge economy rewards and often requires the ability to use information and technology, and consequently more emerging adults pursue tertiary education and training than ever before, across countries. As Gerstorf and colleagues (2020) observe in their contribution to the special issue focusing on changes in the historical context of adult development, the expansion of tertiary education has the potential to be a key factor in raising the median level of cognitive achievement throughout adulthood in the 21st century, as early education did in the 20th century. Almeida

and colleagues (2020) found in their article for the special issue that those with higher levels of education reported greater stress than did those with less education. They highlight the importance of considering historical changes in the experience of daily stress, which they found had increased in the United States from 1990 to 2010.

Structural Changes in Family and Work Patterns

Beyond emerging adulthood there have been other changes in the structure of adulthood over the past half century, making it less linear and predictable. The proportion of adults who never have children has grown across developed countries and exceeds 20% in countries such as Austria, Spain, and the United Kingdom (OECD, 2012). The proportion of children born to unmarried mothers has risen even more and now exceeds 40% in many developed countries, including the United States and most northern European countries (Child Trends, 2018; Eurostat, 2019; OECD, 2019e; Wang & Wilcox, 2019). In sum, today's adulthood may or may not include parenthood, and today's parenthood may or may not include marriage. In the special issue, Aurelie Athan (2020) offers a new concept of *reproductive identity* to represent the diverse ways adults today choose whether, when, and in what interpersonal context to have children.

For those who become parents in adulthood, parenting no longer dominates the entirety of adult life as it has through all of human history. Instead, due to a combination of lower fertility rates and longer life expectancy, active parenting is a relatively brief phase of adult life. In the special issue, Mehta and colleagues (2020) present a new conception of ages 30–45, calling it *established adulthood*, to draw attention to the intensity of parenting responsibilities during these years, especially when children are young, and the collision of these responsibilities with the goal of striving to make progress in the career domain. Also in the special issue, Infurna and colleagues (2020) discuss the challenges and opportunities of the middle years of adulthood and suggest that this period should be less defined by chronological age than by the constellation of roles and place in the family and workforce. It is a period marked by a focus of time and effort directed to those younger and older in the family, at work, and in society at large.

Not just in developed countries but worldwide, a norm of about two children per family has been established since the mid-20th century. As recently as 1970, many developing countries had a total fertility rate (TFR) of over five children per woman, but today nearly all have shifted to a TFR about two children per woman (OECD, 2019d). Consequently, according to Mehta and colleagues (2020) in the special issue, parenting no longer dominates adulthood as it did in the past but is mainly concentrated during the years of established adulthood. For most people in developed coun-



Oliver Robinson

tries, emerging adulthood lasts for at least a decade before parenting begins, and parents still have several decades to live after their youngest child reaches adulthood.

Several of the articles in the special issue discuss how changes in the nature of work due to the rise of the knowledge economy influence patterns of work in relation to age, including the articles by [Ackerman and Kanfer \(2020\)](#) and by [Gerstorff and colleagues \(2020\)](#). [Freund \(2020\)](#) depicts ages 30–60 as a time of high work stress that is tolerable in part because of the promise of decades for new directions after retirement. The great majority of adults at the prime working age of 25–54 are employed—about 80%, across developed countries—but variability rises at ages 55–64 and 65-plus. Current rates of labor force participation at ages 65 and over are higher than in the past in some countries but vary from the low single digits in France and Italy to over 20% in Japan, South Korea, Israel, and Chile ([OECD, 2019a](#)). These variations are due in part to differences in retirement laws across countries, from mandatory retirement at age 65 or earlier to voluntary retirement.

Changes in labor force participation by gender are also notable. The trends differ sharply across adulthood for women and men. Since the mid-20th-century, labor force participation has remained high and steady for men at the prime working age period of 25–54 and declined for men ages 55 and over, whereas for women, labor force participation has risen substantially for women ages 25–54 as well as ages 55 and over ([Institute of Medicine, Committee on the Long-Run Macroeconomic Effects of the Aging U.S. Population, 2012](#)). By now, across age groups, labor force participation is similar for men and women, although it is slightly lower for women across countries ([OECD, 2019c](#)).

This is a welcome change signifying greater opportunities for women, but as [Mehta and colleagues \(2020\)](#) point out in the special issue, it also raises the likelihood of a “Care-and-Care-Crunch” of family and work responsibilities for adults in their 30s and 40s. The Crunch also highlights the need for policies to support work–family balance, as [Infurna et al. \(2020\)](#) discuss in the special issue.

A Longer Later Life

Among the most striking changes in the structure of the new adulthood is that it lasts longer than ever before. Life expectancy at age 65 has risen across countries since 1960 and is now over 20 years in most developed countries and approaching 20 years in developing countries such as Mexico and Turkey ([OECD, 2019b](#)). This trend coupled with declining fertility rates has resulted in dramatic increases in the proportion of older adults in developed countries over the past several decades. [Kitayama and colleagues \(2020\)](#) note that the population median ages are rising, with more than 20% over age 65 in Japan and western Europe, and the United States is expected to reach the 20% mark in the next decade. It is important to note that it is not just the quantity of years that is increasing but also the quality of life is improving with a longer health span than ever before, as detailed in the special issue by [Ackerman and Kanfer \(2020\)](#); [Diehl and colleagues \(2020\)](#); [Freund \(2020\)](#); and [Staudinger \(2020\)](#). For most people in developed countries, more than a decade after age 65 comprises “healthy life years” (defined as years without a disability; [OECD, 2013](#)). In the special issue, [Diehl and colleagues \(2020\)](#) call for a “new narrative” of aging that recognizes how declines with age are not inevitable and can often be reversed, and [Staudinger \(2020\)](#) sounds a similar theme underscoring the “positive plasticity” of adult development. [Freund \(2020\)](#) proposes that increased longevity has created a long post-retirement period devoted to the happy pursuit of the items on a “bucket list”. In contrast, [Kitayama and colleagues \(2020\)](#) warn that the current Western cultural imperative to “stay young” may be mismatched with the harsh realities of physical aging for many people and suggest that the Asian emphasis on fulfilling age-graded social roles may be preferable.

Notably, the United States is an outlier among developed countries, with recent declines in life expectancy in midlife and beyond, due mainly to “deaths of despair”: alcohol abuse, suicide, and opioid overdoses ([Case & Deaton, 2017, 2020](#)). In the special issue, [Almeida and colleagues \(2020\)](#) compare national samples of American adults in 1995 and 2012 and report a rise in stress levels over that interval, especially among midlife adults (ages 45–64). Notably, they found the greatest increases among middle-aged adults with low education levels. The sources of these stresses, and their possible connection to the health crisis among midlife Americans, should be explored



**Margie E.
Lachman**

further. [Kitayama and colleagues \(2020\)](#) highlight the importance of considering cultural differences in the psychosocial and emotional experiences of adult development and aging and their implications for health.

One other important structural change in adulthood that should be noted is the growing prevalence of living alone, a topic discussed in the special issue by [Buhler and Nikitin \(2020\)](#). Living alone is especially common among older adults in developed countries. In a comprehensive analysis of living alone at ages 65 and older in 61 developed and developing countries, [Reher and Requena \(2018\)](#) found that rates varied widely, from under 10% in countries such as India and Mali to nearly 50% for women and 25% for men in countries such as Denmark, Finland, and the United Kingdom. People in more affluent countries were more likely to live alone, but cultural beliefs were also important, because rates of living alone were highest in the most individualistic countries and relatively low in affluent countries such as Japan and Spain that value family obligations and interdependence. Although institutional care of older adults has grown, worldwide it is still mainly families, especially adults in middle age, who face the challenge of caring for older adults as they become unable to care for themselves ([Lachman, Teshale, & Agrigoroaei, 2015](#); [Padyab, Reher, Requena, & Sandström, 2019](#)). This topic is sure to loom large in the future as life expectancies continue to rise.

Implications of Recent Trends for the Future of Adulthood

In light of the changes in adult development just described, several forecasts can be made about further changes to come in the course of the coming decades. The most

notable changes are likely in the areas of family, work, and electronic media use.

Further Changes to Marriage and Parenthood and a Larger Role for Grandparents

Regarding family, further changes are likely in both marriage and parenthood, as the articles by [Athan \(2020\)](#) and by [Buhler and Nikitin \(2020\)](#) discuss in the special issue. Traditionally, marriage has been a bond “‘til death do us part” in most cultures. Now, however, with the rise of feminism, less strict division of gender roles, increases in women’s participation in paid work, and the waning of the traditional stigma on divorce, marriage is more often a temporary bond. Will this trend continue in the decades to come? Perhaps, but it does seem to be that humans are the marrying kind, given the universality of marriage across cultures and history and the persistence of widespread marriage into the present despite vast societal changes. Indeed, the scope of marriage has expanded in many countries in recent years as it has become extended to gay and lesbian couples. It seems likely that marriage will continue to be the main social bond of adult life, even as the nature and length of it continue to transform.

As for parenthood, it has already been transformed from an obligation that dominates adult life to a limited phase, preceded by an emerging adulthood of a decade or more and succeeded by several decades of further adult life after one or two children have left home to pursue their own adult paths. Although children are no longer an economic asset but an economic liability in many cultural contexts, most people entering adulthood today in developed countries seek to have children for the emotional and relational rewards ([Kaufmann & Wilcox, 2015](#)). Nevertheless, as [Athan \(2020\)](#) discusses in the special issue, the options that adults have for developing their reproductive identities have expanded greatly in recent decades and include the choice to remain child-free.

The grandparent role is becoming more common and enduring than ever before, and that trend is likely to continue ([Choi, Sprang, & Eslinger, 2016](#)). As life expectancy increases, more people than in the past live long enough and stay healthy enough to be actively involved with their grandchildren and even their great-grandchildren. This is good news for older adults as well as for the younger generations, as discussed by [Infurna et al. \(2020\)](#) in the special issue. Most grandparents greatly value that role and have warm relations with their grandchildren ([Hayslip & Fruhauf, 2019](#)). Meanwhile, parents benefit from the child-care assistance of the grandparents. There is also an increase in the number of custodial grandparents, who are taking on a primary role in raising their grandchildren due to psychological, physical, or financial problems that interfere with the caregiving abilities of the parents ([Choi et al., 2016](#)).

The Workplace of the Future: Benefits and Challenges of the Knowledge Economy

How is work likely to change for adults of the future? Some concern has been expressed in recent years in developed countries that “robots” that perform many current jobs more effectively and cheaply than humans do will soon be created, resulting in rampant unemployment among adults in their prime working years. However, as [Ackerman and Kanfer \(2020\)](#) note in their article in the special issue, this concern has been exaggerated. The technology revolution is not something that will arrive in the future; it is already here. Since 1950, the proportion of jobs in developed countries that involve manufacturing or factory work has diminished from nearly 30% to only 10% ([McGill & Bell, 2013](#)). Many other jobs have been replaced by technology in fields such as banking and telephone services. Yet the unemployment rate for adults in many developed countries has declined, not risen, during this transition. High unemployment rates in some developed countries are due mainly to government policies that favor protections for existing workers over ease of entry into the labor market for new workers, not to the massive elimination of jobs by technology. Technological innovation has long tended to create more jobs than it erases. For example, the number of information and technology workers has increased in the United States by 1,000% since 1970 ([U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2016](#)). Similar statistics are reported in the United Kingdom and elsewhere ([Statista, 2019](#)).

Nevertheless, there are legitimate concerns about challenges in the workplace for the adults of the 21st century, as [Ackerman and Kanfer \(2020\)](#) also acknowledge in the special issue. Specifically, the knowledge economy of the present and future requires cognitive skills and educational preparation ([Hippe & Fouquet, 2018](#)). Adults who have no education or training beyond the secondary level have lost ground in recent decades, because high-paying manufacturing jobs requiring little in the way of cognitive skills are scarce and they are unprepared for the requirements of the best jobs in the knowledge economy. One of the primary policy challenges for the 21st century is to ensure that all adults have a range of educational and training opportunities to prepare themselves for these jobs. It will be necessary for societies to make the investment to provide tertiary education or training for all in the 21st century, just as primary education for all spread in the 19th century and secondary education for all in the 20th century ([Arnett, 2014](#)). Moreover, it would be a wise investment for societies to offer job retraining throughout adulthood to enable workers to advance their skills and continue to work for as long as they choose.

There is also a trend toward delaying retirement or finding new jobs after retirement, not only for economic reasons but to maintain challenge, meaning, and purpose in one’s life ([Munnell, 2015](#); [Pew, 2018](#)). This growing phenomenon is explored in the special issue by [Ackerman and Kanfer \(2020\)](#) and by

[Diehl and colleagues \(2020\)](#). The rise in workforce participation at older ages is due not just to economic rewards but to improvements in health, increases in education, fewer jobs that involve physical demands, and more desirable benefits such as health care for workers ([Coile, 2018](#)). In contrast, retirement often has negative consequences for health and well-being, including declines in cognitive functioning ([Pew, 2018](#); [Rohwedder & Willis, 2010](#)). A longer work life can have benefits not only for the aging individual but also for society in that older workers continue to pay into the national pension system, helping to keep it solvent. For those who decide not to remain in the workforce, it is important for them to find alternative ways to remain active and engaged physically, socially, and cognitively.

Growing Dominance of Electronic Media Use, With What Consequences?

Finally, a key transformation of adult life that is currently under way and likely to continue to remain important in the future involves the role of electronic media use, as [Hulur and colleagues \(2020\)](#) explore in the special issue. The authors examine the extent to which adults use electronic media to establish and enhance their social relationships and to what extent their electronic media use interferes with or displaces face-to-face relationships. Thus far, most research on electronic media use has focused on children and adolescents, but there are important unanswered questions that pertain to adults. What is so rewarding about electronic media use that adults choose to spend an overwhelming proportion of their time engaging in it? What psychological strategies do makers of electronic media content employ to draw in users and keep them engaged? What are the cognitive and social consequences of adults’ electronic media use? Given the pervasiveness of electronic media use among adults, this topic should be high on the list of research enterprises for psychologists interested in understanding adult development in the century to come.

Conclusion

The goal of this special issue is to serve as a launching pad for innovative new research exploring the many provocative questions raised by the rapid changes occurring today in adult development worldwide. The articles in this special issue present a diverse array of ideas and questions on a broad array of topics to guide future research. In adult development as in other areas, psychological research in the decades to come needs to include more attention to the patterns that occur in the majority world. This special issue will hopefully mark the beginning of a new era of research on adult development that is creative and internationally diverse.

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