

## THE LIMINALITY OF ADOLESCENCE BECOMING AN ADULT FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE THEORY OF THE RITE OF PASSAGE

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### Abstract

Adolescence and becoming an adult have been frequently analysed by the developmental psychology of life stages of the man. In descriptions of these life stages, psychological categories such as developmental crisis, identity transformation and initiation all intertwine.

In the text, I combine the psychological theories that describe adolescence with the theory of rites of passage according to Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner.

**Keywords:** adolescence, "emerging adulthood", rites of passage

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Out of all the stages of human life that are analysed by developmental psychology, it is adolescence and initiation in adulthood that are mostly popular among readers. In describing these stages of life, psychological categories that intertwine are developmental crisis, identity transformation and initiation.

In this paper I pose a question on how this human development stage proceeds in the contemporary world. In search of answers, I apply the theory of rites of passage, especially the liminality as described by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, to the psychological description of adolescence and "emerging adulthood" (Arnett daty).

### 2. RITES OF PASSAGE ACCORDING TO ARNOLD VAN GENNEP AND VICTOR TURNER

Rites of passage accompany changes that occur in the lives of individuals. These changes apply to the roles, status and social position that one has. It is Arnold van Gennep who is thought to be the author of the theory of rites. The author understood them as "ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another" (van Gennep, 2006, p. 37). By claiming that it is possible to notice the rhythm and sequentiality similar to the one that the universe is based on, Gennep perceives human life not as a *continuum*, but as a sequence of leaps (passages) from one state to another.

Van Gennep's most important contribution to the theory of rites is considered to be his differentiation between and description of their stages. According to van Gennep, the passage happens in three stages, one out of which the second one is a moment of a momentary suspension between stage one and two. Van Gennep (2006, p. 45) called these phases: preliminal (separation), liminal (threshold), postliminal (incorporation). He perceived each of these stages both as a part of a whole and as a separate rite. Thus, he wrote about three subcategories of rites of passage: rites of separation, threshold (marginal) and incorporation (integration) (van Gennep, 2006, p. 36).

What is the clue of the ritual process as described by van Gennep? In order for an individual's role or social status to be changed, it has to be separated from the "old world" at the beginning. Their status is for some time suspended between the old and the new role, between the old and new identity. Finally, incorporation in the "new world" occurs. One of the examples given by the author are the rites related to pregnancy and labour. A woman that becomes pregnant is excluded from her previous status but is not a mother yet. Pregnancy is a *liminal* phase – a period of preparation to accept a new role, the role of a mother (van Gennep, 2006, p. 64). Van Gennep indicated that in case of various rituals various phases can be more stressed. Funeral rites are focused on separation; wedding rites are focused on incorporation; and in the rites of maturity and entering adulthood, that interest me most in this paper, the *liminal* threshold phase is

very visible (Gluckman, 1962, p. 3) . Many authors that are dedicated to rites of passage (e.g. Eliade or Turner) stress the latter, the initiation practices, as the most important among all rites of passage.

One of the most important followers of van Gennep's concepts was Victor Turner. His theses can be treated as a milestone towards adapting the concept of "the rites of passage" in psychology and pedagogy, because he indicated their educational and individual-creating potential, which will be developed here later on. It was also him who considered rites of passage as a three-stage process (Turner, 2010). He wrote: "the sequentiality of rite has an inherent character and should be taken into account in its every definition" (Turner, 2005, p.131). So far research into rites was rather focused on their connection with keeping social order, thus the phases of separation and re-establishing the structure. It was Turner who pointed the attention of researchers into primary societies towards the liminal phase (transition, threshold phase, suspension of the structure).

### 3. LIMINALITY IN INITIATION CEREMONIES

Turner combines two notions: *societas*, or society and *communitas*. *Societas* has a structure (and its members have their positions in the structure), and there are rules and law that are binding in this types of social relations. *Communitas* is a society without a structure. It appears wherever a social structure is hidden (Turner, 2010, p. 139). As Turner wrote, *communitas* means being on the edges of structure, in its interstices or on its most inferior levels (Turner, 2010, p. 138). As the author claims, "in the liminal phases of ritual, one often finds a simplification, even elimination, of social structure in the British sense and an amplification of structure in Lévi-Strauss's sense. We find social relationships simplified, while myths and rites proliferate" (Turner, 2010, p. 168). The intensification of rites in the middle phase of rites of passage is justified: this phase is the most dangerous, mysterious, and going through it successfully is a prerequisite for completing the entire rite successfully. If we compare, as van Gennep did, the rites of passage with two competing powers, the powers themselves are less interesting than what happens at the point where they meet. Existing between is dangerous because two equal liminal entities function outside the structure and their rules. They have no rights, and they also are not limited in any way, either. These entities "elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (Turner, 2010, p. 116). And what cannot be classified brings about fear. Tokarska-Bakir notices that "traditional rites of passage are carried out smoothly only when the structure is strong enough to afford liminal questioning and renewal. Wherever the structure becomes weakened, the marginal period gets monstrous until it transforms itself into a new structure" (Tokarska-Bakir, 2010, p. 24).

Liminal entities have many features that are considered negative. As community is the point of reference, adepts in the liminal period are outside the society. They create a community of equals, because they are equally deprived of differences (Tokarska-Bakir, 2010, p. 19). People who are in the transitory phase are similar to one another due to the state of suspension "between this and that" ("neither here nor there") (Turner, 2004, p. 241). Liminal beings "have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system (...) nothing that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes" (Turner, 2004, p. 241). In societies where the gender translates into the position the entity has in the social structure liminal beings are perceived either as asexual or bisexual. During rites of passage, adepts are also made similar to one another with regard to how they were treated by their community; they were totally submitted to this community and its will (Turner, 1987, p. 6). For it to be fully completed, they were withdrawn from their earlier positions, habits and thoughts. "In the liminal phase, a neophyte is like a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate where the knowledge and wisdom of the group is written down with regard to the new status" (Turner, 2004, p. 247). The uniqueness of this stage consists in suspending the rules, rights and regulations. This situation has both pros and cons: on the one hand, adepts are weakened because they have no rights; on the other hand, they are exempted from duties (Turner, 1974, s. 59).

As mentioned before, a neophyte is not "here" anymore, but they are not "there" yet, either. They are thus not obliged to follow any rules that describe "here" or refer to "there". "During the entire novitiate, the usual economic and legal ties are modified, sometimes broken altogether. The novices are outside society, and society has no power over them, especially since they are actually sacred and holy, and therefore untouchable and dangerous, just as gods would be" (van Gennep, 2006, pp. 125-126). The suspension of rules leads to abuses, which are sanctioned as a ritual norm in some communities. Among others, van Gennep refers to the example of young Wai in Liberia who steal in their period of novitiate, and they do so led by their tutors (van Gennep, 2006, p. 126). Such behaviour, however, does not have the hallmarks of a crime or offence, because (from the point of view of the logics of rites) they are ritual activities, a tradition that serves to maintain the continuity of experience and social bond. The paradox of activities directed against a community that in fact are beneficial for this community ceases to be a paradox only when it is explained

from the perspective of the three-phase theory of rites of passage. In Poland, especially in Silesia and Great Poland, there is a tradition of the so-called *Portelabend*<sup>1</sup> on the day before the wedding. Neighbours and friends of the bride and groom come to their house, break glass and bring scrap metal. The young couple has to clean this mess up, and the uninvited guests (nobody invites anyone to the *Portelabend*) are invited to have some alcohol and sweets. As Dorota Simonides, a Silesian folklorist, states, the breaking of glass symbolises the best wishes for happiness, and the noise is supposed to scare the powers of evil away (Simonides, 1998, s. 89). However, it is also possible to find a ritual suspension of rules in this tradition (similarly to the nowadays popular hen and stag parties that often abound in lewd games); a suspension between the state of a single person and a spouse. Just like in the case of the above-mentioned ritual thefts, the noise and mess on the bride and groom's grounds, which would normally be a reason for an intervention by appropriate authorities, are in fact desired by many families that cultivate this tradition (especially in the country where the traditional rites are much richer than those in cities).

The chaos of the suspension phase directs our attention towards one of the most elementary functions of the rites of passage according to van Gennep. After all, they are an arrangement of the unarranged. After a period without rules, neophytes move to the third phase, gain a new status and, together with it, rights, duties and rules that they submit to. At this point, it is again worth recalling the views of M. Eliade, an author who dedicated a lot of his writings to initiation rites. He perceives the rites of passage among primitive peoples as a reproduction of cosmogony that always begins with returning to chaos (Eliade, 1997, s. 11). Chaos and a symbolic death are the beginning of a new life. Eliade underlines the radicalism of "archaic mentality", obsession of an absolute beginning that does not allow the thought of a new beginning if what is old has not been definitively refuted (Eliade, 1997, s. 12).

When considering the course of traditionally described initiation rituals, it is worth mentioning the educational function that is particularly characteristic of them and their relation to executing power. As far as van Gennep is concerned, these issues are read "between the lines", because they are not taken up explicitly. However, they are exposed by other authors dedicated to these topics. In Durkheim's theory, the presence of rites of passage was a consequence of the fact that "the *sacrum* and *profanum* objects can switch from one world to the other" (Jerzak-Gierszewska, 1995, p.112). These objects are usually clearly separated, and thus switching between them (for example entering the *sacrum* sphere) requires a ritual. It is "the way of carrying out this transition that reflects the essence of the duality of these two spheres" (Durkheim, 1990, p. 34). From this perspective, initiation is an introduction to religious life. Unlike van Gennep, Durkheim stressed the aspect of power that is manifested in the rites of passage. Those who participate in the rituals are characterised with enhanced social awareness during the rituals: "all those present felt that they were one unified and ultimately undifferentiated mass" (Parkin, 2007, p. 198). It is a moment that can be used for a persuasive transmission of values. As Robert Parkin writes, Durkheim perceives this as a situation where knowledge transforms into power and the symbolism of rite masks this power effectively (Parkin, 2007, p. 198).

When referring to the rites of passage, B. Malinowski uses the notion of "intensive education of religious character" (Malinowski, 1990, p. 418). The community makes an effort and takes pains, "mobilises and sets in motion its authority to bear witness to the power and reality of the things revealed" (Malinowski, 1990, p. 418). The rite of passage is supposed to be a strong experience, because then the conflict that inevitably accompanies this situation (new privileges bring about temptations, and duties cause anxieties) is "rightly" solved, i.e. according to tradition and rules that regulate social life. The educational function is especially combined with initiation rites through which young people are introduced to the world of adults. In the liminal phase of tribal rites, adepts were encouraged (or forced) to ponder on the society they were to become part of.

#### **4. LIMINOIDALITY: A CHARACTERISTIC TRAIT OF THE CONTEMPORARY TRANSITION FROM ADOLESCENCE TO ADULTHOOD**

With regard to contemporaneity one can talk about permanent liminality, or a fashion for liminality (Matthews, 2008). In fact it was Turner himself who gave examples of contemporary institutionalisation of liminality or manifestations of "liminal pedagogy" (ensuring liminal experiences to people from higher social spheres for educational reasons). When developing his own theses, the anthropologist came to a conclusion that the notion of *liminality* did not fully match the description of contemporaneity. Thus, he introduced the category of *liminoidality* to social sciences.

<sup>1</sup>This custom comes from Germany, and its name can be translated literally as "a noisy evening".

Why is the description of contemporaneity not satisfied with liminality? Turner answers this question by differentiating between the notions he uses. First of all, liminality is of group character, whereas liminoidality can be individualized. Secondly, the cyclical character of liminal phenomena that is compliant with the natural and social flows opposes the contemporary forms of suspending rules that are characterized with some continuity, and not rhythm, but at the same time with fragmentary and experimental nature (Turner, 1974, p. 85). Another important distinction is the following: while liminal experiences are ultimately meant to serve a compensation function, bring us closer to solving the social drama, liminoidality is linked to notions such as criticism and even revolution (Maxwell, 2008). As Grzegorz Godlewski writes, liminoidal situations have the same energy of antistructurality and transformation power as the liminal ones, yet the energy is not used to reconstruct the social order, "but it becomes an instrument of subversion that stimulates the ways of thinking, feeling and actions that are alternative to the binding order" (Godlewski, 2009, p. 169). Turner has a very broad understanding of liminoidality. For example, he includes in it science and its agendas, such as high schools, where experimental cognitive behaviours exist. He also refers to forms of symbolic actions that resemble some of those found in tribal societies, such as entertainment (e.g. sport or carnival) (Turner, 1974, s. 65). Liminoidal phenomena are also distinguished by voluntary participation and lack of utilitarian aims, and in this sense they can be viewed as an expression of the structure suspension. They become a part of individual freedom of an entity and a rise to their self-perfection (Turner, 1974, s. 68).

Turner indicates what the difference is between the threshold phase of rituals characteristic for tribal and contemporary societies. While in case of the former everything that happens in this phase of the ritual is an indisputable duty, *liminoidality* has an instilled optionality (Turner, 1974, p. 74). The anthropologist notes that he cannot imagine that someone would refuse to perform any of the ritual acts during the rites of passage of Ndembu or other peoples that he described. At present, we ourselves design the passages that we experience and liminality of growing up is not a stage between clearly defined "there" and precisely stated "here". Being in the phase of suspension becomes a conscious choice, a form of protest or something that people are condemned to by the society that does not offer them any other options. Initiation rituals that in tribal societies were points in time (for example, one day a young man was an adept, and the next day he was assumed to be an adult) survived into the 20<sup>th</sup> century in contemporary societies, though naturally in a completely different form. One of them was the ritual of getting married. "In other places and times, the crossing of the threshold to adulthood has been relatively clear, with the focus on a single event: marriage (...) Becoming an adult today means becoming *self sufficient*, learning to stand alone as an independent person. There are three criteria at the heart of emerging adults' views of the self-sufficiency required for adulthood: *taking responsibility for yourself*, *making independent decisions*, and *becoming financially independent*" (Arnett, 2004, pp. 208-209; compare with Arnett, 2001, p. 134). Nowadays, initiation rites have thus become quests, oftentimes many years long, of one's own place in the universe. A successful completion of this phase of growth depends on completing many developmental tasks. "The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a critical developmental period involving the completion of education, entry into the adult work world, and pursuit of romantic intimacy" (Chow, Krahn and Galambos, 2014, p. 1102).

## 5. "EMERGING ADULTHOOD" AS A CATEGORY FOR DESCRIBING THE CONTEMPORARY TIMES

By adapting E. Erikson's theory of extending adolescence and moratorium, the American psychologist Jeffrey J. Arnett (2000) proposed to differentiate a new phase in human development: emerging adulthood (18-25/29 years of age). This category entered the psychological language for good, because it is more successful at capturing what happens with young people in this phase than adolescence and early adulthood. "Emerging adulthood is preferable because it is a new term for a new phenomenon" (Arnett, 2007, p. 70). People in this phase are not adolescents anymore, but they are not yet young adults. "Part of the definition of emerging adulthood is that it is a period of being in between adolescence and young adulthood, a period of being in the process of reaching adulthood but not there yet" (Arnett, 2004, s. 207.). As Arnett describes it, "as recently as 1970 the typical 21-year-old was married or about to be married, caring for a newborn child or expecting one soon, done with education or about to be done, and settled into a long-term job or the role of full-time mother. Young people of that time grew up quickly and made serious enduring choices about their lives at a relatively early age. Today, the life of a typical 21-year-old could hardly be more different. Marriage is at least five years off, often more. Ditto parenthood. Education may last several more years, through an extended undergraduate program—the "four-year degree" in five, six, or more—and perhaps graduate or professional school. Job changes are frequent, as young people look for work that will not only pay well but will also be personally fulfilling" (Arnett, 2004, p. 3)

Lipska and Zagórska (2011), Polish researchers, compare Arnett's proposal with van Gennepp's theory of rites of passage. "This period, *emerging adulthood*, is neither adolescence nor young adulthood but is theoretically and empirically distinct from them both. Emerging adulthood is distinguished by relative independence from social roles and from normative expectations. Having left the dependency of childhood and adolescence, and having not yet entered the enduring responsibilities that are normative in adulthood, emerging adults often explore a variety of possible life directions in love, work, and worldviews"(Arnett, 2000, p. 469).

If we compare the contemporary understanding of liminality/liminoidality with the phase of rites of passage of tribal communities, we will notice that today the participation of the community in this process is different. Young people have to rely on their own strength and strategies (Cybal-Michalska, 2013, p.200). "Liminal entities" used to be looked after by the community. Those who deprived adepts of identity at the same time, through ritual activities, ensured them safety – it was known where from, where to and by whom the adept was led. When "assigning roles" and radical collectivism are replaced by searching, creating, individualisation (Lipska and Zagórska, 2011, p. 16)., not only the sense of self-determination that is beneficial from the point of view of development, but also the burden of responsibility for one's own transformation fall on the individual. "Currently, nobody organises the process of 'becoming an adult' for young people" (Lipska and Zagórska, 2011, p. 18). The state of status suspension can be accompanied by a feeling of loneliness<sup>2</sup>. As B. Stephenson (2006, s. 59) claims, becoming an adult used to be identified with a deep emotional and spiritual transformation, and communities inspired curiosity in adolescents, which was necessary for entering the world of adults with courage. Today, the excess information that is provided on adult life is more terrifying than encouraging to take up any action (Stephenson, 2006, s. 67). The moment of passage is not homogenous; frequently it is a period of many months of searching for a job, long, often unpaid internships that in fact are not gainful employment or its lack, periods of unemployment, studying many subjects simultaneously, changes of plans and turnabouts in the career.

One can follow Arnett and ask if the phenomenon of adulthood is positive or negative. Both in the social and individual dimension. The researcher notices both a potential and a threat in it. "The fact that it takes longer to reach full adulthood today than it did in the past has been subject to various interpretations, mostly negative. In American popular media, the term 'quarter life crisis' has been coined to describe the alleged difficulties experienced by emerging adults as they try to find a place in the adult world. Within academia, some sociologists have asserted that higher ages of marriage and parenthood indicate that 'growing up is harder to do' than in the past" (Arnett, 2007, p. 70). On the other hand, young people consciously decide to delay adulthood, and they tend to use rather than waste the time that is their experience. According to Arnett's research, 75% of Americans at the age of 30 are married, have children and are financially independent. Thus, taking up responsibility is not postponed endlessly. What is more, this responsibility is taken up with full awareness. 90% of 30-year-old subjects describes their state as full adulthood; they do not have a feeling of "being between" (Arnett, 2007, p. 72). Therefore if well thought-out, conscious decisions are a consequence of emerging adulthood, both the individual and society benefit from it, because it is possible to count on a greater stability and durability of the obligations taken in this way. On the other hand, the requirements of 30-year-olds are different than those of youngsters. As Arnett describes it: "emerging adults' expectations for love and work tend to be extremely high—not just a reliable marriage partner but a "soul mate," not just a steady job but a kind of work that is an enjoyable expression of their identity—and if happiness is measured by the distance between what we expect out of life and what we get, emerging adults' high expectations will be difficult for real life to match" (Arnett, 2007, p. 72).. Besides, from the point of view of the society, the time of emerging adulthood can be an unproductive time that will also be abundant in risky behaviours. Yet, this also has its good sides: "adolescence and emerging adulthood are a time of life with a pronounced openness to diverse cultural beliefs and behaviours" (Arnett and Arnett, 2012, p. 475). Young adults are expected to enter some roles (of a spouse, parent, employee), and accepting and carrying them out according to social expectations is awarded, whereas on the contrary ignoring them is

<sup>2</sup>J. Allan and P. Dyck underline that with respect to this, contemporary times are a unique historical period; never before had young people been left alone to themselves to experiment with their own emerging adulthood (J. Allan and P. Dyck, *Transition from Childhood to Adolescence: Developmental Curriculum*, in: V. Turner, *Betwixt and Between: the Liminal Period in Rites of Passage*, in: *Betwixt and Between. Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation*, ed. L. C. Mahdi, S. Foster, M. Little, Open Court Publishing, Illinois 1987, p. 25). Instead, we deal with the professionalization of the youth liminality – e.g. survival camps or expeditions are organized where experiences are provided that imitate initiation into adulthood (compare with S. Larson, L. Martin, *Risk Taking and Rites of Passage*, Reclaiming Children and Youth, 2012, volume 20, no 4).

punished (Parker, Lüdtke, Trautwein and Roberts, 2012, p. 1066). In this sense, there can be tensions between an individual in a transitory phase and the whole society. Adolescence and emerging adulthood are a sensitive period. Young people are then exposed to, for example, the occurrence or emergence of mental illnesses or disorders, such as nutritional disorders. It is linked to the intensity of searching for one's own identity and the need to tackle the reality (see MacLeod, Brownlie, 2014, s. 78.).

Thus, there is no unambiguous answer to the question of whether "emerging adulthood" is a positive phenomenon or not. Solving a liminal conflict may be an indicator; if it leads to rejoining, the process can be considered to be successful. Then the length of the liminal phase is less important. What is more, "the transition to adulthood takes place for most people, not only as defined by transition events but also by a more subjective sense of having reached adulthood" (Arnett, 2007, p. 69). It is thus also important what the subjective feeling of young people is, as they call themselves adults after an intense period of identity formation. This feeling cannot be shaped in a person as a result of several hours of rituals, thus in this sense from the point of view of development contemporary rituals are surely more beneficial than those described by researchers into tribal societies.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

1) The more modern the society, the fewer rites linked to "becoming an adult"; however, E. Erikson's thesis that solving an identity crisis requires a ritual inclusion or adjournment is still valid. Becoming an adult is thus of a ritual character.

2) The alternative to the initiation rites of primitive societies that were described by V. Turner or M. Eliade is a period of moratorium that is currently substantially prolonged, identified with the liminal phase of rites of passage (called a ritual adjournment after Erikson). It is liminality (or, as Turner has it, liminoidality) itself that becomes a rite, or remaining in the transitory state observed in contemporary societies. Sense of adulthood is influenced both psychological and contextual factors. Quoting Jeffrey J. Arnett, this phenomenon can be called "emerging adulthood" or a ritual adjournment in time of the moment of starting a family and transition from education to the job market.

3) Apart from a prolonged liminal phase, contemporary rites of passage also differ from those described in traditional anthropological approaches in the reduced participation in this process of the community. It is individualism that is stressed. Young people have to rely on their own strength and strategies. "Role assigning" and radical collectivism are replaced with quests for identity, self-creation and individualization. As a result, it is not only the feeling of self-determination – beneficial from the point of view of development – but also the burden of responsibility for one's own transformation that fall on the individual. In the world of today, no-one organizes the process of "becoming adults" for the young. The state of a suspended status may be accompanied by a feeling of loneliness, which may also make it difficult for the process of change to be successfully completed.

4) It is difficult to clearly evaluate the level to which this phenomenon of "emerging adulthood" is beneficial, and to which level it has a negative impact on individuals and societies that surround it. However, it can be definitely stated that the emerging adulthood is a result of combining the features of an individual and conditions of the modern world that fosters liminality, thus this phenomenon is unavoidable.

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