

To Be, Or Not to Be an Adult, That Is the Question

Abstract: “What is it to become a mature, psychologically healthy adult within today’s society?” This strikes me as a useful question for contemporary psychotherapists and supervisors to consider. As a humanistic, ‘developmentally based, relationally focused’ (Erskine 2019) integrative psychotherapist working in private practice with adults in the UK, helping the individual grow their adult has become increasingly figural in my work. As clinicians we seek to practise with the best interests of the people we work with (UKCP 2019) and I believe safeguarding the individual’s autonomy and helping them learn to seize and safeguard their own autonomy is in their best interest, especially amidst the complexities of contemporary society. Drawing on my personal and professional experience, including my work with clients, supervisees, and psychotherapist groupwork participants, I explore the question of what it means to become an adult and seek to indicate some of the qualities associated with adulting. From a humanistic-integrative perspective I share how bringing attention to ‘growing the adult’ - one of four equally important lenses I utilise in my work - can be used to help people grasp their autonomy and grow towards maturity.

Key words: becoming an adult; maturity; developmental; humanistic; relational; integrative.

Introduction

“We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we first started and know the place for the first time” (Eliot 1942).

What it to be an adult is something we consider early on our lives. I remember as a child of 8 feeling exasperated with my parents who I judged to not be behaving like adults. It is curious that even young children can have this internal sense of what it is and is not, to be an adult. The question of what it means for someone to be and feel like an adult continued to dance around my mind and over the past decade the question has edged forward into my clinical work. As a psychotherapist I work with a range of adults, including other psychotherapists who are as likely as the next person to report feelings of imposter syndrome. They speak about looking like an

adult but often feeling like a child; a state many of us know well. As Sarner wondered in her 2022 book *When I Grow Up*, 'So what to make of this hybrid, both-and-neither, not-quite grown-up state?' (Sarner 2022:1). In my work, I've explored the same question. The fact that this sentiment is voiced with such regularity leads me to remember and reflect on how our most formative years are in fact lived as children. As the late poet and philosopher O'Donohue (2008) said 'no matter how mature and adult and sophisticated a person might seem, that person is still essentially an ex-baby'. Nothing of our formative experience is lost; as Gerhardt (2004:15) wrote, 'we may not be able to consciously recall any of it, yet it is not forgotten because it is built into our organism and informs our expectations and behaviour'.

As adults we are continually faced with the challenge of recalibrating; consciously reviewing our expectations and behaviours. It's as if we need to continually press our internal refresh button so that we can see and live things forward from a more choiceful adult perspective. Our experience over many years of being a dependent child retains an enduring presence and this inevitably impacts our ability to take hold of our autonomy when we develop into a biological adult. Perhaps the many complexities of modern society make it even more of a challenge to move from a state of dependency towards a state of interdependence (Winnicott 1965: 84). Psychotherapy can offer a relational space to grapple with the many internal and external challenges involved in growing up. In this way the individual can begin to appreciate and work with the fact that as an individual they are, to a significant extent, conditioned by society.

Within the process of this inquiry, I was impacted afresh by the many versions of what it is to be an adult. Our adult years present adult shaped challenges, with options - perhaps more options that we can process - as well as constraints. Also, as Winnicott (1965:90) observed, 'there are big possibilities for setback'; even mature adults are vulnerable to setbacks and require support to recover. In the ordinary run of everyday life none of us are adult all the time and the pull towards earlier versions of ourselves is an ever-present dynamic. As Sarner (2022:11) writes, adulthood is 'less a set of achievements or social markers, and more a texture of life, a complex state that emerges gradually, continuously shape shifting'.

The journey towards adult maturity never ends and but it's acquisition can perhaps be gauged through the presence of certain psychological qualities. Identifying what these qualities are and exploring the implications of these qualities for the practice of psychotherapy is the focus of this inquiry. Ultimately, I seek to inspire you to reconsider what it means to become an adult and to consider how this question might impact your professional practice.

To be or not to be adult

Human beings are very different from one another, a reflection of our unique and very specific starting points in life, including inherited characteristics and traits, relational resources, and social privilege. All these specificities impact how a person can grapple with the task of growing up into a mature adult. These childhood discrepancies often lay behind an individual's need to access psychotherapy and sometimes the mature adult faces events which are just plain overwhelming, and help is needed to recover.

For example, Ava (not her real name) was 23 when we started working together and she is now 28 and we still work together. Ava tells me that I am the most consistent, wise, trustworthy adult in her life, providing her with what Bowlby (1988:152) referred to as a 'secure base'. I am a place where she can rest; consider options, priorities and make choices; review; dream; explore possibilities; process anger, disappointment, regret, and failure. A place where she can learn how to look after herself and navigate relationships. Ava's family moved regularly in her growing up years, and she went to several schools. Her parents worked hard and were functioning alcoholics. Despite their love for Ava, Ava's 'relational needs' (Erskine 2015) were consistently overlooked. Ava entered adult life early at 16 when she left home. A decade later Ava still struggles to look after herself. Ava does not feel like a grown-up and is confused about wanting or not wanting the traditional demographic milestones associated with adulthood. This confusion, faced by many young adults, is examined in detail by Cepa and Furstenberg's (2020) writing from a US perspective. They highlight how the 'transition to adulthood behaviours [has] changed across gender and social class. Yet it is unclear whether these changes reflect a corresponding shift in beliefs' concerning what it means to be an adult. In my clinical experience this phenomenon impacts adults of all ages. A person I work

with in their 80's continues to grapple with paths taken and the consequences there of. Many of the people I work with experience this conundrum as a profoundly uncomfortable, confused, and anxious feeling at the core of their identity that contributes to not feeling like an adult and to feeling 'shame bound' (Bradshaw 2005).

Ava's experience typifies the inner landscape of many of the people I work with, whether they be clients, supervisees, or psychotherapist groupwork participants and regardless of age or position relative to societal milestones. The lack of a mature, consistent, engaged, and engaging adult in the lives of many people means they have no consistent adult to turn to, and no mature adult to identify with, try on for size, and internalise. Many people do not have anyone who can help them feel their way into their own unique adulthood. This lack of a healthy adult role model can contribute to the individual's difficulty moving from a child's perspective to a more consistent adult way of relating. It contributes to the difficulties many people have in safeguarding themselves within relationships and much of what society offers does not manifest adult qualities. Despite their age they don't 'feel' like a grown-up and often feel like their 'wounded inner child' – a metaphor I explore below – and/or like society is in charge of them, and they are relegated to the passenger seat in their own life. 'To be, or not to be an adult' becomes an important question for young and old alike and for us as psychotherapists if we are to be responsive to the needs of the people we work with. The question of what it means to be an adult is something most people grapple with repeatedly. With this comes the question of how to step into the driving seat of their life. Helping people understand and practise moving up and down the gears according to their internal and the external terrain has become an increasingly important part of my work as a psychotherapist.

The question of what it is to be an adult may be simply answered by saying a human being in UK society becomes an adult when they turn 18. In some ways this 'easy answer' (Sarner 2022:15) is not as simplistic as first appears. To say that a person is an adult at 18 equates to legal and political rights and responsibilities that are afforded to an individual based solely on age rather than status, merit, or maturity. Turning 18 means being able to determine the shape of one's own life, albeit within the context of internal and external constraints like the law. We can therefore

enthusiastically embrace the idea that 18 is the socially contracted age at which adulthood begins. At the same time, it is important to realise that 18 marks the beginning of a long and winding path; as Winnicott (1965) writes, 'Adults must be expected to be continuing the process of growing, and growing up, since they do but seldom reach to full maturity'. Perhaps being a mature adult is ultimately best considered as aspirational, a trajectory.

Growing the adult: part 1

The question of what it means to become a mature, healthy adult has come to take on a specific shape in my work. This response reflects both my context of practice as a private psychotherapist and the type of people I work with and their social context. Context of practice inevitably makes a difference to how we work. I mostly meet people weekly for one hour, sometimes for half a year, sometimes for a decade. Within my own constraints I seek to be as responsive to the needs of the person I am working with; this might mean working weekly, twice weekly, fortnightly, intermittently or all the aforesaid over the period of working together. My humanistic values mean I want to honour what the client needs and prefers; I want to embody a respect for their autonomy. Obviously, discussions may need to take place, but I seek to have these discussions from an 'adult-to-adult' position; this involves understanding and working with transference dynamics in an explicit and non-regressing way. It is possible and arguably beneficial to the work with what Clarkson (2003:152) refers to as the 'real relationship' most of the time and not wait for it to 'emerge and deepen towards the completion of the psychotherapeutic process'.

It seems to me that people invest in therapy because they want help to better live their 'one wild and precious life' (Oliver 1992). What 'better' means will reflect the unique personality and situation of the individual at this specific point in their life. Therapy may include helping someone recover from adverse childhood experiences with a focus on what I call their 'wounded inner child', a haunting and impactful state hung-over from childhood experiences. However, I believe working with the client to recover from childhood wounds does not necessarily involve a regressing child-parent relationship. Within the therapeutic relationship nurturing does not necessarily mean (re)parenting. The individual qua adult is in the best place possible

to grieve what they never had growing up and come to terms with what they had but didn't want. Help always seems to involve a deeply interpersonal encounter with me as their therapist, where they as an individual feel actively supported to become centre stage in their own adult life. It is therefore important that in my role as psychotherapist I notice, amplify into awareness, and celebrate the individual's capacity to occupy their most adult self. Helping a person at once discover and create themselves, helping them to shape a life that accords with their deepest values and needs, is a work of empowerment. This doesn't mean recalling how the adult client felt as a child is not useful, but I have come to picture therapy as providing a place where a person, from an adult perspective, can be helped to explore and experiment with what is needed now in order to recover from childhood wounds and navigate the many adult challenges of being in the world today.

An integrative approach

Over the past decade I have developed a clinical approach which seeks to reflect these insights. The approach has four equal domains which indicate territory to be explored.

- 1) Grow the adult.
- 2) Liberate the eternal inner child.
- 3) Locate and reconnect lovingly with all the wounded inner child parts.
- 4) When all three domains are worked on this leads to enhanced self-realisation.

Each domain acts as a lens which, when worked with simultaneously, help the therapist help the individual develop more ownership of themselves within their unique givens. Although 'growing the adult' is the specific lens considered in this paper, I will briefly outline the other lenses because the approach requires working with all four lenses equally.

Liberating the 'eternal inner child'

In my experience this lens seeks to get a taste for the unique essence of the individual in all their specificity and aliveness. As Donohue says (2008), 'Your identity is not equivalent to your biography, and there is a place in you where you have never been wounded, where there is still a sureness in you, where there is a seamlessness in you, and where there is a confidence and tranquillity in you'. Inquiry into this

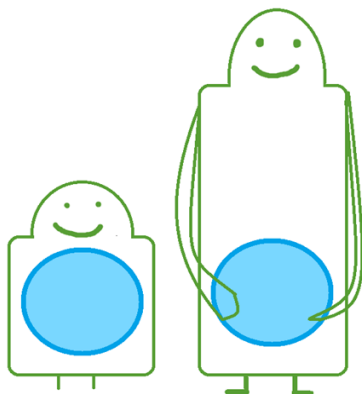
domain helps bring to the surface the vitality and uniqueness of the individual as they journey towards their own version of maturity.

Liberating the 'eternal inner child' includes getting a sense of:

- 1) The historic child, with their innate temperament; neurodiversity; gender; sexuality.
- 2) Their own and others dignity, including their innate sense of fairness; freedom; autonomy; choice.
- 3) Their 'inherited growth tendency' (Winnicott 1988b:12); vitality; spontaneity.
- 4) Their imagination; curiosity; creativity; awe; spirituality.

Connecting with the 'wounded inner child'.

The 'wounded inner child' is a metaphor pointing to the lingering here-and-now states cooked up in the past by adverse childhood experiences. Working with a 'paradoxical theory of change' perspective (Beisser 1970) it's as if the 'wounded inner child' part stays static and isn't even expected to recover.



In contrast the whole person as an adult grows bigger. It is the here-and-now adult who learns to identify their wounded inner child states, responds to themselves lovingly, and takes affirmative action so that this part is contained in the passenger seat. This concept is an adaptation of Tonkin's (1996) 'Fried Eggs Model of Grief'.

Moving toward self-realisation

The final of the four lenses comes from Horney's view of 'self-realisation'. According to Horney (1950:332), 'Self-realization does not exclusively, or even primarily, aim at the developing of one's special gifts. The centre of the process is the evolution of one's potentialities as a human being; hence it involves – in a central place – the development of one's capacities for good human relations'. I think Horney's understanding creates a framework, without being overly prescriptive, for the individual to further reflect on what it means for them to become a mature adult.

Taken together all four lenses help me as a psychotherapist work with the whole, unique named individual with an emphasis on supporting their growth as a here-and-now adult within the context of their life.

My psychotherapy practice sits squarely within the humanistic tradition (Whitton 2003) and draws on a variety of humanistic-integrative approaches including Person Centred; Existential; Gestalt; Psychodrama and Neuro-Linguistic Programming. I also draw on Object Relations; Infant and Child Psychology; and Neuroscience. The approach outlined above has been my attempt to work humanistically and integratively without necessarily incorporating a psychoanalytic use of transference and regression. Many years ago, I was privileged to be subsidised for five years, three times a week psychoanalysis and this gave me first-hand experience of how and why transference is utilised in psychoanalysis. As a humanistic therapist I mostly work with weekly sessions and from a trauma informed standpoint (Rothschild 2010) I seek to make it easier for people to carry the weight of their own lives between sessions. My approach seeks to normalise spontaneous regression in the form of 'wounded inner child' states, as well as other states originating in childhood, and sees recovery and growth from the perspective of growing the whole adult person.

Metaphor

In my fourfold approach I use the inner child metaphor to refer to the 'eternal inner child' and the 'wounded inner child'. I think the 'inner child' as a metaphor is useful and most people relate to this image. The psychoanalyst Bromberg (1991) writes: 'The child in the patient is a complex creature; he is never simply the original child come to life again, but always an aspect of an aware knowing adult'. It is however crucial to retain the metaphorical nature of this phrase; there is not an actual child within each of us; we do not locate and learn to relate lovingly to the actual child we once were. Rather we learn to relate in more loving ways to ourselves now, as we remember our childhood experiences. Acting 'as if' these pervasive memory states are like a 'wounded inner child' can be a useful intervention creating more compassionate inner dialogue and an intrapsychic space for these parts to become less labile within the overall dynamic of being this adult person. These child states are often referred to as regressions and are an everyday phenomenon both within

and beyond the therapy hour. This type of state-inertia, often caused by overwhelming experiences in childhood, is 'a carryover of emotional experiences despite changing environmental demands or intrinsic motivations' (Kragal et al 2021). Part of the work of psychotherapy is to help people as an adult to recognise and get to know these very specific and personal child states, so that as an adult, they are more likely to remain in the driving seat of their lives with their child safe and secure in the passenger seat.

Growing the adult: part 2

Central to all humanistic psychotherapies is the value placed on working with the individual as a whole, unique, complex, person within the specific givens of their life. Fundamental to this perspective is the belief that human beings have an inherent dignity; this translates into their need to make choices and live lives that reflect this drive towards self-determination. Insofar as this trajectory is thwarted people feel unhappy, subject to malaise. Again I refer to Winnicott (1965:83-84) who pictures the mature adult as someone who is able to 'identify with society without too great a sacrifice of personally spontaneity; or, the other way round, the adult is able to attend to his or her own personal needs without becoming antisocial, and indeed, without a failure to take some responsibility for the maintenance and modification of society as it is found'. This is no simple task for us human beings. Winnicott warns that 'maturity of the individual is not possible in an immature or ill social setting'. Arguably we have arrived at this point in UK society. The recent work of Davies (2022) from a UK perspective provides a piercing analysis of how 'successive governments and big business' have created a situation where our autonomy is undermined through an insidious form of groupthink and gas-lighting.

Modern UK society has the effect of reinforcing regressive tendencies in individuals and stifles genuine spontaneity. To create a counterbalance, I think psychotherapy is most effective when it is conducted as a process between equals. This involves deconstructing the power dynamics of therapist-client so that the person in the role of 'client' or 'supervisee' or 'groupwork participant' feels invited and supported to engage as an equal. This helps foster a more mature adult style of relating. This relationship of equals might be the first and only deeply experienced adult-to-adult relationship for the client, supervisee, or workshop participant. Bringing some of the

therapeutic focus onto helping people grow as an adult invites the individual into a process whereby they come to notice and track when they are in an adult state and when they are in a child state or somewhere in between or both/and. Human beings are marvellous in their capacity to occupy more than one state at a time but often this dynamic operates in an automatic, rudderless way without anyone in the driving seat. When I think of someone being an adult, I am not just thinking of an ego state, rather I am picturing the individual named person in the context of a specific life situation.

Psychological markers of being adult

As well as working with adults as clients, I also facilitate workshops and supervision groups with psychotherapists. Facilitating groupwork has been especially useful in discussing with other psychotherapists what their understanding is of what it means to be an adult. Two of the questions I ask are: 'Describe your sense of adults from the perspective of growing up' and 'As an adult today how has your understanding of what it means to be a mature adult changed?'. Children often think adults know everything and should walk around serenely. Such childhood notions of what it means to be adult can be detrimental to becoming a mature adult who feels shame - not necessarily as a carry-over from childhood - but as an adult. Adults often don't know, feel vulnerable and need support especially when doing something new and in times of crisis. Out of these groupwork discussions I have started to gather up a list of indicators around what it means to be a mature, healthy adult. For ease of consideration, I have divided these adulting qualities into three headings: cognitive, relational, and emotional. There are more qualities than listed; the aim is for these qualities to act as pointers for further exploration.

Cognitive

When we are operating from our most adult self, we are both willing and able to think things through. We are more ready to speak to others about our options, plans, and decisions and less likely to just act without thought and reflection. In a similar way we are more likely to plan and take on board events that make a change of plan inevitable. Being a mature adult involves thinking about potential consequences for ourselves and others and weighing up the pro's and con's of options. Taking the time to see things from another's perspective and from various perspectives seems to be

a cognitive capacity that mature adults are able and willing to engage in. This can be reflected in the ability to move away from binary thinking and towards a tolerance of varied viewpoints whilst also accepting the idea that people have beliefs, values and preferences which may not accord with your beliefs, values and preferences which can be highly problematic. The ability to know one's own limits and seek assistance where required is a quality that mature adults are able to embrace. Likewise, a willingness to work within one's competency is a characteristic of maturity. Delayed gratification is something mature adults are willing to factor into their lives and relationships to get the most out of situations and they are more able to make choices over the competing demands of work and not-work.

Relational

Much of our journey growing-up involves a letting-go of ways of thinking and seeing that we our norm as children and adolescents and are perhaps reinforced by society onto grown-up's now. Taking appropriate responsibility for one's life is crucial to maturity and is connected to the ability to set, move, and hold appropriate personal boundaries. Taking appropriate action to pursue one's needs or pursue one's goals rather than waiting for things to happen is another example of what it means to be an adult. Children as young as 2 start to value their own autonomy, their freedom to self-govern. As a child being frustrated by grown-ups, but 'not let down', is a crucial part of the journey towards independence (Winnicott 1988b:8). The mature adult recognises the importance of grappling with their own autonomy within the many vexations, frustrations, and injustices of adult living.

When we were infants and children, we were used to the grown-up's guessing what is going on inside us and this interpersonal process has been identified by child psychologists as crucial to the development of our inner world (Stern 1990:5). Leaving behind the idea that others will and should read our minds is an important adult quality. The ability to compromise and tolerate differences in the way we approach things is something adults can acquire in adulthood. Balancing one's own needs with the needs of others as an adult is something that requires a level of cognitive and emotional capacity associated with maturity. Being able and willing to receive love and convey love in a way that recognises the uniqueness of the other is associated with maturity.

Emotional

Sarner introduces the notion of “grow-ups”. She writes (2022:10) ‘If we avoid or bypass these leaps, we remain stuck in one place, unable to develop - unable to grow’. ‘It is only by making our way through countless grow-up’s, some big and some small, and by making it through the same grow-up’s again and again, that we can hope to come closer to a truer sense of who we are, a kind of freedom of adulthood, and a way of living’. This ability to endure the emotional challenge of “grow-up’s” and seek the appropriate support to endure them is a key emotional marker correlating to maturity. Likewise, the ability to maintain a level of cognition, emotional control, and choice in the face of provocation is another adulting quality. Facing problems head on rather than avoiding the discomfort or depth of feelings that come with facing up to reality is a sign of maturity. Being able to tolerate others' disappointment and upset when you say ‘No’ is closely connected to setting boundaries and correlates with maturity.

Conclusion

In this essay I have sought to share my response to the special issue journal question, ‘Psychotherapy, the individual and society - have we got it right?’. I have proposed that a more focused consideration of what it means to be adult can be of benefit to the people we work with whether that be clients, supervisees, or groups. In the UK we are confronted with statistics around declining mental health (ONS 2021) and this impacts everyone, clients, psychotherapists, supervisors, training institutions included. Growing the adult, within my fourfold approach, is my response and aims at speaking to the need of clients, supervisees and groupwork participants to engage in adult-to-adult relationships. In my experience, there is an inadvertent tendency in humanistic-integrative training institutes to model parent-child dynamics and power structures which undermines the rich experience and maturity of their adult learners. Growing up doesn’t end till death and the work of relational developmental practitioners could be enhanced if the developmental processes of becoming a healthy, mature adult are more systematically reflected on. This essay argues that thinking about what it means to ‘grow the adult’ - within the fourfold approach

outlined above - increases the individual's ability to navigate the opportunities and threats within society and this helps them safeguard their precious autonomy and vitality.

Disclosure statement

The author reports no competing interests to declare.

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