European Journal of Psychotherapy & Counselling

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rejp20

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To cite this article: Del Loewenthal (2020) Toxic young adulthood: Therapy and therapeutic ethos, European Journal of Psychotherapy & Counselling, 22:3-4, 165-172, DOI: 10.1080/13642537.2020.1820136

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13642537.2020.1820136

Published online: 30 Mar 2021.

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EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHOTHERAPY & COUNSELLING
2020, VOL. 22, NOS. 3–4, 165–172
https://doi.org/10.1080/13642537.2020.1820136

EDITORIAL

Toxic young adulthood: Therapy and therapeutic ethos

'I realise now I go into my own dream world because I can't compete with what my friends show they have achieved on social media'.

'It's scary walking through the estate, I wish I had a computer'.

'My auntie's got the bedroom, my gran and I sleep in chairs in the front room'

'I know I said I didn't want to keep taking drugs but that's what we all do every weekend and they're my friends'.

'When my parents divorced I lived with my mother but the area got too violent and I now live at my dad's'.

'Everything I chose to do is with regard to how others would view me'.

'It would be good when I can come and see you again face-to-face as I don't know where I'm going to be able to speak from, particularly with winter coming'.

The above are typical statements from young adults I see for therapy and who are likely to be contributing to my pension to the detriment of theirs. How should we respond either as therapists or as those concerned for the well-being of young adults? We keep receiving research reports stating, for example:

'The impact of youth violence reaches all sectors of society, placing huge strains on public services and damaging communities. Reducing harmful alcohol use and violence among young people should thus be considered a priority for policy makers and practitioners' (The World Health Organisation, 2006).

"And that was before the devastating world-wide effects of COVID on young adults. . . ."

Toxic young adulthood

Yet how as therapists can we come alongside such clients in a way that helps them develop who they are and not as part of some older generation's perhaps unsubstantiated worries, failing to address youth agency? Indeed, what is our responsibility as citizens for the environment these young adults

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are thrown into? What is our part in, and to what extent can we change for the better, their political-economic, social and technological worlds that we have created? Palmer (2006) devised the term 'Toxic Childhood' where rapid technological and cultural changes can cause psychological and physical damage to children. Is it more than time for us belatedly to be speaking of 'Toxic Young Adulthood' where rapid technological and cultural changes can cause psychological and physical damage to young adults?

According to Jean Twenge (2017): Those born in the USA in the mid-1990s up to the mid-2000s, what she terms 'the iGen', are the first generation to spend their entire adolescence in the age of the smartphone. With social media and texting replacing other activities, iGen spends less time with their friends in person – perhaps contributing to their unprecedented levels of anxiety, depression and loneliness.

Indeed, there is an increasing stream of such research where, for example, in the UK, it has been reported:

There is problematic smartphone use in approximately one in every four Children and Young People and accompanied by an increased odds of poorer mental health ... [depression; anxiety; stress; poor sleep quality; and decreased educational attainment]. [This] ... is an evolving public health concern . . . . Policy guidance is needed to outline harm reduction strategies.

Again in the UK The Health Foundation (Hagell et al., 2018, p. 29) when reporting on 'The social determinants of young people's health' states 'that significant proportions of today's young people aged 12–24 are experiencing disadvantage that is likely to be associated with long term health outcomes'.

Further, to compound matters, we do not yet know the effects of COVID-19 on young adults with it interrupting their education, social development and job prospects (not to mention, for those in the UK, Brexit). Yet we do know that tragically young people will be paying, in many ways, for the financial impact. To what extent could we, therefore, consider there is a growing young people's malaise caused by pre-existing, toxic external roots?

Hence, this Special Issue is both for those interested in providing psychotherapy and counselling for young adults, and those who wish to bring a therapeutic sensibility to working with this client group. Two main questions are addressed: What are the implications of providing a therapeutic ethos for young adults; and what, if any, additional training might be required for psychotherapists and counsellors working with this client group?

A therapeutic ethos?

In so doing we start by considering an urgent need for a therapeutic ethos for young adults as has previously been addressed for childhood (see, for

example, House & Loewenthal, 2009). Indeed, there may be an argument that the urgency is such that as with climate change this may be beyond the point of no return.

Such an ethos could include age- and modality-appropriate psychotherapy and counselling, in order to bring both therapeutic and educational sensibilities to bear on the issue of young adults' wellbeing. This may be essential, if truly effective and appropriate policy responses to what we are considering as the current toxic technological and cultural malaise for young adults, are to be fashioned.

So is modern society really bad for young adults?

Furthermore, is much of psychotherapy and counselling of adults often working with what was their young adult (and childhood) experiences? If the answer to either of these questions is 'yes' then is there a way, therefore, we can minimise detrimental experiences among young adults so that they can lead better lives and needless therapy as adults? Indeed, shouldn't one of the aims of our society be to reduce the need for psychological therapies and have culturally and community sanctioned means for reducing, holding and supporting young people's difficulties of living? Unfortunately, it would appear that in contrast, modern technological society is responsible for generating very particular kinds of distress for young adults which are in danger of becoming normalised.

But again will we do anything?

Are we as adults now so thoroughly alienated that we are quite unable even to perceive our young people's own alienation? Further, the pandemic, and in the UK Brexit (which most young adults did not vote for), austerity, commodification and commercialisation are far from helping.

Following Sue Palmer's 'Toxic childhood' (Palmer, 2006), shouldn't we then now be urgently also talking about 'toxic young adulthood'? With such toxicity should it be, to rephrase her case, the moral responsibility of everyone, including academics and therapists to consider how we might counter the negative side effects of such aspects as modern technological culture from young adults wellbeing?

In 2007 the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported children in Britain were at the bottom of a league table of 21 richest countries regarding children's wellbeing. A later UNICEF study in 2013 suggested an improvement with Britain ranking 16 out of 29 of the World's richest countries . . . . With still relative problems in Britain of high teenage pregnancy, a relatively high percentage not in employment, and the lowest

percentage of young people in further education among major developed nations. But this was before the subsequent severe effects of austerity where:

The young poor were early targets for all benefits cuts: their education maintenance allowance went – up to £30 a week for 16- to 19-year-olds from lowest-income families to keep them in education, covering travel, lunches, books and pocket money. Their families lost child tax credits, child benefit and housing benefit, and were often forced to move and move again (Toynbee, 2018).

Interestingly, which might be seen as both evidence of, and contributing to, the continuing 'decline of the West' (if the UK and USA are taken as indicators) in both of UNICEF's studies the USA (who the UK seems to be moving towards) is near the bottom of the international tables in both reports. There, the Institute of Medicine: National Research Council's *Investing in the Health and Well-Being of Young Adults* makes the case that young adults should be considered as a separate group from adolescents and older adults. They state:

'Young adulthood – ages approximately 18 to 26 – is a critical period of development with long-lasting implications for a person's economic security, health and well-being' (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015).

Should we, therefore, be propelling young adults' wellbeing onto the media agenda?

I was a signatory to the first public letter organised by Sue Palmer and Richard House entitled 'Modern life leads to more depression amongst children' published in the Daily Telegraph on 12 December 2006. This had some considerable success in drawing attention to what many believed to be the increasing incidence of mental health problems amongst children. It quickly turned into a news story spreading across the globe. What might this letter look now like if rather than children we spoke of young adults? If the mental health of an unacceptable number of young adults is being unnecessarily compromised and this is a key factor in the rise of substance abuse, violence and self-harm amongst them – what is our responsibility? If this is a socio-cultural problem to which there is no simple solution, is a possible first step to encourage parents, educational establishments and policymakers to start talking more about ways of improving young adult's wellbeing? It is therefore proposed, as with the toxic childhood campaign, as a matter of urgency, public debate being initiated on helping young adults in the twenty-first Century and that this issue should be central to public policymaking in coming decades.

Working therapeutically with young adults

To now turn to our second theme involving working therapeutically with young adults and in particular whether this requires specialist training.

For therapists in, for example, the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy if they want to advertise that they are available for child and adolescent work they have to had undertaken a specialist training and/or engage in specific CPD (UKCP, 2020). How important is this?

First, there seems the ever-present danger that my and others' critiques of young adulthood can become too much old generation psychotherapists worried about iPhones, etc.; failing to address different perspectives on the pros and cons; assuming alienation without engaging with young people and the research on them.

Surely though the psychotherapist needs to be able to come alongside whatever are young adults' current notions. As with *physis* it is also what emerges from the young adult as the natural and comes out of themselves and not to be moralised by the psychotherapist's ideas of what should be nor for the psychotherapist to necessarily convey that 'anything goes'. Further, concepts intended to help may also, as with the notion of 'play' with children, be in danger when:

'It's nature is completely distorted if this is considered psychologistically as a known thing about which assertions can be made and people then set forth to cultivate' (Heaton, 1978).

How best then can the psychological therapies help young adults as a vehicle for learning again through a different kind and quality of relational experience?

Perhaps a greater concern for the soul, and less primacy being given to science and particularly technology, is needed in psychotherapy and education to effectively enhance our wellbeing, and this is regardless of our client's age? For here Plato's argument for *therapeia* is that the focus needs to be more on dialogue. Regarding how we can minimise being corrupted, Plato argues that virtue is a precondition for knowledge and that wellbeing is inaccessible to corrupt minds (Cushman, 2002). But can we facilitate and enable young people to come away from what may be corrupting which could be very different for different groups with the further hope virtue be imparted and acquired through the psychological therapies?

Again, what of the psychotherapist's abilities to have such dialogues with young adults given various inequalities and differences pertaining to class and ethnic background? For example, with young adults intense protests around climate change, or the 'Black Lives Matter' movement providing new

narratives through which young people learn to understand their lives. Notions of systemic racism are being discussed, yet there is complexity that cannot be reduced to a simple solution. What divisions may arise from the current discourse around race; what resentment and backlash might be seen? How might then 'dialogue' be enabled or inhibited by the psychotherapist? And is there the necessary political will to impart it more generally in our society? Such therapeutic approaches would be in direct contrast to those that might take our minds off anything that causes us to be anxious or depressed.

Perhaps, here as elsewhere, a more explicitly psychosocial dimension is needed in the training of psychotherapists. Then, psychotherapists' values could also be explored more in terms of changing political, economic, social and technological contexts.

So don't we all as psychotherapists have a shared ethical responsibility to do all we can to protect young adults from more intrusively poisonous low-trust values that our changing technologies and cultures at their worst represent and actively cultivate? To the extent that we fail there promises to be a too long queue at our door for years to come. Thus, this case for a preventative approach is even more vital for the quality of formal and informal educational experience in general in terms of a therapeutic ethos being addressed in our wider culture. Not least, we must pay particular attention to young adult's experiences. This will entail moving beyond narrowly mechanistic definitions of, and ways of thinking about, 'well-being' and the psychological therapies.

I will now introduce the papers in this special issue and include for each a peer review comment. The first article is 'The Time It Takes: How do we understand personal growth in an age of instant solutions', is by Rowan Williams. Here, Rowan explores how the increasing commodification of experience leads to a sense of pervasive loss. He argues that to create the conditions for mental health requires a cultural resistance which needs to be nurtured as part of any strategy for improving mental health.

'This is a beautifully written paper. It flows immaculately from one convincing argument to the next, creating thus narrative consistency and continuity and an intentional correspondence between the paper's style and content'.

Our second paper, 'Training for counselling young people – what is added by a child and adolescent specialism' is by Susan Kegerreis. Susan argues, with examples, that a specialist training to work with children and adolescents provides a significantly different valuable perspective.

'A clear, engaging and timely article that illustrates the importance of specialist training for supporting young people, and beautifully illustrated with examples'.

The next paper, Sally Parsloe's 'The Narratives of Parental Alienation', explores when one parent uses their power over a child to excommunicate

the other parent. Sally considers the possible effects of this for the child's mind and emotional landscape and how therapists may help young people to make sense of such experiences.

Tony McSherry in 'Looking back with meaning: An imaginary phenomenology of working with a young adult' asks the question: 'How do we provide a safe space for a young person to speak and find their own way without imposing the co-ordinates of our own lives upon them? Tony suggests one answer '… is to be prepared to let go of our firm beliefs and ideas, without rancour, in the face of the energy and curiosity of youth'.

'This paper promotes and highlights the importance clients' especially young adults' of finding their own language (words) without the presence of the other. It does so by presenting an imaginary phenomenology of working with a young adult'.

Our fifth paper 'Finishing school, fishing and flourishing: Appetite, engagement and compliance in Daoism, Existentialism and Psychoanalysis'. As, the author, Onel Brooks comments such writers '… emphasise vastness, complexity, ambiguity, contrasting this with our smallness, finitude, our limitedness, our tendency to conform, comply and crave certainty. In contrast to technological thinking and convictions, they favour and show a kind of indirectness, meandering, a freedom to associate and wander … .'

Turning now to our two published respondents. The first is Bice Benvenuto who in her fascinatingly innovative 'The golden cage' argues that the key issue in the above papers lies in the interconnection between therapeutic and social ethos. Bice suggests a connection particularly affecting young adults between the objects of immediate satisfaction such as high tech gadgets and their solitary enjoyment with the autistic spectrum, which has become the mental paradigm. Here commodity-based and calculative modes of *non-thinking* have become the norm, which do not allow addressing a call towards the other.

Finally, there is from Richard House 'How might a therapeutic ethos serve young adults? – a commentary on the theme issue'. Within this vitally pertinent, wide-ranging response Richard significantly emphasises the importance of the therapist '… *not to get in the way of* the complex developmental struggles of the troubled young adults who find their way into therapy'.

There are many people to thank for this special issue in addition to my gratitude to the above contributors. These very importantly include: Evrinomy Avdi, Julia Cayne, Yana Flint, Anastasios Gaitanidis, Elizabeth Nicholl, Seth Osborne, Jay Watts and David Winter. However, there is one person to whom in particular this issue and much of this editorial would not have been possible and that is Richard House. Richard not only helped me significantly in devising the initial conference from which this special issue developed; but, has influenced me so much through our previous work on childhood and play.

It is hoped that this special issue offers pointers: First to the kinds of arguments that can inform what needs to rapidly become a central concern of politicians and policy-makers, namely those technological and cultural changes causing psychological and physical damage to young adults? Secondly to help psychotherapists, most likely of a different age and identity to their clients (perhaps of class and ethnicity too), effectively therapeutically engage with the lived experiences of young adults today.

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