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Juggling the Many Voices Inside: What It Means to Be an Emerging Adult

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ABSTRACT

Background: Our late modern society has a focus on self-realization, managerialism and instrumental reasoning. A logic of choice dominates the lives of emerging adults. They are focused on "self-managing" their lives. Although many emerging adults can "flourish", others are "floundering," struggling with anxiety or lower self-perceptions. Theories on self-realization which focus on a capability or self-determination approach seem inadequate for understanding this reality.

Aim: This article critically examines what it means to be an emerging adult in late modern society. It aims to counterbalance the dominant theories of self-realization by exploring a dialogical view on the "self". It pays attention to the voices of the "selves" of emerging adults, including the internalized voice of society itself.

Method: A narrative approach was followed. First, an interpretive narrative study was carried out with female respondents. The study employed in-depth focus group and individual interviews and the transcripts of the interviews were then analyzed thematically. We further analyzed the data according to the Listening Guide Approach.

Findings: Self-realization is a dynamic relational and moral process. The findings illustrate the multiple voices and I-positions of emerging adults. In addition, the findings illustrate that in addition to agency, "passive receptivity" also plays an important role in the process of becoming an emerging adult.

Keywords: emerging adults, narrative, dialogical self, self-realization, listening guide, passive receptivity

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Introduction

According to the following social theorists (Giddens 1991, 1994; Beck & Beck-Gernheim, 2002) and philosophers (Taylor, 1989, 1991, 2007; MacIntyre, 1984), three conditions prevalent in our society are individualism, disenchantment and instrumental reasoning. Taylor, for example, has been writing about Western Culture (1989; 1991; 2007), exploring issues of self within the culture (1989) and what it means to be an authentic person (1991). In the *Sources of the Self* (1989), Taylor traces understanding of the self throughout history. Taylor and others argue that our late-modern era has a typical focus on *self-realization*. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001/2002) propose, for example, that individuals are frequently required to decide between competing choices throughout their life-course in order to realize their "self". Giddens speaks of people living a "choice biography" (1991) where they are assumed to be exclusively responsible for the consequences of their choices. In contrast to previous decades, young people find themselves dealing with complex choices about their self-identity, with only their own reflexive deliberation and choice serving as guidelines in a "runaway world" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 22; Arnett, 2006).

Nowadays, this logic of choice determines the normative expectations that our society has of emerging adults. Young adults are expected to be capable, autonomous, independent beings, in charge of their self-realization in a growing secular age. Unfortunately, the media is inclined to reify emerging adults as a group, especially the younger generations like the Millennials and Generation Y. They are generalized and then misrepresented by negative descriptions, such as "complainers", "lazy people" and "victims" (Madara et al., 2018). Fortunately, research tells a different story (ibid) and shows that they are not lazy at all, but instead experience a range of psychological challenges--like increasing perfectionism--leading to greater anxiety (Curran & Hill, 2017).

Giddens suggests these developments are a symptom of a culture of personal meaninglessness: "existential isolation," he writes, "is not so much a separation from individuals from others as a separation from the moral resources necessary to live a full and satisfying existence" (Giddens, 1991, p. 9). Giddens places this "existential isolation" within the context of lifespan development and concurs with Taylor who states that instrumental modes of thought and "action have steadily increased their hold on modern life" (1989, p. 495). Nowadays, it is generally accepted that that all a person's activities should lead to an outcome, these activities no longer have an inherent meaning in themselves. One response to this by emerging adults is their transformation into "entrepreneurial selves" (Bröckling, 2015), that is, they engineer their lives like a self-realizing project. Simultaneously, however, because of the uncertain and precarious circumstances they experience, they live "everyday, one moment a time" (Kelly et al., 2019). This self-management project generates not only a certain kind of existential isolation, but it can also generate feelings of powerlessness and anger. These feelings occur when someone's efforts at self-realization do not lead to the desired outcome (Bröckling, 2015), or when unexpected life events like illness or loss interrupt their plans. Instead of being able to "flourish" or to live their lives as well as possible, these people are "floundering", they struggle with higher levels of anxiety and depression as well as lower self-perceptions (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2008; 2013).

The impact of this socio-cultural "turn to the subject" has been vast, infusing not only interpersonal relations, but also the religious realm (Drescher, 2016; McCarty & Vitek, 2017) and the political order (Macpherson, 1977), as well as education (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Ritchhart et al., 2011). Yet, many scholars have been critical of the view that people are best understood primarily as independent, self-sufficient and autonomous agents. Critics (e.g., Tronto, 2013; Lorey, 2014; Gilligan, 1990; 1982/1993; Vosman

& Niemeijer, 2017; Visse & Abma, 2018) argue that in addition to being capable, autonomous, entrepreneurial and self-managed, people should be acknowledged as precarious, vulnerable, and relational—all characteristics of social beings. Despite the promotion of the "self-directed life" (Laceuille, 2018) as the ideal in Western society, emerging adults do not always experience individual life and social life as two distinct realms (Raggat, 2006; McAdams et al, 2006). This seems a paradox: although they are focused on themselves, their social network and families are of utmost importance to their lives. Self-realization doesn't entail withdrawing oneself from relationships with others. On the contrary, others are *needed* for their project. Here, we wonder what this would mean for how these emerging adults view their self. Could another, more relational view, of the self be necessary?

Moreover, next to the role of external individuals in one's self-realization, society in general seems to have a role *in* the self-realization project of emerging adults (cf. Hermans, 2018). Society has an internalized voice of her own. This leads to the inner tensions that these young adults experience, caused by a cacophony of several inner voices: voices that speak from distinct parts of the self, voices of "external" others, and the socio-cultural voices of society in general. Building on this understanding, we explore what a dialogical view on "society in the self" (Hermans, 2018) would mean for being an emerging adult in 21st century America, investigated from their lived experiences.

In this article, by means of a heuristic use of the sociological concept of the "society in the self", we aim to critically rethink the ideology of self-realization. We will show that, to truly understand the lived experiences of young adults, the subject must be viewed as more than an autonomous agent. Instead, the self of the emerging adult will be approached as a relational self and as a *field of tension* (Hermans, 2018, p.332) that is polyvocal, filled with many voices, spatially positioned within the context of society. We will ground this critical analysis empirically, as this article builds upon the analysis of data from a narrative study carried out with emerging adults. In this study we aim to counterbalance modern discourse on *what it means to be an emerging adult*, by showing that some young people oscillate between different positions, experiencing an "abundance" of centering and decentering "movements" (Hermans, 2018, p.332). This occurs within the context of a young adult's significant relationships with others. Finally, by focusing on the lived experiences of emerging adults, we aim to highlight their voices in social and academic discussions and promote a more human approach to how their everyday experiences are studied and included in the societal debate.

APPROACH AND METHOD

Theoretical underpinnings: the narrative self

Dan McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich open their edited volume, *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative,* by writing "We are all storytellers, and we are the stories we tell" (2006, p. 3). To better understand the lived experience of young people during what Arnett (2016) calls emerging adulthood, this study builds on the work of a number of narrative researchers (Bruner, 1991, Gilligan, 1982/1993; McAdams, 1983). To better understand our participants' narrative, this project is also informed by the use of positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Harré & Moghaddam, 2003), as well as insights gained from the work of Hermans on the dialogical self (2010; 2018). Hermans discusses the development of the self by building on Harré's positioning theory as well as the work of George Herbert Mead's self as a reflection of the "generalized other" (1934/1962, p. 154). Positioning theory explores the manner in which persons stand for and against other persons as well as standing for and against one's self.

Moreover, in order to make it possible to understand him or herself as a historically continuous unity, (s)he will have to engage in very different – possible contradictory – forms of biographical talk. One and the same person is now this and

then that (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p. 61).

It is within the context of stories wherein we create meaning through "self and other" positioning. In this research, we wish to explore the important role of this dialogue in the meaning-making process, analyzed within the context of the personal narratives told by the young people we interviewed.

Narrative research approach

The previous quote from Harré & van Langenhove captures well the struggles of the young women that we examine in this study and is the framework for the design of this study. We used an interpretive narrative approach (Lieblich, 1998) for the data collection (focus groups and in-depth interviews) followed by a thematic data analysis. The analysis was inspired by the Listening Guide Analysis (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). In this approach, narratives are seen as "interpretive wholes" (Schiff, 2006). In the Listening Guide, narratives are not isolated, fragmented or easily assigned to categories. Instead, they contain a complex set of intertwined and polyvocal experiences. The researcher puts together these experiences into a "cogent understanding of meaning" (ibid, p.25). Below, we will describe data collection and analysis in detail. In short, each interview was first recorded and then transcribed ad verbatim. The original interviews were first listened several times and then read (at least twice) by the three authors before being analyzed for themes by the first and second author. These themes were written out as narratives for each of the individual interviews and as a snapshot of the focus groups, highlighting themes and repeated statements. This process allowed for additional and deeper analysis of the interviews according to the Listening Guide method (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017).

Recruitment

Participants were recruited from a master's program in a small midwestern university. Each research participant was given a $20 remittance to participate in the focus group. Each participant was given an informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study and any possible harm that might be an outcome from their participation. They were also given a written copy of the informed consent form and provided a chance to read it and ask questions of the interviewer. Signed copies of the forms were collected by one of two researchers. Participants in the focus groups were also informed that there would be an opportunity for an individual in-depth interview and asked if they wished to be contacted for an interview. If they were interested, a form was provided so they could be contacted. The participants in the in-depth interviews also received an additional $20 remittance.

Data collection

Data collection occurred in two separate focus group sessions and eight individual in-depth interviews.

Focus groups

Two focus groups were conducted to collect, share and validate data. One group had five participants, one male, and four females and the other had seven females and no males. The subjects were all graduate students in a master's program. The focus group sessions were conducted in a university classroom with participants sitting in a circle. All participants were between the ages of 23 and 35. The focus groups were recorded and later transcribed ad verbatim.

One of the 24-year old individuals was not included in the analysis, nor was the 36-year old individual as it was later discovered that they were outside of the parameters of the study, one for her age and the other as she was not a USA citizen. During the focus groups we posed three sets of questions: 1) What life events played a part in who you are? 2) What routines make up your lifestyle? and, 3) What are some of the informal public gathering places in your life? The focus groups were facilitated by the first author.

In-depth interviews

The individual interviewees were contacted by phone or email and given a wide variety of times to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted in a private room in the university library

and were audio recorded after informed consent was received by the respondent. The length of the interviews varied from between 50 minutes to 70 minutes. The average of all the female interviews was 56 minutes. Seven women and one male were interviewed. The male was not included in the results, but his interview will be briefly discussed in the Discussion Section of this article.

The in-depth interviews were inspired by researchers and philosophers working in a phenomenological hermeneutic tradition as well as sociologists and psychologists working within a cultural and agentic orientation (Morehouse, 2012). In-depth interviewing is a conversation with a specific purpose, focusing on the informant's perception of self, life and experience, and expressed in his or her own words. It allows the researchers to understand the particular and private interpretations of social reality that individuals hold (Nussbaum, 1996; Minichiello 1991). The interviews were structured around six topics: Background, Self-description, Memories, People and ideas that influenced me, and Lifestyle. Each interview ended by asking two questions: "What should I have asked that I did not ask?" And, "Is there anything you would like to ask me?"

Data analysis

The data of the focus groups and in-depth interviews were analyzed using a narrative content approach. Transcripts were divided into fragments and coded for meaning units that focused on how the participants experienced events and situations in their lives. Meaning units are sorted into coded subcategories that are presented in the finding section of this article. During the coding process, the transcript was read several times to identify what the respondent sees as the crux or embedded meaning of their experiences (Riessman, 2008). Furthermore, we especially looked at *how* they talk and not just what they said but *why* they said it that way (Clandinin, 2007).

The initial analysis showed contradictory patterns. On the one hand, participants seemed to experience a sense of control in their lives, whilst on the other hand, they felt severely challenged and out of control. This made us wonder about the presence of many I-positions and voices (Hermans, 2010; 2018). The Listening Guide Analysis (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017) takes up these contradictory voices and positions of the self by specifying a series of "listenings". Therefore, we carried out a second analysis according to the Listening Guide (2017). The Listening Guide specifies three successive listenings. First, a listening for the plot. Second, a listening for how the "I" speaks of acting and being on a psychological landscape. The third and final listening is for contrapuntal voices. Here we listen for different voices within the individual and their interplay. For a detailed description of this type of analysis we refer the reader to Gilligan & Eddy (2017). This part of our analysis resulted in two narrative vignettes that will be presented in the findings.

Ethical considerations

A proposal was submitted to an Institutional Review Board established by the university.

The board approved the project before any participant was recruited and interviews began. All members of the research team completed the NIH (National Institutes of Health) Ethics Training.

Participants were read and given the opportunity to read for themselves, the informed consent form. All the interviews were saved in an environment with limited access. Participants were given an opportunity to review the findings and tentative write-up to ensure that they were accurately represented, and their representation was either concealed or that they were not embarrassed by the content or characterization of their representation.

FINDINGS

Overview of themes from the group interviews

Jeffery Arnett's (2006) perspective on what it means to be an emerging adult includes having a goal (purpose) and being self-directed. In the

first interview group, meaning and purposefulness appeared to be defined, in part, by the way they saw themselves and the way they wanted to be seen by others. According to one of the interviewees, "I didn't know who I was because in college [undergraduate] everything was handed to me. I never had to figure out things for myself – everything was laid out for me." There was an emerging consensus in the first interview group that their sense of purpose has grown during their graduate educational experience.

Exploring trails in the bluffs in the Driftless Area was one of the activities that many of the group talked about when given the prompt "what kind of places do you meet with friends and family at?" Graduate school busyness was stated by most of the group as their lifestyle. One person commented, "Your time is not your own in grad school." However, this was counter-balanced by "I live by the river, walking and talking, solving problems with friends", as well as hanging out in coffee shops and watching people. Several young women talked about time with their dogs.

The second group did not spontaneously bring up "grad school as a lifestyle" but when asked they all agreed that it was a major part of their lifestyle. Instead, the focus seemed to be on more specific things that were close at hand. These included external things like professors and project that influenced them. Among the interests and activities that were important to them as undergraduates were biking across the country, working on a Habitat for Humanity project, chatting with friends, pushing forward in life, fitting in and caring for others, participating in the church, and coping with a chaotic life. Their internal life was also a part of what they talked about. They discussed topics such as being ok with their decisions, keeping their head above water, and "I can manage this, too".

The second group also mentioned music, teamwork, people who would listen to you, and a purposeful life pieces of their lifestyle. They named nature and social environments as their "third places", that is, important places that were not home or work (Oldenburg, 1989). They enjoyed being near water (lakes and rivers), as well as coffee shops.

Individual in-depth interviews

The questions were framed around the following set of prompts: background, self-description, life story, memories, influencers, and lifestyle.

Listening to and reading and re-reading all the interviews, the authors were reminded of Jerome Bruner's, *On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand* (1962). In that work Bruner writes about the paradoxes and antimonies that can help understand a person's way of being in the world. The antinomies and paradoxes presented by Bruner (1962) are (1) detachment and commitment, (2) passion and decorum, (3) deferment and immediacy, (4) the internal drama, and (5) the dilemma of ability (pp. 23 - 30).

We considered how these paradoxes and antimonies fit with the young women interviewed. Detachment in the context of the interviews is a willingness to divorce one's self from one's own history. The young women in our study detached themselves from many of the elements of their undergraduate experience and are seeking to commit themselves to a new phase of their lives as graduate students and burgeoning professionals. If they are not becoming clearly detached from their families of origin, certainly their relationship with their parents is becoming less tight and more distant. New commitments are forming with new friends and new responsibilities. Within this context, these young women see the world as something they can examine in a more clear-eyed manner and thus make commitments to change the world (almost always in small ways with incremental steps).

As these young women begin their education and training in their chosen profession, they express passion for their chosen professions and the required professional decorum. The women help others while at the same time recognizing that they need to take care of themselves. Self-care, in some form or another, is their way of maintaining decorum, and restrained them from getting too involved in the problem of others.

One woman said, “I have a much better outlook now. I think that’s just because I have committed myself to change who I am. … I feel I can accomplish more now” (f4, p13). Most mentioned within the context of their education and training, and more generally within the context of a lifestyle choice, that self-care was important, perhaps essential. They felt that they can be more effective in helping others if they are also somewhat detached from others, while at the same time being committed to self-care.

Another antimony (deferment versus immediacy) was obvious when the young women talked about how anxious they are to begin their careers, while simultaneously wishing they could also wait until that had mastered all of the skills needed to be successful in the chosen career. They want to master all the skills and gain all the knowledge that is required for competence in their chosen career path. This antimony is also seen in their dilemma of ability, or competency. When talking about what is meant to be an adult, one woman said, “I think it means embracing your failures and growing from that” (f5, p. 8). On one hand, they expressed confidence in their abilities as caring individuals and the strength they have gained by overcoming their own problems. On the other hand, they remain concerned about the issues that they might encounter as burgeoning professionals. This same woman, later in the interview said, “Because I’m in the helping field and I’ve always wanted to know about kids and helping children and families . . . (when I reflect on some of my family incidences) … I find myself being more resourceful”.

A final observation coming from the interviews is that the women gave voice to multiple, sometimes conflicting, self-descriptions. Bruner writes that there “is within each person her own cast of characters -an ascetic, and perhaps a glutton, a prig, a frighten child, a little woman[1], even an onlooker, sometimes a Renaissance person[2]” (p 28). These “I-positions” as Hermans calls them, are engaged in internal dialogue as they work to create the person they are becoming. We will see the ways that “I-positions” as well as “we-positions” aid in understanding the project of self-realization in the next section.

Two narrative vignettes

Now that we have presented the general themes of this study and have provided the reader with contextual information, we move towards the central question of this paper: how emerging adults experience the process of self-realization. We will do this by examining two narrative vignettes in depth. As the method section already mentioned, these vignettes have been constructed according to the Listening Guide Method (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). One step of this method is the construction of so called “I-poems” and “You-poems”. Therefore, below, the findings are partly presented in a poetic form. These two vignettes present the plurality of voices expressed by two young women and illustrate that these voices cannot be reduced to one or two voices that are narrated in an interview. Rather, these voices are multiple and dynamic, moving into the foreground when speaking about some life occasions, whilst at other times, being in the background, giving space to a less dominant voice, or countering it. These two vignettes were selected based on the criterium of maximum variety: they represent two significantly different narratives describing the process of self-realization. The first presents a clear “field of tension” (Herman) of voices on self-realization, whilst the second one presents a more coherent set of voices that seem to form a “life-sustaining web” (Fisher & Tronto). We did not select these two in order to compare them, but in order to maximize learning (Stake, 1995) about the process of self-realization from two perspectives.

1. Self-realization is like *“working on it while in limbo”*

Working a full-time job, being a full-time grad student, owning a house, being engaged, planning a wedding and having bats in her house: the dominant “I voice” of this young woman seems

[1] The gender was chanced for obvious reasons.

[2] A gender neutral word was substituted in this quote.

to be *a striving voice.* During the interview, from a distance, she watches her story about her life unfold, holding it to several standards, some of which are her own, but closely intertwined with societal values as well, hence social standards. A fusion of these standards guides her "doings" in relation to who she strives to become and what's left to work on ("*I'm still working on it*").

I definitely need a routine, and right now, because my life is so hectic,
I don't have one.
All I do is run.
I don't sleep, almost ever.
I run on like three, four hours of sleep almost every day
I'm hoping one day very soon I can sleep at night. That'd be so nice.

I have to plan my schedules.
I am a grad student.
I have to plan.
I have a class and work night shifts the same night,
so it's going to be really fun.
Not really.

I'm still working on it.
When I'm like really, really old, 112, I'll sleep.
I'll probably get so used to not sleeping, not.

Meanwhile, next to planning her time and resources to realize her goals, she is focused on improving her self-image and her relationships. She is "hard on herself":

I'm still having that issue with food and self-image.
I'm trying very hard to not self-sabotage.
I'm changing my lifestyle when it comes to food.
I'm learning how to live with a 23-year-old boy.
I'm learning to live with my mother and my fiancée at the same time.

Whereas her evaluations of where she finds herself in her life seem to be voiced from the "inside", there is another voice that speaks in a slightly different language and form. It's not a counter voice, but a "You voice" that expresses the social expectations of *living an adult life:* having a house, being married, having children, having a job. Although she is working toward these, this young woman hasn't accomplished these yet and she (I voice) doesn't see herself as an adult, but lives "in limbo", without any routine, but longing for one.

My lifestyle is a little in limbo, because

I don't have a grown-up job.
I have a house, but
I'm not married yet,
I don't have kids yet.

When I'm an adult,
I'll figure things out then.

This "You-voice" is clearly present when it poses a long list of questions that need to be answered (italics by authors):

I'm 22 and it feels like when you're in your early 20s, or even late teens, it's like,
When are *you* going to get a boyfriend?
When are *you* going to have kids?
When are *you* going to get married?
When are *you* going to finish school?
Are *you* finished with school?
What's *your* major?
Where are *you* going to school?
Where do *you* go graduate school?
Are *you* going to go to doctorate school?
When are *you* going to get an adult job?
Why is that not an adult job?
Why are *you* going to work more hours?

And, then, switching back to the I-voice again: Oh my God. Leave *me* alone. I'll make it tomorrow.

On the one hand, she (the I voice) wants to be left alone, follow her own pace, live her life her

way, make it when she can, have more control over her time. Simultaneously, however, society creeps in (the You voice) and will not leave her alone, directing her life towards certain expectations. The You voice becomes entangled with her I voice that is working hard to meet these. For example, when thinking about children (again in a "You voice", italics by authors):

You have to fit in society a little bit.
You get a little bit of choice, like how many kids you have.
Your goals almost kind of have to match society, in a way.
You can put on Facebook.
You'll have CPS called on you in two minutes.
It is so much pressure to meet goals that other people have for you, not necessarily yourself.

Next, a "**we-voice" is expressed as a counter-voice** of the societal "they-voice" when she addresses how she and her peers feel judged by religious institutions:

"*We*'re tired of being told:

You're gay,
you're bad,
you're fat,
you're bad,
you're a single mom,
you're bad,
you have tattoos,
you're bad.

we're called lazy or poor or ill-mannered,
we're just running on steam at this point.

They had to work to go to college, but
they never had the student loans we have.
They never had to work full time and go to school full time and sometimes have a kid on top of all of it."

Although she doesn't see herself as an "adult" as society would frame it, another part of her sees herself very much as an adult, but "adult" means something else altogether. This adult is experienced like a "warrior". This is her "*resilient voice":* strong and able to cope with traumatic experiences like severe abuse and use these experiences as a force for good, to foster social justice. This self learns to become a counselor. This resilient voice emerged because of her fighting a battle for survival and a positive sense of self since her childhood and winning it, despite dark and depressive moods that she still encounters up to today.

I see myself as a strong adult.
I try to see myself as more a warrior
I know that I went through a lot
I can't forget that.

I was locked outside the house in the middle of February.
I was only five or six years old.
I could crawl in the straw.
I've had to battle it for so many years.
I was nine, I didn't want to be here
I was like, "Well screw that. We're going to go graduate school and have a doctorate and put you in jail one day, because that sounds like fun."
I was going to be a lawyer
I found mental health counseling
I can help the people that actually need it and not just for vengeance.

Her view of who she is and becomes, seems closely connected to her relationships with significant others, like her friends and her mother. These provide her with a life-sustaining web and bring back her "lighter self".

I was 16,
I didn't have a boyfriend,
I was like, "Well, I'm worthless.
I'm horrible."

I got together [and]
I really started seeing more of my light side.

I met my girlfriends and they turned it like almost a 180 for me.
I'm not alone. That's so awesome.

I had so many good memories [of]
my mother's stories.

For this young woman, being connected with others resolves her aloneness and sense of worthlessness. Analyzing the interview as a whole, it seems to be about something more than just feeling connected. When group members care for and nurture one another, belonging to such a group sustains and affirms one's self (or selves). Along with her mother who played a significant role in experiencing her "lighter self", her relationship with her girlfriends also affirmed this lighter part of herself. During the interview, she mentions an anecdote on how she and her girlfriends visited a supermarket and how the three of them had fun and were "mothering" each other: "we're always taking different sides of who gets to be the mom of the day". This illustrates the significance of care as well as her ability to self-reflect on her interactions with others.

This awareness of and reflection upon how one relates to oneself and to others, is also present in the interview with another respondent, but in another way.

2. Self-realization is like being "*in tune with faith and family"*

The second vignette highlights a rather different tapestry of voices. In this narrative, several layers of voices seem to encounter one another and each one speaks about resilience and self-realization, but from different I-positions. The space where these voices come together, is *not* so much a "field of tension", as in the previous narrative, but a coherent, supportive structure. They "weave a web" that sustains the woman's life, that fosters her resilience in the context of her closest relationships, her relationship with her faith included.

Similar to the woman of the first vignette, this emerging adult also articulates the meaning of family, however, this time as the main source for her resilience. Her dominant voice is one of "*resilience and ownership"*, but of a particular kind: a *relational* resilience. Her strength comes from being in relationship with others and her faith. Her first statement in the interview "*I just got married last month"*, is meaningful here. She continues with:

I *think* I just I would say how resilient I am,
I have a different outlook on life [than some other people],
I *think* it takes a lot for me to see a situation where I feel like I can't do anything about.
I *think* it's just something that I have ...
I don't know. I mean, now that I am married, so …
I have two sets of families.
I have a family that I live with my own family that I'm currently creating
I have my family.
I *think* that's one of the driving factors of my life now in that
I ... I *think* everything else is secondary
I am very in-tuned with my faith life as well.
I do *think* that my faith and my family are going to be the things that
I value the most.

During the interview, this young woman conveys that her mother has been a guiding force. Her mother did not teach her anything about resilience, but she learned by observing what her mother did. If her mother was not successful at something, she would just start again until she was successful. Her mother did this without emphasizing either the success or failure, she just moved ahead.

The resilient voice of this young woman emerges from a subtle interplay between several "subvoices": one that thinks, as it speaks in cognitive terms mainly ("I think"), and one voice that "knows and owns" ("I have" and "I feel"), but as a non-cognitive knowing: a *heartfelt* knowing. It

builds upon the more reflective, thinking position and draws it “inside” by connecting it with her *felt* experiences with her family and her faith. This process of “owning” and “being in relation” generates an awareness of her strengths and possibilities.

I always *feel* like there is a reason for the things that I have as strengths, there is a reason for just things that I'm good at.
I just *feel* like I have to do some really great things.
I just *feel* like, yeah, there's a lot of good stuff to come

This doesn’t just happen by itself, it requires self-care and figuring out what matters along the way and being encouraged and validated by others.

I think self-care is really important to me
I think that out of everything else,
you as a person comes first,
I constantly have to work is making sure that I'm taking care of myself.

I did this and I was capable of doing this
I have the criteria to do certain things you know,
I felt, validating for me.
I'd say my family, some of my closest friends,
we were just there to support each other.

I didn't know who to go to about it.
I went to one of my professors
they validated what I was saying and it was just like ...
that idea of having validation does so much for people.

She acknowledges her dependency upon others for being encouraged and validated but doesn’t judge this dependency as negative. Instead, it is vital for her development and growth:

I think, those people in your life that see potential,
they point out their strengths to you
even though you don't see them.
I had a lot of that.

Finding her way in life is a process of which the outcome cannot be determined in advance and flexibility and acceptance is required.

It has been a little bit of a process for me.
I think that I've learned so much about myself
I'm willing to be flexible
I don't have a set thing that ...
I'm exploring and learning
that's going to be a process for me
and just being okay with that.

In order for her to learn about what matters and how to proceed in life, this young woman takes an open and flexible stance towards life. Instead of wanting to control the course of things by actively steering or “self-managing”, she uses words like “exploring”, “learning” and “process”: these all point towards a view on life that is about being open to receive what one might meet along the way. This is one of the main findings of our analysis that we will elaborate upon in the next section.

Discussion

The emerging adults that participated in this study are between 22-30 years of age and all of them are college students in the Midwest of the United States. This makes them a member of the college-educated, rural and small city Millennial generation. In general, Millennials are known for their digital immersion, their engaged interaction in social media and they are considered to be loyal to meritocratic institutions that they can trust (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). Politically, Millennials are considered to have a progressive, liberal and left-oriented political identity (Levine et al., 2009). Socio-psychologically, they form a group that has “more choices available

than any other generation" and is attached to relational structures like the (extended) family and friends (e.g. Madara, 2008, p.1). Society often portrays Millennials rather negatively, as a "me" generation, being more self-centered than other generations (Berger, 2017). Our findings confirm that the participants in our study experience being seen by outsiders through a negative lens, as if they are self-consumed and have a sense of entitlement (narrative vignette I). Recently this stereotype is contested by scholars (e.g. Cairns, 2017) who aim to understand Millennials from a more nuanced and contextual perspective. According to these scholars, Millennials face enormous challenges, living in continuous uncertainty about their economic prospects, threatened by financial insecurity (ibid) and high social and scholarly demands.

Our study confirms this. Participants wrestle with limited time, while demands and expectations — from significant others, their work or from school—are increasing. They are also challenged by existential themes, like suffering because of insecurity, losing a loved one or being betrayed by someone during times of abuse. The findings highlight how participants maintain or repair their life-sustaining web to be able to live life as well as possible. For example, relationships with family and friends are of utmost importance to them, as is their faith, either practiced in the context of a denomination or by practicing an independent spirituality.

Our findings illustrate that when inquiring about self-realization, we should not underestimate the challenge confronting the emerging adult's agency in working towards a unified "self". In our study, we see self-realization as a dynamic relational-moral process of learning. The two narrative vignettes that were presented in the previous section are not unique, we noticed this process in all narratives of the study participants. For the first woman, the criteria that guide her decisions and her responses to life's events, are still relatively veiled and in tension. On the one hand, she values her friendships and feels resilient ("warrior"), while on the other hand, she struggles with juggling many activities and societal expectations (you/they-voices). This plurality of voices creates tension. This is a productive and recursive tension (Ricoeur, 1995), because it is necessary for learning what matters to oneself and to others with the passing of time. The second woman seems to have more clarity on what is of value to her at this moment in her life: her family and faith. Her self is plural too, as she articulates multiple voices as well, but for her the voices seem to be "in tune", as if in the context of her relations with others and her faith they form a field of support that sustains her wellbeing. This will likely be temporary, as life events, other people, and decisions that she makes destabilize this equilibrium and evoke a phase of change, requiring additional work to find a renewed balance later on.

According to the capability approach or self-determination theory (Ryan et al., 2013; Nussbaum, 2000), self-realization is a process that focuses on the capacities one should develop in order to realize one's full potential. Our findings show a different perspective. They illustrate that self-realization is not only a sociocultural-psychological process, but a *moral-relational* endeavor as well. Moral not in terms of judging life's events and one's decisions in terms of good or bad, or as holding oneself to (external or internal) standards, nor as in developing particular kinds of capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000) or virtues (MacIntyre, 1984). Instead, our findings illustrate that self-realization is a complex *relational-expressive* process of people who need each other to figure out what events and situations *mean* to themselves along the way and how to respond to those events and situation (Walker, 2007; Nistelrooij & Visse, 2018). Self-realization is focused on the process of meaning making (Bruner, 1993) and depends on the relational web that the subject is part of. In line with the French phenomenologist Ricoeur, "the self" implies a relationship between the self and another (1992). There is no split between the self and another that we exist in relation with.

Experiencing (living) the process of self-realization leads to insights on “what matters”, in other words, what one values in life in the context of relationships with family, friends, peers, mentors and society as a whole. The process of self-realization is *expressive*, because by responding to others and events, one’s life gradually takes shape and meanings emerge. Here, “responding” should also be understood passively and not only understood in the common conceptualization of “(re)acting” or “choosing”. Responding to events and situations can be seen as a “*receiving*” passivity (Marion, 2002)[3]. This means the emerging adult is a recipient of life’s events, not solely in charge as an agent.

The process of self-realization is *relational* because it is bound up with historical and socio-cultural fabrics and trends. The identities of emerging adults in society is determined not only by their own possibilities and capabilities, but also by the communities they are part of as well as their ethnicity and class. These societal “givens” govern their identities as well. For these emerging adults, self-realization entails a process of becoming aware of the standards one holds oneself to, whilst *simultaneously* being subjected and responding to standards of society. Again, there is both agency and “givenness” (Marion, 2002) in their lives: they not only actively steer their lives in order to self-realize, but they “undergo” events that happen to them, evoked by larger patterns of traditions and others. How young adults evaluate their positions and determine next steps, doesn’t happen against traditional, historically grown standards, nor against clear ideas on what is “good and bad” but *emerge* from the *process* of living one’s life in relation with others in society. According to sociologists, this is the late modern condition of society as a whole: the disappearance of traditions (e.g. Taylor, 1989, 1991, 2007).

The narratives also illustrate that emerging adults are inclined to compare themselves with others in order to live a meaningful life. This habit of comparing one’s life with the lives of others is something other than *being in relation* with others. For some emerging adults, who lack clarity or confidence on their own values and what is of meaning to them, this process of continuous comparing brings confusion (as was illustrated in narrative vignette 1). One could argue that the trend of comparing creates deception (Stake, 2019). It prevents someone from being open to the *process* of self-realization through the cultivation of relations and a passive receptivity.

Consequently, if we take this phenomenological view on self-realization serious, we should develop a perspective on what accounts for “meaningful” as well. Instead of focusing on listing values of young people as if these can be decontextualized or as if these would exist as “guiding forces” independent of context, time and place, we should develop a dynamic view on values and what gives rise to meaning. How does meaning for these young adults emerge through time, place and relationships with others? Is meaning something that is constructed, or is it something that can be heard as “a call” that needs a response? How do these young people perceive “meaningfulness” (Bruner, 1993)? Here, a narrative-hermeneutical approach, e.g. in order to elicit stories of young people through a story exchange method, could be of benefit. These stories could (in)directly inform us about the rise of what is meaningful in the context of their everyday lives.

To enhance validity, we have described the process of analysis in detail to demonstrate the soundness of the interpretative process (Bekhet and Zauszniewski, 2012).

Qualitative studies focus on rich, nuanced data, rather than a large sample size. The sample size for this study was small but the interviews provided rich experiential data. In a qualitative phenomenological study, emerging understanding is important, and we do not aim for a generalization

[3] and becomes a ‘responsal’, in Jean-Luc Marion’s terms, 2002:p.282

of the findings. The focus of the study which provided the data for this paper was relatively wide: how emerging adults in the United States experience their life in the 21st century. Therefore, the data covered a wide range of subjects. Building on this, future studies might focus a phenomenological research project that investigates a *phenomenon,* leading to more depth. For example, a phenomenological study of *meaningfulness* could provide us with insight on the circumstances in which meaning emerges in the lives of young adults.

One limitation in this study is the lack of male subjects. One young man was interviewed and ultimately, we did not include his interview in the study. Nonetheless we did listen to and read his interview and several insights emerged from having his voice in the backdrop of our analysis. First, it encouraged us to think again about Carol Gilligan's *In a different voice* (1982/1993). In discussing the voices of Amy and Jake with reference to Lawrence Kohlberg's moral dilemmas, Gilligan make the observation that what Jake says and Amy does not say, gets recognized, but what Amy says and Jake does not say, remains unrecognized. This observation has two implications for our project as well as for future projects. First, it reminded us that the challenge of listening is to hear everything that is said, being careful not to filter out anything the speaker says because of the listener's bias. Second, it suggests that future research would benefit from including both male and female voices. To listen closely to female and male voices, would allow us to better hear what is being said, not necessarily by drawing comparisons between genders, but because our listening is often enhanced by becoming more aware of the other.

Other researchers may wish to conduct similar studies while taking into consideration issues of socio-economic, ethnic, and gender diversity while constructing their sample. We also desire to explore the role of storytelling and myths in meaning-making in a more detailed phenomenological study. Our hope is that the present study makes some contribution to thinking more carefully about the current generation and inspires other to challenge and extend this research.

Implications for practice

There are three broad areas that might benefit from this study: higher education, the caring professions, and cross-generational communications. Each of these areas will be discussed briefly. We begin with what this study might contribute to the understanding of young adults within the context of post-secondary education.

As discussed earlier, today's emerging adults are especially interested in how they define themselves as well as how others define them. They ask these questions within the larger context of their age, marital status, employment status and economic status. The types of questions as they relate to higher education are in line with questions raised by Erik Erikson (1968) years ago and have continued relevance: How does my previous school and work experience influence what my current position is? What are my goals? How do I situate myself in this new environment? How do I square what I was with what I wish to become? Will I and others see me as I was or as what I am becoming? To be sensitive to these questions and concerns, however, does not mean that faculty and administration should coddle students (cf., Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; Twenge, 2006; Twenge,2017), but rather recognize that their students are dealing with self-identity questions and concerns that feel urgent and unique.

A part of both the urgency and uniqueness of their experience is expressed in the works of Anthony Giddens who argues that our late modern age, which young people today are facing full on, is characterized by new forms of mediated experiences, such as video games, social media, and other forms of virtual reality. In these experiences, self-identity becomes a reflexively organized endeavor. "The reflexive project of the self, which consists in the sustaining of a coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple

choice as filtered through abstract systems" (Giddens, 1991. p. 5).

The challenge for educators is to help young people understand these continuously evolving sets of abstractions (the task of all education), while being sensitive to the evolution of their biographical narratives which today unfold in a far more public environment than it did for past generations. This requires both private space and public discourse that is inclusive of many voices. This discourse will challenge both the inherited abstractions of our world but also the students' stayed beliefs. While these challenges are always the challenges of education in any age, they are exacerbated today and need thoughtful attention.

In the past, struggling with the inevitable challenges on the path to adulthood, was accepted as a part of life. Not having it "all together" was accepted as part of learning how to stand on your own feet. Nowadays, the media outlets communicate a different story: people who cannot care for or "manage" all the conflicting parts of their life, are almost considered to be a failure. In the introduction, we acknowledged the common reality that millennials are stereotyped as a group that experiences challenges with growing up and becoming "someone". Our view sheds another light on this group. We have mentioned the increasing tempo of social life where time seems to flow ever faster, making the relationships we have with each other and the world fluid and problematic (Rosa, 2015). It is as if – more than other generations – Millennials are standing on slippery slopes (cf. Rosa, 2015).

Sociologists Campbell and Manning described that in contrast to previous generations, young people now live in a culture of victimization, instead of in a care/dignity culture that we used to know. Their research demonstrates a culture of increased microaggressions at American universities (2018). Emerging adults try to live their lives as well as possible within the everyday complexities that result from these trends. That puts them in an inherently precarious position. This requires educators to see and understand emerging adults with attention, compassion and care. It also requires another response: instead of judging or stereotyping them, it asks for a caring response. Such a response is characterized by paying attention to subtleties in their lived experiences, instead of us assuming that we know what matters to them. It invites a view of them – and people in general – that balances the human being as being both capable and vulnerable. It needs for us to see them as persons who are in relation with others all the time, not separated from their parents, teachers, friends and other fellow citizens as sometimes is assumed. It requires scholars and anyone who cares about these young adults, to ask open, hermeneutic questions, especially about how we can support them in developing a "self that seeks its identity on the scale of an entire life" (Ricoeur, 1992, 115).

Next to be considered are the implications for practice in the caring professions. The caring professions are, just as educational professions, based on the encounters that people have with one another. In the context of these encounters care is given by a subtle process of "being in relation with" each other in terms of listening and telling. Good care for young adults requires genuine listening, attentiveness, being responsive and sensitive to the interpersonal dimensions of the relationship and – as our study highlights – to their "polyphonic selves" (Leget, 2017: 49). In most care work, the caregiver and the care receiver find themselves in different positions regarding age, competence in the field of concern, and social and sometimes educational status. Listening across these barriers can be challenging especially within the context of efficiency and time management.

Here Giddens provides some insight again. He argues that what it means to maintain one's self-identity is to have biographical continuity, a sense of trust that allows one to develop integrity, and that these efforts are deemed worthwhile. If people do not feel listened to and heard, their interaction might lead to miscommunication and potentially to a disruption of the self-identity

of one or both individuals (1991. p. 54). In order to deliver good care, care professionals that serve young adults need to be sensitive to these insights on biographical continuity, trust and integrity.

Communication across generations is a long-standing issue but has been exacerbated by the omnipresence of social media. While we may think of social media as influencing only young people, intergenerational communication is also affected. Questions and issues of judgment are influences by the anonymity and immediacy of communication. These issues are compounded by the all too common stereotypes of class, gender, and age. These stereotypical presentations place demands on our ability to communicate across generational boundaries. Taking time to listen and to withhold judgement, as well as being open to think beyond categories like class, gender and age, are some of the keys to cross-generational communication.

Of course, some adults are more privileged than others, and we wonder how issues of inequality, asymmetry and power relate to our view on self-realization. Therefore, follow-up research on self-realization should include an intersectional approach. Intersectionality critically re-thinks the workings of ideologies that are bound to cultural, ethnic and racial diversity, and simultaneously involves gender and social class (Hankivsky, 2014). Instead of categorizing young people in one of these containers, an intersectional approach is interested in how these different categories intertwine and how they determine what we consider to be normal (normalization). For example, how would the project of self-realization and the juggling of voices inside look like for young man of color, with a high education, born in Germany and raised soley by his mother? Or for a white woman who is a first-generation student, raised in the context of a multiracial family in the Midwest of the United States? Here, the work of bel hooks is of interest. She argues for an approach to diversity that centers the encounter of the voices inside (hooks, 1990). This approach would discuss the project of self-realization by looking at how these categories lead to normalization in education and the unequal distribution of privilege and disadvantage for emerging adults.

The implications for practice presented here may provide an opportunity for further discussion.

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