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EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AS A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING EMERGING ADULTHOOD

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The transition from adolescence to adulthood represents one of the most dynamic and formative phases of psychological development. Classic theorists such as Erik Erikson and Daniel Levinson emphasized the psychosocial and structural aspects of this process, while Jeffrey Arnett later introduced the concept of emerging adulthood as a distinct developmental stage characterized by exploration, instability, and self-focus. Despite the extensive research on its cognitive and social dimensions, relatively little attention has been paid to the emotional mechanisms that shape adaptation and identity during this period. Emerging adulthood can therefore be viewed as a paradoxical stage – marked by both maximal freedom and minimal structure – where individuals must navigate uncertainty, autonomy, and emotional complexity.

The aim of the paper is to examine emotional intelligence as a central theoretical framework for understanding the psychological dynamics of emerging adulthood. Drawing on the models of Salovey and Mayer as well as Goleman's social-competence perspective, this article argues that emotional intelligence mediates the interaction between cognitive growth, affective awareness, and social experience. By integrating developmental, emotional, and neurobiological perspectives, the paper proposes that emotional intelligence provides the regulatory and interpretive mechanisms through which emerging adults transform emotional turbulence into coherence and self-understanding. In this sense, emotional intelligence functions not merely as a coping resource but as the developmental architecture that supports identity formation, self-regulation, and resilience. Recognizing emotional intelligence as a key component of emerging adulthood enriches both theoretical and practical approaches to education, counselling, and social integration, positioning emotion as a driving force in the journey toward mature adulthood.

Key words: emotional intelligence, emerging adulthood, psychological development, identity formation, self-regulation.

Бігунов Дмитро. Емоційний інтелект як підґрунтя для розуміння перехідного періоду до дорослості

Перехід від підліткового віку до дорослості є однією з найдинамічніших і найформативніших фаз психологічного розвитку. Класичні теоретики, такі як Ерік Еріксон та Даніель Левінсон, наголошували на психосоціальних і структурних аспектах цього процесу, тоді як Джеффри Арнетт пізніше запровадив концепцію ранньої дорослості як окремого етапу розвитку, який характеризується дослідженням, нестабільністю та зосередженістю на собі. Незважаючи на значний обсяг досліджень когнітивних і соціальних аспектів цього періоду, відносно мало уваги приділено емоційним механізмам, що формують адаптацію та ідентичність. Таким чином, рання дорослість може розглядатися як парадоксальний етап, одночасно відзначений максимальною свободою та мінімальною структурою, де особам доводиться орієнтуватися в невизначеності, автономії та емоційній складності.

Метою статті є розгляд емоційного інтелекту як теоретичного підґрунтя для розуміння психологічної динаміки ранньої дорослості. Спираючись на моделі Саловея та Майєра, а також на соціально-компетентнісний підхід Гоулмана, автор статті стверджує, що емоцій-

ний інтелект опосередковує взаємодію між когнітивним розвитком, афективною усвідомленістю та соціальним досвідом. Інтегруючи розвиткові, емоційні та нейробиологічні перспективи, автор пропонує, що емоційний інтелект забезпечує регуляторні та інтерпретативні механізми, за допомогою яких молоді дорослі перетворюють емоційну турбулентність на когерентність та саморозуміння. У цьому сенсі емоційний інтелект функціонує не лише як ресурс подолання стресу, а і як архітектура розвитку, що підтримує формування ідентичності, саморегуляцію та стійкість. Усвідомлення емоційного інтелекту як ключового компонента ранньої дорослості збагачує як теоретичні, так і практичні підходи до освіти, консультування та соціальної інтеграції, позиціонуючи емоції як рушійну силу на шляху до зрілої дорослості.

Ключові слова: емоційний інтелект, перехідний період до дорослості, психологічний розвиток, формування ідентичності, саморегуляція.

Problem statement. The passage from adolescence to adulthood has long been recognized as a pivotal stage in human development. Classic models, including Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory and Daniel Levinson's "seasons of a man's life," portray this period as a bridge between dependence and autonomy, when individuals negotiate identity, purpose, and direction [1; 2]. Jeffrey J. Arnett later advanced the concept of emerging adulthood – a distinct life stage, typically from ages 18 to 25, characterized by exploration, self-focus, and instability [3]. Unlike adolescence, which is guided by external authority [4; 5; 6], or adulthood, which involves enduring commitments [1; 2], emerging adulthood is marked by fluidity and transformation.

Emerging adulthood is therefore both a time of opportunity and vulnerability. Individuals face decisions about education, work, and relationships while lacking the stable emotional scaffolding of mature adulthood. Research by Nelson and Barry [7] and Tanner [8] has contextualized this stage within broader social and cultural transitions – economic uncertainty, delayed family formation, and global mobility – yet the emotional mechanisms that enable adaptation remain insufficiently examined. Emotional functioning, understood as the capacity to perceive, interpret, and regulate affective experience, is increasingly recognized as essential for navigating these complex transitions.

Traditional developmental theories, grounded mainly in cognitive and social paradigms, seldom explain how emotional processes contribute to identity formation and autonomy. The concept of emotional intelligence, introduced by Salovey and Mayer [9] and later expanded by Goleman [10], provides a promising framework for bridging this gap. Emotional intelligence encom-

passes the ability to recognize and manage one's own emotions as well as to understand and respond appropriately to the emotions of others. It thereby links cognition and affect, offering a dynamic model of how individuals adapt to change and construct meaning.

In recent years, studies have shown that higher emotional intelligence correlates with better psychological well-being, academic adjustment, and relational satisfaction among emerging adults [11; 12]. However, these insights have rarely been integrated into developmental theory. What is lacking is a conceptual synthesis that positions emotional intelligence as a core developmental mechanism rather than a supplementary trait.

Therefore, **the aim of the paper is** to examine emotional intelligence as a central theoretical framework for understanding the psychological dynamics of emerging adulthood. Specifically, it explores how emotional competencies – perception, understanding, and regulation – mediate the transition from dependence to autonomy and support the formation of a coherent adult identity. By combining emotional, developmental, and neurobiological perspectives, the paper proposes that emerging adulthood should be viewed as an emotionally structured ecosystem in which affective capacities transform instability into resilience and meaning.

Recognizing emotion as an organizing force rather than a reactive element broadens developmental theory and offers practical implications for education, counselling, and workplace adaptation. Integrating emotional intelligence into the study of emerging adulthood, thus, enriches both academic understanding and applied practice, framing this life stage as an arena of emotional learning that shapes the foundations of mature identity.

Results of the research. Although existing theories acknowledge the importance of affect in identity and motivation, they rarely specify how emotional processes facilitate development. Erikson's "identity versus role confusion" [1] stage, for instance, presumes emotional struggle but focuses primarily on social identity negotiation. Similarly, Arnett's five features of emerging adulthood – identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and optimism – emphasize content rather than process.

Recent developmental neuroscience has reinforced the need to integrate emotion into these models. Studies demonstrate that maturation of the prefrontal cortex and limbic system during early adulthood enhances emotional regulation and reflective judgment [6; 13]. These neurobiological changes parallel the psychological capacities described by emotional intelligence theory. Hence, emotional development cannot be treated as secondary; it is neuro-developmentally synchronized with cognitive growth.

Moreover, the transition to adulthood increasingly unfolds in socio-cultural contexts of uncertainty – economic precarity, globalization, and shifting relational norms. Emotional adaptability thus becomes a prerequisite for psychological resilience. Without an emotional framework developmental theory risks overlooking the internal resources that enable emerging adults to navigate these external complexities.

In turn, the concept of emotional intelligence originated with Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer, who defined it as the ability to perceive, understand, manage, and utilize emotions to facilitate thinking and adaptive behaviour [9]. Daniel Goleman popularized the idea, broadening it to include motivation, empathy, and social competence [10]. Emotional intelligence encompasses both intrapersonal and interpersonal capacities: recognizing and regulating one's own emotions while perceiving and responding appropriately to the emotions of others [14].

Emotional intelligence has been conceptualized through different theoretical lenses. Within contemporary research, two principal models of emotional intelligence dominate the field: the Ability Model proposed by Salovey and Mayer [9] and the Trait Model advanced by Petrides and Furnham [15].

The former defines emotional intelligence as a set of measurable cognitive-emotional abilities, whereas the latter views it as a constellation of self-perceived emotional dispositions embedded within personality.

Despite theoretical differences, both perspectives converge on the understanding that emotional intelligence bridges cognition and affect. It provides the regulatory architecture through which emotion informs judgment, social interaction, and decision-making. In developmental terms, emotional intelligence is the mechanism by which maturing cognition and evolving affective experience achieve integration.

This integrative function becomes especially critical during emerging adulthood, a period when individuals encounter increased autonomy, shifting social structures, and emotional volatility. Emotional intelligence functions here as a mediator between cognitive reasoning and emotional adaptation. It enables individuals to interpret affective signals, regulate internal states, and sustain coherent behaviour amid uncertainty.

Empirical evidence suggests that young adults with higher emotional intelligence demonstrate greater tolerance for ambiguity, higher life satisfaction, and more stable identities [11; 12; 16]. These competencies help them manage stress arising from academic, vocational, or relational challenges [17].

Conceptually, emotional intelligence transforms Arnett's "instability" feature into a developmental opportunity: emotions become informational feedback guiding exploration and commitment. Rather than perceiving transitions as disruptions, emotionally intelligent individuals use them as occasions for self-definition. This dynamic converts potential vulnerability into adaptive growth.

Furthermore, emotional intelligence supports the emerging adult's need for autonomy and relatedness. The ability to empathize while maintaining self-boundaries enables constructive social negotiation – a core developmental demand in forming mature relationships. Hence, emotional intelligence is not merely an adjunct to cognitive maturity; it constitutes the emotional infrastructure of independence.

Cultural psychology further extends this argument. Cross-cultural research reveals

that expressions and interpretations of emotion vary widely, influencing how emerging adults construct selfhood and belonging [18; 19]. Emotional intelligence, understood as contextual sensitivity, provides the flexibility needed to navigate diverse cultural expectations. Integrating cultural variability into emotional intelligence models enriches our understanding of how emotion operates as both universal mechanism and culturally embedded practice.

By integrating developmental, emotional and neurobiological perspectives, we can reconceptualize emerging adulthood as an emotional ecosystem. In this view, identity, cognition, and emotion evolve through mutual feedback loops rather than linear progression. Emotional intelligence orchestrates this system by enabling regulation, interpretation, and integration of affective experience.

Within this ecosystemic framework:

- Perception of emotion provides data about internal states and environmental demands.
- Understanding of emotion allows cognitive appraisal and meaning-making.
- Regulation of emotion sustains coherence and resilience during transition.

Together, these processes transform raw affect into reflective awareness and purposeful behaviour.

This synthesis positions emotional intelligence as the developmental engine that propels emerging adults from reactive to reflective functioning. The transition to adulthood thus becomes not only a cognitive and social shift but an affective reorganization of the self.

Analysis of the research results. Integrating emotional intelligence into developmental psychology opens several lines of inquiry. First, longitudinal studies could examine how emotional intelligence trajectories predict adaptive outcomes such as identity stability, relational satisfaction, or professional competence. Second, inter-

disciplinary collaboration between affective neuroscience and developmental psychology could clarify how neural maturation supports emotional regulation. Third, educational research might explore how emotional intelligence training interventions accelerate psychosocial adjustment during university years.

Methodologically, adopting a multi-dimensional assessment – combining ability tests (e.g., MSCEIT) with self-report measures – would capture both cognitive and dispositional aspects of emotional functioning. Qualitative approaches, such as narrative analysis, could further reveal how emerging adults interpret emotional experiences in constructing self-stories.

Conclusions. Emerging adulthood constitutes a period of both vulnerability and possibility – a transitional stage where cognitive expansion, social diversification, and emotional turbulence converge. Emotional intelligence provides the adaptive architecture through which individuals transform this turbulence into growth.

By perceiving, understanding, and regulating emotions, emerging adults integrate affective experience with cognitive appraisal, fostering coherence, authenticity, and resilience. Recognizing emotional intelligence as a core developmental mechanism reframes early adulthood as not merely an age of exploration but an age of emotional learning.

Future developmental models should therefore treat emotional intelligence as foundational rather than supplementary. Doing so aligns theoretical frameworks with contemporary realities, where emotional adaptability defines success in personal, academic, and professional spheres. As societies grow increasingly complex and uncertain, emotional intelligence may represent the most vital competency for navigating the journey from dependence to mature self-authorship.

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