

Chapter 2

Transition to Adulthood as Goal-Directed Action

One of the many poignant scenes in Arthur Miller's play, *Death of a Salesman*, is the conversation between Happy and his mother, Linda. Linda is trying to convince her son that he has to commit to something in life; that he can not just sit around and not do anything. This conversation represents a segment of a transition to adulthood process – the mother–son conversation in which they are discussing his future. Similarly, the research literature on the transition to adulthood reviewed in Chapter 1 has pointed to transition as a process. It also showed that this process takes place over a longer period of time than once was the case, often a decade or more, well after 18 years of age. Third, what constitutes a successful transition to adulthood is less clear than it once was. Marriage, full-time employment, and leaving the family home are not the decisive markers of adulthood that they were even 50 years ago, the kind of markers that Linda Loman sought for her son. Research evidence also shows that parents and their children in the 18–34 years age range in North America spend a great deal of time together – on average, 367 hours per year (Schoeni & Ross, 2005). In addition, there are a number of tasks that seem central to youth who are in this transition process, including developing and acting on romantic relationships, pursuing higher and further education, making plans for and testing out various employment options, determining how to be healthy and fit, and feeling comfortable with themselves and others. When the range of possible outcomes is broadened and the time span for their realization extended, then the focus on the processes becomes more salient.

All these characteristics of the transition to adulthood reflect how it can be understood as goal-directed action, that is, in one form or another, these aspects of the transition to adulthood represent intentional goals undertaken by youth individually and jointly with significant others in their lives. Our purpose in this chapter is to present action theory as a heuristic framework for understanding the transition to adulthood, and counseling and other interventions that can assist young people engaged in this process.

The evidence provided in Chapter 1 indicated that there are innumerable social conditions that either facilitate or prevent youth from adequate transition to adulthood (e.g., Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005a). To some extent these factors can be considered as resources available to a greater or lesser degree to youth during the transition process. But a number of these conditions can be

understood from the perspective of the actions of youth and those who act jointly with them. These conditions are encapsulated in youth's goals, cognitions, emotions, and behavior. For example, addiction to illegal substances can be considered as an impediment to the successful transition to adulthood, but as we have shown elsewhere, addiction can also be considered as goal-directed action (Graham, Young, Valach, & Wood, 2008).

We begin this chapter with an overview of action theory as an explanation of the transition to adulthood. This paradigm is then illustrated by applying it to the issue of what constitutes a successful transition, under the assumption that naturally occurring processes, such as many parent–youth joint projects during this period, as well as formal interventions such as counseling, ultimately directed at facilitating transitions.

The Action-Theoretical Paradigm for Understanding Transitions to Adulthood

Consider a hypothetical young woman making the transition to adulthood. She is engaged in a number of projects. Several of these projects are likely subsumed by relationships, for example, she is likely involved with her parents in reconstructing their relationship to foster greater self-governance as well as addressing issues of separation. She is engaging in friendship projects by both participating in shared activities with peers and drawing them into her projects and interests. She is apt to be testing out and developing romantic relationships. Other probable projects include engagement in educational and occupational pursuits that point to possible futures for the person. These projects are based on and involve the continued construction of an identity. All of them are grounded in the skills that she has developed and honed up to this point. These skills are in a wide range of areas and enable her to implement short-term and mid-term goals, as well as consider long-term ones. Her projects rely on the internal and external resources that are available to her. In engaging in these projects she is aware of and able to reflect on her own thoughts and feelings. Moreover, she is able to use these internal processes to motivate herself to engage in her projects. She is able to see the connection between current and past actions as well as their projection into the future. At the same time, the communication between her and those engaged in the projects with her contributes to accomplishing these projects.

While this encapsulation of the hypothetical youth in transition may sound ideal, these processes are needed by youth and should be supported by people, institutions, and agencies with whom youth are in contact. Contextual action theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding these processes, whether they turn in favor of the youth's transition to adulthood or against it.

Action theory is based on the notion that the common experience of people is that their own and other people's behaviors are understood as goal-directed actions (Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996, 2002). Thus, transition to adulthood can be understood as goal-directed action. This framework for how people understand and make sense of human behavior looks to the goals of action and other action processes

rather than the causes of behavior for understanding. Once considered across time, action theory suggests a significant link between actions, projects, and career, which is particularly relevant because transition to adulthood looks across time to the future. *Action* refers to the intentional goal-directed behavior of persons, for example, the mother–son conversation referred to at the beginning of this chapter can be considered an action, as can writing this chapter, or going to a film. When several discrete actions that occur over a mid-length period of time are constructed as having common goals we consider them as a *project*, for example, the mother–son conversation in *Death of a Salesman* may have been one of a series of conversations that they had regarding Happy Loman’s future, of helping him “take hold of some kind of life.” Finally, when projects coalesce over a long period of time and have a significant place in one’s life, then we can speak of *career*. Here, of course, we do not restrict career to its occupational meaning, but use it to refer to the construct that allows people to make connections among actions and projects over longer periods and significant domains of their lives (see Young et al., 2002). In the case of Linda in *Death of a Salesman*, this project could have been seen by her and others in her family as a parenting career, involving a number of projects over a number of years.

In this action theoretical view, transition to adulthood can be understood as a project, that is, a series of goal-directed behaviors directed toward one or more aspects of becoming adult. It is also suggested that, when optimally engaged in, it looks to the long-term meaning making that is career (again, not simply in the narrow occupational sense). This long-term construction of *career* depends upon engaging in projects of a mid-term length, and projects are only possible when we can see that relevant *actions* are associated through common and hierarchically linked goals.

In the process of engaging in transition-related actions and projects, the youth cognitively steers and regulates them. As youths act, they steer that action based on their thoughts and feelings. For example, a young person can react with a high degree of anxiety at the prospect of applying for a job or be indecisive when asked to choose higher education options (e.g., Germeijs, Verschueren, & Soenens, 2006). The communication between people that invariably happens in joint actions and projects also contributes to the regulation and steering of action. For example, parental involvement and support for autonomy were found to be important protective factors for adjustment to college (Duchesne, Ratelle, Larose, & Guay, 2007). We can interpret these findings to suggest that communication with parents contributes to the adjustment-to-college project. Finally, the hypothetical youth identified earlier engages in specific behavior, based on her skills and habits. These behaviors have both conscious and unconscious sources. As well, youths draw on internal and external resources to be able to engage in actions and projects.

The action theoretical paradigm proposed here has a significant social dimension, which again points to its relevance for understanding transition to adulthood, as the social features of the latter are clear. By conceptually linking action, project and career, we have already moved beyond the idea of the individual – whether considered from the perspective of personality traits or individual decisional processes – to ideas of joint action and the embedding of actions in socially constructed projects and careers. The intentionality we spoke of earlier reflects, at one level, the

individual intentions of actors that they bring to and are generated within actions. We also agree with Shotter (1993) that joint action captures an intentionality that is not fully accounted for by the individual intentions of the participants.

Contextual action theory leads us to propose an understanding of transition that is different from most uses of this term. In contrast to transition as a period during which a number of specific tasks are accomplished (e.g., Osgood et al., 2005a), or a time when one sets oneself on a life trajectory (Lloyd, Behrman, Stromquist, & Cohen, 2005), transition in action theory is conceptualized as goal-directed action. In other words, transition is represented or captured in the goal-directed actions, project and career of people. From our perspective, transition involves goal-directed actions, but it is most readily understood as a project (or several projects) that the young person engages in. Rather than predetermining these projects as tasks to be accomplished, our view is to approach these projects as the person sees them as meaningful to him or her and as they are jointly constructed as meaningful to those engaged in them together. An example may be helpful at this stage. A mother may be helping her daughter, a high school senior, to apply to university for the following year. This action is seen by both of them as a necessary step if the young woman is to be able to attend university in the subsequent year. Furthermore, university may be thought of as part of a longer-term project of getting the education she wants, or is expected to have, or providing her with the opportunities to lead the kind of life she only dimly anticipates at this time. From our perspective, this action can be easily understood as involving the transition to adulthood. To the mother and daughter at the time, the critical question is what this action is about for them. Of course, many answers are not only possible but likely. Some of these answers will be common to both mother and daughter, for example, getting along with each other, getting the application done, being motivated, showing their love for each other. Other answers may be more particular to each individual; for the daughter, answers may include counting on my mother's experience in these matters, acquiescing to her mother's wish for her to go to university, feeling scared to do it by herself. For the mother, motivating her daughter to actually apply rather than just talk about it, fulfilling her role as a mother, solidifying their relationship through concrete tasks. Further, each of these possible answers could be ordered in a hierarchy, with one being more important than another, and lower ones contributing to higher ones. When asked, or if it is brought to their attention, this mother and daughter would likely agree that this action is about the transition to adulthood. What they have done, however, is to engage in a goal-directed action, and probably several actions together, that are directed toward a goal or goals that they have commonly and jointly constructed. While in the particular and specific, this has to do with applying to university, in a larger and longer time perspective, this action contributes to the transition to adulthood.

What distinguishes this understanding of transition from a task understanding is the focus on intentionality of the person and persons involved. If we are to make any difference in transition to adulthood, it is necessary, in the first instance, to appreciate how the persons involved in specific actions understand these actions, that is, what they see them as being about. Determining what an action is "about" is

based on naïve, consensual, as well as scientific observations, which are described throughout this book. We have used the words *intention* and *intentionality* several times already, and you can expect them to be used frequently in the chapters that follow. Without delving too deeply into the philosophical roots, we note that intentions and intentionality have to do with mental states associated with actions. Two specific examples are illustrative for our purposes. First, many young people have future-oriented intentions, for example, “I intend to go to university,” or “I am planning to get married by the time I am 30 years old.” These are intentions and plans for the future. While they may explain some of the person’s current actions, there is a great deal of variability in the extent to which they do. This variability may range from a vague hope to a realistic plan.

Another example of intentionality is that associated with current actions. A young person may be in the process of moving out of the family home. The intentionality associated with this action may have to do with “getting my own place,” “being responsible for myself,” “having less parental supervision,” or many other possible intentions or combinations of intentions. Our view is that the intentionality of current action has not received the attention it deserves in understanding and explaining transition to adulthood. Heretofore, transition to adulthood has often referred to a future state rather than an ongoing process, attention has been focused on the actions and intentions of that future state, for example, being married, or being a geneticist. The classic example of the fixation of Western and other cultures with adulthood as a steady state is reflected in the question often asked of children and adolescents, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Whatever future intentions are represented in the answer to that question, they cannot be realized without considering present actions which contain their own intentionality beyond the occupation that may be identified in the response. Moreover, it is necessary to recognize that the long-term plan is not primarily a matter of working backwards from whatever the long-term intention may be, although for some persons the long-term plan is influential. Rather we consider it critical to focus on present action and the intentionality which informs it. The farther distant in time a future intention may be, the more likely it is that current actions/intentions will interfere with its realization.

We also know from philosophy that any action may represent more than one intention. We previously spoke about goals being hierarchically related. For example, in some of the research that is reported in this book, we found that the parent–youth relationship projects as well as identity projects were judged as more important than some other projects which they subsumed, such as the governance transfer projects and parenting projects.

Successful Transition to Adulthood

How can we talk about successful transition to adulthood in general terms? We know that adulthood was considered differently in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s than it is currently. Young adults who are successful now might have been looked upon as

not wanting to grow up if they had lived in the 1950s. Consider a young woman living in the first decade of the twenty-first century. She may not be married, is not pursuing a conventional career but engages in a series of projects. She dresses as an adolescent and tries to keep her appearance as youthful as possible. She behaves in a silly, adolescent way, and does not adhere to the values expected of a serious and respectful member of this society. She might be a member of a rock band and earn more than an accountant of the same age. She might continue to buy records and go to concerts just like she did when she was an adolescent. Thus, it seems to be that a person can be a successful adult at present with the manners, behavior, and appearance that used to be reserved for adolescents. In addition, we know that a successful adult in one cultural circle or social strata might not be considered successful in another. Subordination to parents might be viewed as demonstrating a lack of maturity in one cultural or social group and as a moral maxim for adults in another. Financial dependence on parents might be seen in one socio-economic level as a sign of immaturity and as irrelevant in judging successful adulthood in another. Thus, the conventions of cultural and social background cannot be considered universal, but they are nonetheless very important in process of transitioning to adulthood. Culture figures prominently in action theory. The challenge of developing a dynamic and sensitive understanding of culture in the transition to adulthood is addressed in Chapter 3.

The action theory paradigm allows the transition to adulthood to be understood and described in a way that is closer to human experience and which has greater ecological validity than many other explanations. However, it does not propose what is necessary for successful transitions. Rather, it has the potential to describe what the case is, that is, what is actually happening in the transition to adulthood. Furthermore, it focuses on how these processes are conceptualized and organized. Chung, Little, and Steinberg (2005) described what it takes to become a successful adult as a series of development tasks that lead to psychosocial maturity. We prefer to think of it as a series of actions and projects that are constructed by those involved in them as much as they are expected chronologically or culturally. There is substantial overlap in what Chung and colleagues identified with our view, but identifying these tasks as joint actions and projects allows us to think of them as processes and to look specifically at the levels of meaning, functional steps, and behavior, as well as resources, that are needed for their realization.

Earlier in this chapter, we were able to portray a hypothetical person in the process of transition. This portrayal can be expanded so that we can posit characteristics of both the systems of action, that is, action, project, and career, and the levels in which action is organized, that is, goals, steps, and elements. It is our view that these systems and levels of action encapsulate successful transition processes, at least hypothetically. As we have tried to make the case above, the goals of transition cannot be predetermined and proposed to represent populations, except in the most general sense. Goals have to arise in and through the actions of those engaged in them. However, using the action theory paradigm, we can posit aspects of the processes which are ideally engaged in at each level of the transition to adulthood

process. The question that we address here is, What are the steps or processes that will comprise a successful transition to adulthood?

The first characteristic of this paradigm is the dynamic relationship between action, project, and career. Rather than considering either the tasks or the outcome of transition, the action theory paradigm allows us to establish the connection between goals at various levels.

The second characteristic is that transition to adulthood is not a single event, but a series of actions over several years, actions that are seen as meaningful for transition. Transition to adulthood aims toward the life-enhancing career, but does not encapsulate it. Thus, the processes that are specifically involved in the transition to adulthood can be specified at the action and projects levels. Examples of these processes are given in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Domains and issues of the life-enhancing career. In Young and Valach (2008), used with permission

	Meaningful goal-directed actions	Motivated participation in projects generated by actor and/or others	Life-enhancing career
<i>At the level of meaning</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Shared action goals <input type="checkbox"/> Relevant to projects and career	<input type="checkbox"/> Joint, goal-directed projects <input type="checkbox"/> Cooperative <input type="checkbox"/> Emotionally sensitive <input type="checkbox"/> Relevant to career and identity	<input type="checkbox"/> Long-term meaning of life <input type="checkbox"/> Socially integrated <input type="checkbox"/> Emotionally satisfying
<i>At the level of steering processes</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Serving identity and goal processes <input type="checkbox"/> Emotional and cognitive components	<input type="checkbox"/> Mid-term challenging <input type="checkbox"/> Successful steps <input type="checkbox"/> Positive feedback in cooperative undertakings <input type="checkbox"/> Emotionally functional	<input type="checkbox"/> Long-term challenging <input type="checkbox"/> Allowing predictability and novelty <input type="checkbox"/> Attendance to emotional issues
<i>At the level of unconscious and conscious behaviour, structural support, resources</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Energy <input type="checkbox"/> Cognitive and emotional regulation <input type="checkbox"/> Skills <input type="checkbox"/> Habits	<input type="checkbox"/> Adequate structural support <input type="checkbox"/> Predictable and manageable time order <input type="checkbox"/> Adequate emotional resources	<input type="checkbox"/> Long-term adequate time and sequence <input type="checkbox"/> Structural properties <input type="checkbox"/> Resources <input type="checkbox"/> Functional emotional regulation

Actions a young person engages in for a successful transition to adulthood are ones in which there are shared goals with others, as well as goals that are relevant to longer-term projects. These actions involve identity and goal processes, include emotional and cognitive components, include energy, and are based on skills and habits, as well as being cognitive and emotionally regulated. In turn these actions, when taken together, contribute to and are constructed as joint projects that are generated with others and are motivated. Here meaning is achieved through their

cooperative nature, their emotional sensitivity, and their relevance to the young person's identity and career. In the process of engaging in these projects, the young person finds them challenging, but not so challenging as to not be successful at most of these steps involved in them. The young person receives positive feedback and engages in them in an emotionally functional way. In order to engage in these projects, the young person needs adequate structural support, predictable and manageable time, as well as adequate emotional resources.

The Processes of Successful Transitioning to Adulthood

We are now able to pose the questions, "What constitutes a successful transition to adulthood from an action theory perspective?" and, "Does the action theory paradigm allow us to propose what constitutes a successful transition?" Answers to these questions describe what youth involved in transition can direct their efforts toward and how counselors can help them.

Process Issues

It is difficult to conclusively describe a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood by its outcome. Thus, it becomes all the more important to consider process issues. As we discuss in other chapters of this book, the conscious understanding of these processes by all participants as joint goal-directed processes in which the participants are the actors or agents is crucial. The adolescence-to-adulthood transition can be seen as a joint project composed of a series of important subprojects. Thus, it is important to ensure youth are engaged in and attend to all the relevant projects in their lives, including the autonomy project, the vocational project, projects leading toward financial independence, the relationship project, the romantic project, the educational project, and many other projects that are a priority at this time of life, socially or individually.

Coordination and Compatibility

The coordination and compatibility of these projects must be assessed. It is cumbersome to ask for advancement in autonomy and responsibility projects of adolescents, on the one hand, and to regularly insist, as a parent for example, on being informed on all details of their life, on the other. The best career propositions made by parents will be useless unless adolescents are able to accept them and make them their own. If the push from outside is stronger than the drive from inside, steered by high autonomy goals, outside well-intended help will not facilitate the relevant actions but may be detrimental to the transition to adulthood.

Communication

Relationship projects, described in Chapter 5, and the concomitant communication required for their success must function well. The question that can be asked is, “Is the family successfully managing family changes according to the many new challenges of transition?” One important component of successful joint family projects is effective communication that is responsive to the needs of all involved. For example, successful transition requires communication in which the recipients are informed but not questioned so as to be challenged; where emotions are communicated; where individual expectations are discussed; where individual feelings and not the mistakes made by the partners in the joint action are recognized; where communication is used to facilitate the identity goals; where positive references and, in particular, negative references are specific rather than general; and where one refers to consequences of actions and not to the value of the person performing this action. Thus, the quality of the transition can also be assessed based on the quality of communication within family projects.

Steering Processes

Another dimension to assess the quality of transition is the quality of steering processes within the various projects. Steering implies setting up goals in individual and joint actions and projects. Family and individual projects require steering. Family and other groups participating in transition projects should develop a heterarchical structure allowing different participants to be active in steering projects. Acquiring such a structure is an important quality for successful transition. Steering should be processed in such a way that it does not obstruct any other projects or actions. It should be related to clearly defined goals, and not subverted by adjoined goals. To learn to steer individual and joint actions and projects takes some time and cannot be accomplished by simple instruction. Learning and practicing mindfulness can facilitate the steering of actions and project. Acquiring projects, setting up goals, being able to formulate wishes and visions in terms of a hierarchy and sequence of goals are important steps on the way to effective transition. It is important that the youth learns that living his/her life means having goals, even though having goals is sometimes connected to pressure exercised by parents or teachers.

Control and Regulation Processes

Individual and joint actions and projects related to the transition to adulthood require adequate control processes. These are designed to choose, maintain, and revise the procedures, steps, strategies, and plans in the service of the implemented goals. Thus, effective transition and transition-related projects and actions must possess well-functioning control processes that enable the actors or agents to operate at low

emotional, relational, and other costs. Learning to engage in control processes of one's own or joint actions and projects in a facilitative rather than a punishing or distractive way is an important process in achieving effective transition. This type of engagement in control processes requires a certain degree of reflexivity and an ability to obtain information and to evaluate this information adequately. Another important process to address in assessing effective transformation is the process of regulation. These processes are often semi-conscious or unconscious in individual actions and projects and frequently are not talked about or are handled in nonverbal ways in joint actions and projects. However, it is necessary to assure that these processes work. For example, many actors or agents assume that others should know when they are disappointed, but, in fact, this is not always the case. Thus, establishing effective regulation requires extensive communicating and informing those engaged in joint actions. It also is necessary to find ways to ensure that differing values and other conflicts do not affect actions and projects in a detrimental way. Conflicts can be addressed by making them conscious and communicating about them in order to solve them. Unregulated actions are well known as impulsive actions or responses. While disagreeable on an individual level, they are even more difficult in joint actions or projects, as the actors move toward ineffective, nonfunctional, and often irrational decisions. An important part of all these processes is also a well-functioning knowledge management. It should be possible to implement new knowledge in individual and joint action and project processes. We know how difficult it is to learn and absorb new knowledge, and to apply it to individuals, groups, and organizations in joint processes. Often it is even difficult to engage people in learning processes. As we often cannot let go of habits and ineffective strategies, it frequently is difficult to accept and process new knowledge in joint actions and projects. New knowledge feels threatening; the power structure in a joint project might be challenged. However, it is important that a knowledge management system is developed to enable to youth in transition to adulthood to continuously engage in learning.

Monitoring Processes

Effective transition also requires well-functioning monitoring processes, that is, cognitive and emotional monitoring in individual actions and projects, and communication and positive group feeling in joint actions and projects. To be able to reflect about one's own action, to access consciously the complex network in actions, to free emotional monitoring from old traumas and anxieties about the future are important achievements in individual action. To be able to communicate in a group about ongoing processes, to free the group's feelings from future worries and past disagreements, as might occur in a family, facilitates the transition processes. Being able to address and improve these issues is an important competence in the efficient transition process.

Energizing Processes

Effective transition also requires energizing processes that are well attended to and focused, and that move transition projects forward in enduring ways. Energizing is often achieved by emotional–motivational processes in individual actions and projects and in gratifying–supporting ways in family or joint projects. Developing self-generated motivation and energizing are significant assets in the transition to adulthood. Not having to constantly refer to obligations, punishment, negative thoughts, and similar repressive measures facilitates the effective adolescent-to-adulthood transition.

Summarizing the suggestions for a successful transition, the following points can be stressed. All those engaged in the transition to adulthood, that is, youth, parents, family members, friends, teachers, employers, and others, should consciously understand that processes relevant to the transition to adulthood are joint and goal-directed. In the complex network of these processes, all relevant projects should be identified, attended to, and maintained. They should be run in a well-coordinated and compatible way. A successful relationship project, effective communication, steering, control and regulating as well as knowledge management, monitoring, and energizing at individual and group level are important preconditions of successful transition.