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“Adulthood” by Whose Definition?: The Complexity of Emerging Adults’ Conceptions of Adulthood

Larry J. Nelson *and* Stephanie S. Luster

Abstract

The beginning of adulthood may well be the most nebulous transition of the life course. It is fair to say that no clear-cut universal marker indicates the beginning of adulthood, leading to widespread cultural and individual diversity in the beliefs of young people aged 18–29 regarding what it means to be an adult and how the transition into adulthood should occur. This chapter examines this complexity. The authors review the literature exploring the conceptions of adulthood of young people beginning at age 18 and continuing through the third decade; examine how these conceptions have been linked to beliefs, behaviors, and relationships during the third decade of life; (c) recommend numerous areas of inquiry needed to better understand factors related to young people’s conceptions of adulthood; and (d) provide some thoughts on the implications of the extant research for those who work with young people.

Key Words: emerging adulthood, conceptions of adulthood, adulthood, development, cultural diversity

A 19-year-old Chinese woman working in a factory sees herself as an adult, whereas a 27-year-old man working in a design firm in Europe does not. A 23-year-old Romanian mother of one child does not feel like an adult, but a 20-year-old student attending university in the Midwestern United States does perceive himself as an adult. It is fair to say that there is no clear-cut universal marker indicating the beginning of adulthood. Indeed, in reality, there is increasing confusion regarding age-related expectations of what it means to be an adult, and this results in multiple transitions and increased diversity in development across the ages from 18 to 29 (Hendry & Kloep, 2007; Stauber & Walther, 2002). Although the first part of this chapter briefly reviews theoretical approaches that have attempted to capture what it means to be an adult and when that transition occurs, we feel it is a rather futile objective to try to define a universally agreed

upon definition of what it means to be an adult. For that reason, the main focus of this chapter is on “conceptions” of adulthood. Specifically, the purpose of this chapter is to (a) review the literature that has explored the conceptions of adulthood of young people beginning at age 18 and continuing through the third decade; (b) examine how these conceptions have been linked to beliefs, behaviors, and relationships during the third decade of life; (c) recommend numerous areas of inquiry that are needed to better understand factors related to young people’s conceptions of adulthood; and (d) provide some thoughts on the implications of the extant research for those who work with young people.

Theoretical Approaches of What It Historically Means to Be an Adult

The work examining the position of adulthood within the life span has evolved over time. Serious

conceptual strides at defining not only adulthood but what constituted becoming an adult were made in the middle of the 20th century by the likes of Erikson and Havighurst. Two major frameworks guided these early scholarly efforts aimed at understanding developmental change from adolescence to adulthood. First, a focus was placed on how individuals progress through unique developmental stages that (loosely) correspond with chronological age (i.e., Erikson, 1950, 1968; Gould, 1972, 1978; Levinson, 1978, 1986). Second, scholars addressed the transition to adulthood as a function of societal expectations and role transitions that emphasize the sociological aspects of development (i.e., Côté, 2000; Havighurst, 1953; Neugarten, 1976, 1968; Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965).

Early age-based theories emphasized how individuals mature through a sequence of stages, wherein each stage has its own unique crises and resolutions. For example, Erikson's theory of ego development described eight universal stages that individuals progress through. Each stage is associated with an inherent conflict that individuals must encounter and resolve in order to proceed with development. Although Erikson did not define a range of chronological ages, he believed that identity formation was the primary task of adolescence, even though identity development continued through later years (Sokol, 2009). According to Erikson (1968), identity development allows for young people to explore possible careers and vocations, ideologies, and relationships. To Erikson (1968), reaching young adulthood meant that identity was achieved, signaling the end of adolescence, and that issues of intimacy took over as the central crisis of the stage.

Along the same lines, Gould (1972, 1978) believed individuals undergo a series of transformations that occur in sequential, age-related stages. In Gould's (1978) theory, young adulthood is a period of "dismantling the protective devices that gave us an illusion of safety as children" (p. 39). Young adults (aged 16–22) are charged with *leaving the parents' world*, where they must challenge the false assumption "I will always belong to my parents and believe in their world" (Gould, 1978, p. 6). Simply put, young adulthood to Gould was a time to develop independence, find safety beyond parents, and develop a sense of family beyond the family of origin (Dean, 2007).

Finally, Levinson (1986) proposed an age-based theory of development in which he believed the life cycle could be divided into eras (e.g., early adulthood encompassed ages 17–45) that were

further subdivided into periods (e.g., entry life structure for early adulthood, spanning ages 22–28). Each era was linked by transitional periods that spanned 5 years marking the end of one era and the beginning of the next (e.g., the early adult transition spanned ages 17–22). In the Early Adult Transition, young people are expected to question their place in the world and their personal relationships and make preliminary choices about their adult life. Next, the period of Entry Life Structure for Early Adulthood is a time dedicated to building and maintaining initial choices in love, work, friendship, values, and lifestyle. Young people also begin to try on possible adult roles and assume their adult identity. These tasks continue to be modified and solidified throughout the second era (i.e., early adulthood). Thus, early adulthood is a time for making critically important decisions about the self and future including marriage, family, work, and lifestyle. In sum, Levinson claims that development follows an orderly sequence, with a standard series of periods, each beginning at a well-defined age within a range of only 4–5 years. Indeed, he resolutely contends that the "basic nature and timing of life structure development are given in the life cycle at this time in human evolution" (Levinson, 1986, p. 11).

In contrast to age-based theories of adulthood, Havighurst (1953, 1964, 1972) proposed that specific developmental tasks dominate certain periods in one's life in terms of what should be accomplished and the pressures that influence development. He argued that the transition to adulthood is influenced by physical maturation, societal pressure, and personal expectation. Havighurst and colleagues believed that "In our society a child, as part of the process of growing up, must choose his life-work, his mate, his friends, and his philosophy of life" (Havighurst, Prescott, & Redl, 1942, p. 106). So, as adolescents move toward young adulthood, their focus should shift from "preparation for marriage, an occupation, and independence" to actually choosing a mate, bearing and rearing children, managing a home, and starting a career. Successful achievement of such tasks, it is argued, will lead to happiness and success with later tasks, whereas failure will lead to unhappiness, difficulty with later tasks, and social disapproval (Havighurst, 1972).

Similarly, Neugarten (1968, 1976) believed that society played an extremely important role in the transition to adulthood via the *social clock*. The social clock is the prescribed timeline for accomplishing the typical markers of adulthood including

of maturity in general (e.g., Tilton-Weaver et al., 2001) and of adulthood specifically (e.g., Barker & Galambos, 2005; Horowitz & Bromnick, 2007). Second, adolescents' implicit theories of maturity and adulthood appear to change over the course of adolescence (e.g., younger adolescents link maturity to being privileged more than do older adolescents; Tilton-Weaver et al., 2001). Next, the conceptions may guide adolescents toward or away from certain behaviors and relationships (e.g., adolescents report less of a desire to hang out with peers who exhibit immature characteristics such as being mean and hurtful and, to a lesser extent, silly or goofy; Galambos, Barker, & Tilton-Weaver, 2003). Finally, it is also important to note that conceptions of adulthood in adolescence appear to vary based on the life experiences of the adolescents (e.g., parents' divorce, Kenyon, Rankin, Koerner, & Dennison, 2007; dating, sexual experience, substance use, Galambos, Albrecht, & Jansson, 2009).

Taken together, it is important to understand that the conceptions of adulthood that young people have beginning at age 18 and continuing throughout the third decade of life have their origins much earlier in life. Indeed, more longitudinal work is needed that examines the development of conceptions of adulthood across the second and third decades of life and how conceptions held in adolescence might affect trajectories throughout the next phase of young people's lives. Thus, we acknowledge the developmental importance that adolescents' conceptions of adulthood may have as they become emerging adults, but the remainder of this chapter focuses on the conceptions of adulthood for individuals aged 18–29.

Emerging Adults' Conceptions of Adulthood

FEELING LIKE AN ADULT

The reason why it is so important to investigate the role of conceptions of adulthood in understanding the variance in development between the ages of 18 and 29 is that increasingly more young people are not feeling like adults until increasingly later into the third decade of life. In 1997, Arnett asked individuals between the ages of 18 and 28 the question, "Do you think you have reached adulthood?" Response options included "yes," "no," and "in some respects yes, in some respects no." Only 27% of the 18- to 23-year-olds responded "yes." Although the proportion of young people responding "yes" increased with age, there was still nearly 30% of the 25- to 28-year-olds who responded who did not see themselves as adults. Because of this, Arnett (2000)

coined the term "emerging adulthood" to capture a growing number of young people who no longer see themselves as adolescents but who do not yet see themselves as adults.

Although the numbers may vary from one culture or country to another, the research conducted over the past two decades repeatedly shows large proportions of young people (college students and nonstudents) who do not yet see themselves as adults. Some of the countries in which these results have been found include (the percentage of young people who do not yet see themselves as adults is in parenthesis) Greece (62%, Petrogiannis, 2011), Austria (62%, Sirsch, Dreher, Mayr, & Willinger, 2009), the Czech Republic (70%, Macek, Bejček, & Vaníčková, 2007), Argentina (54%, Facio & Micocci, 2003), the United States (53%; Lowe, Dillon, Rhodes, & Zwiebach, 2013), China (41%, Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004; 75%, Nelson, Duan, Padilla-Walker, & Luster, 2013), Romania (60%, Nelson, 2009), India (39%, Seiter & Nelson, 2011), and Canada (72%, Cheah & Nelson, 2004). Similar findings have been found in a variety of within-country subgroups including Aboriginal Canadians (48–54%, Cheah & Nelson, 2004) and both religious (e.g., Mormons, 76%, Nelson, 2003) and ethnic (African Americans, 41%; Latinos, 52%; Asian Americans, 62%; Arnett, 2003) subgroups within the United States. Taken together, a growing number of young people in the third decade of life do not see themselves as adults.

CRITERIA FOR ADULTHOOD

If a growing number of young people do not consider themselves to be adults, it begs the question of when they think they will become adults. This question has received a great deal of attention during the past decade and a half. Much of the work has been guided by Arnett's framework of providing young people with a list of possible criteria for adulthood and then asking them to respond to the question "Is this criterion necessary for adulthood" (response options include "yes" or "no") or, alternatively, "Is this criterion important for adulthood" (response options include a range of 1 "not at all important" to 4 "very important"). Early work (e.g., Arnett, 1994, 1997, 1998; Nelson & Barry, 2005) employing this approach in the United States repeatedly found that intangible internal markers of adulthood were highly endorsed, most notably accepting responsibility for self, being able to make decisions independently, becoming less self-oriented, and (more tangibly) gaining financial

independence. Markers that tap role transitions that might more clearly demarcate entry into adult roles (e.g., marriage and bearing children) were rarely endorsed. Chronological markers (e.g., reaching age 18 or age 21), biological markers (e.g., capable of bearing/fathering children, or growing to full height), and behavioral markers (e.g., having had sexual intercourse or buying a house) were likewise seldom selected.

This is not meant to suggest that the traditional social markers of adulthood do not matter. There is certainly research that shows that for many individuals an event (e.g., getting married, completing education, having a child, being employed full time) is at least somewhat important to being considered an adult (Furstenberg, Kennedy, McCloy, Rumbaut, & Setterstein, 2004; Hartmann & Swartz, 2006; Johnson, Berg, & Sirotzki, 2007; Molgat, 2007; Shanahan, Porfeli, Mortimer, & Erickson, 2005). In fact, for those individuals who have *already* experienced a role transition, they tend to place particular emphasis on the role that the event played in their feeling like an adult (Johnson et al., 2007; Lowe et al., 2013). However, for young people who do not see themselves as adults and who have not yet taken on adult roles, research does suggest that the majority of them do not believe that formal transition events and markers (e.g., marriage license, birth certificates, diploma, or paycheck) are the defining and sole criteria in what makes one an adult. Instead, they endorse criteria for adulthood that reflect individualistic, intrinsic (e.g., decide on personal beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences; accept responsibility for the consequences of one's actions), behavioral (e.g., avoid committing petty crimes; use contraception if sexually active and not trying to conceive a child), and relational (e.g., establish a relationship with parents as an equal adult) markers of maturity.

Gender Differences

It is important to note that there may be very important gender distinctions to be made in examining the conceptions of adulthood. Almost without exception, results of the studies reviewed to this point have noted significant gender differences in the percentage of young people who consider themselves adults and the criteria they deem necessary for adulthood. On average, higher percentages of men tend to consider themselves to be adults than do women (e.g., Sirsch et al., 2009). Furthermore, women tend to rate criteria associated with norm compliance (e.g., Sirsch et al., 2009) and relational

maturity (e.g., Nelson et al., 2007) as more important than do men. Aronson (2008) identified three themes in the interviews she conducted with young women on their conceptions of adulthood: independence/self-reliance, self-development, and uncertainty. Likewise, Gordon and Lahelma (2003) identified an underlying tension experienced by young women as they look forward to becoming adults in some ways but are fearful of giving up the possibilities that exist for them prior to taking on adult roles. Taken together, the growing work seems to capture a greater level of tension, or complexity, in the process of becoming an adult for women as they attempt to balance the shifting views of women's roles as adults. This underscores the importance of examining for gender differences that may exist in issues related to conceptions of adulthood.

The Role of Culture

Since the initial work using Arnett's framework of "criteria for adulthood," there has been extensive work examining the role of culture in shaping what young people think is necessary in becoming an adult. It is important to note that work exploring the role of culture has found that the criteria most frequently endorsed in the early work in the United States (i.e., accepting responsibility for self, being able to make decisions independently, becoming less self-oriented, and gaining financial independence) have been found to be likewise highly endorsed in nearly every culture that has been subsequently studied. For example, these criteria have been highly endorsed in subgroups within the United States such as ethnic groups (i.e., African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans; Arnett, 2003) and religious groups (e.g., Mormons; Nelson, 2003; Barry & Nelson, 2005), as well as in countries/cultures around the world including Argentina (Facio & Micocci, 2003), China (e.g., Badger, Nelson, & Barry, 2006; Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004), Romania (Nelson, 2009), Greece (Petrogiannis, 2011), Sweden (Westberg, 2004), Austria (Sirsch et al., 2009), Israel (Mayseless & Scharf, 2003), Aboriginal Canada (Cheah & Nelson, 2004), and India (Seiter & Nelson, 2011). In sum, there is overwhelming evidence that young people around the world tend not to see discrete events or rites of passage as indicating the beginning of adulthood (e.g., completing one's education, buying a home, or marrying). Instead, they recognize that maturity in intrinsic, behavioral, and relational facets of one's life is integral to becoming an adult.

Despite these cross-cultural similarities, research also points to the important role that culture plays in *variation* in the conceptions of adulthood. For example, there tend to be variations in conceptions of adulthood based on broad cultural differences such as individualism versus collectivism. Western cultures, such as those found in Canada and the United States, tend to have an ideology of individualism that has been defined broadly as emotional independence from groups and relatively less concern for family and relatives (Triandis, 1995). In contrast, collectivism is related to solidarity, concern for others, and integration with other people (Shkodriani & Gibbons, 1995). Collectivistic cultures tend to value group- or other-oriented goals and place the interests of the group (e.g., family, community) above self-interests (Triandis, 1995). Variations on criteria endorsed by emerging adults in more collectivistic cultures have been found. For example, college students in Argentina endorse characteristics relating to family capacities (e.g., being able to care for children) and interdependence (e.g., become less self-oriented; Facio & Micocci, 2003), and young people in China rank highly those criteria related to norm-abiding behavior (e.g., avoid becoming drunk) and fulfilling duties to family (e.g., becoming capable of financially supporting parents; Nelson et al., 2004).

Another particularly interesting example of the cultural differences that result from a more collectivistic versus individualistic emphasis is seen in young people's responses to whether being "capable of supporting parents financially" is an important criterion for adulthood. In the United States, this criterion tends to rank near the very bottom of criteria deemed necessary for adulthood. For example, in one study conducted in the United States, only 16% of participants considered being able to support parents financially as necessary criterion for adulthood (Nelson, 2003). In contrast, in more collectivistic Asian cultures, the ability to support parents financially tends to rank as one of the most important steps in becoming an adult. For example, in a study of Chinese college students, it was found that 89% of participants endorsed being capable of supporting parents financially as being necessary for adulthood (Nelson et al., 2004). Similarly, college students in India ranked it as the eighth (of 42) most important criterion for adulthood (Seiter & Nelson, 2011).

These findings were explained within the cultural context of China and India, respectively. In China, Confucian doctrine places great importance

on putting the needs and interests of the family before one's own. Confucius taught that being able to support one's parents and take care of one's family are morally significant and indicative of a mature adult, as part of the cultural value of "filial piety" (see Nelson et al., 2004). Likewise, Hindus in India consider it part of a grown son's *dharma* or duty to take care of his parents in their old age (Verma & Saraswathi, 2002; see Seiter & Nelson, 2011). In sum, cultural teachings regarding the obligation of children to care for aging parents are reflected in the criteria young people see as requisite for adulthood.

These examples not only show how the broader influence of collectivism versus individualism might impact views of adulthood, but they also demonstrate how specific aspects of a culture (e.g., Confucian or Hindu teachings) might impact a person's conceptions of what is important for adulthood. This can be seen in other findings as well. For example, India is one of the few cultures studied to date in which young people rank "becoming capable of keeping family physically safe" as being important for adulthood. In fact, it was rated as the second most important criterion for adulthood in a sample of college students in India (Seiter & Nelson, 2011). The authors speculated that this was due to a number of reasons, including the fact that things like regular traffic accidents in urban areas and poisonous snakes in rural areas present real physical dangers. Furthermore, the prevalence of corruption among government officials and police officers and a slow judiciary system may cause young people in India to feel that becoming capable of keeping their family physically safe is necessary when growing into adulthood, especially when compared to more developed nations.

There are numerous other examples that demonstrate the ways in which aspects of a culture may influence the criteria individuals deem necessary for adulthood. Some of these examples include the more "communal" nature of Israeli society (Mayseless & Scharf, 2003, p. 17) and the requirement there of military service, the focus on marriage and families of Mormons (Nelson, 2003), and the concept of *marianismo* (belief that a woman is supposed to be obedient, enduring, and morally and spiritually superior to a man) in Argentina (Facio & Micocci, 2003). Taken together, there is ample evidence to suggest that culture plays an important role in the criteria that young people feel are necessary before considering oneself an adult. However, the evidence also reveals that a number of intrinsic, behavioral, and relational qualities and characteristics are

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essential to becoming an adult that seem to cut across cultural boundaries.

Future Work

The amount of work that Arnett's framework has generated in such a relatively short period of time is really quite astounding. Indeed, the amount of research conducted in such a wide range of cultural settings has helped to shed light on both cross-cultural similarities and differences in what today's young people deem as necessary for adulthood in a time when the lines demarcating the transition to adulthood have become much more blurred (Hendry & Kloep, 2007). In acknowledging the amount of work that has been done, however, there likewise needs to be a call for more work in this area. There is certainly a need to continue to understand how culture influences conceptions of adulthood because there are glaring omissions in the samples that have been studied (e.g., numerous nations from the continent of Africa and the Middle East, a plethora of indigenous populations, young people from lower socioeconomic status and rural settings throughout the world, members of various religious traditions). However, for our understanding of the conceptions of adulthood to grow, we need to expand the work being done beyond just identifying whether young people feel like adults and the criteria for adulthood to broader areas of inquiry. In the sections that follow, we highlight specific questions that might guide future research in the area of conceptions of adulthood.

Conceptions of Adulthood and Well-Being

The first area that deserves greater attention is the role that feeling or not feeling like an adult may play in the lives of young people. Specifically, the subjective belief of whether individuals feel like adults may impact the well-being of individuals in a number of ways (Johnson et al., 2007). Evidence for this may be found in a study of 18- to 25-year-old college students in which Nelson and Barry (2005) found that young people who felt like they had reached adulthood (i.e., saw themselves as adults and self-reported having achieved necessary criteria for adulthood) were less depressed, engaged in fewer risk behaviors (e.g., drunk driving and illegal drug use), and had a better sense of their own identity in a number of areas than did those who did not yet see themselves as adults. Similarly, in a longitudinal study following high school seniors for eight years postgraduation, it was found that greater success in developmental tasks (e.g., financial autonomy,

substance abuse avoidance, work) was tied to higher levels of well-being (Schulenberg, Bryant, & O'Malley, 2004). Finally, Kins and Beyers (2010) found that individuals' self-reported well-being was predicted by the achievement of criteria related to financial independence from parents, making life-long commitments to others, having control over one's emotions, avoiding the use of illegal drugs, being capable of supporting a family financially, and settling into a long-term career.

Taken together, the emerging evidence speaks to the possibility that conceptions of adulthood, including the perception of having achieved important criteria or tasks for adulthood, might be tied to well-being. Specifically, for some, a lengthy period of instability during which they do not feel they have done what it takes to be an adult may begin to take its toll on their mental, emotional, and even physical health. Conversely, achieving successes in areas deemed important to becoming adults may foster growth in numerous areas (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy, internal locus of control, less depression) that would be indicative of well-being.

The role of feeling like an adult in regard to personal well-being may be as or more important than just taking on adult roles. For some young people, they may enter into adult roles too quickly, before they have had the opportunity to accomplish the things they feel they need to do to subjectively feel like an adult. For example, in a study done with Romanian college students aged 18–27, Nelson (2009) examined four groups of young people who differed in the extent to which they felt like adults and whether they had taken on adult roles (specifically, marriage and/or parenthood). The four groups included *adults* (perceived themselves to be adults and had taken on adult roles), *unprepared adults* (did not perceive themselves to be adults but had taken on adult roles), *self-perceived adults* (perceived themselves to be adults but had not taken on adult roles), and *emerging adults* (did not perceive themselves to be adults and had not taken on adult roles). The results of the study revealed that, not surprisingly, emerging adults (i.e., those who did not see themselves as adults and had not taken on adult roles) were less settled in regard to their identities than were their peers who considered themselves to be adults (i.e., adults and self-perceived adults). However, what is particularly noteworthy is that those young people who were struggling most with their overall identities were those who did not think they were adults but who had taken on adult roles (i.e., unprepared adults). It was the subjective

notion of not *feeling* like an adult that seemed to suggest that some young people may take on adult roles prematurely, thereby underscoring the role that conceptions of adulthood may play in the individual lives of young people.

Toward this end, it is now fairly well established that a wide amount of variation exists in the extent to which young people consider themselves adults during the third decade of life, but much more work is needed to examine the ways in which subjectively feeling like an adult may be tied to an individual's well-being in areas such as beliefs (e.g., identity formation), behaviors, and relationships. In fact, we would contend that scholars may be arguing over the wrong questions related to emerging adulthood. Currently, many scholars (i.e., Côté & Bynner, 2008; Hendry & Kloep, 2007) contend that emerging adulthood is not a universal period of development because many young people do not have the opportunity (e.g., time and resources) to experience a lengthy period of self-focused time that includes experimentation and exploration because their culture expects or their financial condition dictates that they enter into adult roles soon after turning 18 years of age (or even earlier). If, however, *feeling* like an adult plays an important role in one's well-being (e.g., Nelson & Barry, 2005), including for those who have taken on adult roles (e.g., Nelson, 2009), scholars may, again, be asking the wrong questions. Instead of asking whether the features of emerging adulthood exist for all young people, it may be important to ask whether the features *need* to exist in order for healthy, adjusted development to occur. For example, does taking on adult roles before settling on identity issues (i.e., being left without the opportunity to engage in the process of exploration) place some individuals at risk (e.g., Erikson, 1968)? In other words, rather than debating over whether emerging adulthood exists universally, it might be better to ask whether young people need a period of emerging adulthood (i.e., a period of self-focus, experimentation, exploration, etc.) in order to come to feel like an adult and experience higher levels of well-being. This need may be stronger in cultures valuing individualism than in cultures that value collectivism and family obligations (Zhong & Arnett, 2014).

As a parallel, we can consider infants reared in institutions. Just because an orphaned baby's setting (i.e., orphanage) is different from what is "normal," few would argue that infancy, as a developmental period, does not exist. Instead, institutional deprivation is correctly labeled as a risk factor for

normal development (see Maclean, 2003). Indeed, throughout infancy and childhood, scholars examine risk factors for normative development rather than debate the universality of the period of development. Similarly, might there be factors such as poverty, cultural beliefs/practices (e.g., limiting the rights of women), or political structures that might present risk factors for young people entering into and developing throughout the third decade of life? Specifically, might there be risk factors that prematurely push young people into adult roles before they have experienced developmentally appropriate processes (e.g., skill acquisition, identity exploration/achievement, experimentation) that would lead to healthy, adjusted development, including acquiring the subjective sense of feeling like an adult? Given that coming to *feel* like an adult appears to be an important factor related to well-being regardless of whether one has taken on adult roles (e.g., Nelson & Barry, 2005; Nelson, 2009), might there be developmental processes that are facilitated by a period of emerging adulthood, and may these processes differ for men and women, respectively?

Irrespective of the direction that the scholarly debate takes regarding the universality of emerging adulthood as a period of adulthood, the growing body of evidence suggests that the conceptions individuals have regarding their status as adults are important factors in their well-being. Therefore, more work is needed to examine the ways in which conceptions of adulthood are tied to indices of well-being and how the timing (e.g., before or after taking on adult roles, before or after a period of lengthy exploration and experimentation) of coming to see oneself as an adult might likewise be tied to aspects of adjustment or maladjustment. Also, work is needed to help us better understand the factors that lead individuals to consider themselves adults, a topic that we turn to next.

Individual Differences

We have examined previously the literature that shows that young people tend to endorse certain criteria as necessary/important for adulthood. We have also seen that culture appears to play a role in the criteria young people deem necessary for adulthood. However, whether it be across cultures or within cultures, there is a significant amount of individual variation in the conceptions young people have about adulthood and what individuals think they need to do to be considered an adult. For example, it appears that young Chinese women who are working in factories tend to endorse learn

to care for parents, settled into a long-term career, and become capable of caring for children as the most important markers for adulthood (Zhong & Arnett, 2014). These criteria appear to be ranked higher by these female factory workers than the criteria most frequently endorsed by Chinese college students (e.g., Nelson, Duan, Padilla-Walker, & Luster, 2013). This serves as just one example of the individual differences that exist even within cultures. Thus, it would seem important to better understand (a) what young people think adulthood entails and how that is related to what they perceive is needed to become adults; (b) how this variation in beliefs regarding the criteria for adulthood might impact the beliefs, behaviors, and relationships of young people *during* the third decade of life; and (c) the origins of these individual differences in the criteria deemed necessary/important for adulthood.

CONCEPTIONS OF ADULTHOOD AND DIFFERENCES IN BELIEFS, BEHAVIORS, AND RELATIONSHIPS

Although there has been an abundance of work examining the criteria young people feel they need to achieve in order to be considered an adult, there is relatively little that is known regarding individual differences in why they feel these criteria are important. For example, what is it about their conceptions of adulthood that lead them to believe it important to “learn to accept responsibilities for the consequences of one’s action” or to “learn to make decisions independently”? Relatedly, do young people view adulthood positively or negatively? How would whether they view it positively or negatively impact their beliefs, behaviors, and relationships during emerging adulthood? Although it is becoming increasingly clear that the conceptions young people have regarding their own status as an adult are important, more research is needed to explore emerging adults’ conceptions of adulthood more generally because these may play a role in explaining the beliefs, behaviors, and relationships of young people during the third decade of life.

For example, Ravert (2009) asked college students the following question, “How often do you do or try something because you think you won’t be able to do it later on when you settle down as an adult?” (p. 382). The most common theme that emerged was travel/adventure, followed by social events, alcohol/tobacco/drug use, relationships (e.g., multiple sexual experiences), carefree lifestyle (e.g., being lazy, enjoying not having a real job), sports/action, academic/career (e.g., being able to

change schools or change jobs), and independence/personal expression. Inherent in both the question and the responses is the notion that adulthood entails a rather significant shift in lifestyle. Similarly, the findings demonstrate how conceptions about what it means to be an adult can influence the behaviors that individuals engage in before becoming an adult. Thus, to be able to understand better the beliefs, behaviors, and relationships of emerging adults, we need to know more about what they think being an adult *means* and whether these views are positive or negative. Indeed, in the nature of Ravert’s (2009) research question (i.e., examining “now or never behaviors”), young people were asked to focus only on what might be deemed the *negative* aspects (i.e., the fun things that they will *not* have the freedom to do as adults) of adulthood. Researchers need to examine whether young people see any *positive* aspects of adulthood, what those features might be, and, then, examine how those might be guiding their beliefs, behaviors, and relationships during emerging adulthood.

There is ample evidence to suggest that how one feels about future events or adult roles might be tied to variation in beliefs, behaviors, and relationships during emerging adulthood. However, rather than focusing on views about adulthood, most of this line of inquiry has been in regard to the ways in which views about marriage and relationship formation play a role in framing emerging adults’ behaviors in many aspects of their lives, such as risk-taking, sexual patterns, educational pursuits, and employment plans (e.g., Carroll et al., 2007; Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995; Willoughby, 2012; Willoughby & Dworkin, 2009). For example, *marital horizon theory* (Carroll et al., 2007) refers to a person’s outlook or approach to marriage in relation to his or her current situation and that a person’s own marital horizon includes (1) the relative *importance of marriage* in one’s current life plans, (2) the *desired timing of marriage* in the life course, and (3) the *criteria for marriage readiness* or the types of preparation one believes are needed before being ready to get married. Employing a large sample of college students from across the United States, Carroll and colleagues (2007) found that each of the aspects of one’s marital horizon was indeed linked to subgroup differences in the length of emerging adulthood and the specific behaviors that occur during this period in the family life cycle. Even after controlling for age, dating status, religiosity, impulsivity, and extroversion, significant differences were found between those who wanted to marry between

ages 18–23, 24–26, and 27 years or later on indices of substance use, sexual permissiveness, and values related to family formation (e.g., cohabitation). Specifically, emerging adult men and women with relatively close marital horizons (i.e., those who desire to marry in their early 20s) tended to have lower levels of substance abuse and sexual permissiveness and endorsed lower acceptance of nonmarital cohabitation than those who desired marriage in their mid-20s or later (Carroll et al., 2007).

Taken together, there is conceptual and empirical evidence suggesting that views about the future might be linked to one's current situation, but little of that work has focused specifically on conceptions of adulthood. More work is needed to see how variations in beliefs about the meaning of adulthood might account for various developmental trajectories within emerging adulthood and whether these may vary by gender. Indeed, it is time for researchers to move beyond a broad examination of the criteria deemed necessary for adulthood and into a more focused exploration of how these criteria might account for different developmental trajectories within emerging adulthood.

For example, Nelson and Padilla-Walker (2013) attempted to identify the characteristics of individuals who are flourishing in emerging adulthood versus those who are floundering. They identified three types of young people—one group that was flourishing and two types who were floundering. The characteristics that distinguished the first floundering group (e.g., “externalizing group”) were high levels of alcohol, drug, pornography, and video game use, as well as a high number of sexual partners. The second floundering group (labeled “poorly adjusted group”) consisted of individuals who, like the externalizing group, scored high on alcohol and drug use and number of sexual partners, but they also all scored high on depression and anxiety and low on self-esteem. The flourishing group was characterized by strong, internalized values related to kindness, honesty, and fairness, as well as low levels of anxiety and depression; low levels of alcohol, drug, video game, and pornography use; and fewer risky sexual behaviors (e.g., numbers of sexual partners). After identifying these three groups via cross-sectional mixture modeling, the groups were compared on a number of indices deemed relevant to emerging-adult development, including the criteria they deemed important for adulthood. Interestingly, the well-adjusted emerging adults rated criteria related to *norm compliance* (e.g., avoid becoming drunk, avoid petty crimes like

shoplifting) and *family capacities* (e.g., become capable of caring for children) as more important than did the externalizing and poorly adjusted emerging adults, whereas the poorly-adjusted emerging adults rated *age/biological transitions* (e.g., reach age 21) as more important than did well-adjusted and externalizing emerging adults.

These findings beg the question of how views of adulthood generally and the emphasis on different criteria for adulthood specifically might be guiding or shaping what goals young people are striving toward and therefore what behaviors and relationships they should be engaged in during the pursuit of achieving these criteria. In sum, there is a need for researchers to now do more than just rank order the criteria deemed necessary for adulthood in different groups (i.e., cultures, religions, students vs. nonstudents). Work is needed to see to what extent, if any, these criteria might account for the variations seen in the beliefs, behaviors, and relationships of young people, as well as the roles the criteria might play as potential internal guides for emerging adults as they make their way through the third decade of life.

SOCIALIZATION AND INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Another important line of inquiry that is needed is the examination of factors that influence variations in both the conceptions of adulthood and the criteria young people have for adulthood. In other words, are there factors beyond the achievement of certain criteria that affect whether young people feel like an adult? What influences affect emerging adults' views of adulthood as either positive or negative? Finally, what or who might play an important role in shaping young people's view of what the important criteria for adulthood are? We have already addressed the fact that culture appears to play an important role in shaping the emphasis that young people in various countries and subcultures place on certain criteria but less is known about who or what the specific socialization factors and processes are that convey these cultural messages.

It is pretty safe to assume that parents play an important role, but surprisingly little work has been done to examine this possibility. In a study of Canadian emerging adults, Galambos, Darrach, and Magill-Evans (2007) found that emerging adults who self-reported that parents treated them as younger than they actually were (i.e., chronological age) reported feeling younger (i.e., subjective age) than they actually were. In studies that have

There is evidence, however, that specific parenting practices may be linked to views of adulthood. For example, Padilla-Walker and colleagues examined the varying levels of financial assistance that parents provided for their children's education. Results showed that those parents who provided minimal financial support were more likely to consider their children to be adults, and their children were likewise more likely to consider themselves to be adults as well as work more hours per week, engage in less drinking and binge drinking, and be more settled on their occupational identity than their peers who received more financial support from their parents, especially those whose parents provided financial assistance for almost all of their needs (e.g., tuition, living expenses) and wants (e.g., recreation; Padilla-Walker, Nelson, & Carroll, 2012). This provides just one example of how specific parenting practices may be tied to emerging adults' conceptions of adulthood, thereby underscoring the need for more work in this area.

Another aspect of the parent-child relationship that appears to matter in the achievement of criteria deemed necessary for adulthood is living circumstances. It has been found that emerging adults who live in their parents' home report having achieved fewer criteria for adulthood related to financial independence, making life-commitments to others, role transitions, and family capacities than do those who live outside of their parents' home (Kins & Beyers, 2010). More work is needed to better understand the mechanisms that may hinder progress toward adulthood in young people who live at home. Likewise, work is needed to examine individual variation in this regard. In other words, work is needed to examine whether there are conditions under which living at home might facilitate, rather than hinder, the achievement of aspects of adulthood. For example, only 9% of 25- to 34-year-olds in the United States lived in poverty in 2009, but the number is estimated to have been closer to 43% if they had not been living with their parents (Rich, 2010). Therefore, living at home may be a protective factor in some regards, but little is known regarding how it might impact conceptions of adulthood. Taken together, there is reason to believe that whether one resides in the same home with parents might be related to variation in conceptions of adulthood, but much more work is needed to explicate how.

Parents, however, are just one possible socialization factor in young people's developing conceptions of adulthood. A number of other factors may

play important roles, including peers (e.g., friends, romantic partners), media, and possible mentors (e.g., professors, employers, religious leaders). The number of unexplored socializing factors underscores the need for researchers to move beyond simply the examination of how young people feel regarding their adult status and the identification of the criteria they have for adulthood and into new realms of inquiry aimed at better understanding the development of these conceptions, including multiple socialization influences, the role these conceptions have on their behaviors and relationships during emerging adulthood, and the potential longitudinal trajectories of individuals with varying conceptions of adulthood as they move beyond the third decade of life.

FLUID NATURE OF CONCEPTIONS OF ADULTHOOD

The language that has been employed throughout most of this chapter has tended to suggest that once people feel like adults, they never again experience the feeling of not being an adult. However, this may not be the case. The metaphor of a yo-yo has been used to capture the ups and downs of fragile and reversible transitions related to feeling like an adult. Feeling like an adult may change right along with individual skill, opportunities to explore and experiment, availability of resources, and individual motivation (European Group for Integrated Social Research, 2001). Although this provides a nice conceptual lens through which to see the fluidity of individuals' perceptions of their own status as adults, few studies have attempted so specifically identify factors related to these shifts in self-perceptions. One notable exception is the work of Massoglia and Uggen (2010), in which they demonstrated that participation in prosocial acts (e.g., voting) tends to evoke feelings of adulthood, whereas violations of the law diminish feelings of being an adult. More work of this nature is needed to better understand the fluid, often back-and-forth nature of feeling like an adult that many young people may experience throughout the third decade of life.

Implications for Practice

Understanding the ways in which young people view adulthood, perceive their own status as either adults or emerging adults (i.e., not-yet-adults), and the criteria they deem necessary for adulthood may have implications for policy and practice. As noted previously, the perception of oneself as not-yet-adult may be related to indices of maladjustment for

some young people (e.g., underdeveloped identity, Nelson, 2009; depression, Nelson & Barry, 2005). It is beyond the scope of this chapter, or the expertise of its authors, to elucidate the ways in which mental health professionals might incorporate an understanding of conceptions of adulthood into their clinical work with emerging adults. Suffice it to say, greater strides need to be made to take a more developmentally appropriate approach to working with emerging adults by seeing that their well-being may be tied to conceptions of adulthood (e.g., receiving pressure to take on adult roles before feeling ready, concerns regarding one's capacity to take on adult roles, anxiety resulting from instability associated with feeling in-between).

Similarly, a better understanding of young people's conceptions of adulthood should prove useful to anybody who might work with this population (e.g., employers, parents, policy makers, educators). As an example of how understanding the conceptions of adulthood may impact policy, the European Group for Integrated Social Research (2001) has outlined how the changing structure and agency of the transition to adulthood in Europe's young people call for changes in the current policies and practices of labor markets, higher education, government programs, and social traditions. However, rather than taking this larger macrolevel approach to discussing how an understanding of conceptions of adulthood might impact policy, we would like to provide more person-centered implications.

Specifically, understanding the variation that exists in conceptions of adulthood may be helpful in working with individuals. For example, working with young people who have a positive view of adulthood and who are proactively working on achieving the criteria they feel necessary for adulthood may be a very different experience from working with those who want to put off for as long as possible taking on adult roles and achieving requisite criteria for adulthood. Indeed, the current state of emerging adulthood in many Western countries like the United States presents a rather challenging dilemma both for young people and those who work with them. When one considers the intangible nature of the criteria for adulthood that are frequently deemed as important for adulthood, it raises the questions of how young people will develop these qualities (e.g., the ability to accept the consequences of one's actions, develop greater concern for others, or cultivate the capacities to run a home or care for children).

During emerging adulthood, there is very little structure that would facilitate the cultivation of

these characteristics. For example, young people are not required to pursue education beyond secondary school, and, even if they do, professors do not provide the personal oversight for students' studies that teachers do in elementary, junior/middle, and high school. If young people do not like their employers, they are able to simply quit. There is no longer a requirement for military service that would provide a system of accountability in the third decade of life. In sum, there is no universal structure in place that would provide a setting that might foster the acquisition of certain characteristics deemed necessary for adulthood. In stark contrast, this is a time of self-focus during which young people might choose to spend their time focused solely on pleasurable and individualistic pursuits (Ravert, 2009). By its very nature, emerging adulthood is not fully conducive to the development of many of the very characteristics and capacities captured in the criteria young people themselves deem necessary for adulthood.

This is not to say that it is impossible for growth to occur but rather to underscore the fact that more responsibility is being placed on young people and the adults who work with them to create contexts that are conducive to positive development. For example, Gottlieb, Still, and Newby-Clark (2007) found that at least 50% of emerging adults in their study reported growth in domains of relating to others (e.g., greater compassion for others, putting more effort into relationships), new possibilities (e.g., developing new interests, doing better things with one's life), and personal strength (e.g., better at handling difficulties, greater feeling of self-reliance) as a result, largely, of eventful experiences with their close social networks (e.g., meeting new friends) and with matriculating at a university. This is not surprising given that 4-year colleges may provide the closest thing to structure that exists for today's emerging adults. Indeed, Settersten (2012) has pointed out that 4-year colleges provide "shelter, directed activities, adult and peer support, health care, and entertainment" (p. 20). This underscores the fact that developmental supports are attainable, and growth can and does occur in emerging adulthood, but the experiences that generate it are largely driven by events that emerging adults bring about by their own choosing (e.g., opting to attend college if financially able, putting themselves in settings to make new friends) rather than on any socially mandated structure.

Thus, without any set structure during a period that, for many, is focused extensively on fun

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