Reconsidering adulthood: Relative constructions of adult identity during the transition to adulthood

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A B S T R A C T

This article explores how peers influence the process of adult identity development during the transition to adulthood. The influence of peers leads to similar individuals adopting differing definitions of adulthood. Utilizing data from interviews with 60 young adults who are all exactly 30 years old, findings indicate that peer groups can partly explain variation in self-perceived definitions of adulthood. Respondents described how peers influence the transition to adulthood in two ways. First, they measure the timing of their transitions relative to their peers. Second, they assess the nature of their transitions relative to what they perceive to be the normative nature of that transition within their peer group. While this process was reported by respondents across gender and education level, the outcomes varied between individuals who are demographically similar. Variation in self-perceived status is due in part to the differences between peer groups, as the reference point for each individual varies from one peer group to another. These findings suggest that norms about adulthood are perceived at the group level, which can explain why differing feelings of adulthood exist among individuals who have completed comparable transitions and share similar status characteristics. As previous research has focused on adulthood norms that exist primarily at the societal level, this study expands on that work by suggesting that salient adulthood norms may be developed and referenced at multiple levels.

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As the United States shifted from an industrial to a post-industrial society during the twentieth century, the process of becoming an adult also underwent large-scale changes. The amount of time it took young people to become adults increased, in addition to the increased variation in the sequencing of events during the path toward adulthood (Shanahan, 2000). While a large body of scholarship has examined the reasons as to why today's young adults experience a lengthier and more varied transition than previous generations (Buchmann, 1989; Côté, 2000; Furstenberg, Kennedy, McLoyd, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2004; Shanahan, 2000), there has also been new focus on the ways that young people make sense of the experience of becoming an adult. In the face of these changes, how do young adults develop their adult identity?

Much of the research on identity during the transition to adulthood has focused on age identity. Specifically, these studies have sought to understand how differences in perceived age identity, or the age that a person feels, exist across individuals with differing status characteristics. Research has found differences in perceived age identity during the transition to adulthood by race (Benson & Elder, 2011; Benson & Johnson, 2009; Burton, 2007; Johnson et al., 2007a), and gender (Aronson, 2008; Johnson, Berg, & Sirotzki, 2007a; Johnson, Berg, & Sirotzki, 2007b), socioeconomic status (Benson & Elder, 2011). While these studies have shed light on how young adults develop their adult identity, their focus has been on

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explaining the outcome of the process, namely what age young adults perceive themselves to be. In addition, their focus has been on explaining differences in self-perceived adulthood among young adults in different social locations. This study seeks to understand first, more about the process of the development of subjective age identity and second, how differences in self-perceived adulthood also exist within a homogeneous population of young adults.

To answer this question, this study frames individual constructions of adult identity in a peer group context. While some attention has been given to the ways that young people construct their age identity relative to those around them (Johnson et al., 2007b), most studies of relative age ask individuals to compare themselves to anyone of the same age. This study extends that work by narrowing the point of reference and asking young adults to focus their assessments specifically on their peers. In-depth interviews were conducted with 60 young adults who were all exactly 30 years old and lived in the United States, in the same mid-sized northeastern city. These young adults were asked to explain how they construct their understanding of themselves as adults relative to their peers. This study offers insight into how micro-level interactions with peers shape adult identity.

1. Literature review

Due to large-scale changes in the process of becoming an adult in the United States, namely increased length in transition duration and variation in sequencing (Buchmann, 1989; Côté, 2000; Shanahan, 2000), studies have sought to understand how young people develop their adult identity in the wake of these changes. Many studies have utilized subjective age identity, the age an individual feels relative to their chronological age, as a way to measure how individuals understand their adulthood status relative to others (Johnson et al., 2007a; Kaufman & Elder, 2002). In the social psychological tradition, identity is based on the definitions derived from a particular situation, including internalized role transitions and meanings (Stryker, 1991; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Wells & Stryker, 1988). To that end, social roles influence age identity such that as young people complete salient transitions, they will be treated more as adults and therefore begin to feel more adult (George, 1990; Logan, Ward, & Spitze, 1992; Neugarten, 1977). Subjective age is also contingent on chronological age, however, as the age at which a person is completing transitions can impact subjective perceptions. For example, one study found that becoming a grandparent at an early age is associated with feeling older than one's chronological age (Kaufman & Elder, 2003).

Subjective age identity varies depending on an individual's status characteristics. The timing and ordering of adulthood transitions varies due to these characteristics, such as race or socioeconomic status. For that reason, individuals who are the same chronological age may express differences in subjective age. To illustrate, research has shown that in America, Hispanics and blacks become parents at earlier ages than Asians and non-Hispanic whites (Brown, Moore, & Bzostek, 2003; Ingels, Curtin,

Kaufman, Alt, & Chen, 2002; Sanderson, Dugoni, Rasinski, Taylor, & Dennis Carroll, 1996) and this can explain why Hispanics and blacks are also more likely to describe their subjective age as older than their chronological age (Johnson et al., 2007b). Broadly speaking, young adults from less privileged backgrounds are more likely to move quickly into adulthood through the completion of selected life course markers than their more privileged counterparts (Osgood, Ruth, Eccles, Jacobs, & Barber, 2005), which may explain why they also report higher feelings of subjective age.

Another line of research has considered how age is developed relationally, focusing on it as more of an interactional accomplishment. Laz (1998) argues for viewing age as a social construction, where it is developed through interactions with others. In this way, age is viewed as something that individuals "do," similar to the doing gender perspective (West & Zimmerman, 1987). A study of 16- and 17-year olds found that feelings of adult status are based upon treatment by others; being treated like an adult leads to feeling like an adult (Horowitz & Bromnick, 2007). Similarly, losing the safety net offered by one's parents has also been attributed to increasing feelings of adulthood (Andrew, Eggerling-Boeck, Sandefur, & Smith, 2007). Some young women, particularly those from working class backgrounds, have attributed becoming a parent and the responsibility of taking care of another person as what led to their feelings of adulthood (Aronson, 2008; McMahon, 1995).

When examining subjective age during the transition to adulthood specifically, a host of more recent research has sought to understand how young people make sense of what it means to be an adult (Andrew et al., 2007; Aronson, 2008; Benson & Elder, 2011; Benson & Furstenberg, 2007; Benson & Johnson, 2009; Burton, 2007; Hartmann & Swartz, 2007; Johnson & Mollborn, 2009; Johnson et al., 2007a, 2007b). Many of these studies have demonstrated differences in how and when young adults develop their adult identity contingent on their status characteristics. In regards to race, research has found that among all racial groups, African American young adults are the first to develop feelings of adulthood, while Asian American young adults develop an adult identity latest (Benson & Elder, 2011). African Americans may develop feelings of adulthood earlier than their counterparts because, as described previously, African Americans take on adult responsibilities at earlier ages than young adults from other racial groups (Johnson et al., 2007b). While Benson and Elder (2011) were not able to fully explain why their research found that Asian American young adults develop feelings of adulthood at the oldest age, they hypothesize that the reason may be rooted in that particular group's delays in autonomy (Fulgini, 1998). The earlier acquisition of adult roles can also explain differences in feelings of adulthood by social class. Young people from financially disadvantaged family backgrounds report developing feelings of adulthood faster than young people from more privileged backgrounds, likely due to adultification, namely needing to take on adult-like responsibilities within the family at a young age (Benson & Elder, 2011; Burton, 2007; Johnson et al., 2007a; Johnson & Mollborn, 2009). Differences also exist by gender, with