



Brief report: Danish emerging adults' conceptions of adulthood



Jeffrey Jensen Arnett^{a,*}, Laura M. Padilla-Walker^b

^a Clark University, United States

^b Brigham Young University, United States

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ABSTRACT

Four hundred Danish emerging adults ages 17–29 were surveyed regarding their conceptions of adulthood and their self-assessments of their adult status. A majority of the 17–24-year-olds and nearly half the 25–29-year-olds viewed themselves as being adults in some ways but not others. Participants reported feeling most adult when with co-workers or romantic partners, and least adult with mothers, fathers, or friends. The most widely-endorsed criteria for adulthood were accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent. Among the least-endorsed criteria were the traditional transition events of entering marriage and parenthood, as well as “avoid becoming drunk.”

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When do young people feel they have reached adulthood? Over the past two decades, numerous studies have addressed this question (see Nelson & Luster, 2015; for a review). Most of the studies have taken place in developed countries, such as Austria (Sirsch, Dreyer, Mayr, & Willinger, 2009), Argentina (Facio & Micocci, 2003), Czech Republic (Macek, Bejček, & Vaníčková, 2007), Israel (Mayseless & Scharf, 2003), and the United States (Arnett, 1998, 2003). However, recently studies have taken place on this topic in India (Seiter & Nelson, 2011) and China (Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004; Zhong & Arnett, 2014), including noncollege as well as college samples.

There have been two consistent patterns in studies of conceptions of adulthood (Nelson & Luster, 2015). One is that most 18–25-year-old emerging adults respond to the question “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?” with neither “yes” nor “no,” but “in some ways yes, in some ways no.” The second consistent finding is that the top three criteria for adulthood are *accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and financial independence*. There are some exceptions to this pattern, especially in rural areas of developing countries. Young people in India value emotional self-control, abiding by social norms, and fulfilling traditional gender roles most highly as criteria for adulthood (Seiter & Nelson, 2011), and for young women factory workers in China, learning to care for parents is the top criterion (Zhong & Arnett, 2014). These variations demonstrate that reaching adult status is culturally-defined and consequently varies depending on cultural and historical context (Arnett, 2011; Blakemore & Mills, 2014).

Two relatively unexplored topics in this area are the focus of this study: conceptions of adulthood among emerging adults in a Nordic country, and perceptions of adulthood in different social contexts. The Nordic region of Europe is distinguished from other European regions in several ways with respect to emerging adulthood (Douglass, 2007; Frisén, Carlsson, &

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: arnett@jeffreynarrett.com (J.J. Arnett).

Wängqvist, 2014; Moreno Mínguez, López Peláez, & Sánchez-Cabezudo, 2012). Nordic emerging adults leave home earlier, are most likely to have a “gap year” (or two or three) between secondary school and post-secondary education or training, are most likely to cohabit before marriage, and enter marriage and parenthood latest, compared to other young Europeans. These differences may influence their subjective sense of becoming adults. Although there have been recent studies of emerging adults in Sweden (Frisén et al., 2014; Frisé & Wängqvist, 2011), no studies of Nordic emerging adults have yet investigated their conceptions of adulthood.

In most studies of subjective feelings of becoming adult, the question has typically been phrased in general terms: “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?” However, it is also possible that emerging adults feel relatively more or less adult depending on whom they are with (e.g., parents, sibling, friends, romantic partner, teacher, co-workers). This is one of the first studies to explore this variation in contexts of feeling adult, and we did not have any definite hypotheses. Emerging adults report feeling a shift to a more adult-like relationship with parents (Arnett, 2015; Fingerman & Yahirun, 2014), but often continue to be financially dependent on them. Relations with friends and romantic partners could be contexts where there are mutual feelings of being equally adult, or they could be contexts where the pressure to appear adult is relaxed. Relations with co-workers was perhaps the context where feeling adult would be most likely, because these relations typically entail definite mutual responsibilities. Mainly, we viewed these context questions as initiating an important new approach to examining feelings of reaching adulthood.

Method

Participants, procedure, and measures

The participants were 400 Danes ages 17–29 ($M = 21.0$, $SD = 3.23$), 57% female. Only 4% were married and only 5% had one or more children, reflecting the high median ages of marriage and first birth in Denmark. Their social class backgrounds were diverse, as measured by mother's educational attainment: 16% *folkeskole* (through 8th grade), 10% *haandvaerkeruddannelse* (secondary-level trade school), 17% *gymnasium* (the secondary school that is considered preparation for university studies), 16% post-secondary non-university education or training, 14% university, and 27% other.

Most of the younger participants, ages 17–20 ($n = 202$), were in their last year of secondary school in three schools, two in Copenhagen in the eastern part of Denmark and one in Aalborg in the western part. These participants completed the questionnaire during a portion of a class period. Copenhagen is the largest city in Denmark, with a metropolitan population of about one million persons. Aalborg is a medium-sized city of about 200,000 persons. Of the two schools in Copenhagen, one was a *gymnasium* ($N = 84$), and the other was a *handelskole*, ($N = 60$), which provides training in commercial professions such as bookkeeping, marketing, and running a small business. The Aalborg school was a *gymnasium* ($N = 58$).

Additional participants ages 18–29 ($n = 193$) were recruited from public places in Aalborg, where they were asked by research assistants to complete the short questionnaire used in the study. These participants were sought in order to extend the age range of the sample through the twenties, and to include participants in the work force as well as those who were continuing their education.

IRB approval was obtained from the first author's institution. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

The 33-item questionnaire on markers of adulthood used in the present study has been used in a variety of previous studies (e.g., Arnett, 2003; Nelson, 2009). Participants indicated how important the criteria were for adulthood on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 4 (*very important*). In addition, participants were asked “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?” with response options “no,” “in some ways yes, in some ways no,” and “yes.” Participants were also asked how adult they felt when they were in the following relationship contexts: father, mother, sibling, friends, romantic partner, teacher, and co-worker. Their response options were “not at all,” “partly,” and “fully.” In the current study percentages were calculated for each response category, but consistent with past research, responses were also examined continuously, with higher scores indicating feeling more like an adult (e.g., Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). The questionnaire also included demographic items.

Results

Perceptions of adult status

In response to the question “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?” 27% of the sample responded “yes,” 11% “no,” and 62% “in some ways yes, and in some ways no.” Perceptions of adulthood were significantly and positively correlated with age ($r = .33$, $p < .001$), suggesting that older individuals felt more adult. In response to the question, “How adult do you feel when you are with...?”, descriptive statistics suggested that in most relationship contexts the largest percent of emerging adults reported feeling “partly adult” (Table 1). A repeated measures ANOVA with LSD post-hoc follow-up analyses (controlling for age) was conducted to determine how feelings of adulthood varied as a function of all seven relationship contexts ($F(6, 238) = 2.22$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$). There was no significant relationship context by age interaction. Higher scores were indicative of feeling more like an adult, and results suggested that Danish emerging adults felt most adult with co-workers ($M = 2.40$, $SD = .63$) and romantic partners ($M = 2.36$, $SD = .59$), who did not differ from one another, followed by siblings ($M = 2.24$, $SD = .62$) and teachers ($M = 2.22$, $SD = .64$), who also did not differ from one another. They felt least adult

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