

# YOUNG PEOPLE'S CONCEPTIONS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

JEFFREY JENSEN ARNETT  
University of Missouri

*Conceptions of the transition to adulthood were examined using data from 346 college students aged 18-23 and 140 21- to 28-year-olds. Participants indicated the characteristics necessary for a person to be considered an adult on a questionnaire containing 40 possible criteria. In both studies, the top criteria endorsed emphasized aspects of individualism, including "accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions," "decide on own beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences," and "establish a relationship with parents as an equal adult." In contrast, role transitions typically associated with research on the transition to adulthood, such as finishing education, entering the labor force, marriage, and parenthood, were rejected as criteria for adulthood by a large majority in both studies. The results suggest that the current generation of young people in American society conceptualizes the transition to adulthood in intangible, gradual, psychological, and individualistic terms.*

**The transition to adulthood** has been a topic of interest to social scientists for many years, particularly in sociology (e.g., Hagan & Wheaton, 1993; Hogan, 1981; Hogan & Astone, 1986; Marini, 1984a; Modell, 1989; Sewell & Hauser, 1975). Numerous studies of the transition employ a perspective in which factors related to the timing of transition events in various cohorts are examined. The transition events focused on in these studies include finishing education, enter-

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ing the labor force, establishing an independent household, marriage, and parenthood (often referred to as "first birth"). These are referred to as "social," "demographic," or "role" transitions (Hogan & Astone, 1986).

Consider what is implied by the use of the phrase "the transition to adulthood." It implies the existence of a social idea of what it means to be an adult. That is, it implies that there is a commonly held view concerning the criteria that constitute adult status. Thus, adult status is not merely biological but is socially constructed, formed from the criteria the members of a culture deem to be most important in signifying adult status. As such, the transition to adulthood, the movement into adult status, is also socially constructed. For this reason, it would seem to be important to investigate how the transition to adulthood is conceptualized by the members of various cultures at various times. Because adult status is a social concept, the criteria considered important in the transition to adulthood may vary from one culture to another, and within any given culture these criteria may change over time.

The social construction of the transition to adulthood has been recognized, even emphasized, by social scientists studying the transition to adulthood (see Hogan & Astone, 1986). Generally, scholars have portrayed the transition to adulthood as one facet of the life course, which (like the rest of the life course) is constructed by social institutions (Dannefer, 1984; Kohli, 1986; Kohli & Meyer, 1986; Riley, 1986). During the first half of the 20th century, the life course became increasingly "institutionalized" (Kohli & Meyer, 1986). The rise of compulsory education was especially important in this respect. Schools are hierarchical and age-graded institutions, and compulsory education is seen as having established a definite separation between the stages of adolescence and adulthood (Rosow, 1985). Furthermore, the institutionalization of the life course through compulsory education and other institutions has shaped what Kohli and Meyer (1986) term the "life world perspectives" of individuals; that is, the expectations according to which individuals plan their futures, including their entry from adolescence into adult life.

However, in spite of this attention to the social construction of the life course, including the transition to adulthood, there has been

remarkably little research actually exploring the life world perspectives of individuals with regard to the transition to adulthood. Social science research has paid little attention to people's conceptions of the transition to adulthood in American society. Instead, research has focused on historical patterns in the timing of role transitions, assuming that the transition to adulthood is defined by departure from the institution of the school and entry into the institutions of work, marriage, and parenthood. For example, Marini (1978, 1984a, 1984b) explored the linkages between various role transitions, especially the relations between education and the timing of marriage. She stated explicitly the focus on role transitions that underlies most research on this topic: "In the United States . . . beginning in late adolescence . . . a number of role changes begin to take place which mark the passage to adulthood. These include movement out of the student role, entry into the labor force or housewife role, entry into marriage, and entry into parenthood" (1978, p. 483).

Research on expectations for role transitions to adulthood has had a similar focus. Expectations have been argued to be important predictors of the timing of events associated with the transition to adulthood (Hogan & Astone, 1986). Adolescents' expectations for the timing of finishing education, marriage, and parenthood have been shown to be related to their families' socioeconomic resources, their parents' expectations, and their own educational aspirations (Hogan, 1985; also see Sewell & Hauser, 1975). In one study, Greene (1990) investigated adolescents' expectations for completing transition events, and reported that as adolescents move through their teen years, there is an increasing consensus among them in the anticipated timing of role transitions (also see Greene & Wheatley, 1992). The study focused on what Greene (1990) described as "the normative event sequence comprising the transition to adulthood (i.e., completion of formal education, followed by full-time employment, marriage, and parenthood)" (p. 289). Thus, the study investigated adolescents' expectations of the timing of their future role transitions into adulthood, but without investigating whether those events constitute their conceptions of adult status.

In an important review article, Hogan and Astone (1986) integrated dozens of articles on the transition to adulthood. The authors acknow-

ledged the importance of biological and psychological aspects of the transition but focused their review on role transitions—that is, finishing education, entering the labor force, marriage, and parenthood—and the many studies on the transition to adulthood that also focus on these events. Their review was comprehensive and insightful, and included an exploration of the historical development of age grading of transition events; linkages between transition events; norms related to transition events; and variability in the timing of role transitions according to factors such as race, socioeconomic resources, and gender. However, out of more than 100 references cited, few addressed young people's conceptions of the transition to adulthood—how the transition is viewed by the people experiencing it themselves.

Research on young peoples' conceptions of the transition to adulthood may provide a useful complement to research that focuses on the timing of role transitions. Two questions are of particular interest. Do young people who are at the ages typically associated with the transition to adulthood define it in terms of transition events? What other criteria do young people view as a necessary part of the transition to adulthood?

These are the questions explored in this article. To examine them, two studies are presented describing young people's perspectives on the transition to adulthood. The first study included 346 college students aged 18 to 23. The second study included 140 persons aged 21 to 28 with a broad range of individual differences in certain demographic characteristics (such as education). Although the samples in the two studies differed in the median and variance of participants' ages, current educational status, current employment status, marital status, and family socioeconomic status (SES) background, the results of the two studies were virtually identical. The studies indicated that young people in their late teens through their 20s generally reject the principal role transitions as markers of the transition to adulthood in favor of more intangible, psychological, and individualistic criteria.

Two other studies have investigated conceptions of adulthood among people in their teens and 20s, and reached conclusions similar to the present studies concerning the criteria most important in defining adult status (Greene, Wheatley, & Aldava, 1992; Scheer, Unger, &

Brown, 1994). However, these previous studies used only open-ended questions. The present studies are the first to investigate the topic more systematically, using a questionnaire based on a wide range of theoretical and empirical perspectives in the social sciences on the transition to adulthood. Thus, the present studies indicate criteria that young people consider to be important in their conceptions of adult status and criteria that they clearly do not consider a necessary part of adult status. Participants provided responses concerning criteria they may have mentioned in response to open-ended questions and criteria that may not have occurred to them in that format.

## METHOD

### STUDY 1

#### Participants

College students at a large midwestern university were surveyed ( $N = 346$ ). The students were enrolled in an introductory course in communications. General characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1. Nearly all the students (95%) were aged 18 to 21 (highest age 23), and nearly all were full-time students. The sample was about evenly divided between male and females. Nearly all were unmarried and childless, although most planned to marry and raise children eventually. Few were employed full-time, but nearly half were employed part-time. With regard to their financial status (not shown in the table), 72% indicated that their parents supported them financially "mostly" or "entirely," whereas the other 28% supported themselves "mostly" or "entirely."

#### Procedure

The questionnaires were administered during a class period. Students were informed that participation in the study was voluntary, but fewer than 2% declined to take part. The questionnaires took about 15 minutes to complete. Data collection took place in the fall of 1993.

TABLE 1  
General Characteristics of Participants (in percentages)

	<i>Sample 1</i>	<i>Sample 2</i>
Gender		
Male	46	53
Female	54	47
Race		
White	90	94
Black	5	5
Other	5	1
Current educational status		
In school full-time	97	28
In school part-time	3	8 <sup>a</sup>
Not in school	0	65
Marital status		
Married	1	60
Single	99	40
Number of children		
None	98	73
One	2	14
Two or more	0	13
Employment		
Full-time	2	67
Part-time	46	24
None	52	9
Father's education		
Less than high school degree	1	8
High school degree	19	24
Some college	21	15
College degree	31	24
Some graduate school or graduate school degree	28	30

## STUDY 2

### Participants

The participants in Study 2 were 140 persons aged 21 to 28. General characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1. The sample was evenly divided between 21- to 24-year-olds and 25- to 28-year-olds, and between males and females. Close to half of the participants were married, and about one fourth had had at least one child. Two thirds of the participants were employed full-time, and one fourth were

employed part-time. Of the persons employed part-time, three fourths were in school full- or part-time. Overall, 28% were in school full-time and 8% were in school part-time. Of the participants, 9% were neither employed nor in school. "Some college" was the modal level of education, indicated by 52% of the participants. The SES of the participants' families of origin varied widely, as indicated by father's education.

### **Procedure**

The data presented in Study 2 were collected as part of a larger study on people in their 20s. The study took place in a medium-sized city in the Midwest. Potential participants were identified from local high school enrollment lists from the previous 3-10 years. They were sent a letter describing the study, then contacted by phone. Of the persons contacted, 72% agreed to participate in the study. Data collection took place in the author's office or the participant's home, depending on the participant's preference. The study was conducted over a 2-year period (1994-1995).

### **MEASURES**

The participants in each study indicated on a questionnaire the criteria they believed to be necessary for a person to be considered an adult. There were 40 items on the questionnaire, and participants were asked to "[i]ndicate whether you think the following must be achieved before a person can be considered to be an adult." They could then indicate "necessary for adulthood" or "not necessary for adulthood" for each item. All items are shown in Table 2. The items were based on the literature (in sociology, psychology, and anthropology) concerning the transition to adulthood (see Arnett, 1994; Arnett & Taber, 1994) and on pilot studies.

Participants were also asked on the questionnaire, "Do you think that you have reached adulthood?" Response options were "yes," "no," and "in some respects yes, in some respects no." A variety of questions concerning background and demographic information were also included on the questionnaire.

TABLE 2  
Criteria for the Transition to Adulthood

<i>Necessary for Adulthood?</i>	<i>Percentage Indicating "Yes"</i>	
	<i>Sample 1</i>	<i>Sample 2</i>
<b>Role transitions</b>		
Financially independent from parents	66	73
No longer living in parents' household	57	60
Finished with education	18	10
Married	15	17
Have at least one child	12	14
Settle into a long-term career	28	21
Employed full-time	27	17
Purchased a house	14	17
<b>Cognitive</b>		
Decide on personal beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences	80	78
<b>Emotional</b>		
Establish a relationship with parents as an equal adult	72	69
Learn always to have good control of your emotions	54	50
Not deeply tied to parents emotionally	14	19
Committed to a long-term love relationship	10	16
<b>Behavioral</b>		
Avoid becoming drunk	29	30
Avoid using illegal drugs	44	41
Have no more than one sexual partner	32	29
Drive an automobile safely and close to the speed limit	26	32
Avoid drunk driving	60	55
Avoid committing petty crimes like shoplifting and vandalism	70	66
Avoid using profanity/vulgar language	16	18
Use contraception if sexually active and not trying to conceive a child	65	65
<b>Biological</b>		
Capable of bearing children (woman)	38	29
Capable of fathering children (man)	44	30
Grow to full height	18	13
Have had sexual intercourse	8	9
<b>Legal/chronological</b>		
Obtained driver's license	25	24
Reached age 18	41	39
Reached age 21	35	31
Reached age 25	21	23
Reached age 30	24	27
<b>Responsibilities</b>		
Accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions	92	94
Make lifelong commitments to others	31	36
Capable of keeping family physically safe (man)	61	52
Capable of keeping family physically safe (woman)	55	47

(Continued)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Capable of supporting a family financially (man)	46	50
Capable of supporting a family financially (woman)	40	42
Capable of caring for children (woman)	48	50
Capable of caring for children (man)	50	50
Capable of running a household (woman)	55	67
Capable of running a household (man)	55	72

## RESULTS

Because the results of the two studies were so similar, they will be presented together. Table 2 shows the responses of the college students and the people in their 20s to the questionnaire on the criteria for the transition to adulthood. Few of the role transitions were considered by them to be important markers of the transition to adulthood. Most notably, the criteria most often employed in sociological studies—finish education, begin full-time employment, marriage, and parenthood (“have at least one child”)—were rejected by a large majority. Most of these criteria were considered necessary for adulthood by less than one fourth of the participants in each study. However, two role transitions were endorsed by a majority of each sample: “financially independent from parents” and “no longer living in parents’ household.”

Two of the psychological (cognitive, emotional) transitions were endorsed widely by the participants in the two studies as criteria for adulthood. “Decide on personal beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences” was viewed as necessary for adulthood by more than three fourths of each sample, and “establish a relationship with parents as an equal adult” was endorsed by more than two thirds of each sample. However, establishing an equal relationship with parents evidently does not mean rejecting them or distancing one’s self emotionally; less than one fifth in either study indicated that being “not deeply tied to parents emotionally” was necessary for adulthood. Emotional self-control was another item that received relatively high endorsement as a criterion for adulthood (by about half of each sample).

Endorsement of behavioral criteria for adulthood was mixed, depending partly on the potential effects of the behavior on others. In

general, behavior that might be considered to have potentially adverse effects on others was regarded by a majority of the participants in each study as necessary to avoid as part of adulthood. This included drunk driving, committing petty crimes, and failing to use contraception if sexually active and not trying to conceive a child. The one exception to this pattern was the item "drive an automobile safely and close to the speed limit," endorsed by less than one third of each sample in spite of the potential danger of automobile accidents, perhaps because exceeding the speed limit is common among Americans of all ages.

In contrast, behavior for which the effects were more likely to be restricted to the individual (and for which the potential consequences were perhaps viewed as less serious) was not considered to be incompatible with adult status. Less than one third indicated that it was necessary to "avoid becoming drunk" or "have only one sex partner," and less than one fifth endorsed "avoid using profanity." Avoiding use of illegal drugs was considered necessary for adulthood by a somewhat greater proportion (more than 40%), perhaps because the potential consequences for the individual were considered more serious than the consequences of being drunk, having multiple sex partners, or using profanity, or because the illegality of this behavior carries a greater negative sanction.

None of the biological markers or legal/chronological markers was endorsed by more than 50% of the participants in either study. The biological capacity for reproduction was considered necessary for adulthood by about one third, "grow to full height" was endorsed by less than one fifth, and "have had sexual intercourse" by less than 10% (the lowest percentage endorsement of any item in both studies). The two legal/chronological markers considered most important were ages 18 and 21, perhaps because of the greater legal rights and responsibilities associated with those ages in American society.

Responsibilities of various kinds received moderate to high endorsement from the sample. Most notably, the item "accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions" received the highest endorsement (more than 90%) of any item in both studies. Most of the other items were taken from the anthropological literature on the transition to adulthood, which indicates that young males in many nonindustrialized non-Western societies worldwide must prove themselves able to *provide*, *protect*, and *procreate* before they are consid-

ered to have reached manhood status (Gilmore, 1991). Young women in these societies, in contrast, must be able to *care for children* and *run a household* (Schlegel & Barry, 1991). However, for the participants surveyed in the present studies—all of them members of a highly industrialized society much different from those described by Gilmore (1991) or Schlegel and Barry (1991)—none of these requirements was strongly linked to gender. About half considered it necessary for a person (man or woman) to be able to keep a family physically safe (protect), to be capable of supporting a family financially (provide), to be capable of caring for a child, or to be capable of running a household. As noted above, slightly less than half viewed the biological capacity for reproduction (procreate) to be necessary for adult status for either men or women.

The one item on which the participants in the two studies notably differed was in their responses to the question "Do you think that you have reached adulthood?" Among the college students, 27% responded "yes," 10% responded "no," and the majority (63%) chose the ambiguous response, "in some respects yes, in some respects no." In contrast, among the people in their 20s, 63% indicated "yes," 2% "no," and 35% "in some respects yes, in some respects no." The proportion of people in their 20s indicating "yes" increased with age, from 53% among the 21- to 24-year-olds to 71% among the 25- to 28-year-olds.

Various characteristics were analyzed separately for each sample to see if they would be related to participants' conceptions of the criteria necessary for adulthood. Analyses were limited to likely relationships; for example, employment status was analyzed in relation not to all 40 items but only to the item concerning full-time employment. Cross-tabulation analyses were used (with chi-square tests of independence). With regard to Study 1, for the most part the characteristics of the students made no difference in their responses. Students' endorsement of "employed full-time" as a criterion for the transition to adulthood was unrelated to whether they themselves were employed full-time, part-time, or not at all. Students' endorsement of "financially independent from parents" was unrelated to the extent to which they were receiving financial support from their parents. There were eight gender-specific items on the questionnaire, all of them related to responsibilities (Table 2). Of these, students' gender was

unrelated to their responses for six of the items. However, women were more likely than men to indicate that a woman should be capable of supporting a family financially (chi-square = 4.03,  $p < .05$ ) and that a woman should be capable of running a household (chi-square = 6.24,  $p < .05$ ).

Social class background has been found in previous studies to be related to the timing of transition events (e.g., Hogan, 1985). To explore the possibility that social class was related to conceptions of the transition to adulthood, father's education (representing social class background) was examined in relation to the items on the questionnaire using correlations. However, father's education was not significantly correlated with students' responses for any of the 40 items.

In analyses of the data in Study 2 (again using cross-tabulations), participants who were not currently in school were no more likely than those who were currently in school full- or part-time to indicate that they believed "finished with education" was necessary for adulthood. Those who were married were no more likely than those who were unmarried to indicate that marriage was necessary for adulthood. Those who were employed full-time were no more likely than those who were employed part-time or not employed to indicate that being employed full-time was necessary for adulthood. There was a trend ( $p = .06$ ) for those with at least one child to be more likely to indicate that "have at least one child" was necessary for adulthood. However, even among those participants who had had children, only 24% indicated that having at least one child was necessary for adulthood. Gender was examined in relation to the eight gender-specific items (under Responsibilities in Table 2). However, there were no significant associations between gender and any of these items.

As in Study 1, father's education was examined in relation to all 40 of the criteria for the transition to adulthood using correlations. There was only one significant correlation (.30,  $p < .001$ ). Those with relatively lower father's education were relatively more likely to indicate that a man should be capable of supporting a family financially to be considered an adult. Participant's own level of education (representing their current social class) was also examined in relation to the 40 criteria for the transition to adulthood using correlations. There were two significant correlations. Participants with relatively

less education were more likely to indicate that a man should be capable of supporting a family financially (.22,  $p < .01$ ) and that a woman should be capable of supporting a family financially (.24,  $p < .01$ ) to be considered an adult.

## DISCUSSION

### AN INDIVIDUALISTIC CONCEPTION

The studies presented here match each other closely in the portrait they offer of how young people in the United States conceptualize the transition to adulthood and understand their own lives in relation to that transition. The conception of the transition to adulthood held by the people in these studies is consistent and coherent; the criteria they believe to be most important in marking the transition to adulthood are generally *intangible, gradual, psychological, and individualistic*. From their perspective, the transition to adulthood generally is not marked mainly by discrete events. In the two studies combined, the three criteria most widely endorsed were "accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions," "decide on personal beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences," and "establish a relationship with parents as an equal adult." These are not events but processes, processes that are largely internal and psychological. They tend to be reached gradually, and the ultimate attainment of them is intangible and subjective, a judgment that individuals make largely for themselves rather than one that is conferred upon them by others.

Individualism is perhaps the most dominant characteristic of their conception of the transition to adulthood. The top three criteria emphasize individualistic qualities such as independence and equality. Other criteria endorsed by a majority in both studies also emphasized individualism, including the top two role transitions: "financially independent from parents" and "no longer living in parents' household."

Other recent studies point to a conception of the transition to adulthood among young people similar to the one presented here. The same emphasis on intangible, gradual, psychological, and individualistic criteria emerges in the different studies. In a study of high school

and college students (Greene et al., 1992), it was found that the students named responsible behavior, autonomous decision making, and financial independence as distinguishing adult characteristics. In another study of high school students (Scheer et al., 1994), nearly identical criteria ("taking responsibility for my actions," "making my own decisions," and "financial independence/having a job") were viewed as the most important markers of the transition to adulthood. Also, a small study of conceptions of manhood reported that African American men of various ages defined manhood principally according to "self-determinism" and "accountability" (Hunter & Davis, 1992). All of these studies used different (although similar) open-ended interview questions, and the similarity between their results and the results of the present study make it less likely that the findings of the present study can be attributed to particular characteristics of the design of the studies or the phrasing of the questions.

Furthermore, the study of African American men (Hunter & Davis, 1992) suggests that an emphasis on individualism and independence in the transition to adulthood may be held by Black as well as White members of American society. However, more research is necessary to investigate the extent to which the conception of the transition to adulthood presented here is shared by various groups in American society, including groups of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, different religions, and different ages.

#### THE CONTRAST WITH SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTIONS

The results presented here may come as a surprise to scholars who have followed (or contributed to) the literature on the transition to adulthood in the social sciences. In that literature, particularly in sociology, there has been a tendency to focus on transition events such as finishing education, entering the labor force, marriage, and parenthood. However, the present studies suggest that these events have very little salience for young people in their own conceptions of the transition to adulthood. For the most part, not even one in four participants indicated that completing any of these transition events was necessary for a person to be considered an adult. Thus, the studies indicate that there is a deep disparity between the way the transition

is conceptualized by researchers and theorists in the area and the way it is conceptualized by the people who are undergoing the transition.

However, this is not to suggest that sociological researchers on the transition to adulthood should simply abandon their reliance on role transitions as a way of framing and following the transition to adulthood. The function of the sociological definition of the transition to adulthood is not merely to reflect accurately a cultural or phenomenological definition of the transition but to identify patterns in a more or less common role sequence. This function remains even as cultural conceptions of the transition may change from one historical period to another. Still, it may be useful for scholars to be aware of people's conceptions of the transition to adulthood and how these may depart from sociological conceptions, and also to investigate changes in conceptions of the transition to adulthood in different cohorts.

The results of the studies presented here are related to another literature in the social sciences, again particularly in sociology, that stresses the prominence of individualism in American society (e.g., Alwin, 1988; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Berger & Berger, 1984). The results of these studies can, in one sense, be taken as evidence of the strength of the ideology of individualism, in particular among young Americans. The criteria they value in the transition to adulthood are criteria that indicate their ability to stand on their own, to make independent decisions and take responsibility for them, and to live without being dependent psychologically or materially on anyone else. Interviews conducted with the sample of people in their 20s (Study 2 here) indicate that the prominence of these criteria reflect not only the development of autonomy as a psychological characteristic but young people's embrace of individualism as an ideology (Arnett, 1997). They not only seek autonomy as they move into their 20s, they also *believe in* the desirability of becoming a self-sufficient individual.

Some investigators have suggested that individualism in American society may be especially pronounced among the current generation of Americans in their teens and 20s (Jensen, 1995). Also, studies of changes in parenting goals and beliefs over the course of the 20th century in American society indicate a strong movement in recent decades toward more individualistic goals such as independence and

autonomy and away from goals such as obedience (see Alwin, 1988). Postulating a more pronounced individualism among the current generation of young people could explain, in part, their high endorsement for individualistic criteria and their low endorsement for criteria such as marriage and parenthood. It may be that for the generations of their parents and grandparents, transition events were more salient as markers of adulthood. Unfortunately, studies of young people's conceptions of the transition to adulthood have appeared only recently, so statements on the conceptions of adulthood held by previous generations of Americans must remain speculative.

#### ISSUES OF CULTURAL CONTEXT

It should be noted that the current emphasis on individualism in conceptions of adulthood among young Americans is unusual compared to non-Western cultures. Schlegel and Barry (1991), in their examination of adolescent development in 186 non-Western cultures, concluded that the transition to adulthood is defined by marriage in nearly all of them, with some cultures also requiring parenthood before a person is considered to have reached full adult status. In none of the cultures included in their study was the transition to adulthood defined by the kind of individualistic criteria so prominent in the present studies. However, it should also be noted that Schlegel and Barry's (1991) analysis is based on explicit cultural designations of the transition, and not on a systematic investigation of the conceptions of the transition to adulthood held by young people in those cultures. Perhaps young people's conceptions would differ from the explicit conceptions held by adults in the same way that the conceptions held by young people in the present studies differ from the conceptions employed by sociologists.

It is also possible, and perhaps more likely, that the emphasis on marriage and parenthood in non-Western cultures reflects a greater emphasis on communal obligations and interdependence, among young people as well as adults. When marriage and parenthood are important as transition events, this implies that it is the family, the community, and the society that confer adult status on young persons. Social groups (family, community, society) are understood as investing such events with the power to verify the transition to adulthood.

In contrast, by favoring more individualistic criteria for adult status, young people in American society may be rejecting the authority of larger groups to confer adult status upon them. Instead, they appropriate for themselves the power to determine when they have become adult, based on intangible criteria that only they as individuals can assess.

#### ISSUES OF CHANGING PATTERNS IN ROLE TRANSITIONS

Another important factor in the low endorsement of role transition events as important markers of the transition to adulthood for the current generation of young people in American society may be the rapidly escalating median ages for these transitions. In a period of just 33 years, from 1960 to 1993, the median age of marriage rose by *four years*, from 22.8 for men and 20.3 for women to 26.7 for men and 24.5 for women (Modell, 1989; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). With most young people waiting until their mid- to late 20s before getting married, it may be that marriage and parenthood now take place too late in their development to have any substantial importance in marking the transition to adulthood. Study 2 indicated that more than half of people aged 21 to 24 considered themselves to have reached adulthood, which suggests that the majority of young Americans consider themselves to have completed the transition to adulthood before the time when they get married or have their first child. Similarly, education lasts longer (on average) for the current generation of young Americans than it has for any previous generation (Amett & Taber, 1994; U.S. Department of Education, 1988). With the majority of young people obtaining at least some college education, with substantial and increasing proportions attending graduate school, and with many of them expecting to obtain additional schooling at some point in their working lives to advance their skills or change occupations, finishing education also loses its prominence as a transition to adulthood.

This interpretation is supported theoretically by Kohli (1986). He observed that the first half of the 20th century was a time of "chronologization" in industrialized societies, when compulsory education led to the development of a chronologically standardized "normative life course." However, in recent decades, according to Kohli, chro-

nologization has been superseded by individualism as the dominant trend, such that "formerly strict age norms seem to have become obsolete" (p. 295). There has been a "destandardization of the life course" (p. 296), with rising median ages (and greater variance) in finishing education, marriage, and parenthood, as individualism has gained strength and the timing of life transitions becomes based less on social norms and more on individual preferences.

But surely finishing education, marriage, and parenthood are significant events in most people's lives. If they are not events that people view as marking the transition to adulthood, what then is their *subjective* developmental significance in the life course? This is an intriguing question, and it is one of the questions for future investigation suggested by the results of the studies presented here. Perhaps people see these events as marking the entry into different stages *within* adult development, not necessarily related to age (Neugarten, 1986). Perhaps, because of the prevalence of divorce and remarriage in American society, and the increase in the proportion of Americans who obtain additional education at various times during adulthood, the role transitions of marriage, parenthood, and finishing education are no longer viewed in a linear way as transitions passed at a given point and left behind permanently.

Among the present subjects, there was considerable ambiguity in response to the question about whether they considered themselves to have reached adulthood. Among the college students, only 27% indicated a definite yes to this question, and almost two thirds chose the ambiguous response "in some respects yes, in some respects no." Even among the 21- to 28-year-olds, more than one third chose the "yes and no" response, indicating that they did not consider their transition to adulthood to be complete. This is understandable in light of the intangible nature of the criteria they consider most important in marking the transition (see Arnett, 1994). When exactly does a person become capable of accepting responsibility for the consequences of his or her actions? At what point can it be said that one has decided on one's own beliefs and values? How does one know when one has established a relationship with one's parents as an equal adult? There is no day or hour at which these thresholds are crossed; there is not

likely to be any anniversary to mark them. Rather, they are reached gradually and incrementally, as processes that take years to complete.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In sum, the results of the present studies are a step toward understanding young persons' conceptions of the transition to adulthood in American society. Elder (1975) observed that "age categories and distinctions have frequently been proposed or accepted as common knowledge without evidence of their meaning to the individuals involved. At what point, for example, do young people begin to take an adult standpoint and view themselves accordingly?" (p. 173). More than two decades after Elder raised this question, the answer is becoming clearer. From the perspective of many young people, the transition to adulthood evidently takes place not in the form of discrete transition events but according to the individual's judgment of when various subtle psychological processes have reached fruition. These findings open up a wide range of questions for future research on how the phenomenology of the transition to adulthood changes from one cohort to the next, and how people in different cultural groups in the United States and elsewhere conceptualize the transition to adulthood.

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*Jeffrey Jensen Arnett is associate professor of human development and family studies at the University of Missouri. He received a Ph.D. in developmental psychology from the University of Virginia. His current research interests are in reckless behavior in adolescence and young adulthood, adolescents' uses of media, and the transition to adulthood. He is the author of Metalheads: Heavy Metal Music and Adolescent Alienation (Westview, 1996).*