

Paper

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**Learning to Stand Alone:
The Contemporary American Transition to
Adulthood in Cultural and Historical Context**

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Key Words

Individualism · Late adolescence · Transition to adulthood

Abstract

Conceptions of the transition to adulthood in the contemporary American majority culture are examined, and compared to conceptions cross-culturally and historically. Perspectives from other places and times are presented first, indicating that there is a widespread view that the transition to adulthood involves the gradual development of character qualities such as impulse control and diligence but culminates in marriage as the ultimate marker of the transition to adulthood. Findings from several recent American studies are then presented, indicating that for contemporary young Americans the preeminent criteria for the transition to adulthood are the individualistic character qualities of accepting responsibility for one's self and making independent decisions, along with becoming financially independent; marriage, in contrast, ranks very low. New data are presented to illustrate young Americans' conceptions of the transition to adulthood. Reasons are discussed for the prominence of individualistic criteria in American society and the prominence of marriage in other places and times. The concept of emerging adulthood is presented as a new way of conceptualizing the period between adolescence and young adulthood.

When does a person become an adult in American society? How does the conception of the transition to adulthood held by contemporary young Americans compare to the conceptions held by people in traditional cultures and in previous centuries of American and Western society? Anthropologists have found that in most cultures, and particularly in the more traditional, non-Western cultures of the world, marriage is often designated explicitly as the event that marks the transition from boy to man and from girl to woman [Gilmore, 1990; Schlegel and Barry, 1991]. Historically, too, in the United States and other Western countries, marriage has loomed large as the definitive transition to adulthood, at least until recently [Ben-Amos, 1994; Modell, 1989]. But are

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there other transitions in addition to marriage that have been viewed as an important part of the transition to adulthood, cross-culturally and historically? And how do these perspectives from other places and times compare to the perspectives of young people in the United States today?

In the course of this paper I will address these questions by presenting conceptions of the transition to adulthood held by people in other places and times, based on the anthropological, sociological, and historical literatures. These perspectives will then be contrasted with research on conceptions of the transition to adulthood among contemporary young Americans in their teens and twenties. This analysis will show that there is substantial evidence that the transition to adulthood is widely regarded as a process extending over several years, including adolescence and sometimes an additional period beyond adolescence. However, in most places and times this gradual transition has been viewed as culminating in marriage, the quintessential transition event marking the attainment of adult status.

In contrast, the conception of the transition to adulthood held by the current generation of young people in the majority culture of American society rejects marriage and other role transitions as essential markers of adulthood, in favor of criteria that are distinctly *individualistic*. The criteria most important to young Americans as markers of adulthood are those that represent becoming independent from others (especially from parents) and learning to stand alone as a self-sufficient individual. The three individualistic criteria that emerge repeatedly in studies of young Americans' conceptions of the transition to adulthood are accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and financial independence.

In addition to being individualistic, in my view the capacities for accepting responsibility for one's self and for making independent decisions are *qualities of character*. By this I mean that they are qualities that are part of the individual's psychological and moral identity, so that they manifest themselves in a wide variety of situations. The term character has a moral connotation and these qualities are regarded in a distinctly moral light, as the *right* way for an adult to be and to behave. Character qualities are also *intangible* and develop *gradually* over an extended period of time.

We will see that other character qualities have been valued as part of the transition to adulthood in other places and times, for example qualities such as reliability, diligence, and (especially) impulse control. However, in other places and times marriage has held the status of the transition event that marked a definite, ritualized, unambiguous entry into adulthood, whatever character qualities a young person may have been required to develop in order to be considered ready for marriage. In contrast, for young Americans the transition to adulthood is considerably more indefinite and ambiguous because it is based principally on intangible qualities of character, and marriage is no longer regarded as the culminating event that marks the incontestable attainment of adulthood.

With respect to American society, the focus in this paper will be on the American majority culture, i.e., the largely White and broadly middle-class majority in American society that sets most of the norms and standards and holds most of the positions of political, economic, and intellectual power. It is recognized that American society also includes other cultures with perspectives that may differ from the one presented here. However, little information is available at this point on views of the transition to adulthood among American minority cultures. This is one of the most promising and important areas for future research on the transition to adulthood.

Perspectives from Other Places and Other Times

Other Places: Marriage and Gender Issues

According to anthropologists, marriage is almost universally regarded as the definitive transition to adulthood in traditional cultures worldwide [Schlegel and Barry, 1991]. For most young people, this means making the transition to adulthood in the late teens or very early twenties. In Schlegel and Barry's [1991] analysis of adolescent development in 186 traditional/preindustrial cultures, the typical marriage age was 16–18 for women and 18–20 for men (although marriage could come somewhat earlier or considerably later for either sex depending on family needs for labor or goods).¹ In such cultures, the timing of marriage (and therefore of the transition to adulthood it confers) is often chosen not by young people themselves but by their families, according to family interests and cultural expectations of the appropriate age of marriage. As Schlegel and Barry [1991, p. 106] observe, 'the length of adolescence ... is determined in most societies by the age of marriage, which in turn is the consequence of decisions made by persons controlling the marriages of very young people, who are rarely in an economic or political position to make such determinations themselves'.

One possible consequence of this traditional pattern is that young people may find themselves designated as adults by their cultures, through marriage, before they would have considered themselves to have reached adulthood according to their individual perceptions of their developmental maturity. On the other hand, it is also possible that young people in traditional cultures 'feel adult' earlier than young people in the United States and other industrialized societies, as a result of being given considerable work and family responsibilities from an early age [e.g., Whiting and Edwards, 1988]. A third possibility is that young people in traditional cultures accept marriage as the ultimate marker of adulthood because they have been socialized to hold cultural beliefs that the guidelines for many aspects of life are set by the group rather than by the individual [Arnett, 1995; Triandis, 1995].

It is difficult to know which of these possible interpretations to favor, because few anthropological studies have asked young people directly about their conceptions of adulthood. However, there are some suggestive sources of evidence on the issue. One important source is Davis and Davis' [1989] ethnography on adolescents in rural Morocco. They asked young people (aged 9–20) 'How do you know you're grown up?' as part of their basic interview. They found that the two most prominent types of responses were: (1) those that emphasized physical development or chronological age, and (2) those that emphasized character qualities the authors categorized as 'behavioral, moral, or mental changes' [Davis and Davis, 1989, p. 52]. Few of the young people mentioned marriage as a criterion, even though Davis and Davis [1989, p. 59] state that in Moroccan culture generally, 'after marriage, one is considered an adult'. It should be noted that the question concerned being 'grown up' rather than adulthood per se, and that their responses may reflect the increasing Westernization of Moroccan society. Nevertheless, the results suggest that further investigation of young people's conceptions of adulthood in various cultures may prove enlightening, and that their conceptions may not match the conception of adulthood held by adults.

¹ It is of course recognized that there is also considerable diversity among traditional cultures. However, Schlegel and Barry [1991] make an effective case that patterns common to many of them can also be discerned, and that is the view taken in the present paper as well.

Davis and Davis [1989] also reported evidence that Moroccan adults view the development of character qualities as important in their conception of adolescence and the transition to adulthood. The key character quality in this conception is *'aql*, an Arabic word with connotations of rationality and impulse control. To possess it means to be capable of making reasoned, informed judgments, and to have control over your needs and passions. Moroccans see this as a quality expected of adults and often lacking in adolescents. Although both males and females are expected to develop *'aql* in the course of adolescence, males are viewed as taking a decade longer to develop it fully, perhaps because females take on greater responsibilities at an earlier age, as they do in most traditional cultures [Schlegel and Barry, 1991].

Kirkpatrick's [1987] ethnography of the people of the Marquesas Islands of Polynesia provides similar evidence of a conceptualization of the transition to adulthood that includes character qualities. In the Marquesas Islands, by age 14 girls and boys are working alongside adults and are considered to be capable of adult work. However, they are not yet considered to be adults, and not only because they have not yet married. They are also seen (by adults) as lacking the qualities of character necessary for adult status. The term *taure'are'a* is used to describe the lack of these qualities in adolescents. Translated by Kirkpatrick as 'errant youth', it is a term that includes unreliability, laziness, and lack of impulse control. To become an adult, then, means growing out of *taure'are'a* by gradually developing the character qualities necessary for the fulfillment of adult role responsibilities.

Another source of evidence comes from Condon's [1987] ethnography on Inuit adolescents in the Canadian Arctic. Condon explored conceptions of the transition to adulthood by asking young people in their teens to assign life-stage categories to various people in the community and to explain the reasons for their designations. Their responses reflected a variety of criteria for the transition to adulthood, including marriage, parenthood, chronological age, and employment. Most important was establishing a permanent pair-bond by moving into a separate household with a prospective spouse – a marriage-like relationship, but not necessarily involving a formal ceremony or legal tie. Chronological age also mattered; young people living with a prospective spouse but remaining in the parental household of one partner or the other were considered adults if they were beyond their teen years. In addition, certain character qualities were viewed as distinguishing adolescents from adults. Adolescents spend a great deal of their time 'running around', which means visiting each other at all hours of the day and night and (for the boys) playing team sports such as hockey, baseball, and football. Becoming an adult means developing character qualities of self-restraint, reliability, and seriousness of purpose. This is expected to be reflected in spending less time running around, and more time at home with one's partner and visiting other households accompanied by one's partner.

Evidence of the relationship between the development of character qualities and preparation for adult roles has been compiled by Gilmore [1990], who analyzed information from a variety of ethnographies in an effort to explore cross-cultural similarities and differences in conceptions of manhood and the passage from boyhood to manhood status. Gilmore concurred that marriage commonly marks the ultimate passage to adulthood in traditional cultures around the world. However, he focused on the years of preparation for manhood, especially on the skills that are developed by boys during adolescence as preparation for taking on adult roles.

According to Gilmore's analysis, there are three capacities that boys in traditional cultures must develop in the course of adolescence in order to be considered fit to enter manhood: *provide*, *protect*, and *procreate*. They must learn to *provide* economically for themselves and for their wives and children. They learn this by acquiring the knowledge and skills that are necessary for economic performance in their culture – hunting, fishing, and farming are typical examples. They must learn to contribute to the *protection* of their family, kinship group, tribe, and other groups to which they belong, from attacks by human enemies and/or animal predators. They learn this by acquiring the skills of warfare. Also, they must learn to *procreate*, that is, they must gain some degree of sexual experience before marriage, so that in marriage they will be able to perform well enough sexually to produce children. Although Gilmore claims no similar set of requirements exist for girls in preparation for womanhood, Schlegel and Barry [1991] and other anthropologists [e.g., Chinas, 1991; Davis and Davis, 1989] have noted that girls in traditional cultures are typically expected to be capable of *caring for children* and *running a household* before they are considered to be ready for marriage and the adult status it confers.

Although these expectations require the development of specific skills, the cultures described by Gilmore [1990] also require the development of qualities of character in tandem with those skills. Learning to provide requires the development of diligence and reliability. Learning to protect means cultivating courage and fortitude in battle. Learning to procreate requires boldness and confidence in heterosexual relations and sexual performance. For girls, too, learning to care for children and run a household means developing character qualities such as diligence and reliability.

In sum, anthropological studies indicate that many traditional cultures view marriage as the ultimate marker of the transition to adulthood. However, marriage is typically viewed not as the sole and isolated marker of adult status but as the culmination of a transition to adulthood lasting several years. The focus of this period is on the development of character qualities along with the development of gender-specific skills.

Other Times: Marriage and More

Historians have noted that the conception of adolescence as a time of prolonged institutional education and family residence through the late teens arose in the West only in the late 19th century [Kett, 1977]. However, in a more general sense, as a period of acquiring the skills and character qualities required for attaining adult status, adolescence and an extended transition to adulthood have a long history in the West, reaching back at least 500 years [Hanawalt, 1986].

Particularly striking is the recent work on early modern English society (during the years 1500–1700), summarized by Ben-Amos [1994]. This work indicates that people in early modern English society viewed the transition to adulthood as an extended and gradual transition, in which legal, social, and economic rights and obligations were granted gradually as young people developed the appropriate character qualities in the course of many years after puberty. The transition to adulthood became complete for most people when they married in their late twenties.

The median age of marriage in early modern English society was high – about 26 for women, while for men it fluctuated between 27 and 29 – from 1500 to 1700. A key reason for the lateness of marriage was that most young people took part in what historians term 'life-cycle service', a period in their late teens and twenties in which young people would engage in domestic service, farm service, or apprenticeship in various

trades and crafts. This involved moving out of their family household and into the household of the 'master' to whom they were in service, for a period lasting (typically) 7 years. Young women were somewhat less likely than young men to engage in life-cycle service, but even among women a majority left home before marriage, most often to take part in domestic service.

Adults in early modern English society held a view of adolescence (which they termed 'youth') and the transition to adulthood that emphasized character qualities. They viewed youth as a distinct stage of life, characterized by character qualities such as lack of impulse control (especially with regard to sexual behavior), emotional extremes (especially anger), and reckless and riotous behavior (the Prodigal Son theme was popular in plays and songs). They also viewed this period as a time of developing favorable character qualities such as open-mindedness and rationality. The rights and obligations gradually conferred on young people in the course of their teens and twenties were conferred according to societal perceptions of their character development. Marriage was the culmination of these developments, 'the single most important event in the entry of most young people into adult life' [Ben-Amos, 1994, p. 208], but as in the traditional cultures discussed in the previous section, marriage was seen as 'the culmination of a series of transformations rather than a sudden transition into adult life' [Ben-Amos, 1994, p. 208].

The transition to adulthood in early American society was similar in some ways to its form in early modern English society. Rotundo [1993] takes up the historical trail where Ben-Amos [1994] left off, focusing on males and tracing the development of conceptions of manhood in the American middle class from the 17th century to the present. In Rotundo's account, the 17th and 18th centuries in colonial New England were characterized by communities that were small, tightly knit, and strongly based in religion. In this phase of what Rotundo terms 'communal manhood', the focus of the transition to adulthood was on assuming adult role responsibilities in work and marriage. The role of 'head of the household' was seen as especially important for men, with the man as provider and protector of wife and children (a striking correspondence to Gilmore's [1990] description of the requirements of manhood in traditional cultures). Women prepared for complementary adult role responsibilities as wife and mother (again, highly similar to traditional cultures). Life-cycle service was sometimes part of preparation for adult roles, as it was in early modern England, but in colonial New England such service was less common and usually took place in the home of a relative or family friend.

In the 19th century, as the American population grew and industrialization proceeded, communities became more fluid and young people became more likely to leave home in their late teens for a setting (often urban) where they neither knew nor were known by others. This was an era in which individualism grew in strength, as the bonds of community diminished. The movement into adulthood became 'variable in definition and loose in the definition of its boundaries' [Rotundo, 1993, p. 56], and there was an explicit emphasis on the importance of developing the character qualities necessary for adulthood. 'Decision of character' became a popular term to describe the passage of a young person from high-spirited but undisciplined youth to an adult status characterized by self-control and a strong will for carrying out independent decisions [Kett, 1977]. Nevertheless, the focus of the transition to adulthood remained role-related: work and marriage for young men, marriage and motherhood for young women. Marriage (which took place in the mid-twenties for most young people during the 19th century) was the mark of full adulthood, the event that 'completed the social identity' [Ro-

tundo, 1993, p. 115] of the adult. Thus even as individualism rose in strength in American society from the 17th through the 19th centuries, and qualities of character gained a new and explicit prominence as criteria for adulthood, marriage remained central to the transition to adulthood.

In the first half of the 20th century, marriage continued to hold its status as the definitive transition to adulthood. In fact, its status as a transition event may even have risen, as the median age of marriage declined steadily and marriages become more elaborate as social and communal events [Modell, 1989]. However, this pattern changed markedly beginning about 1960. The median age of marriage began to rise steeply, and by the mid-1990s had reached its highest level ever in American society (age 24.5 for women and 26.7 for men by 1994).

This rise, along with a corresponding rise in the strength of American individualism [Alwin, 1988; Bellah et al., 1985], led ultimately to the demise of marriage as a significant marker of the transition to adulthood, in favor of the individualistic character qualities described in the following section. Modell [1989, pp. 330–331], in his comprehensive analysis of changes in the timing of marriage and other transition events in the course of the 20th century, concluded that during recent decades ‘young individuals have gained more control over the resources that allow them to choose the timing of their own life course events and have come increasingly to value the expression of personal choice in this as in other aspects of their own lives ... Conformity to (adult) expectations ... has come to matter less. One’s own identity has come to matter correspondingly more.’

The Current Perspective of Young Americans

Although the transition to adulthood has been a topic of research for decades in the social sciences, particularly in sociology, this research has focused on demographic patterns and has rarely included studies of how young people themselves view the transition. However, in recent years several studies have investigated young people’s perspectives on the transition to adulthood [Arnett, 1994; Greene et al., 1992; Scheer et al., 1994]. All of these recent studies were conducted on mostly White, middle-class samples representing the American majority culture. The findings of these studies, conducted on samples of various ages using a variety of methods, converge so strongly as to suggest the existence of a pervasive, coherent conception of the transition to adulthood among young people in the American majority culture. The three criteria found in these studies to be most important for the transition to adulthood were: *accepting responsibility for one’s self*, *making independent decisions*, and *financial independence*.

Specifically, Scheer et al. [1994] surveyed adolescents aged 13–19 about the criteria they viewed as marking the transition to adulthood. Participants were asked to mark one of eight options as the *most important* factor for them in becoming adults, with the options based on a previous interview study [Scheer and Palkovitz, 1995]. The top three responses were ‘taking responsibility for my actions’, ‘making my own decisions’, and ‘financial independence/having a job’. Legal age thresholds and role transitions such as marriage, parenthood, and finishing education ranked low.

Greene et al. [1992] asked high school (12th grade) and college students to respond in writing to the question ‘In your perception, what characteristics and/or experiences make a person an adult?’ They found the top three criteria to be the same for both high

school and college students: responsible behavior, autonomous decision making, and financial independence. Chronological age, physical changes, legal thresholds, and role transitions were rarely mentioned.

Also, Arnett [1994] used a 40-item questionnaire to examine college students' (aged 18–23) conceptions of the transition to adulthood. They were asked to 'Indicate whether you think each of the following must be achieved before a person can be considered an adult', by marking yes or no. The three criteria endorsed by the highest percentage of students were 'accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions' (92%), 'decide on beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences' (80%), and 'establish a relationship with parents as an equal adult' (72%), with 'support self financially' (66%) close behind. As in the Greene et al. [1992] and Scheer et al. [1994] studies, criteria such as chronological age and role transitions ranked very low.

These studies indicate that the conception of the transition to adulthood held by contemporary Americans in their teens and early twenties is notably *individualistic* and emphasizes *qualities of character*. The top three criteria – accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and financial independence – have a common theme of individualism, in that they emphasize the capacity of the individual to stand alone as a self-sufficient person, without relying upon anyone else. Furthermore, accepting responsibility for one's self and making independent decisions are character qualities rather than specific events.

But how do young people explain the importance of these criteria, and how do they apply them to their own progress through the transition to adulthood? To answer this question, let us explore conceptions of adulthood among contemporary young Americans in more detail, drawing upon new research on young people in their twenties.

An Interview Study of the Transition to Adulthood

In this section I will present excerpts from interviews that illustrate conceptions of the transition to adulthood among young Americans. The interview excerpts will be preceded by a brief review of the design of the study and the questionnaire results, as background information. The participants in the interviews were 140 persons aged 21–28 (50% aged 21–24, 50% aged 25–28). They were predominantly White (94%), and about evenly divided between males and females (47% female, 53% male). Forty percent of the participants were married and 27% had had at least one child. There was a wide range of educational attainment and socioeconomic background.²

Participants filled out a questionnaire containing 38 possible criteria for adulthood (table 1), the same questionnaire used in Arnett [1994] except with two fewer items. The items were drawn from a wide range of empirical and theoretical perspectives in psychology, sociology, and anthropology, as well as from pilot studies. More detailed explanation of the basis for including particular items will be included in the context of the results. The questionnaire also contained the item, 'Do you think that you have reached adulthood?' Response options to this question were 'yes', 'no', and 'in some respects yes, in some respects no'.

² Participants were contacted from local high school enrollment lists from 3–10 years earlier, and 72% agreed to participate in the study. For married persons contacted, spouses were also invited to participate. Level of education varied from high school or less (16%) to some college (52%) to college degree (19%) to some graduate school or a graduate school degree (13%). Father's education varied from high school or less (32%) to some college (15%) to college degree (24%) to some graduate school or a graduate school degree (30%).

Table 1. Criteria for adulthood: Rank order of questionnaire responses

Necessary for adulthood?	% indicating 'yes'
1. Accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions	94
2. Decide on personal beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences	78
3. Financially independent from parents	73
4. Capable of running a household (man)	72
5. Establish a relationship with parents as an equal adult	69
6. Avoid committing petty crimes like shoplifting and vandalism	66
7. Capable of running a household (woman)	67
8. Use contraception if sexually active and not trying to conceive a child	65
9. No longer living in parents' household	60
10. Avoid drunk driving	55
11. Capable of keeping family physically safe (man)	52
12. Learn always to have good control of your emotions	50
13. Capable of supporting a family financially (man)	50
14. Capable of caring for children (woman)	50
15. Capable of caring for children (man)	50
16. Capable of keeping family physically safe (woman)	47
17. Capable of supporting a family financially (woman)	42
18. Avoid using illegal drugs	41
19. Reached age 18	39
20. Make lifelong commitments to others	36
21. Drive an automobile safely and close to the speed limit	32
22. Reached age 21	31
23. Avoid becoming drunk	30
24. Capable of fathering children (man)	30
25. Capable of bearing children (woman)	29
26. Have no more than one sexual partner	29
27. Obtained driver's license	24
28. Settle into a long-term career	21
29. Not deeply tied to parents emotionally	19
30. Avoid using profanity/vulgar language	18
31. Married	17
32. Employed full-time	17
33. Purchased a house	17
34. Committed to a long-term love relationship	16
35. Have at least one child	14
36. Grow to full height	13
37. Finished with education	10
38. Have had sexual intercourse	9

For each item, participants were asked to 'Indicate whether you think each of the following must be achieved before a person can be considered an adult', and they responded by indicating yes or no.

Participants also took part in a structured interview. Two two-part questions from that interview concerned their conceptions of adulthood.³ One question applied to themselves: 'Do you feel like you have reached adulthood? In what ways do you feel you have or have not?' This question was asked in order to explore the criteria they applied to their own transition to adulthood, for comparison with their general conception of the transition to adulthood as indicated on the questionnaire. The second question was specific to gender: 'What would you say makes a person a woman, as opposed to a girl? What would you say makes a person a man, as opposed to a boy?'⁴ This question was asked because (as described above) historical and anthropological evidence indicates that the requirements for adult status have often been gender-specific in other times and places, and in light of this it seemed appropriate here to explore the possibility of gender-linked criteria.

Both the questionnaire and the interview results confirmed the findings of previous studies indicating that the conception of the transition to adulthood held by young people in the American majority culture especially emphasizes three specific criteria: accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and financial independence. The present study broadens the validity of the previous studies by indicating that the same conception of the transition to adulthood is held not only by high school and college students but also by people in their twenties, from a broadly middle-class variety of educational and socioeconomic backgrounds within the American majority culture. (In the present study, neither participants' education nor their fathers' education were notably related to their responses on the questionnaire.⁵)

Accepting responsibility for one's self and making independent decisions are not only individualistic character qualities but are also intangible and develop gradually. Perhaps in part because of the prominence of these nebulous qualities in the criteria the participants considered most important as markers of adulthood, a substantial proportion of them viewed their own status with respect to the transition to adulthood as ambiguous. In response to the question 'Do you think that you have reached adulthood?' on the questionnaire, 63% of the participants indicated 'yes', 2% 'no', and 35% 'in some respects yes, in some respects no'. The proportion indicating 'yes' increased with age, from 53% among the 21- to 24-year-olds to 71% among the 25- to 28-year-olds. In a previous study [Arnett, 1994], only 27% of college students responded 'yes' to this question. This indicates that the transition to adulthood takes place across a long range of years extending through the late twenties for many young people in the American majority culture.

The questionnaire findings and coded interview responses confirmed the results of previous studies with respect to the criteria viewed as the most important markers of the

³ Responses to the interview questions were coded by the author using a categorical system based on the questionnaire (table 2). A second person also coded 10% of the interviews (randomly selected), and the rate of agreement between the coders was 89%.

⁴ Female participants were asked the woman/girl part of the question first, and then the man/boy part; for male participants, the order was reversed.

⁵ Father's education was examined in relation to all 38 of the criteria for the transition to adulthood, using correlations. There was only one significant correlation ($p < 0.001$): Those with relatively lower father's education were relatively more likely to indicate that a man should be capable of supporting a family financially in order to be considered an adult. Participants' own level of education was also examined in relation to the 38 criteria for the transition to adulthood, using correlations. There were two significant correlations (both $p < 0.01$): Participants with relatively less education were more likely to indicate that a man should be capable of supporting a family financially and also that a woman should be capable of supporting a family financially, in order to be considered an adult.

Table 2. Criteria for adulthood: Coded responses from interview questions

Criterion	Personal conception		Man-boy woman-girl	
	rank	%	rank	%
Accept responsibility for one's self	1.	43	1.	60
Financial independence	2.	40	4.	15
Independent decision-making	3.	25	2.	24
General independence/self-sufficiency	4.	25	5.	12
Independent household	5.	22	13-14.	2
Become a parent	6.	19	9-10.	5
Spontaneous, fun-loving, adventurous, nonconforming (as <i>not</i> adult)	7.	17	15.	1
Employed full-time	8.	15	11.	4
Avoiding reckless behavior	9.	12	9-10.	5
Emotional maturity	10.	12	8.	7
Marriage	11.	8	13-14.	2
Finish education	12-13.	5	16-19.	0
Cognitive maturity	12-13.	5	6.	10
Consideration for others	14.	4	3.	16
Purchase house	15.	3	16-19.	0
Military service	16-19.	1	16-19.	0
Committed to long-term relationship	16-19.	1	16-19.	0
Any physical/biological	16-19.	1	7.	8
Any legal/chronological	16-19.	1	12.	3

The percentages indicate the percentage of participants who mentioned each criterion in response to the interview question. For 'Personal conception', the whole question was 'Do you feel like you have reached adulthood? In what ways do you feel you have or have not?' For the 'Man-boy/woman-girl' question, the whole question was 'What would you say makes a person a woman, as opposed to a girl? What would you say makes a person a man, as opposed to a boy?' For this question, males were asked the man-boy part first and females were asked the woman-girl part first. Because the majority (72%) of the participants indicated that the criteria were the same for males and females, only the first part of this question was coded (man-boy for males, woman-girl for females). The numbers under 'Rank' indicate the rank order of prevalence for each criterion for each interview question (with tied rankings indicated by dashes, e.g., 12-13).

transition to adulthood. Now we turn to examples from the interviews, to explore how young people explain the importance of these criteria and how they apply them to their own lives.

The Preeminence of Accepting Responsibility for One's Self

Accepting responsibility for one's self was far and away the top criterion for adulthood, in both the questionnaire and the interview. The endorsement of the questionnaire item 'accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions' as necessary for adulthood was nearly unanimous – 94% (table 1). With respect to the interview questions, the proportion mentioning responsibility for one's self was higher than for any other criterion, in response to both the question regarding one's self and the question regarding becoming a man or a woman (table 2).

Thus the idea of 'responsibility' looms large in the conception of adulthood held by Americans in their twenties, and for the most part it is an individualistic kind of responsibility they endorse, responsibility *for one's self* rather than responsibility *to or for others*. The item in the questionnaire stated specifically, 'accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions', and this view was expounded repeatedly in the interviews – indeed, the questionnaire item was developed on the basis of pilot interviews in which responsibility was often placed in this context.⁶ Notice the contrast between this individualistic kind of responsibility and traditional cultures' criteria – provide, protect, and procreate – all of which involve responsibilities toward others [Gilmore, 1990]. Marriage, too, carries definite responsibilities toward others – specifically, a marriage partner and his/her kin – particularly in traditional cultures.

Examples of participants' responses from the interviews illustrate the individualistic nature of their conception of responsibility. One 24-year-old man stated that becoming an adult means 'just being accountable for your actions and being responsible. I describe it as taking care of your own actions, and not looking to other people to help you along.' A 28-year-old woman was similarly concise and individualistic, explaining that she felt she had reached adulthood 'because I finally realized that I'm responsible for everything that I do and say and believe, and no one else is. Just me. That's all. So, I'm an adult.'

Thus, responsibility is seen as the key to adult status because it has such strong connotations of self-sufficiency and self-reliance. The prominence of this criterion reflects the individualistic cultural beliefs of the contemporary American majority culture. In this culture, accepting responsibility for one's self is the character quality that is essential to the attainment of adult status.

Independent Decision-Making

The second most-endorsed item on the questionnaire was 'decide on personal beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences' (endorsed by 78%), and independent decision making was also among the top three criteria for adulthood in response to both interview questions. The questionnaire item was based on psychological studies of the transition to adulthood, particularly a well-known study by Perry [1970]. Perry studied Harvard undergraduates through the course of their college careers and concluded that the typical path of cognitive development during the transition to adulthood begins with adherence to absolute truths at the beginning of the college experience, followed by a swing to relativism midway through college, and finally landing on a set of individualized and self-chosen beliefs and values by the end of college as the cognitive transition to adulthood is completed. The item was also based on Erikson's [1963] idea that part of identity formation in adolescence means developing and clarifying a set of beliefs and values. One might expect that if making decisions about one's beliefs and values is part of identity formation in adolescence, reaching fruition in this process would prompt a subjective sense of having reached adulthood.

The validity of Perry's [1970] and Erikson's [1963] views for contemporary young Americans seems to be indicated from the widespread endorsement of the item 'decide

⁶ It should be noted that 'accepting responsibility for one's self' was coded only if the focus of the response was on responsibility for one's self as a general characteristic. Specific references to, for example, financial responsibilities or taking responsibility for children, or to any aspect of responsibility that concerned responsibility to or for others rather than for one's self, were coded according to the specific context mentioned rather than for 'responsibility'.

on personal beliefs and values ...' on the questionnaire. The importance of deciding on one's beliefs was also stated frequently in response to the interview questions (coded as an aspect of 'independent decision-making'). For example, a 25-year-old woman described how she had grown up in a highly religious household, and said that becoming an adult for her meant that 'I learned to believe what I believe and not let my parents or anyone else tell me what to believe. And I think once you establish your own beliefs and control your own life, then you're an adult.'

In the interviews, however, the importance of decision-making as a criterion for adulthood was not restricted to the formation of beliefs and values, but applied to a variety of aspects of life. An adult is not only someone who has decided on a set of guiding beliefs and values, but also someone who has the maturity of character to make sensible, *independent* decisions about any issues that come up in the course of daily life. To this 22-year-old woman, it was self-evident: 'I mean, that's what being an adult *is*, thinking for yourself and making the right decisions and taking care of yourself.' A 24-year-old man described the crossing of the threshold from boyhood to manhood in these individualistic decision-making terms: 'All of a sudden, you've just got to decide, "Okay, I'm a man. I'm going to do this how I want to. It's going to be my life, and this is how I'm going to run it."' This response echoes the idea of 'decision of character' that was such an important criterion for the transition to adulthood in American society during the 19th century [Kett, 1977], in that it combines a sense of making independent decisions with a self-consciously strong-willed intention to carry them out.

Making independent decisions means becoming less dependent on parents, in particular, for guidance. Describing her passage to adulthood, a 28-year-old woman said 'I had always been very, very dependent on my parents in making decisions. I wanted to make sure I had their stamp of approval. Now, I certainly don't worry as much about that. I feel confident in being able to make decisions.' Although 'establish an equal relationship with parents' was rarely stated explicitly in the interviews, it was one of the most widely endorsed questionnaire items (69%), and it was implicit in interview responses such as this.

Evident in all of these responses is that the capacity for making decisions, like accepting responsibility, has strongly individualistic connotations. Becoming an adult means not just that you have developed the cognitive maturity to weigh a variety of considerations before deciding among a range of choices, but that you make these decisions *independently, self-sufficiently*, without relying on anyone else – especially your parents – to advise you [Moore, 1987]. Also like accepting responsibility, the capacity for making decisions is reflected in behavior but is essentially a quality of character, part of the individual's psychological and moral identity.

Financial Independence

The third of the top three criteria, financial independence, also has connotations of individualism. However, financial independence is more tangible, more definite and measurable than accepting responsibility for one's self or the capacity for making independent decisions. It is a yardstick by which young people can measure quite definitely their progress toward adulthood. A 25-year-old woman viewed herself as mostly but not entirely finished with the transition to adulthood, because 'I'm paying for everything. I'm paying for school, I'm paying for my car, I'm paying for my credit card bills that were my fault a long time ago ... The only thing is, I'm not paying for rent, and I think that's a part of adulthood.' A 28-year-old man recalled the significance of a single event

that denoted his financial independence, and at the same time his movement into adulthood: 'I would say the first time it ever hit me in the face was the first time I ever had to sign on the dotted line for a car loan. To me, being an adult was signing on the dotted line and knowing I had a big payment every month.'

Like decision-making competence, financial independence often means, specifically, independence from parents [Moore, 1987]. A 23-year-old man observed that becoming an adult means 'not going to Mom and Dad and saying, "Can I have 300 dollars to go to Florida with the guys for Spring Break?"' A 24-year-old woman said that she does not feel like an adult 'when I have my mom pay half the rent ... when she helps me out with that, it makes me feel like a kid again.'

Although independent decision-making and financial independence rank high as criteria for the transition to adulthood, and both have connotations of independence from parents, it is interesting to note that several studies of relationships with parents among young people in their teens and twenties emphasize that these forms of independence do not signify emotional separation from parents. This literature stresses that autonomy (independence of thought and behavior) and relatedness (emotional closeness and support) are complementary rather than opposing dynamics in parent-child relationships during adolescence and the transition to adulthood in the American middle class [Allen et al., 1994; Ryan and Lynch, 1989; O'Connor et al., 1996]. In fact, it is a consistent finding in these studies that young people who are more self-reliant also report *closer* relationships to their parents. In the present study, this is reflected in the finding that 'not deeply tied to parents emotionally' ranks very low as a criterion for adulthood even though a variety of criteria indicating autonomy from parents rank high (table 1) [also see Moore, 1987].

At the same time, the difference between traditional cultures and Western cultures in relationships with parents during adolescence and the transition to adulthood should not be underestimated. Numerous studies show that expectations of continued interdependence with parents through adolescence and into adulthood is the norm for traditional cultures [for example in China, Yang, 1988; and Japan, Shand, 1985]. Although relationships between parents and adolescents in the American majority culture tend to seek a balance of autonomy and relatedness, the degree of autonomy allowed and expected for American adolescents is considerably greater than in traditional cultures [Shand, 1985]. What is considered emotionally close by American adolescents and their parents may seem relatively distant to parents and adolescents in traditional cultures [Kagitcibasi, 1996].

In sum, individualism is the predominant feature of young people's conceptions of the transition to adulthood in the American majority culture. The three top criteria for becoming an adult – accepting responsibility for one's self, independent decision-making, and financial independence – all signify the developing capacity of the individual to be independent, self-reliant, and self-sufficient.

Furthermore, the top two criteria, accepting responsibility and making independent decisions, are qualities of character. Qualities of character are also important to the transition to adulthood cross-culturally and historically, as we have seen. However, in other places and times the attainment of the appropriate character qualities has been capped by marriage as a definite, explicit marker of reaching adulthood. For contemporary young Americans, in contrast, marriage ranks low as a criterion for adulthood, and consequently it is qualities of character that play the largest part in marking their transition to adulthood.

Modifications of the Individualistic Theme

Although the conception of the transition to adulthood held by young people in their twenties is characterized by individualism, it is not necessarily an unbridled or selfish individualism. On the contrary, for many young people becoming an adult necessarily means that individualism is tempered by the development of character qualities that emphasize social and communal considerations. Egocentrism and selfishness are character qualities they see as part of adolescence, and becoming an adult means overcoming these tendencies and learning to take other people's interests and needs into account. Modifications of the individualistic theme fell into three general areas: consideration for others, avoiding reckless behavior, and becoming a parent.

Consideration for others was not included as a specific item on the questionnaire, but it came up often as a theme in the interviews. In response to the woman-girl man-boy question, it was the third most common theme. Being a man involves, to one 24-year-old man, 'putting others in front of yourself. When you make a decision with others in mind before yourself, that probably makes you a man.' A 28-year-old woman said that for her, becoming an adult means learning 'not to be selfish, to take other people into account – their feelings, needs, and wishes.'

In addition to cultivating a general sense of consideration for others, making the transition to adulthood also means avoiding behavior that might be harmful to others. On the questionnaire, three types of reckless behavior concerning crime, sexual behavior, and automobile driving were viewed by a majority of participants as important to avoid as part of becoming an adult. The specific items were: 'avoid committing petty crimes like shoplifting and vandalism' (endorsed by 66%), 'use contraception if sexually active and not trying to conceive a child' (65%), and 'avoid drunk driving' (55%). All three involve behavior that may affect others. In the interviews as well, avoiding various types of reckless behavior was occasionally stated as an important criterion for adulthood, although it was not among the top criteria (table 2). For example, a 22-year-old woman who had recently been stopped by the police and charged with driving while intoxicated said the experience had 'made me think about things ... like drinking and driving, that you need to be responsible and not just think about where you want to go but how it's going to affect someone else.'

The third kind of response that indicated a communal counterpoint to their individualistic conception of adulthood was becoming a parent. This was rated quite low on the questionnaire as a necessary marker of adulthood, endorsed by only 14% (table 1). However, in the interviews it ranked sixth highest in participants' responses concerning criteria they considered important in their own transition to adulthood (table 2). More importantly, one-fourth of the participants had had at least one child, and for them having a child was mentioned *more often than any other criterion* (61%) as a marker of their own transition to adulthood. (In contrast, those who were married were no more likely than those who were unmarried to name marriage as a key transition, either for themselves or more generally.) This is consistent with other studies indicating that becoming a parent adds considerably to the sense of being adult for many people [Feldman et al., 1981; Galinsky, 1981]. Many of the parents in the present study saw children as having the effect of puncturing one's egocentrism and directing one's concerns to others, in an inescapable and even involuntary way. 'Children can definitely make you feel like an adult,' said a 25-year-old woman with two children, 'because you have responsibilities, and it's not so much myself anymore, because you have to raise someone else.'

Unlike character qualities, which tend to develop gradually, having a child is an event that some describe as a sudden thrust into adulthood, as numerous weighty responsibilities descend simultaneously. ‘I have two daughters, and if you want to grow up fast, that’s a sink or swim’ said a 26-year-old man. ‘I went from happy-go-lucky to “You’ve got a baby to take care of. You’ve got to put a roof over its head. You’ve got to do this and this and this.”’ A 22-year-old woman responded to the question of whether she had reached adulthood by saying ‘With kids, definitely! Adulthood overnight, you know! [*What is it about having kids?*] The attention that you have to put on them. The focus is on them and not on you ... You think of that other person before you think of yourself.’

These comments suggest that young Americans may incorporate ‘provide’ and ‘protect’ into their conception of adulthood more centrally after they procreate [Gilmore, 1990]. It is also worth noting here the prominence of parenthood as a criterion for adulthood in some traditional cultures [e.g., Herdt, 1987; Nsamenang, 1992; Schlegel and Barry, 1991, p. 11]. Perhaps parenthood would loom larger in Americans’ conceptions of the transition to adulthood if it took place as early – the mid to late teens – as it does in most traditional cultures [Schlegel and Barry, 1991].

In sum, although the view of the transition to adulthood held by young people in their twenties is distinctly individualistic, it is not necessarily a selfish individualism. On the contrary, their individualism is often tempered in a number of ways that reflect sensitivity to and concern for the rights and needs of others. They are not egoists, but social individuals [Jensen, 1998].

The Absence of Gender-Specific Criteria

In contrast to the strict demarcation of gender expectations in the preparation for the transition to adulthood in traditional cultures – with provide/protect/procreate as requirements for males, and care for children/run a household as requirements for females – it is striking how little the views of the contemporary young Americans described here were linked to gender. The questionnaire items specific to gender, and the interview question on woman/girl and man/boy distinctions, were intended to explore this issue, and were based directly on the work of anthropologists, as summarized by Gilmore [1990] and Schlegel and Barry [1991]. The results indicate that for young Americans, gender has little relevance to the transition to adulthood. Learning to provide for and protect a family, care for children, and run a household were all viewed as quite important criteria in the transition to adulthood (table 1), but for males and females equally, not as gender-linked criteria.

Also, for all 38 items on the questionnaire, males and females were highly similar in their responses.⁷ Furthermore, even though one of the interview questions asked specifically about distinctions between males and females in the transition to adulthood (woman-girl, man-boy), most participants stated that there was no important distinction between the genders in this respect. Their responses to this part of the question were also coded, and the results indicated that 72% held the view that adult status is defined no differently for males and females, 21% believed there were gender differences in the

⁷ Gender differences in the questionnaire were examined for each of the 38 items, using the SPSSPC crosstabulations procedure. There were only two significant differences out of the 38 items, both at $p < 0.05$, which is no more than would be expected by chance in the course of 38 analyses.

most important criteria for adulthood, and the remaining 6% were unsure. This is a stark contrast to the gender-distinct pattern in traditional cultures and historically in the West, and perhaps reflects the fact that the participants have grown up in a time and a culture in which gender role distinctions are relatively nebulous, in comparison to many other places and times.

The Novelty of the Contemporary American View

The cultural and historical comparisons presented earlier indicate that there are certain similarities between the transition to adulthood as it takes place in the contemporary American majority culture and as it has taken place in other cultures and other times. In all cases, the transition to adulthood is characterized not by a single event but by an extended process of preparation for the challenges and responsibilities of adult life. In all cases there is an implicit recognition that adolescents (or 'youth' or whatever term a particular culture uses) are different from adults, and that they make the transition to adulthood in the course of acquiring the qualities of character needed for measuring up to cultural expectations of what it means to be an adult.

However, the similarities between the transition to adulthood as it takes place now in the American majority culture and as it has occurred in other times and places should not be exaggerated. In addition to the similarities, there are features of the contemporary American (and perhaps Western) transition to adulthood that make it novel, perhaps even unique, in human cultural history. The absence of strict gender differentiation is one striking feature. However, the most outstanding features are the low importance of taking on specific adult roles, and the corresponding preeminence of distinctly individualistic criteria for the transition to adulthood.

As we have seen, marriage is the definitive criterion for the transition to adulthood cross-culturally and historically, whereas for contemporary young Americans marriage is rated very low. Although this may be partly because of the recent rise in the median age of marriage in the United States, it cannot be due only to this. The median age of marriage was higher in early modern English society, and nearly as high in early American society, yet marriage held great prominence during those times as a marker of the transition to adulthood. Perhaps the changing status of marriage explains the difference – perhaps the high current rates of cohabitation and divorce have reduced the status of marriage as a life transition, because it is now more likely to be entered gradually (preceded by cohabitation) and is often impermanent (dissolved through divorce). However, it is also likely that marriage is incompatible with contemporary American views of the transition to adulthood simply because it involves a transition to a specific, defined role. Taking on a role inherently means compromising one's individualism in order to conform to the requirements of the role [Berger and Luckman, 1966], and it may be for this reason that marriage and other role transitions are rejected as important criteria for entering adulthood by the current generation of American young people.

The lack of definite roles for a long period during the teens and twenties is a distinguishing feature of the contemporary American transition to adulthood. In the traditional cultures described by Schlegel and Barry [1991] and by Gilmore [1990], young people never cease to have a definite role and place in their culture during the time they are preparing for adulthood. They are recognized as having capacities beyond those of

children, and they are given increasing responsibilities to match their growing capacities, but they retain a role as young people subject to the authority of adults.

Many of the young people in early modern English society described by Ben-Amos [1994] moved out of their family households during their teens, but not for roleless independence. On the contrary, in the system of life-cycle service they held the role of an apprentice who was subject to the authority of adults in a quasi-family setting, and at the end of their service most soon married and took on new family roles. In Rotundo's [1993] account of the transition to adulthood through American history, the focus of the transition to adulthood from the 17th century until the 19th century was on entry into distinct roles of work and marriage. By the 19th century, young people often did not go directly into marriage upon leaving home, but a host of other institutions of social control (from debating clubs to literary societies to religious associations) developed to temper their individualism and provide them with definite social roles [Kett, 1977].

In contrast, most contemporary Americans leave their families of origin at age 18 or 19 [Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1994] and do not marry until age 25 or older. During this time they have little in the way of definite social or family roles, and their work roles tend to be highly tentative and changeable. Thus the period of their transition to adulthood is characterized by a long role hiatus [Spitze, 1978], and their sense of becoming adult is measured not according to their preparation for or acquisition of adult roles but by their development of the character qualities that are the mark of an independent, self-sufficient person. Furthermore, the period of their transition to adulthood consists not just of what is typically understood as adolescence – the teen years, or the second decade of life – but lasts beyond, through the mid to late twenties for many of them, according to their subjective reports of whether or not they have attained adult status.

The Concept of Emerging Adulthood

Given that the transition to adulthood may not be completed until the mid to late twenties for many young people in American society, what shall we call the period between the end of adolescence and the completion of the transition to adulthood? Keniston [1971] used the term 'youth' to describe this period, and subsequently this has become the term used most widely in the social sciences.

Although Keniston [1971] made many interesting observations on the transition to adulthood, the choice of the term 'youth' was ill-conceived. The main problem with it is that 'youth' has a long history in the English language, applied to children in general and (before the widespread use of 'adolescence') to young people in their teens and early twenties in particular [Ben-Amos, 1994; Kett, 1977; Moran and Vonovskis, 1994]. It is still used popularly to refer to children and/or adolescents (terms like 'youth organizations' reflect this), and in fact it continues to be used by many social scientists to refer to adolescence or even preadolescence.

In view of the limitations of 'youth', I propose a new term for this period, *emerging adulthood* [also see Arnett and Taber, 1994]. Emerging adulthood can be defined as a period of development bridging adolescence and young adulthood, during which young people are no longer adolescents but have not yet attained full adult status. During emerging adulthood young people are in the process of developing the capacities, skills, and qualities of character deemed by their culture as necessary for completing the transition to adulthood. In the majority culture of the United States (and perhaps in similar

cultures in the West), the most important characteristics to develop during emerging adulthood are those that confer a sense of becoming an independent, self-sufficient individual. These include the character qualities of accepting responsibility for one's self and making independent decisions, along with less individualistic character qualities such as consideration for others, and the more tangible achievement of financial independence.

Emerging adulthood is most likely to exist in contemporary industrialized cultures that extend the transition to adulthood until the mid to late twenties. However, emerging adulthood also existed in early modern English society and through most of American history, as we have seen. It exists as well in some traditional cultures. Although the transition to adulthood culminates in marriage in traditional cultures and the typical marriage age is approximately 16–18 for women and 18–20 for men, there are also some traditional cultures that have an older marriage age that allows for a stage of emerging adulthood. Schlegel and Barry [1991] state that 25% of the traditional cultures in their sample have a stage between adolescence and adulthood for males, and 20% for females. Traditional cultures tend to emphasize gender-specific skills, and character qualities such as diligence and courage, as the focus of development during emerging adulthood.

Emerging adulthood can be distinguished from adolescence in several ways. Most notably, emerging adulthood is a period of more intensive focus on preparation for adult status. It is more clearly a liminal stage, i.e., a stage in which the young person is distinctly *in transition*, having moved out of one stage but not yet having entered the next. Adulthood is imminent in this stage, and emerging adults are likely to be keenly aware of how they are measuring up to cultural and/or personal criteria for the attainment of adult status. Emerging adults are likely to have more independence from their families than is the case for adolescents, because of their greater physical and psychosocial maturity. Often this will be reflected in the establishment of a separate residence from parents (unlike most adolescents); however, it is also possible for emerging adults to remain in their family household and have greater autonomy within the household.

Finally, although adolescence exists in some form in nearly all cultures [Schlegel and Barry, 1991], emerging adulthood does not. It exists primarily in cultures where adult status is not attained until the mid to late twenties. The period may vary in length depending on the culture, but emerging adulthood nearly always ends by the late twenties, when the transition to adulthood has become consolidated.

Future Directions

The focus of this paper has been on conceptions of the transition to adulthood among young people in their twenties who are part of the American majority culture. There remains much to be learned about conceptions of adulthood among cultural groups outside of American society, as well as minority cultures within American society. Explorations of their views are important to a fuller understanding of the transition to adulthood, as well as to an understanding of the different balances between individualism and social obligations that cultural groups may devise in contemporary societies.

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