Common themes and variations across the studies in the previous chapters are considered, with a focus on how culture influences conceptions of what it means to be an adult.

Culture and Conceptions of Adulthood

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For decades, even centuries, scholars of human development have devised theories about how the life course is divided into different stages or periods. The Talmud contains a section titled “The Sayings of the Fathers,” written over two thousand years ago, that outlines the “ages of man” from five to one hundred years old. Solon, the Greek poet, proposed in 7 B.C.E. a theory of ten life course stages, each lasting seven years. In the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud divided childhood into discrete stages of development, although he believed little of interest happened in adulthood except for the reworking of neurotic fixations. Erik Erikson proposed a stage theory of the life course, and Daniel Levinson presented a stage theory of adult development.

Each of these theories, both ancient and modern, had something to say about when a person reaches adulthood. However, it is only recently that attention has turned to how people think about their own position in the life course. Specifically, it is only within the past decade that studies have asked people what they believe makes a person an adult and whether they believe they have reached adulthood.

These studies have contained some surprises for scholars, who may have been inclined to assume that adulthood is defined by entry into definite adult roles: finishing education and obtaining full-time work, entering marriage, and becoming a parent. Repeatedly, these role transitions have ended up at the bottom among a wide range of possible criteria for adulthood when young Americans have been asked about what they believe makes a person an adult. Instead, what has come up consistently on top in young people’s conceptions of the transition to adulthood are criteria that represent processes rather than discrete events—character qualities monitored and measured by the individual rather than roles established and sanctioned by
The three top criteria consistently have been accepting responsibility for one’s self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent (Arnett, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2001). Together, these three criteria indicate a conception of adulthood focused on self-sufficiency, reflecting American values of individualism (Arnett, 1998).

Up to now, studies on this topic have been limited to the mostly white American middle class. The chapters in this volume initiate a fresh and exciting new arena for research on conceptions of adulthood by looking at how people in a variety of cultures think about what it means to be an adult and by considering their responses in the context of the distinctive characteristics of their culture.

Cultural Differences

The cultural distinctiveness of conceptions of adulthood is one of the notable themes of the previous chapters. Two-thirds of the young Israelis whom Mayseless and Scharf studied (see Chapter One) viewed completing their required term of military service as an important part of becoming an adult. For young Argentines, the economic upheavals that have taken place in recent years in their country make the prospect of entering the adult world more daunting than it might be in places with greater economic stability. Facio and Micocci suggest in Chapter Two that these upheavals explain in part the tendency of Argentinian emerging adults to emphasize family capacities as criteria for adulthood, because they value family as a source of stability in a way the world of work is not. Among the Mormons whom Nelson described in Chapter Three, the roles and rites of passage unique to their religion have considerable meaning to them as markers of adult status. Among the emerging adults in the American ethnic groups whom Arnett studied in Chapter Five, Asian Americans were especially likely to favor criteria related to interdependence.

There were also cultural differences in the importance ascribed to specific criteria. For example, avoiding illegal drug use was considered a marker of adulthood by nearly nine of ten Argentines (88 percent) and a solid majority of Israelis (73 percent) and Mormons (68 percent), but by only about half of African Americans (50 percent), Latinos (57 percent), and Asian Americans (48 percent) and only one-fifth of white Americans (21 percent). Being committed to a long-term love relationship was valued as a marker of adulthood by 71 percent of Argentines and 55 percent of Israelis, but by only 28 percent of African Americans, 16 percent Mormons, and 14 percent of White Americans.

Cultural Similarities: How Widespread?

The cultural variations explored in the previous chapters promise that further investigation of conceptions of adulthood in other cultures will be fruitful and rewarding. Nevertheless, the similarity across cultures in conceptions
of adulthood is also striking. In Israel, in Argentina, in every American ethnic group, and among Mormons, the most widely supported criteria for adulthood were those that reflected values of independence and individualism, just as in previous studies of American middle-class whites (Arnett, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2001).

The widespread endorsement of individualistic criteria across the different studies is notable. However, this does not mean that we can in any sense draw conclusions about a universal, worldwide conception of what it means to be an adult. The studies here represent diverse cultures in several regions of the world. Nevertheless, all the samples consisted mainly of young people from the urban middle-class sector of their societies.

Rural-urban differences may not be large in industrialized countries. For example, a mostly rural sample of emerging adults in Missouri (Arnett, 1998) held conceptions of the transition to adulthood almost identical to the emerging adults in San Francisco described by Arnett in Chapter Five. However, rural-urban differences may be larger in less industrialized countries, because young people living in the two areas are likely to be much more different culturally, in, for example, education, economic basis, and exposure to media, than is the case in economically developed countries.

In short, country does not equal culture, and there may be cultural differences within countries that are as great as or greater than differences between similar groups across countries. Chapters Three and Five are illustrative. The Mormon emerging adults described by Nelson in Chapter Three are part of American society and embrace many individualistic criteria for adulthood, yet certain aspects of their conception of the transition to adulthood are starkly different than those for emerging adults in the majority culture. Their religious beliefs are the basis for some of the criteria for adulthood that are important to many of them, such as participating in religious rites of passage and being admitted into the gender-specific adult organizations that are part of their religious institution. Similarly, the emerging adults in the ethnic minority groups described by Arnett in Chapter Five support a variety of individualistic criteria for adulthood, just as white American emerging adults do, but they are more likely than whites to favor certain criteria for adulthood that reflect the more collectivistic values of their cultures.

And what of the rest of the world, the vast regions and diverse areas not sampled in the studies in this volume? Clearly, much remains to be discovered about how young people around the world think about what it means to be an adult. Of particular interest are the conceptions of adulthood that exist among young people in traditional tribal cultures that are as yet little touched by globalization or industrialization. Here is where the sharpest contrast may be found to the individualistic conception of adulthood favored by many young people in industrialized societies.

Anthropologists report that in tribal cultures, marriage is the definitive marker of adult status (Schlegel and Barry, 1991). But how do they know this? Have they asked young people about their conceptions of adulthood,
or have they simply drawn conclusions based on the apparent significance of the marriage ceremony? In the same way that American social scientists have assumed a definition of the transition to adulthood that turns out to have very little to do with how young Americans actually think about adulthood, it could be that anthropologists have drawn conclusions about the transition to adulthood in tribal cultures that are not shared by the young people in those cultures.

Of course, it could be that the anthropologists have it right after all. Because tribal cultures are generally much more collectivistic than industrialized societies and often discourage individualism (Schlegel and Barry, 1991), perhaps self-sufficiency as the sine qua non of adulthood would have no more meaning to them than entering the Melchizedek priesthood would have to a non-Mormon. Marriage may well be the ultimate transition to adulthood in many cultures with collectivistic values, because it reflects not an achievement of the individual but a mutual commitment between two persons and (often) two extended families. We can only speculate at this point, but this is certainly an important and compelling topic for future research.

Another common theme across several studies was that criteria for adulthood reflecting collectivistic values were found to be more important than in previous studies of white Americans. In Facio and Micocci’s study of Argentine emerging adults, subscales with criteria for Norm Compliance, Family Capacities, and Interdependence, all reflecting communal, collectivistic values, were equal in prominence to the subscale for Independence, with its individualistic criteria. Mayseless and Scharf found that Israelis endorsed the Norm Compliance items (for example, “avoid drunk driving”) much more widely than Americans have done. In Arnett’s study of emerging adults in the United States, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos were more likely than whites to support Family Capacities criteria; African Americans and Asian Americans were more likely to support Norm Compliance criteria; and Asian Americans were more likely to support Interdependence criteria. Together, these findings highlight the unusually high individualism of American whites and the tendency even in other cultures that are Western and industrialized to balance individualism with a stronger measure of collectivism.

Methodological Issues

Two methodological issues that were evident in the chapters should be mentioned. One involves the question of translation. In order to compare studies across cultures, some translation of concepts and terms is of course necessary. However, it is important to keep in mind always that a translation has taken place and that the meaning of words like *adolescent* or *adult* may contain subtleties that are difficult to translate exactly. For example, in Meulemann’s study (see Chapter Four), thirty-year-old Germans were asked
to indicate if “they see themselves as an adolescent (Jugendlicher), an adult (Erwachsener), or as something else.” But what exactly does Jugendlicher mean to a German? Does it have the same faintly pejorative connotation that adolescent has in English? And what does Erwachsener mean? Is it precisely the same as adult or grown-up, or does it have other subtle connotations not found in English? Only persons fluent in both languages can be sure of the answers, but the rest of us should simply bear in mind that a translation has taken place and the meanings of key terms may not be identical across languages.

A second methodological issue concerns the scale used in four of the studies to assess conceptions of adulthood. This scale was originally developed on samples of middle-class Americans (Arnett, 1994, 1997, 1998). There is some merit to using the same scale in studies of different cultures, because it makes for easier cultural comparisons. However, it can also be misleading, because a scale developed in one culture may fail to measure aspects of a construct that are crucial in a different culture. The investigators in the studies here wisely added items to the original scale that they believed would be important in their particular culture. In future studies, interviews should be used to generate culturally distinctive criteria that investigators may have overlooked (see Arnett, 1998). Although adding new criteria makes it more complicated to compare results across cultures, it is necessary in order to reflect each culture’s distinctive characteristics. Doing justice to cultural distinctiveness is more important than using an identical set of items.

In a related vein, analyses by Mayseless and Scharf on the scale’s psychometric properties suggest a further direction for research: improving the internal consistency of the Independence subscale and exploring the possibility that some items on the scale might measure the construct of emotional maturity. Enhancing these aspects of the scale’s psychometric qualities is important in the light of the fact that independence items rate high as markers of adulthood across many studies (Arnett, 1994, 1998, 2001; Tilton-Weaver, Vitunski, and Galambos, 2001).

**Areas for Exploration**

The chapters in this volume suggest a number of potential areas for research. The question of possible gender differences in conceptions of adulthood merits further investigation. For both the Argentines studied by Facio and Micocci and the Israelis studied by Mayseless and Scharf, women were more likely than men to support criteria for adulthood related to Norm Compliance. Otherwise, few gender differences were found in conceptions of adulthood in any of the studies explored in the previous chapters. However, it may be that gender differences would be greater in traditional cultures that have a sharper division of gender roles than the Western (or Western-influenced) industrialized cultures described here. Furthermore,
it may be that in traditional cultures, there would be a distinction in reaching adult status between becoming a man and becoming a woman. This distinction has not been found to be important in American studies (Arnett, 1998), but scholars investigating this topic in traditional cultures may wish to have participants indicate the criteria they believe are important for marking not only adulthood generally but also manhood and womanhood specifically (Arnett, 1998; Gilmore, 1990).

The studies by Meulemann in Chapter Four and by Galambos, Barker, and Tilton-Weaver in Chapter Six open up interesting questions about conceptions of adulthood before and after the emerging-adulthood period that was the focus of most of the studies in this volume. Using data from a longitudinal study of Germans assessed when they were thirty and forty-three years old, Meulemann asked whether they felt adult at age thirty, but at age forty-three he asked questions designed to measure their self-identification with adult status rather than whether they had reached adulthood. He argued that conceptions of adulthood become more differentiated with age and that by age forty-three, it no longer makes sense to ask individuals whether they feel like adults. Not surprisingly, the studies in this volume show that the older one gets, the more one feels like an adult. The percentages responding yes to the question as to whether they have reached adulthood ranged from 24 percent of the Mormon college students in Nelson’s study, to 46 percent of the twenty-five- to twenty-seven-year-old Argentines in Facio and Micocci’s study, to 75 percent of thirty-year-old Germans in Meulemann’s study.

These percentages suggest that Meulemann is correct in asserting that at some point in the life span, the question concerning whether one feels like an adult may be obsolete. Hence, his attempt to substitute self-identification as an adult at age thirty with self-identification with adult status at age forty-three is a reasonable one. However, it is an open question whether Meulemann’s questions about work, family life, and feeling “at home” in society accurately represent self-identification with adult status. As studies of conceptions of adulthood have vividly shown, what investigators assume about definitions of adulthood may be very different from how people define adulthood for themselves (Arnett, 1998). Nevertheless, Meulemann’s study highlights conceptions of adulthood across the life span as an important direction for research.

The study by Galambos, Barker, and Tilton-Weaver is the one study in this volume that does not directly concern conceptions of adult status, but it complements the other studies in some intriguing ways. Their results indicate that what is considered childish is in some ways a mirror image of what is considered adult. Failures of emotional control, irresponsible behavior, and norm-breaking behavior such as drug use are considered by Canadian adolescents to be childish, just as learning to control one’s emotions, taking responsibility for one’s actions, and complying with social norms are considered adult behavior by participants in the other studies.
Thus, becoming an adult means relinquishing behaviors inconsistent with adult status and replacing them with behaviors deemed to be genuinely adult.

Chapter Six also presents the interesting theoretical idea of implicit theories of maturity and immaturity. This is an idea that can be applied to conceptions of adulthood as well as conceptions of what it means to be childish. It is clear from the studies reported in this volume that people in many different places have an implicit theory of what it means to be an adult. They may not speak about it in everyday conversation, but nearly all have a ready response when asked. As Galambos, Barker, and Tilton-Weaver note, it is worth exploring further how these implicit theories may guide the individual’s life decisions.

Finally, the chapters by Facio and Micocci and by Nelson address whether a period of emerging adulthood exists in Argentine and Mormon culture, respectively. Both reach an affirmative answer, but for Mormons, it is clear that emerging adulthood is shorter and more structured than it is in the American majority culture. The question of whether a period of emerging adulthood exists in a culture is closely connected to the question of how young people view adulthood and when they believe themselves to have reached adulthood, because a subjective sense of feeling “in between”—on the way to adulthood but not there yet—has been proposed as one of the distinguishing features of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Thus, future investigators of cultural conceptions of the transition to adulthood may wish to keep in mind that in exploring this topic, they are also addressing the question of whether emerging adulthood has become part of the life course in the culture they are studying.

Conclusion

The previous chapters represent not the final answer to the question of conceptions of adulthood across cultures, but a beginning. If we have begun to answer some of the questions on this topic, we have also raised far more new questions. It is our hope that scholars around the world will be inspired to explore them.

References


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