



Becoming Adult: Meanings and Markers for Young Americans

Richard A. Settersten, Jr.

March 2006

Forthcoming in *Coming of Age in America*, Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas, editors.

Network on Transitions to Adulthood Research Network Working Paper

These working papers have been posted to stimulate research and policy analysis on issues related to the transition to adulthood. The papers have not been formally reviewed by members of the Network. The papers reflect the views of the authors and do not represent the views of the other members of the network nor of the MacArthur Foundation. This work has been supported by the Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Grant No. 00-00-65719-HCD.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Karie Feldman, Lynn Gannon, and Elizabeth Pund for their assistance. This project has also benefited from feedback provided by the editors and other contributors, colleagues in the MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy, and participants in symposia at Johns Hopkins University, Case Western Reserve University, and the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association.

The Network's recent book *On the Frontier of Adulthood* described and explained the transition to adulthood in populations, how the transition varies cross-nationally, and how it has changed over the last century.¹ The book focused largely on relationships among five traditional experiences—leaving home, completing school, entering the workforce, getting married, and having children. The portrait, while naturally distanced and impersonal based as it is on quantitative data, reveals several important themes that are critical context for the more intimate portrait provided in this book and chapter.

First, entry into adulthood has become more ambiguous and occurs in a less uniform and more gradual and complex fashion. Social timetables that were widely observed a half century ago no longer apply. It is simply not possible for most young people to achieve economic and psychological autonomy as early as they once did. Education and training are now even more valuable than before because jobs are less permanent, work careers have become more fluid, and the economic returns to education have increased. A shrinking fraction of young adults enters full-time work before their early 20s and a growing number do so only toward the end of their 20s. We are just beginning to appreciate the full ramifications of the economic and social changes that have resulted from the extension of schooling and the delay of work, and of the fact that family transitions now occur a decade or so later.

Second, families are overburdened, with parents in particular providing significant and varied support to their children through their late 20s and into their early 30s. In the United States, expectations about independence and autonomy promote a “sink-or-swim” transition to adulthood, to use Cook and Furstenberg's (2002) phrase.² Young people who “swim” are often able to do so only because families provide significant material and emotional support. This raises special concerns about the plight of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, whose skills and resources may be less adequate or relevant going into the transition, whose families may be more fragile or simply cannot afford to help their children, or those who have been attached to foster care, special education, or juvenile justice systems and are abruptly cut off from support when they reach 18 or 21. The sizable and often formidable challenges that vulnerable populations must face are addressed in the Network's subsequent book *On Your Own without a Net*.³

Third, the transition to adulthood is overlaid with a fragmented patchwork of often disconnected institutions: residential colleges and universities, community colleges, military and national service programs, work settings, and other environments. Significant mismatches exist between the emerging and varied pathways now taken into adulthood, on the one hand, and the institutions, policies, and programs that affect young people, on the other. What emerged in the middle of the last century as a neatly packaged “three-box” model of life—with education up front, full-time work in the middle, and retirement or leisure at the end—is clearly crumbling.⁴ Some of this new “flexibility” has been forced, and some of it has been actively chosen. Either way, the models of the past do not fit the behavior and opportunities of the present. These themes all point to the significant need to both strengthen the capacities of young people as they navigate the transition to adulthood as well as the institutions through which they move.

Against the protracted and ever more fragmented transition, against patterns that suggest significant uncertainty about experiences and opportunities that lay ahead, and against longer reliance on others for support, how do young people come to think about themselves as “adults”? This chapter seeks to understand young adults’ perspectives on what adulthood means, what experiences or statuses mark it, and how adult identities are achieved. The first section turns to themes of the salience and meanings of chronological age as a marker in this process, especially in getting the process started. The second section then develops a set of themes related to the gradual nature of the transition to adulthood and its implications for identity-building in early adulthood. The chapter draws on in-depth interviews with young people from all four of the settings discussed in prior chapters this book: New York City, San Diego, Minneapolis, and rural Iowa. An overview of the four samples and research designs is provided in the opening chapter.

The Salience and Meanings of Age

The first theme uncovered in the interviews relates to the salience and meanings of age during early adulthood. Age is important from the perspectives of societies, groups, and individuals.⁵ At the societal level, the meanings and uses of age are often formal. For example, age underlies the organization of family, educational, work, and leisure institutions and organizations. Many laws and policies structure rights, responsibilities, and entitlements on the basis of age, whether through explicit age-related rules or implicit judgments about the nature of particular life periods. At the same time, members of a society, or large subgroups of the population, hold common notions about appropriate behavior or the proper timing and progression of experiences and roles.

For individuals and small groups, the meanings and uses of age are often informal. Individuals use age-related ideas to organize their lives, the lives of others, and their general expectations about the life course. Age enters into and shapes everyday social interactions, often in subtle ways, affecting the expectations and evaluations of individuals involved in those exchanges. Age is also often linked to personality attributes and behavioral dispositions, conceptions of the self, and processes of self-regulation, coping, and goal setting. With these points in mind, how do young people in our study think about age and its meanings?

Age as an Anchor for Meaningful Experiences

Young people respond readily to questions about age. They can even generally give a specific age at which they began to feel adult, typically between 18 and 26. But there is nothing magic about the ages *per se*. What matters is what the age indexes—the important experiences that happen at those times. Most statements that reference age are quickly followed up with examples of such experiences. For example:

[I began to think of myself as an adult] maybe when I was like 20. And really, like, got out of my parents’ house and started, like, living, I mean working to pay the bills.
— Female, between ages 24–26, from San Diego

[I began to think of myself as an adult] Um, probably at 21 ... I finished school. Finally working. Taking care of myself. And no longer dependent on my parents.
— Female, between ages 24–26, from San Diego

These are typical examples in that these individuals see themselves as accomplishing key markers at or around a particular time, in the first case, leaving home and working, and in the second case, finishing school and establishing herself as separate from and no longer financially dependent on her parents. Age simply serves to anchor the experience; it is a window into a larger process. The exceptions to this rule are the ages of 18 and 21, which are in fact symbolic to many young people because they are tied to legal age norms.

Legal Age Norms as Starting Points in Becoming Adult

Not surprisingly, 18 and 21 are often given as ages of adulthood because they are embedded in laws and signal the acquisition of significant legal rights and responsibilities, such as when one can vote, drink, marry, have consensual sex, serve in the military, or be prosecuted. For example:

[I began to think of myself as an adult at] 18, I guess... Because it seemed to be, it was the age at which I was legally able to do a lot of things. And I guess to me that had significance, so that was the age at which I could vote, ... [and] have a credit card in my own name. It was also the age at which—or was it 17?—the government informed me that I would have to register for selective service.

— Male, between ages 30-32, from New York

Legal markers may also be important to parents and others in their social worlds because they now think about the young person in new ways. These legal markers seem especially important in situations when the young person is viewed as being adrift or as lagging behind expectations:

When I turned 21 ... [my parents said], you know what? You're an adult now. You should start thinking like an adult. You know, you should start setting up for your future as, you know, adult stuff that adults do ... [But it wasn't until] the "Big Two-Five" [25] that I started thinking more as an adult and stuff life that.

— Male, between ages 24–26, from San Diego

The fact that parents and others send subtle and not-so-subtle cues to young people about their progress, or lack thereof, is consistent with the dynamics of "age norms" that are enforced through mechanisms of social control. Social sanctions may be positive in an effort to keep young people "on track," or they may be negative in an effort to bring them back into line. Young people should be aware of the sanctions and consequences for violating norms and be sensitive to social approval and disapproval. These sanctions may be informal (e.g., in the form of persuasion, encouragement, reinforcement, ridicule, gossip, ostracism) or formal (e.g., entailing political, legal, or economic ramifications).⁶

Traditional Markers Still Matter

As with chronological markers of adulthood, traditional markers—leaving home, finishing school, getting a job, getting married, and having children—remain salient in the minds of young people. Yet, these markers also bring tensions.

Although there is an ideal *sequence* of traditional markers in individual's minds, what is striking is the fact that many young people acknowledge that their own lives have not gone or will not go this way. Of course, this ideal sequence is rooted in the ideas and behaviors of cohorts past; yet even for those cohorts, "disorder" in the life course was much more prevalent than is often assumed.⁷ Regardless of whether the transition to adulthood *ought* to unfold in this sequence, young people recognize that there are benefits to staying this course:

I would say that's my beliefs as well [accomplishing traditional markers in the ideal order] ... even though ... a lot of times it's not realistic because ... it depends on ... your family and your growing up—how you make that a reality.
— Female, between ages 24–26, from San Diego

[It's hard] living up to the expectations of being an adult. You should have a good job. You should have your own place. Should have a family ... It's '*What's wrong with you?*' What's wrong with you if you don't have a good job, what's wrong with you if you don't have a family.
— Male, between ages 30–32, from New York

These examples again reveal an awareness of an ideal sequence, in the first case, regrets that her life did not unfold in this way, and in the second example, a distinction between knowing the script and being able to meet it.

These traditional assumptions about order also underlie many institutions and policies, despite a growing awareness that lives no longer fit this model. This is where new questions about risk come into play, as atypical timing or sequencing may leave individuals vulnerable as they make their way through institutions or are subject to social policies that are based on outdated models of life. From the perspectives of young people, when one's own patterns mesh with normative patterns, the process of navigating life is easier, and when life is easier to navigate, personal growth and development come more easily. Crafting a life of one's own, especially when it goes against the grain, is a difficult enterprise. It brings risks, many of which are not known in advance. But it also brings new freedom and flexibility to live life in greater accordance with one's interests and wishes.

Young adults also view these traditional markers as ultimately being tied to more abstract concepts such as "maturity," "responsibility," or "control." These qualities are often viewed as being facilitated by traditional markers rather than exclusively as necessary conditions to enter into them.

This "order," in which responsibility or maturity are made possible by adult markers, runs counter to many popular discussions of marriage or childbearing, for example, where it is argued that individuals should be or feel mature or responsible before they marry or become parents, or that the problem with the state of marriage and parenthood today is that individuals make these transitions before they are ready. Surely, to a degree, these capacities are necessary to assume these roles, or at least to perform them with minimal effectiveness. Indeed, many young people now actively postpone marriage and parenthood precisely because they want to be ready for and do well in these roles. Their concerns about wanting to be ready for marriage and

parenthood are also driven by the prevalence of divorce or fragile relationships among their parents.

Financial independence from parents is also an important marker in the United States, reflected not just in the opinions of young people but in the public at large.⁸ At the same time, there is new evidence that large proportions of middle and upper class American “children” receive sizable instrumental, and especially financial, assistance well into their 30s.⁹ In addition, in places such as New York or San Diego, where opportunities for housing are limited or costs are prohibitive, leaving home and living alone are not even possibilities for large groups of young people.

Similarly, marriage and parenting are becoming more disassociated with conceptions of adulthood in public opinion,¹⁰ although these roles continue to have a strong presence in the minds of young people. Indeed, once these roles have been assumed, there is the sense that these experiences, especially parenthood, are the very things that crystallize one’s sense of self as an adult.

Given postponements in marriage and parenting, traditional markers related to education and work now seem to be the minimal and earliest set of transitions that young people experience as they navigate the early adult years. Markers related to education and work also seem more in one’s control than marriage and parenthood. It is important to recognize, however, that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have far fewer opportunities in education and work than those from more privileged backgrounds. As the prior chapters illustrate, young people across the sites we have studied are both searching and striving, and their experiences are heavily conditioned by opportunities in local markets, whether those markets are related to jobs, education, housing, or marriage.

Caught Up in the Process of Becoming

When asked, most young people across our research sites say that they are adults. Yet when one looks carefully at responses to this question and others, it is clear that most we interviewed do not yet feel entirely adult, even into their late 20s and early 30s. In some ways and in some spheres they feel like adults, and in some ways and in some spheres they do not. Consider the following:

I’m still a kid ... *not* in the sense of, you know, my *mindset* ... I know what I need to do to, you know, bring home money, stuff like that, *but* I still feel like a kid, meaning I like to have fun .. [and] I haven’t gotten married, I haven’t bought a house and all that. ... And I don’t have kids. I bought a car; that’s about as close as I [get] ... [but] I think the fact that *I know what to do or when to do it* or, you know, *basically I’m grown up*. I have *control of my own life*.

— Male, between ages 27–29, from New York

I still kind of sometimes think to myself, “*Oh my god, I’m a grown-up*” ... I don’t think the adult thing will [completely] hit me until I have kids ... I mean I’m responsible for myself and yeah I’m married and yeah I’m responsible for making my health payment and my car payment, but you know I’m not really responsible for any other human life or anything like that. So ... I know I’m an adult because I’m 28 years old, but I ... didn’t

wake up one day when I was 23 and think oh I'm an adult now ... I still sometimes don't think of myself [that way].

— Female, between ages 27–29, from Iowa

These quotes illustrate common distinctions between thoughts and feelings, on the one hand, and actions on the other. They reveal that individuals are able to sort in complex ways a wide range of possible markers, judge their relative importance in determining adult status, and evaluate their own progress with respect to these benchmarks, which need not be congruent. In the second case, the woman has already married, but she does not yet fully think of herself as an adult. The first quote also illustrates another common theme: that adulthood is often equated with letting go of fun, a sense that many of life's joys must be relinquished or diminished when one "grows up" (or is forced to do so).

Similarly, striving for greater control over life also emerges as a key theme in these interviews. What many young people do not seem to recognize, however, is that this is a struggle to which they will repeatedly return in life, not one that will somehow be resolved in early adulthood. What is unique about early adulthood is that individuals are encountering this struggle in a significant way for the first time. This struggle often involves navigating the fuzzy and evolving spaces between control, autonomy, and independence, and recognizing new kinds of responsibilities and consequences. For example:

[B]eing 18, I knew that there were different consequences for me ... so in that way I felt like an adult. But I ... recognized it [age] didn't really make me an adult ... I can't say there was any one event [when I suddenly felt like an adult], even after joining the Army I ... kind of let other people kind of take care of me in a way ... I'd say 25 is really when I became an adult and kind of made my own decisions and kind of took control of my own destiny.

— Male, between ages 27–29, from Minneapolis

In this case, this man sees the process starting at 18, though it isn't until 25 that he feels more fully settled into adulthood. Yet even then, his sense of himself as an adult is rather hedged: he *kind of* made his own decisions, and *kind of* took control of his own destiny. There is tremendous awareness among young people of being caught up in the process of "becoming." The passage above reveals that part of becoming an adult is not just *knowing* when one could or should take control and responsibility but, more important, actually *doing* it. There is a grace period where young people may be exempt from not taking (or not taking enough) action, partly from their own perspectives, but especially from the vantage points of others. But that grace period eventually ends. A common sentiment expressed throughout many interviews in our study was the sense that, while age signals movement into adult status, the full immersion or embodiment of that status is contingent on many other things and the path toward adult identity can take several different forms.

Upward Slopes, Turning Points, and Cycles

No single event makes one an adult. Instead, it is a *larger cluster of events* and, more important, the gradual accumulation of experiences that come with these events, that makes one an adult.

The process of becoming an adult also need not be about (or just about) the traditional markers. Three different models of moving into adulthood capture most of the views and experiences of young people across the sites: (1) upward slopes; (2) turning points; and (3) cycles.

Upward Slopes

The gradual establishment of adult identities is most often construed as being *linear*, and as entailing slow but ever-evolving upward progress toward adulthood. This path is also often punctuated with notable “adult moments,” as one young woman put it:

[Once] you are 25 or 26, you can't pretend you're a kid anymore. Every once in a while I do, but then you have *adult moments*. ... You don't see yourself as an adult all the time. You just think of yourself as yourself, and every once in a while, you'll have an adult moment when you have to make an adult decision ... doing things that adults do. ... Buying an apartment. That was a real adult thing. Adults do that. Not kids.
— Female, between ages 30–32, from New York

For many people, this state is often reached without much fanfare, or, for that matter, much recognition by oneself or others. For example:

I hate to think of that, you know, magical time line that you pass, 21, and suddenly you're an adult. I don't think it happens overnight. I don't think it happened at midnight. I think *it's been a process*. I think there's still certain characteristics to my personality that are more juvenile than adult.
— Male, between ages 21–23, from New York

[I started thinking of myself as an adult at] Maybe like 27, 28 ... [but] nothing really happened, [it was] just *an accumulation of everything*.
— Male, between ages 36–38, from New York

The first quote is particularly important because it reveals the fact that age-related categories such as “child,” “adolescent,” “young adult,” and so forth, are important divisions in the social world and in how we think about ourselves and others. Yet they may be so central that they are taken for granted, almost forgotten about, until we catch ourselves in such moments when we recognize their salience. This awareness would seem to be greater when one reaches landmark ages or when moving between categories, in this case from the category of “kid” into the category “adult.” Few moments mark the rest of adult life, in both number and strength as the shift from “child” to “adult,” despite the fact that traditional markers of this transition have clearly become more diffuse and prolonged.

The gradual nature of the transition to adulthood is also reflected in the imagined future of this woman:

[I will feel like an adult] when I accomplish everything I want to in life ... I'll have my own place, have a family, have my kids ... It's never ending. It's like a job, you know, there's always more to it.
— Female, between ages 24–26, from New York

As part of this exchange, the interviewer joked that “you’ll be like 70 before you do [accomplish everything you want in life]!” Surely, one would hope that “adulthood” occurs before seven decades have elapsed. Yet it raises a good question: Do we ever really reach a point where we feel that our development is complete? The strong focus on growth, especially psychological development, evidenced in these interviews may also be uniquely Western, if not uniquely American and middle class.¹¹ The emphasis on growth may also come with a personal toll. That is, our strivings, even obsessions, with continually growing, changing, and reinventing our selves may be self-destructive; we want to “grow until we fall apart,” to use Kohli’s (1986), phrase.¹²

Turning Points

Also common are *threshold models*, in which one’s identity as an adult again grows linearly (and gradually) until some point at which a more complete and integrated sense of adult identity occurs. Unlike the more subtle “adult moments” described above, these are far more significant, not only in degree but in that they leave the individual feeling qualitatively different. Once the turning point occurs, individuals think about themselves in new ways, distinctly aware of the fact that what they are now very different from what they once were. Common turning points are marriage and, especially, parenting. Although the event may vary, its effects are the same:

[I began to think of myself as an adult] after I had my son [and not after my marriage] ... Because I was responsible for another human being, that was a part of it. And the other reason was that it made me realize that I couldn’t act like a kid because I had this child. And you can’t act like a kid when you are a parent.
— Female, between ages 27–29, from Minneapolis

What makes parenting and partnering especially critical turning points is that individuals must shift much of their attention away from themselves and toward others, whether to a child or a spouse. This theme of being and becoming responsible for other human beings, and of needing to stop “acting” like a child once one has a child, emerges repeatedly in these interviews as a culminating act that designates entry into adulthood. The quote above also illustrates the ways in which these acts entail shifts in both thought and behavior.

From the perspective of the general public, marriage and parenthood are not as important as markers of adulthood as other things, such as completing education, becoming financially independent, working full time, being able to support a family, and leaving home (in that order).¹³ From the perspective of many young people in our study, however, marriage and parenthood remain key events that transform and crystallize adult identities, although other events can function in this way as well, as this woman implies:

Believe it or not, the day I moved into my own home ... is when I became a full-fledged adult. Yes ... I had a kid and yes I was married. However, there was no one here but me, my husband and my son, it was up to me ... I’m writing the check for the house, I’m responsible to make sure that it gets there. Buying the house made me feel like an adult, not even having my kid made me feel like an adult.
— Female, between ages 27–29, from Minneapolis

I raise this example because it is a reminder that the things that we, as outsiders, assume will matter most to others do not always match what matters to others, from their own vantage points. Clearly, even big events such as marriage and parenthood may not leave individuals feeling like adults, or not necessarily or uniformly so. In cases of a major turning point, it is not the event itself that matters but the process and the outcome, which is always similar.

Some of these turning points, in fact, are not related to specific events as much as sudden moment of awareness when “reality hit”—a phrase echoed often:

I guess about 23. ... That’s when I – *reality hit*. *I opened my eyes and the world seemed different*. It wasn’t the same any more. That was at 23 when everything just changed ... I mean, I saw the world different. I didn’t see it as a child. I just knew, now it’s time to get up, get a job, do what you gotta do, and I hadn’t really ... felt like that – wow.
— Male, between ages 33-35, from New York

[I started to feel like an adult] Mainly after 21, people see you’re adult. But you’re really not adult, you know? You’re still like, the mind isn’t [there yet]. Like I would say around 23 ... Reality hit me. [laughs] I need to finish school! I can’t just go around doing whatever kind of job, you know? I need a career! And a sense of direction in my life.
— Male, between ages 24-26, from San Diego

Cycles

Although fewer in number, there are also views and experiences of early adulthood that are cyclical and reversible, in which certain experiences propel young people forward and other experiences set them back. This view highlights the stop-and-go nature of the road to adult identity. For example:

It went in *cycles with me*; I didn’t really feel like an adult when I got married. I was just myself. [B]ut ... moving into our own place ... and probably 6 months into being married and really getting into that routine of what our life was, paying bills, paying rent, car payments ... that’s when I really started to feel like an adult. I ... felt that way for a few years and then I ... went backwards a little when I moved home. [And] then [backwards] again, going back to being a student, [and then moving forward] to the full-time job.
— Female, between ages 27–29, from Minneapolis

I started *backwards*...I had the kids first. Then I skipped a couple of [those typical transitions]...I tell some people: you know why white people are so successful? ‘Cause when they’re young, this is what their parents teach them. You go to school; then, when you’re done in school, you go to this college. And then, when you’re done [with college, you ...] — And other races, they don’t! Not all of them do [things in the right order], you know. At least us Mexicans, not all of us, not a lot of us do.
— Male, between ages 24–26, from San Diego

Interestingly, both of these young adults determine whether they are moving forward or backward on the basis of what is, or is perceived to be, normative. Returning home and returning

to school when adult life is already well underway are viewed as setbacks, whereas finding full-time work restores one's course. These experiences are more widespread and shared than either of the young adults above imagine, but they evaluate their progress using old scripts that no longer reflect the reality of life for many young people today. The second quote also suggests that important cultural variations exist in the script, that some people have the benefit of learning it early and executing it accordingly, or at least understanding the consequences of straying from it. In this case, the young male implies that this is a model is conveyed in white and more privileged families.

This mismatch between old scripts for life and the new realities of the contemporary world are fertile grounds for family tensions. Parents were subject to different social expectations set against different opportunities. Although their children may try to meet these expectations, many cannot, and many will attempt to create, out of necessity or desire, new paths that depart from old ways. Indeed, a willingness to veer from traditional paths, to repackage the self as needed, to define oneself in ways that do not rely on convention may be especially beneficial when experiences in most spheres of life seem so uncertain. At the same time, "do-it-yourself biographies" bring important freedoms *and* risks, as they are more prone to "biographical slippage and collapse," to use Beck's (2000) terms.¹⁴ When individuals veer from beaten paths they find themselves on courses that are not widely shared by others and not reinforced by organizations, institutions, and social policies. They risk losing important sources of informal and formal support along the way. The loss of this support leaves one more fragile, and personal failures, when they occur, are interpreted as being no one's fault but one's own.

All of these models—whether upward slopes, turning points, or cycles—run counter to the assumptions that under gird most theories of early adult development and to the ways in which the transition to adulthood is conceptualized and analyzed. Most research analyzes transitions singly (rather than jointly), takes a short temporal view, and assumes that any one of these experiences—and certainly marriage and parenting—certify individuals as a full-fledged adults and leave them feeling that way. However, as I show below, there is frequently a gap between the event and feeling like an adult.

Chickens before Eggs: Experiences, then Feelings

There is a strong sense in our interviews that adult identities get firmed up significantly after (even years later) the event. Consider these examples:

Once we had our first son, little by little that changed me as a parent, and as a person, as a husband, I started growing. And then I started to realize what I wanted out of life, and what I needed to do to get what I wanted out of life. So ... by that definition alone ... I feel I've become an adult [only] in the past two years or so.

— Male, between ages 33–35, from New York

Honestly, I would say [I became an adult] a year after my son was born. Because it took some time to get used to being a parent. Being a father. Taking time to get all those thoughts together and knowing how to deal with them. How to prioritize my time. So probably about a year [after] ... at that point I thought I was an adult. There was no ifs, ands or buts about it.

— Male, between ages 27–29, from New York)

These two excerpts are wonderful illustrations of the fact that feelings and experiences are enmeshed, and that the feeling of being an adult often grows out of experiences in adult roles. It is often only with the benefit of distance and reflection that we come to realize how we have been affected by the things that happen to us, that we develop more acute understandings of how we have grown and changed in the process. In both cases above, fatherhood brings new insights not only into one's growth and self-definition, but in terms of priorities and what actually needs to be done to achieve those things in a concrete way. Desires, goals, and actions are part of and stem from these insights; they are not always known in advance. Indeed, in many cases individuals talk about these experiences in a relatively passive way: things happen to them and they respond in turn. Yet they also clearly play active roles in directing their lives, and these quotes suggest that an important part of becoming adult is about developing the capacity to reflect on our past experiences, extract lessons, and apply those lessons in the future.

The seemingly inevitable lag between experiences and feelings is surely exacerbated against the prolonged entry into traditional adult statuses. Consider this reflection on the problem of lag:

I think we should treat everyone over 18 as if they were adult. We shouldn't wait for them to feel adult. [Interviewer: Do you feel like you're completely grown up?] No. (laugh) I think it may actually be a particularity of childhood to imagine that there will be a point when you feel completely adult, because it seems to me that people our age are always running around saying "Oh, I don't feel grown up" ... and [that] may just be what it feels like to be grown up. You don't feel it.

— Female, between ages 30–32, from New York

This woman so thoughtfully articulates what many in the public see as a growing social problem. This woman, having been in graduate school for many years and only recently entering her profession, feels first-hand the effects of prolonged education and delayed entry into work. Yet she does not think that avoidance of commitments or refusal to "grow up" should be tolerated; being a *young* adult is still about being an adult; the young part matters far less than the adult part. Being young is not an excuse to simply play and hang out. Of course, for some young people, especially those from more privileged backgrounds, the early adult years may be an extended moratorium for development. For others, especially those from less privileged backgrounds or vulnerable populations, it is a difficult period with limited choices and opportunities. Whether about exploration, drift, or hardship, prolonged entry into adulthood begs an important question: How much and how long can it be permitted? And what consequences does it bring for individuals, families, and society?

Adding another wrinkle to this lag between experiences and feelings is the fact that our bodies and the world around us change rapidly but how we think about and see ourselves lags behind, caught up in earlier time:

Well, I'm an adult, I understand that I'm an adult, I know that I've reached the age of adulthood. [Laughter] But, I think we all see ourselves, unless we look in the mirror, as how we are as sort of kids or as young people. You know what I mean? ... or maybe I'm just in a state of arrested development ... But, it's like my little sister, she turned to me and she goes "John, I'm 16. I can't believe it, I'm 16. I don't feel 16. ... When did this

happen, I still feel like I'm 12..." And I said, "I know, I know how you mean." It's like *you're growing on the outside, but your mind and your heart and your feelings and your tastes are still the same, and it's like, you almost feel like you can't control your outside.* And, ... you're still in a different stage, mentally or emotionally. And, then later, ... when you're in your 20s, [you think] "Oh, I still feel like a teenager." When you're in your 30s, you feel, "Oh god, I'm still in my 20s." So, you do catch up, [laughter], you do you see yourself as an adult, but I think you see yourself as an adult a decade earlier.
— Male, between ages 30-32, from New York

This is surely not a feeling unique to early adulthood. Perhaps at most points in adult life, one's sense of self simply cannot keep pace with actual age. This gap may even increase as we age. However, this feeling may be confronted first in early adulthood, with the realization that we no longer wish to be adult, as teenagers so often do, but that we now *are* adult.

The Power of Intimates and Strangers

One's own feelings about whether one is an adult are often tied to the views of others. Recent survey data,¹⁵ for example, find that young people are more likely to report feeling like adults at work, with romantic partners or spouses, and with children. They feel less like adults when they are with their parents and sometimes with friends, depending on whether the activities "confirm" adult identities or are more similar to adolescent pursuits (for example, staying out late and partying). This is especially true with parents, as this quote illustrates:

I still feel like I'm not an adult completely. I hate the way my parents treat me and how my siblings treat me too. I feel like I'm still under their control all the time and [that I] need guidance or something. But I feel like I don't need guidance — they give me guidance anyway... They still call me "baby-doll" (laughter), they still try to pamper me.
— Female, between ages 21–23, from San Diego

Reflected in this statement is a kind of "semi-autonomy" experienced by a woman who thinks of herself as adult but is not treated as such by her parents and siblings. From her perspective, her parents have not eased reigns that would give her more of the freedoms she expects as an adult. Although she laughs about the fact that her parents continue to use a nickname she dislikes, it symbolizes the struggle she is having with her parents and what seems to be their difficulty in acknowledging that she is no longer a child. She is ready to assume adult status, and she has, at least in terms of her own self-definition. Her parents and siblings, on the other hand, are unable to let her do so, or at least to let her do so completely. Some of this may also reflect dynamics around birth order and gender, where, for example, the "baby" of the family is not allowed to grow up. One wonders how the mix of birth order and gender not only play into how we view ourselves as adults, but how other family members view us, and to what extent these histories of family relationships and experiences follow us.

On the other hand, families can also send messages that pose new freedoms and become liberating:

I tell you, my parents started treating me like an adult when I came home [after being away a year in high school] ... there was a definite change ... in the way that they treated

me. I remember ... I had a couple of beers with my dad in my house. I mean they let me do things like that ... they ... really treated me as a responsible young adult and I think that made me want to please them even more.

— Female, between ages 21–23, from Iowa

These tensions between holding on and letting go, which are characteristic of parent-child relationships during the teenage years, clearly extend into early adult life. Parents want their children to show signs of maturity and responsibility (even if they may have some reservations about doing so), and young people want opportunities to do so. Successful experiences lead to further negotiations about enlarging the scope of these opportunities. These dynamics are reflected in the case above, as the parents begin to treat their son in new ways, and he, in turn, begins to feel and be more responsible.

The messages young people receive from parents and siblings can have powerful effects in promoting or constraining entry into adulthood. While these sources are discussed most often, signals from others, such as co-workers, are also important. For example:

I really felt like an adult when I was living in New York and commutin' back and forth, just like you know, somebody twice my age would do. Go home to see family and you know, on weekends, stuff like that. And ... I sit in Business Class a lot, ... I see a lot of people who are middle-aged and you know, doing well for themselves and you know, I can talk about career stuff, this and that. It sounds to me like I'm in the same league with them and it's like, it feels good. That's when I really feel like an adult. I mean, like my peers are all older and I'm still doin' well.

— Male, between ages 27-29, from New York

[I began to think of myself as an adult at] about 2 years ago... That's when I got the job. I felt people treated me differently. They treated me with respect and they treated me like an adult, so I started acting like an adult.

— Male, between ages 18–20, from New York

The importance of other people's expectations and views can even extend to encounters with strangers:

[I think of myself as an adult] Sometimes, not all the time ... I'm responsible I guess. I ... started to think [this way] maybe a year ago. Somebody [told] me I need to quit acting like a child and be grown up. [I: Do you remember who it was?] *No, just somebody off the street.* [I: And that stuck with you.] Yeah.

— Female, between ages 27–29, from Minneapolis

This woman's experience is important because it illustrates that even random messages from strangers can have powerful effects on how we think of ourselves, and even affect us more powerfully than intimates or acquaintances. We expect parents, siblings, and others we know to share their views, solicited or not. But we do not expect strangers on the street to intervene and tell us to “grow up” and “get over” ourselves. It is clear that this encounter had a powerful legacy for this woman. She did not simply brush it off and move on; it changed her.

Beyond the Usual Suspects: The Importance of Subtle, Unexpected, or Difficult Experiences

Normal, expectable experiences, such as the “traditional” markers of adulthood, are salient for most young people. Yet atypical and unexpected experiences are also very important, as are seemingly subtle shifts in everyday life and in the mind. These experiences are rarely considered in most dominant theories and research on the early adult years. As a result, research on this period of life often misses critical elements, which may be as, if not more, important than the usual suspects.

Subtle Shifts in Everyday Life

Some of these more unusual markers involve *subtle behavioral shifts*, for example, in being invited to sit at the adult table at a holiday, or having parents include one in important decisions or allow one to look “behind-the-scenes” at sensitive aspects of family life. For example:

[I began to fully feel like an adult] When [just 2 years ago] *my grandma let me sit at the adult table for Christmas dinner* (laughs). No, really, it’s actually kind of funny because the kids have always had a table at my grandma’s for Christmas dinners and I [finally] got to sit with the adults, it was like you know [a big deal] (laughs).

— Female, between 27–29, from Minneapolis

* * *

[I began to think of myself as adult when my parents] would actually like include me in, “*Hey, we got a situation here. Give us an opinion on it.*” (*mock gasp*) “*Me? Oh my gosh.*” [They began] filling me in as to things that are going on in the house and like asking *opinions* about it and [involving me] in that sense.

— Female, between ages 24–26, from New York

In this case, the parents allow the child to come “backstage” and be involved in important family decisions. The parents actively solicit and take into account the perspective of their daughter, and they reveal information that was suppressed for her protection when she was younger. As with the prior theme, these experiences also grow out of relationships with others. Individual perceptions of adulthood are shaped by others, what they are willing to reveal or how they are willing to involve the person in adult matters.

Subtle Shifts in the Mind

Other markers are subtle shifts in the mind, especially in insights and perceptions. As with the subtle shifts in everyday life, research risks overlooking these shifts in mind. Repeatedly, we hear comments such as:

[Being an adult] is when *your reliance starts shifting away from relying on somebody else and starts ... relying on yourself ...* really that’s what independence is, when you begin to take care of yourself in every way. I say “every real way” because people are

you know, trying to rush out of home and go be somewhere else and go do something else ... But the fact is that a lot of these people are in the end, still knowing that they can fall back on their parents ... *But [being truly adult is] about whether you really have that in the back of your mind.* — Male, between ages 21–23, from New York

Being an adult ... [is about realizing] that there is *a lot of things that you can do*—you can go out to the bar, you can get trashed every night, but *it's not something that you should do*. You should act like an adult. You should be more responsible.
— Female, between ages 27–29, from Minneapolis

In the first example, the powerful but subtle shifts in the mind was whether the young man could fall back on parents if something went wrong, and in the second instance, it was realizing the difference between what one can and what one should do, and more often choosing the latter. Such shifts are especially important in identity-building because they leave one more aware of choices and their implications for how one views and thinks about oneself and how others view and think about him or her.

Accelerated Adulthood: Growth from Hard Times and Unexpected Experiences

Other transformations stem from difficult experiences or periods of hardship—whether a divorce (especially of one's parents, but even one's own divorce), early parenting, or the serious illness or loss of a parent or sibling. These teach young people difficult life lessons and accelerate movement into adulthood. Consider these examples related to teenage childbearing, drug use, and abuse:

My lifestyle was too wild. Doing too much. The guys that I was dating were way too abusive. I'm really lucky to be here ... I think my kids are part of what's kept me from drugs and things...I didn't have any priorities, really no goals... [It's] a blessing that I'm not with either of these [abusive men], I probably wouldn't have survived anyway
— Female between ages 27–29, from Minneapolis

I believe if [my son] wasn't here, I'd be dead today ... Because the way I grew up. I grew up with a lot of people who was doing things they shouldn't be doing [doing drugs, having a lot of sex]. [My son] gave me a reason to not stay still and to move on with my life. I had someone that was countin' on me to be there, to take care of him. Without him ... I would have been just like them ... He has saved me a whole lot, so yeah, he's a Godsend.
— Female, between ages 27–29, from New York

What is surprising at first glance is that early parenting is often discussed as a positive experience, even one that is life-saving, because it forces a turn-about in destructive paths. These and other women see the births of their children, even those that result from abusive relationships, as sources of salvation. These transformative views are consistent, however, with long-standing research on teen pregnancy and new work on the meanings of motherhood and marriage among single low-income mothers.¹⁶ These mothers regard their children not as

obstacles, but as resources, giving order and purpose to their lives and providing a new and positive identity.

Events such as the illness or death of a parent or sibling also become turning points, although not in ways as positive as the teenage mothers' experiences. Although most of these young people believe these experiences accelerated movement into adulthood, some also feel as if their childhoods were foreclosed. For example:

[I began to think of myself as an adult] probably [first at] 10 [when father died, and again at] 17 when I got out of high school. ... You worry about different things when your father dies, you know, things kids shouldn't be worried about.

— Male, between ages 30–32, from New York)

It really hit me that I was an adult when I was 22 and I had just completed my student teaching ... and all in that same month, when I [thought] hey I'm on my own, ... my brother in law dies at 41 years old. I've got a sister at 34 who's a widow with three boys and I'm beginning my life so to speak and that right there was like holy cow. This is real world stuff right here, real world stuff ... that's when adulthood set in for me.

— Male, between ages 30–32, from Iowa

Uh, my step-father, he left my mom and I had to take care of her [she was very sick] and it made me realize that I was the only man left to take care of my mom and I had to, you know, I had a lot of responsibility.

— Male, between ages 24–26, from San Diego

The last quote is a good illustration of a similar set of themes among children whose parents separate or divorce, circumstances that require them to take greater responsibility for themselves or other family members or greater responsibility in household. These demands create new “awakenings,” as one young man put it, because they heighten responsibilities or because they teach lessons about how one's own behaviors have repercussions for others. They also illustrate the fact that these need not be negative events, but can also be positive, especially when one has the privilege of looking back with some distance, bringing to mind the adage “that which doesn't kill us makes us stronger.”

However, these quotes also harken back to earlier comments about the link between adulthood and not relying on parental support as an escape hatch. This comment is voiced frequently by individuals from less privileged backgrounds, and is often said with a tone of resentment that young people from more privileged backgrounds can and do rely heavily on parents to help them navigate this period. The things they are able to achieve, in contrast to their better positioned peers, are viewed as hard-won badges of honor. Those with greater privileges are allowed to play in their early adult years, while they must instead settle in more quickly to adult roles and responsibilities without pillows to cradle and protect them.

This leads to an important point: Although the prolonged and more variable patterns of entry into adulthood today may, from the outside, characterize young people from different social classes and racial-ethnic groups, the processes that drive these patterns may be quite different. For more privileged groups, these fragmented patterns are more likely the result of active choices to extend schooling, to consider more fully the range of career and relationship options and choose those that provide the best fit, or to travel and explore other opportunities, all

of which may be facilitated by family resources. For less privileged groups, in contrast, these fragmented patterns are not as much about choice as they are having more limited skills and experiences coming into the transition and more limited or even foreclosed opportunities in education and work. Because these patterns are driven by very different processes, their ultimate consequences will also be very different. Given their differential resources, the gap between disadvantaged and advantaged youth will only grow over time.

Routes to Adult Identity: An Evolving Model

Recent demographic research has taught us several important lessons about the contemporary transition to adulthood: That it has become more ambiguous and uncertain period of life, and occurs in a less uniform and more gradual and complex fashion; that many families are overburdened in trying to help their children swim rather than sink during this period; and that the transition is overlaid with a patchwork of disconnected institutions, and significant mismatches exist between the emerging and varied pathways now taken into adulthood and the institutions, policies, and programs that affect young people. Against these protracted and fragmented patterns, this chapter has considered what young people themselves have to say about the meanings of adulthood, what experiences or statuses mark it, and how adult identity can be achieved. Across our disparate research sites—from two of the biggest cities on the east and west coasts, to two large cities in the Midwest, to a small community in the heartland—some common themes emerge. And they reveal just how complex the task of moving into adulthood is in today's world.

Most of the young people in our study do not completely feel like adults, even into their 30s. In some spheres and ways they do, and in some spheres and ways they do not. Most young people can also give specific ages at which they began to feel adult, but there is nothing magic about these ages. What matters is what age serves to index, which is when important experiences happen and how they are ordered. Some of what age also serves to index is a set of rights and responsibilities that are embedded in law, which themselves are granted gradually during the teenage years and then at 18 and 21, depending on the type of right or responsibility in question.

Young Americans have in their minds a wide variety of experiences that compose the process of becoming adult. They can sort in complex ways a wide range of possible markers, judge their relative importance in determining adult status, and evaluate their own progress with respect to these benchmarks. They continue to include big traditional markers of adulthood (e.g., leaving home, finishing school, finding work, getting married, having children) in the mix, despite the fact that they are aware that their experiences with these traditional markers will generally happen later and in a more jumbled way than their parents. Yet young people also surprisingly and often reference other alternative markers—atypical and unexpected experiences, and subtle shifts in everyday life and in the mind—all of which are rarely considered in most dominant theories and research on the early adult years, and all of which may hold equal and even greater importance than traditional markers.

Whether markers are big or small, normative or non-normative, objective or subjective, rooted in one's own views or those of others, in or out of our control, one thing is clear: No single experience renders one an adult. Instead, it is a larger cluster of events and the gradual accumulation of experiences that come with these events that eventually make one an adult.

Most young people describe the process of entering adulthood as slow but ever-upward, and as punctuated with “adult moments” when individuals become conscious of the fact that they are crossing over into a new social category that begins to alter how they see themselves and how others see them. Other young people describe major turning points, big and often unexpected moments of transformation when the individual suddenly feels a strong sense of discontinuity with the past. Still others, though fewer in number, describe the process of becoming adult as a dynamic and iterative stop-and-go process, with some experiences propel them forward, others set them back. Actual experiences can, of course, contain elements of each of these models. But regardless of the particular route into adulthood, there is often a significant lag between experiences and feelings. That is, a solid feeling that one is an adult typically comes well after individuals have experienced a wide array of markers.

As individuals experience these markers, they stand as symbols to others and to oneself that the young person is in the process of becoming, making strides toward complete adult status. These experiences are often associated with gains in core components of adult development, such as maturity, responsibility, and control. These experiences, in turn, alter the subjective sense of oneself as an adult, though these feelings often come later, to a great degree growing out of and having interactive relationships with the behavioral markers. It is often not until individuals have spent adequate time in these statuses, and the privilege of retrospection, that their experiences and feelings are consolidated into a fresh sense of self.

The privilege of retrospection serves as a reminder that the insights young people have into the process, and the understandings we gain as researchers, will depend on where we catch young people in the process. To paraphrase the Kierkegaard, life can only be understood backwards, but in the meantime it has to be lived forwards, and it is constantly revised along the way. Our accounts must therefore be sensitive to prospective and retrospective views and to the fact identity is tangled up in time. Three key questions—Who am I? What do I want? How can I get there?—pose challenges that must be actively confronted and navigated during the early adult years. These challenges are likely heightened by the increasingly protracted, complex, and fragmented transition to adulthood. In some sense, many of the challenges related to identity in early adulthood are not unique to that period and are instead lifelong challenges in setting goals, striving to meet them, deferring or revising them, and often failing to realize them. What is presumably unique about early adult life is that it is a time when these challenges are confronted for the first time in a significant way.

Of course, in some places and for some people, the very notion of a life plan and the chance to focus on one’s own development are great privileges. The very ability to plan also depends on the ability to count on a relatively certain future. Historical demographic shifts now make it possible to plan at both individual and collective levels for a longer future. In the past, it may have been far less possible, or profitable, to plan. Now, life experiences are potentially more predictable and controllable. What is more, planning may be all the more necessary in a world with seemingly unlimited opportunities and time. It may be important to carefully select a path early in life to build on opportunities along the way. These conditions make good choices all the more important. Yet one can also argue that these very conditions may lead individuals to plan less. Because time seems plentiful, individuals may be less compelled to plan. Life seems flexible, bringing many opportunities to change one’s course along the way; to revise, defer, abandon, or return to experiences or reactive relationships at a later point. In times of rapid social change, even the best laid plans may not come to fruition, which may make their dissolution all the more difficult to stomach.¹⁷

Our interviews do not support increasingly popular theories in psychology that depict the early adult years as an extended “moratorium” from age normative tasks and as being characterized by pervasive experimentation and leisure, avoidance of work, fear of commitment in intimate and other social relationships.¹⁸ To be sure, a subset of young adults may fall into these categories. Yet so, too, do some older adults. Most young people are striving toward adulthood—seeking responsibility, negotiating autonomy, making commitments in education and work, nurturing connections to other people, finding ways to be involved in their communities, and expressing concern about their futures and the futures of our nation and world. Yet many are having a difficult time finding their way, and it is taking them much longer to get there. The important question to ask in response, however, is not “What is wrong with young people today?” Instead, a more important question is “How have changing social and economic conditions combined to create a new life period, what new capacities and skills do young people now need to navigate this period successfully, and how do institutions and policies need to be revamped to smooth entry into and through adult life?” To answer this question, we still have so much to learn.

¹Settersten, Richard A., Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut, eds. 2005. *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. This book is the first major product of the interdisciplinary MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy.

²Cook, Thomas D. and Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr. 2002. Explaining Aspects of the Transition to Adulthood in Italy, Sweden, Germany and the United States: A Cross-Disciplinary, Case Synthesis Approach. Pp. 257-287 in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science: Early Adulthood in Cross-National Perspective*. Edited by Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr. London: Sage Publications.

³Osgood, D. Wayne, E. Michael Foster, Connie A. Flanagan, and Gretchen R. Ruth, eds. 2006. *On Your Own without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. This book is a second major product of the MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy.

⁴For illustrations, see Settersten, Richard A., Jr. 2005. Social Policy and the Transition to Adulthood: Toward Stronger Institutions and Individual Capacities. Pp. 534-560 in *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*. Edited by Richard A. Settersten, Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁵For further discussion of the meanings and uses of age for individuals, groups, and societies, see Settersten, Richard A., Jr. 2003. Age Structuring and the Rhythm of the Life Course. Pp. 81-98 in *Handbook of the Life Course*. Edited by Jeylan Mortimer and Michael J. Shanahan. New York: Kluwer Academic/ Plenum Publishers.

⁶For further discussion of age norms in contemporary social life, see Settersten, Richard A., Jr. 2003. Age Structuring and the Rhythm of the Life Course. Pp. 81-98 in *Handbook of the Life Course*. Edited by Jeylan Mortimer and Michael J. Shanahan. New York: Kluwer Academic/ Plenum Publishers.

⁷For evidence, see Rindfuss, Ronald, C. Swicegood, and Rachel Rosenfeld. 1987. Disorder in the Life Course: How Common and Does it Matter? *American Sociological Review* 52: 785-801. See also Wu, Larry and Jui-Chung Allen Li. 2005. Historical Roots of Family Diversity: Marital and Childbearing Trajectories of American Women. Pp. 110-149 in *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*. Edited by Richard A. Settersten, Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁸Furstenberg, Frank F., Jr., Sheela Kennedy, Vonnice C. McLoyd, Rubén G. Rumbaut, and Richard A. Settersten, Jr. 2004. Growing Up is Harder to Do. *Contexts* 3: 33-41.

⁹Schoeni, Robert and Karen Ross. 2005. Material Assistance from Families during the Transition to Adulthood. Pp. 396-416 in *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*. Edited by Richard A. Settersten, Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁰Furstenberg, Frank F., Jr., Sheela Kennedy, Vonnice C. McLoyd, Rubén G. Rumbaut, and Richard A. Settersten, Jr. 2004. Growing Up is Harder to Do. *Contexts* 3: 33-41.

¹¹For examples, see Settersten, Richard A., Jr. 2003. Age Structuring and the Rhythm of the Life Course. Pp. 81-98 in *Handbook of the Life Course*. Edited by Jeylan Mortimer and Michael J. Shanahan. New York: Kluwer Academic/ Plenum Publishers.

¹²Kohli, Martin 1986. Social Organization and Subjective Construction of the Life Course. Pp. 271-92 in *Human Development and the Life Course: Multi disciplinary Perspectives*. Edited by Aage B Sorenson, Franz E. Weinert, and Lonnie R. Sherrod. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

¹³Furstenberg, Frank F., Jr., Sheela Kennedy, Vonnice C. McLoyd, Rubén G. Rumbaut, and Richard A. Settersten, Jr. 2004. Growing Up is Harder to Do. *Contexts* 3: 33-41.

¹⁴Beck, Ulrich. 2000. Living Your Own Life in a Runaway World: Individualization, Globalization, and Politics. Pp. 164-174 in *Global Capitalism*. Edited by W. Hutton and A. Giddens. New York: The New Press.

¹⁵See Shanahan, Michael J., Erik Porfeli, Jeylan T. Mortimer, and Lance Erickson Subjective Age Identity and the Transition to Adulthood: Demographic Markers and Personal Attributes. Pp. 225-255 in *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*. Edited by Richard A. Settersten, Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁶See, for example, Edin, Kathryn and Maria Kefalas. 2005. *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood before Marriage*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

¹⁷For further discussion of the dynamics between planning, demographic conditions, and social change, see Settersten, Richard A., Jr. 2002. Socialization and the Life Course: New Frontiers in Theory and Research. Pp. 13-40 in *Advances in Life-Course Research: New Frontiers in Socialization*. Edited by Richard A. Settersten, Jr. and Timothy J. Owens. London: Elsevier Science, Ltd.

¹⁸The work of Arnett has been especially visible in promoting these images. See, for example, Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. 2000. Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens through the Twenties. *American Psychologist* 55: 469-480, and Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. 2001. *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: A Cultural Approach*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

APPENDIX

Family Codes, Analytic Codes, and Illustrative Quotes

These codes have been applied to the interview section devoted to “subjective aging,” “self and identity,” and “future appraisal.” The “subjective aging” portion of the interview is especially important to this project. It focuses on topics such as whether and when young people come to think about themselves as adult, what milestones mark the achievement of adulthood, and what constitutes “success” in early adult life. The coding scheme was developed and refined based on sample of 100 interviews, 20 interviews for each of the four sites included in this volume as well as the Detroit, Michigan site. Codes were developed both deductively and inductively. Some codes are based on existing theories and literature: not only the traditional markers that are prevalent in demographic research (e.g., leaving home, completing school, entering the workforce, getting married, and having children) but also alternative markers. Other codes are based on themes and categories that emerged directly from the voices of the young people who were interviewed for this project.

The following “family” codes were developed for the purposes of sorting data: (1) young person (R) considers self adult; (2) R does not consider self adult; (3) parents consider R adult; (4) parents don’t consider R adult; and (5) parents differ on R’s status as an adult.

The analytic codes listed below were developed for specific responses in the transcripts. “SA” stands for “Subjective Ageing”; “self” for one’s own views of adulthood; “parents” for one’s parents’ views of adulthood (as reported by the interviewee). Codes beginning with “SA Markers” reference those who consider themselves adults, and codes beginning “SA Not” reference those who do not consider themselves adults.

The transcript excerpts provided in the chapter are extracted directly. Elipses indicate that material has been withdrawn to provide a more compact presentation. Italics are added to highlight especially critical components of the excerpt.

Analytic Plan, Organization of Output

In order to examine data on the subjective markers of adulthood, we used two separate methods to extract data from Atlas/ti. The first method was aimed at getting an overall picture of the views of young people, with data split by site and sorted first by gender, then by whether or not the respondent self-identified as an adult, and then retrieving all coded information for each individual. This allowed us to develop a sense of the similarities and differences across the sites, and allows a view of the full range of topics. By reading through large files of quotations from each site, we were able to evaluate the essential characteristics that made each site unique, as well as those themes that were more universal, cutting across location. We started with NY and IA as extremes, and then worked our way through San Diego and Minneapolis. The analytic strategy employed here involved sorting all codes by site, gender, and whether or not the person thought of him or herself as an adult. This strategy provided glimpses into which markers, across sites, seemed to have the greatest or most limited salience, and why. A second strategy resulted in an in-depth examination of specific codes. Here, we again extracted site-based files, sorted

first by whether the respondent self-identified as an adult and then, all information pertaining to each of the specific analytic codes described earlier.

Analytic Codes

SA Markers of adulthood—self—finishing school
SA Markers of adulthood—self—leaving home
SA Markers of adulthood—self—entering the workforce
SA Markers of adulthood—self—getting married
SA Markers of adulthood—self—having children
SA Markers of adulthood—self—purchase home
SA Markers of adulthood—self—trip/traveling
SA Markers of adulthood—self—divorce
SA Markers of adulthood—self—long term relationship (living with someone)
SA Markers of adulthood—self—always felt like an adult
SA Markers of adulthood—self—legal definitions/chronological age
SA Markers of adulthood—self—greater responsibility (except financial)
SA Markers of adulthood—self—financial independence
SA Markers of adulthood—self—judgment of parents
SA Markers of adulthood—self—control
SA Markers of adulthood—self—balance concerns for self with those for others
SA Markers of adulthood—self—having others depend on you
SA Markers of adulthood—self—opinions of others (except parents)
SA Markers of adulthood—self—other

SA Markers of adulthood—parents—finishing school
SA Markers of adulthood—parents—leaving home
SA Markers of adulthood—parents—entering the workforce
SA Markers of adulthood—parents—getting married
SA Markers of adulthood—parents—having children
SA Markers of adulthood—parents—purchase home
SA Markers of adulthood—parents—trip/traveling
SA Markers of adulthood—parents—divorce
SA Markers of adulthood—parents—long term relationship (living with someone)
SA Markers of adulthood—parents—legal definitions/ chronological age
SA Markers of adulthood—parents—greater responsibility (except financial)
SA Markers of adulthood—parents—financial independence
SA Markers of adulthood—parents—self control
SA Markers of adulthood—parents—balance concerns for self with those for others
SA Markers of adulthood—parents—having others depend on you
SA Markers of adulthood—parents—opinion of others (except parents)
SA Markers of adulthood—parents—other

SA Not an adult—self—still in school
SA Not an adult—self—still at home
SA Not an adult—self—not employed
SA Not an adult—self—not married

SA Not an adult—self—no children
SA Not an adult—self—doesn't own home
SA Not an adult—self—not old enough/not legal age
SA Not an adult—self—no responsibility (except financial)
SA Not an adult—self—not financially independent
SA Not an adult—self—no dependents
SA Not an adult—self—insufficient self control
SA Not an adult—self—opinion of parents
SA Not an adult—self—opinion of others (except parents)
SA Not an adult—self—process not complete
SA Not an adult—self—other

SA Not an adult—parents—still in school
SA Not an adult—parents—still at home
SA Not an adult—parents—not employed
SA Not an adult—parents—not married
SA Not an adult—parents—no children
SA Not an adult—parents—doesn't own home
SA Not an adult—parents—not old enough/not legal age
SA Not an adult—parents—no responsibility (except financial)
SA Not an adult—parents—not financially independent
SA Not an adult—parents—no dependents
SA Not an adult—parents—insufficient self control
SA Not an adult—parents—opinion of others (except parents)
SA Not an adult—parents—process not complete
SA Not an adult—parents—other

SA Mother thinks adult
SA Father thinks adult
SA Father thought adult first
SA Mother thought adult first