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Abstract

This study explored the roles and psychological experiences identified as defining adult moments using mixed methods with a racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse sample of young adults both enrolled and not enrolled in college ($N = 726$; ages 18–35). First, we evaluated results from a single survey item that asked participants to rate how adult they feel. Consistent with previous research, the majority of participants (56.9%) reported feeling “somewhat like an adult,” and older participants had significantly higher subjective adulthood, controlling for other demographic variables. Next, we analyzed responses from an open-ended question asking participants to describe instances in which they felt like an adult. Responses covered both traditional roles (e.g., marriage, childbearing; 36.1%) and nontraditional social roles and experiences (e.g., moving out of parent’s home, cohabitation; 55.6%). Although we found no differences by age and college status in the likelihood of citing a traditional or nontraditional role, participants who had achieved more traditional roles were more likely to cite them in their

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responses. In addition, responses were coded for psychological experiences, including responsibility for self (19.0%), responsibility for others (15.3%), self-regulation (31.1%), and reflected appraisals (5.1%). Older participants were significantly more likely to include self-regulation and reflected appraisals, whereas younger participants were more likely to include responsibility for self. College students were more likely than noncollege students to include self-regulation and reflected appraisals. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Keywords

conceptions of adulthood, emerging adulthood, identity issues, self-image, college issue

Introduction

Traditional markers of adulthood, including marriage, parenthood, financial independence, and home ownership have become increasingly elusive to many young adults in the United States (Arnett, 1998; Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005). In the early 1970s, over 75% of women and 65% of men had met these traditional milestones, whereas fewer than half had done so in 2000 (Furstenberg, Kennedy, McLoyd, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2004). Arnett coined this new, protracted developmental stage “emerging adulthood,” a period of postponed markers and extended exploration (Arnett, 1998, 2000). According to Arnett (1998), emerging adulthood has resulted from sociocultural and economic factors that have made it possible and, in some cases, even desirable, to delay traditional adult roles.

In the current study, we explored self-perceptions of adulthood. Drawing on a large, diverse sample of young adults between the ages of 18 and 35 ($N = 726$), including both college students ($n = 517$) and young adults who were neither attending nor had graduated from college ($n = 209$), we first replicated findings that the majority feel “in-between” adolescence and adulthood. We then used an open-ended question to solicit incidences in which participants “really felt like an adult,” and coded for the traditional and non-traditional roles and experiences, as well as aspects of psychological development evident in their responses. Lastly, we investigated variation by age and college status for traditional and nontraditional roles and psychological experiences to explore how young adults’ subjective experiences of adulthood relate to developmental maturity and context.

Background

Subjective Adulthood

Although some individuals move seamlessly from feeling like an adolescent to incorporating an adult self-identity, much research in the last decade suggests an “in between,” or “not quite adult” status period for those aged 18 to 25 (Arnett, 2000). Indeed, it is not until the late 20s or even early 30s that many young people consider themselves to be full-fledged adults (Arnett, 2000; Fadjukoff, Kokko, & Pulkkinen, 2007). Furthermore, not all adults who have achieved traditional markers of adulthood necessarily feel like adults, and many who have not achieved these milestones do consider themselves to be adults (Arnett, 1997). As social definitions of adulthood become more fluid, it is increasingly difficult to define adulthood.

Defining Adulthood: Traditional Versus Nontraditional Markers

The most common way that young adults’ definitions of adulthood have been explored is through their endorsement of roles and experiences that they feel “must be achieved before a person can be considered an adult” (e.g., Arnett, 1998, p. 302; 2001, p. 135). Items on this scale have been organized into five subscales: individualism (e.g., “accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions”), family capacities (e.g., “capable of caring for children”), norm compliance (e.g., “avoid drunk driving”), legal/chronological transitions (e.g., “reached age 18”), and role transitions (e.g., “have at least one child”). Arnett consistently has found that young adults emphasize three criteria reflective of individualism: responsibility for one’s self, independent decision making, and financial independence. Moreover, individualistic criteria were most commonly endorsed across adolescents (13-19 years), emerging adults (20-29), and young-to-midlife adults (30-55 years; Arnett, 2001).

Subsequent research has provided insight into how a broader array of youth, both nationally and internationally, conceptualizes adulthood. In these studies, individualistic criteria have also been consistently ranked as the most important to achieving adulthood. For example, in his study of an ethnically and racially diverse sample of young adults in the United States, Arnett (2003) found that European Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos all endorsed items reflecting greater independence as the most important markers of adulthood. Other studies have yielded similar findings, with individualistic attributes emerging as the key criteria for adulthood

among young adults in Israel (Mayseless & Scharf, 2003), Argentina (Faccio & Miccoci, 2003), the Czech Republic (Macek, Bejcek, & Vanícková, 2007), China (Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004), India (Seiter & Nelson, 2010), and Romania (Nelson, 2009).

A closer look suggests these findings might be more nuanced than they appear. For example, although participants in India and China have endorsed individualistic criteria related to maturity, researchers have argued that their responses may be indicative of more collectivist values (Nelson et al., 2004; Seitler & Nelson, 2010). In addition, although participants endorsed individualistic criteria when listed alongside other transitions, roles, and experiences, it is not clear that they would have spontaneously described or reported these criteria. For instance, although some research suggests a diminishing importance of traditional roles as benchmarks of adult status, a qualitative study of Canadian 25- to 29-year-olds found that most participants still mentioned traditional adult roles in response to the interview question, "Do you have the impression of being an adult?" (Molga, 2007). This suggests that more open-ended interviews might yield a different breakdown of roles that youth associate with adulthood.

In contrast, Arnett (1998) supplemented his checklist approach with structured interviews in which participants described the ways in which they had, and had not, reached adulthood, and found that young adults emphasized the individualistic criteria of accepting responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, and financial independence in both. It is possible that the consistency in the results stemmed from the way the interview question was phrased. That is, in formulating their responses, young adults might have drawn upon their definitions of adulthood, rather than on experiences in which they felt a subjective sense of adulthood. In our study, we expanded upon Arnett's work by asking participants to describe a specific event in which they felt like an adult. By investigating the roles and responsibilities represented in these events, we provide a different lens into subjective experiences of adulthood.

In a similar vein, by analyzing participants' responses, we aimed to achieve greater insight into the psychological experience of becoming an adult. Scholars have noted psychological capacities that could facilitate adaptation in the transition to adulthood, including flexibility (Blatterer, 2007), agency (Côté & Bynner, 2008; Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005), and social competence (Chung, Little, & Steinberg, 2005). The *confluence model* of age identity (Johnson, Berg, & Sirotski, 2007), for example, suggests that role transitions coincide with the accumulation of psychological qualities. That is, the subtle, intangible aspects of psychological development occur as young

adults accumulate more concrete transitions and responsibilities. Psychological development, in turn, might also drive the achievement of traditional milestones. Yet research to date has not adequately explored young adults' accounts of psychological development and the ways in which psychological growth accompanies subjective adulthood.

Of course, these processes are likely to be shaped by individuals' age and life circumstances. Older participants have been consistently more likely to report feeling like adults (e.g., Arnett, 2001); however, their greater subjective adulthood could be due in part to their greater likelihood of having achieved traditional markers of adulthood (Cohen, Kasen, Chen, Hartmark, & Gordon, 2003). There are also documented age differences in definitions of adulthood. For example, Arnett (2001) found that 20- to 40-year-olds were more likely to cite norm compliance (e.g., avoiding use of illegal drugs), and less likely to cite biological transitions (e.g., being capable of bearing children), than teenagers. However, little is known about whether there is variation by age and psychological experiences in the markers and roles that contribute to youths' subjective adult identity.

Along similar lines, there might be variation in subjective experiences of adulthood among youth who attend 4-year colleges and those who do not. This body of research is limited, however, as few studies include noncollege youth, referred to as the "Forgotten Half" in the United States (William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family, & Citizenship, 1988) and as the "Missing Majority" in China (Nelson & Chen, 2007). Findings to date, however, suggest that non-college-enrolled young adults experience higher levels of subjective adulthood than their college student counterparts (Luyckz, Schwartz, Gossens, & Pollock, 2008; Reitzle, 2006), perhaps because they have taken on more traditional roles (Reitzle, 2006) and have greater responsibilities for themselves and others (e.g., Ahituv & Tienda, 2004; Reitzle, 2006). Others have argued that college can provide a psychosocial moratorium, affording unique opportunities for adult identity and psychological development (Schwartz, p. 205; Seiter & Nelson, 2010). It is thus important to compare and represent the perspectives of noncollege youth who might be experiencing less of an economic buffer and less scaffolding and direction historically provided by institutional educational contexts.

The Current Study

In this study, we used mixed-methods to explore a racially and ethnically diverse sample of college and noncollege young adults' feelings of subjective adulthood. In addition to completing a survey question, participants were

asked to describe an instance in which they “really felt like an adult.” This latter approach is a departure from previous list-based methods and interviews asking more broadly about criteria for adulthood and the ways in which participants have, and have not, achieved them. Our method was designed to elicit a range of specific, descriptive instances of feeling adult in order to capture the traditional and psychological markers associated with subjective adult experiences. Consistent with previous research, we expected that older and noncollege participants would be more likely to endorse feeling like an adult. Likewise, although all participants were expected to describe a range of psychological experiences associated with feelings of adulthood, older and noncollege participants’ experiences were expected to reflect more traditional roles.

Method

Procedures

This study drew on data from an ongoing, larger investigation of adaptive capacities thought fundamental to the transition to adulthood (Dillon, Lowe, McLoyd, & Rhodes, 2009). Participants were students at an urban university as well as noncollege young adults who were neither attending nor had graduated from a 4-year university. Students ($n = 625$) were recruited through introductory and advanced psychology classes during the fall 2007, spring 2008, and fall 2008 semesters, as well as through tables at a central location on campus. On completing the survey, student participants were compensated with either extra credit or US\$10. Noncollege young adults ($n = 265$) were recruited through the Craigslist web site for the same metropolitan area as the university. Participants responded to a survey advertisement, indicating their age (18- to 35-years-old) and college status (i.e., whether they were attending or had graduated from a 4-year university). Eligible participants were provided information on how to complete the study, and were sent US\$10 compensation upon completion of the survey. For participants’ convenience, the survey could be completed online or in paper form. Two versions of the survey were administered. The first, completed by 357 students and all of the noncollege young adults, assessed adaptive capacities, demographic characteristics, and relevant outcomes (e.g., mental health indices). The second, completed by 268 students, consisted of a trimmed-down set of adaptive capacity items, and the same demographic characteristics and outcome measures. In the current study, we drew on

measures included in both versions of the survey and participants from whom we have complete data ($N = 726$, 81.6%).

Measures

Subjective adult status. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they feel like an adult “most of the time.” The item was rated on a 3-point scale, with the response options (1) *not at all like an adult*, (2) *somewhat like an adult*, and (3) *entirely like an adult*. This item was selected from a larger measure of subjective adulthood in various contexts (e.g., with friends, at school) as a global assessment of adult status (Shanahan, Porfeli, & Mortimer, 2005).

Defining adult experience. In an open-ended question, participants were asked to describe an instance in which they “felt like an adult.” This item emerged from discussions among the MacArthur Network on the Transition to Adulthood and Public Policy on how to better understand subjective adult identity. After an initial review of participants’ responses, the two primary authors independently created lists of the traditional and nontraditional social roles represented. These lists were then combined, eliminating redundancies, and notes on the types of responses that should be included under each category were made. As the coding process progressed, the researchers communicated about additional nontraditional social roles that emerged and updated the coding list accordingly. A total of six traditional roles (e.g., marriage, employment) and 19 nontraditional social roles (e.g., moving out of parents’ home, cohabitation) were created (Table 2). Next, the researchers separately coded for whether each participants’ adult instance included each of the traditional and nontraditional social roles. Once the preliminary coding was complete, the researchers reached consensus on common differences and separately completed a second round of coding. A third rater resolved the remaining discrepancies (an average of 3.0 cases per category, range: 0 to 10; average $\kappa = .96$, range: 0.86 to 1.0).

The researchers also created codes for psychological experiences evident in the data. Again, independent lists were created and consolidated into a total of 12 categories. Coding proceeded as above, with a third coder resolving discrepancies (an average of 7.8 discrepancies per category, range: 3 to 12; average $\kappa = .86$, range: .76 to .96). The 12 psychological experience categories were condensed into four overarching categories based on theoretical relationships (Table 2). The overarching code, *Self-Regulation*, was made up on the following individual codes: *Perspective*, *Perceived Competence*,

Adaptability, Decision Making, Self-Control, Assertiveness, Personal Strength, and Future Orientation. These codes were combined based on their utility in setting and working toward long-term goals. Likewise, two individual codes, *Others' Perspectives* and *Receiving Respect*, were combined into the overarching code *Reflected Appraisals* because both involved deriving a sense of adulthood through relationships with others.

Participants

Demographic characteristics for the full sample and college and noncollege young adult subsamples are listed in Table 1. The majority of participants (73.2%) were female and there was considerable racial and ethnic diversity in the sample: 60.5% identified as White, 12.4% as Black or African American, 13.9% as Asian or Pacific Islander, 6.5% as "Other" race, and 6.7% as multiracial; 11.6% identified as being of Hispanic ethnicity. Nearly 20% (19.6%) reported being first generation immigrants to the United States, 24.6% second generation (one or both parents born outside of the United States), and 55.7% third generation immigrants or later (both parents born in the United States). The mean age of participants was 22.9 years ($SD = 4.4$, range: 18-35). In terms of traditional adult roles attained, 12.8% were married, 21.6% were parents, 12.7% worked full-time, and 37.1% owned a home.

We tested for differences between the 726 participants included in the study and the 164 who were dropped, using a Bonferroni correction for multiple tests. Those included were significantly younger, $t(176.34) = 9.08, p < .001$ (equal variances not assumed), and were also less likely to have completed three of the four traditional markers of adulthood: they were less likely to be married ($\chi^2 = 11.08, p < .05$), to be parents ($\chi^2 = 23.30, p < .001$), and to own a home ($\chi^2 = 9.21, p < .05$). Also of note are differences between the college student and noncollege samples (Table 1).

Results

Subjective Adult Status

For the full sample, 37.9% reported feeling "entirely like an adult," 56.9% "somewhat like an adult," and 4.3% not at all like an adult in their everyday lives. These rates varied for the college and noncollege subsamples. For the college subsample ($n = 517$), 32.2% reported feeling "entirely like an adult," 62.7% "somewhat like an adult," and 4.5% "not at all like an adult." In contrast, for the noncollege sample ($n = 209$), 52.7% reported feeling "entirely

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Full, College, and Noncollege Samples

	Full sample (N = 726)	College sample (n = 517)	Noncollege sample (n = 209)	χ^2
Age	M = 22.9 (SD = 4.4)	M = 21.7 (SD = 3.5)	M = 26.1 (SD = 4.7)	12.26*
Gender				7.71
Male	26.8%	23.9%	34.0%	
Female	73.2%	76.1%	66.0%	
Race				15.43
White	60.5%	56.8%	69.6%	
Black or African American	12.4%	13.9%	8.7%	
Asian or Pacific Islander	13.9%	16.2%	8.2%	
Other	6.5%	6.9%	5.3%	
Multiracial	6.7%	6.1%	8.2%	
Ethnicity				.06
Hispanic	11.6%	11.5%	12.1%	
Non-Hispanic	88.4%	88.5%	87.9%	
Immigrant status				76.49***
1st generation	19.6%	24.2%	8.3%	37.34***
2nd generation	24.6%	28.1%	16.1%	18.32***
3rd generation or later	55.7%	47.7%	75.6%	71.88***
Mother's highest level of education				18.82
Not a high school graduate	12.9%	12.2%	14.8%	
High school diploma or GED	30.6%	27.9%	37.3%	
Some college	15.0%	14.3%	16.7%	
Associate's degree	11.7%	12.2%	10.5%	
Bachelor's degree	16.3%	18.0%	12.0%	
Master's degree	9.9%	12.2%	4.3%	
Doctoral degree	1.4%	1.4%	1.4%	
Adult roles attained	M = 0.8 (SD = 1.0)	M = 0.5 (SD = 0.7)	M = 1.7 (SD = 1.3)	71.88*** ^a
Marriage	12.8%	4.4%	33.5%	112.41***
Parenthood	21.6%	12.2%	45.0%	94.29***
Full-time employment	12.7%	6.4%	28.2%	64.19***
Home ownership	37.1%	25.0%	67.0%	112.75***

Note: For variables with more than one category (i.e., race, immigrant status, mothers' highest level of education, adult roles attained), post hoc tests using contrast coding were computed following a significant omnibus test. All significance values were Bonferroni-corrected for multiple tests.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

like an adult,” 43.5% “somewhat like an adult,” and 3.8% “not at all like an adult.” Noncollege students had greater subjective adulthood than college students, $t(361.56) = 4.49, p < .001$, equal variances not assumed, and older participants had significantly greater subjective adulthood than younger participants ($r = .27, p < .001$). However, in a linear regression with age and college status, as well as additional demographic variables (sex, race, ethnicity, immigrant status, maternal education, and total traditional adult roles fulfilled) included, age was significant ($\beta = .16, p < .001$), whereas college status was not. In addition, participants who fulfilled more traditional adult roles had significantly higher subjective adulthood ($\beta = .16, p < .001$), and Asian participants had significantly lower subjective adulthood than non-Asian participants ($\beta = -.19, p < .05$).

Defining Adult Experiences

Although there was variation in subjective adulthood among the participants, all were able to describe an instance in which they “really felt like an adult.” We coded these instances for whether they included traditional or nontraditional roles as well as whether they evidenced various aspects of psychological development. In supplementary analyses (not shown), we found that participants with a higher subjective adulthood were significantly more likely to have described instances including a traditional adult role, whereas there were no differences by subjective adulthood in nontraditional roles and psychological experiences. Descriptions of each traditional role, nontraditional social role, and psychological experience are listed in Table 2, along with an exemplary defining adult experience, the frequency in the full sample, and the kappa statistic of interrater reliability for each category. We note here that total percentages exceed one hundred because multiple codes were applied to most instances ($M = 1.89, SD = 1.28$, range: 0-8).

Traditional and nontraditional social roles. As shown in Table 2, 36.1% of participants listed a traditional role and, of the traditional roles, employment experiences were the most commonly cited (22.0% of all adult instances). More than half (55.6%) of participants listed a social experience not representative of the traditional markers of adulthood. Of the nontraditional social roles, financial responsibilities for self (20.8%), moving out or living with friends (12.9%), school experiences (12.1%), and taking care of younger people (11.4%) were the most commonly cited.

Regression analyses were conducted to determine whether there were differences in the frequency of traditional and nontraditional roles in participants’ responses by the two key demographic characteristics of interest, age

Table 2. Descriptions, Exemplary Quotes and Frequencies for Traditional Roles, Nontraditional Social Roles, and Psychological Experiences

	Description	Example	κ	Frequency
Traditional roles				36.1%
Marriage/proposal	Getting engaged or married, or being engaged or married central to the response. Mere mention of fiancé, spouse, or partner not sufficient.	I really felt like an adult when I got married this past summer. It was the first thing that I did that is considered adult-like.	.92	2.5%
Pregnancy/child rearing	Becoming pregnant, giving birth, or taking care of biological or adopted children.	I was 16 when i had my daughter. I think the true sense of responsibility and life's purpose came through to me then, holding her at the hospital.	.94	9.2%
Employment	Going on a job interview, getting a job, taking part in work-related interactions; performing daily work responsibilities; getting promoted or recognized at work.	My job as an EMT allows me to feel more like an adult than the average person my age because I am responsible for people's lives everyday. Dealing with people who are older than you who are sick or hurt makes you feel like the more grown up and responsible.	.99	22.2%
Educational degree	Obtaining one's highest level of education.	I got pregnant at 17 and still stayed in high school. It was difficult, I worked full time and went	.94	1.1%

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

	Description	Example	κ	Frequency
Homeownership	Purchasing or owning a home.	<p>to school full time. I took one semester off and had to go an extra year but I got my hard earned diploma while working full time, and taking care of a newborn baby.</p> <p>During the purchase process of our first single family home. There is so much more thought and decision to the entire process than what you realize. I had to consider schools for my child and future children, location to shopping, highways, trains, airports, friends, family, etc. It was a really long, well-thought out process, and it definitely wasn't a decision that was made instantly (unlike when we first got married and bought our condo, we were really young and only really cared about how far it was from our jobs).</p>	1.00	1.7%

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

	Description	Example	κ	Frequency
Chronological age	Reference to a particular age or birthday as a marker of adulthood.	On my eighteenth birthday I felt like I was really old. Everyone kept telling me I'm an adult now. I couldn't believe I was eighteen because it seems so much older than how I feel. But i felt like an adult because I realized I was one and all of the things I could do like voting and buying cigarettes.	.97	1.9%
Other social experiences				55.6%
Moving out, living with friends	Leaving parents' house, moving in with friends, or living independently. Not living with a significant other or spouse.	Now that I am living in my own apartment I feel more like an adult. I have to do my own grocery shopping, cooking and cleaning. These were all of the things that my mother did for me at home, so it has been a big transition for me.	.97	12.9%
Cohabiting	Moving in or living with a significant other, but not being married.	I have felt like an adult ever since moving into my own apartment with my boyfriend. There are so many responsibilities you have to be conscious of, and it takes so much maturity!	1.00	1.1%

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

	Description	Example	κ	Frequency
Financial responsibilities for self	Paying bills, managing one's bank account, not having to rely on parents or others for money.	Having to pay my own bills that are under my name makes me feel like an adult. One instance in particular was getting a credit card and then using it to get my own cell phone plan.	.98	20.8%
Household management	Doing chores, buying groceries, taking care of a pet, etc.	I got an apartment for the first time last year and really felt as if I were growing up. I had more responsibilities to take care of, housework, paying bills, cooking, etc. and it really made me realize that growing up is not always going to be easy.	.86	4.8%
Major purchase	Buying something deemed expensive or important, such as a car, college tuition, or furniture.	I felt like an adult when I bought a new bed. It was expensive and I didn't have to ask anyone else's opinion or permission to purchase it.	.92	3.3%
Traveling	Going on a personal or work-related trip by oneself or with peers (friends, significant other).	I feel like an adult when I went away on vacation, with just my boyfriend. I did most of the shopping and cooking. This situation made me	.95	2.5%

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

	Description	Example	κ	Frequency
School experiences	Enrolling in higher education, going to school on a daily basis, being in class, completing homework assignments, doing well in school.	feel very adult like, and dependent on my partner and myself. I felt like an adult when I signed [up] for school to better myself.	.96	12.1%
Financial responsibilities for others	Helping parents, relatives, or friends financially, for example, paying for bills, helping manage finances, or lending significant amounts of money.	When I have to help my parents pay for their utility bills and mortgage.	.92	2.5%
Growing up fast	Having a precocious transition, for example, taking on adult responsibilities at a young age; must specifically describe it as such.	I felt like an adult when I was young. I grew up fast. When my mother got sick I worked 2 jobs to take care of myself, sister, and my mother. I felt like I was a mother. Being a mother makes you an adult. I was treated like a grown woman and I acted like one as well. Being young and trying to take care of a family is not that easy.	.91	2.1%

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

	Description	Example	κ	Frequency
Stressful life events	Having a stressful experience, such as a death or illness of a family member or friend, an accident, or victimization.	When my grandmother died in my arms and I had to be brave and tell her it was okay to go.	.96	8.0%
Drinking/drug use	Going to a bar, drinking alcohol, or using cigarettes or illicit drugs.	When I'm out with friends and I can drink and smoke without consequences.	.95	1.2%
Giving up drinking/drugs	Making the decision to abstain from alcohol, cigarette and drug use; refusing others' offers or resisting pressures to use substances.	When I was having problems with drugs, I went to my family and friends for help and cleaned up my act.	1.00	0.4%
Taking care of young people	Attending to the needs of young people, whether younger relatives, peers or strangers. Could be part of an employment experience, for example babysitting or being a camp counselor.	I work at a day care and most of the time, I feel like I am an adult because I'm always responsible for 20 kids. If anything at all happens to one of them, I will be responsible for their health/life.	.95	11.4%
Helping older people	Taking care of older people, for example giving advice	I feel like an adult when my mother consults me for advice regarding	.87	5.5%

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

	Description	Example	κ	Frequency
	or taking care of medical or personal needs. Not financial assistance.	her daily activities, including finances and relationships.		
Socializing with other adults	Being in a social setting, such as at dinner or parties, with other perceived adults; hosting a social gathering.	When I hang out with my friends, I feel like an adult because they are getting married and having babies (even if I'm not). It makes me feel old or adult-like.	.95	1.2%
Adult clothing	Wearing clothes deemed "adult" or "old," such as work or formal attire.	When I have to go to charity events where you have to dress up.	1.00	0.7%
Driving-related milestone	Getting one's license, driving either alone or with other people in the car.	When I am driving, because I have control over myself and everyone in the car.	1.00	1.5%
Politics/civic engagement	Voting, participating in rallies, discussing politics with friends, volunteering.	I really felt like an adult when I went to vote for the first time.	1.00	2.2%
Immigration	Immigrating to the United States, either alone or with family.	When I moved to the USA, and I left my parents' house. My parents are living in another country. Since then, I [have felt] like an adult.	1.00	1.0%

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

	Description	Example	κ	Frequency
Psychological experiences				54.0%
Responsibility for self	Feeling autonomous, independent, or separate from one's parents; feeling responsible for oneself; refusing help from others, or taking responsibility for self by asking for help; admitting guilt; making decisions independently.	I felt most adult when I decided to get a job. I often relied on my parents for material and financial things. Yet, getting a job meant taking more responsibility for my needs and interests.	.96	15.3%
Responsibility for others	Taking care of other people, including financial responsibility; giving advice to others; being a role model to others; being reliable for others; being less selfish and more giving.	When I am taking care of my niece I feel like an adult. Although I am silly with her and joke around I always feel I know the responsibility I have when she's in my care.	.95	19.0%
Self-regulation				31.1%
(a) Perspective	Being able to focus on the "big picture" or something larger than oneself; having insight or awareness of	When I'm in class with people younger than me and we talk about society. I feel like our viewpoints are sometimes worlds apart, and that my maturity	.89	3.0%

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

	Description	Example	κ	Frequency
	one's values; accepting the negative aspects of life.	shines through a lot because of my perspective on the things that are important in life.		
(b) Perceived competence	Feeling competent, confident, knowledgeable or experienced; being a leader; passing on concrete knowledge to others.	When others look to me for learning how to do something. If I'm the knowledgeable one and others need to rely on me, then I feel like an adult.	.89	5.8%
(c) Adaptability	Balancing different roles and responsibilities.	I'm not sure about one instance, but carrying 3 jobs, tutoring, 5 courses, homework, relationships and family life make me feel a lot more mature than others my age. It's hard not to feel like an adult when learning to balance these things with my finances and other obligations.	.96	7.0%
(d) Decision making	Feeling reasonable or rational; making major decisions and being thoughtful about them; planning and problem solving.	I feel like an adult the most when making choices about my future and my goals in life because those are the ones I'll have to live with as an adult so thinking like a child wouldn't help at all.	.94	11.6%

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

	Description	Example	κ	Frequency
(e) Assertiveness	Defending oneself; setting limits on others; going against parents' wishes; taking charge in a relationship or situation; feeling self-reliant.	I was seeing a psychologist for a while, but I always thought she wasn't a good fit for me. One day she said some really mean completely unprofessional things to me so I told her I wasn't going to go back to her again. This was a huge accomplishment for me because I have a fear of authority figures and I perceived her as an authority figure, so i felt very adult-like that day.	.76	3.2%
(f) Self-control	Feeling in control; being able to stay calm or take control in stressful circumstances; being able to remain impartial and resolve conflicts; refraining from arguing with others or expressing one's anger or annoyance; completing necessary tasks when unmotivated; sacrificing or prioritizing.	Professionally handling angry customers without expressing any anger. Whenever I work, there are many angry customers who don't receive there medications when I work. They get angry towards me believing it is my fault. I don't cuss back or talk back negatively; I just say I am sorry and explain the reasons why they were not able to receive their medications despite the fact that they are still angry in the end.	.79	4.3%

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

	Description	Example	κ	Frequency
(g) Personal strength	Feeling strong, brave or courageous; feeling like one can rise above or persevere in the face of adversity.	One instance when I really felt like an adult was when I ran away from home and decided to come back and face my troubles, rather than running away from them.	.83	1.5%
(h) Goal/future orientation	Thinking about how current behaviors and decisions relate to long-term outcomes or goals.	I felt like an adult when I made the decision to change my life around and take school more seriously. I decided to take college more seriously than high school, and to take better care of my overall health. I felt like I needed to be a better role model for my nieces and nephews, and make myself, God, my mother, and my family proud despite of all the things that I experienced as a child. I made the decision to change my life for the best!	.76	3.9%
Reflected appraisals				5.2%
(a) Others' perceptions	Being treated like an adult (e.g., being called "sir" or "ma'am," not being carded).	I felt like an adult the first time someone asked me for directions.	.79	3.0%

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

	Description	Example	κ	Frequency
(b) Receiving respect	Being treated with respect; being given responsibilities; being trusted by others; not being "treated like a child;" being "treated like an adult."	I have many responsibilities at work. My boss doesn't treat me like a child and lets me make my own decisions, even when they affect her company.	.83	2.9%

and college status. Covariates for other demographic variables (sex, race, ethnicity, immigrant status, maternal level of education, and total number of adult roles completed) were also included. A Bonferroni correction for the number of regression analyses was applied to reduce the risk of Type I error. As shown in Table 3, neither age nor college status was a significant predictor of whether participants endorsed either traditional or nontraditional social roles. Of the other demographic variables included, there was only one significant finding: participants who had fulfilled more traditional adult roles were more likely to have included them in their responses ($p < .01$).

Qualitative findings. A noteworthy phenomenon in our qualitative coding was the emergence of nontraditional roles that were not on our original list. These represented social experiences not apparent in the existing literature but that participants nonetheless cited as salient markers of adulthood. First, we added a code for driving-related experiences, such as getting one's license or driving with other people in the car. Some participants (1.5%, $n = 11$) referred to these experiences not only as markers of personal accomplishment and responsibility for others but also as a concrete milestone dividing their child and adult selves. Second, we added a code for immigration experiences (1.0%, $n = 7$). All participants citing immigration experiences were, not surprisingly, first generation immigrants and 4.7% of first generation immigrants cited such experiences. Immigration experiences tended to represent either independence from one's family, increased responsibility within the family, or a stressful adjustment to a new cultural context.

Similarly, 8.0% ($n = 58$) of participants cited stressful life events in their adult instances. These experiences, which included bereavement, accidents, victimization, and war experiences, propelled participants into fulfilling adult roles or coping with intensely negative emotions. Some of these instances

Table 3. Results of Logistic Regression Analyses Predicting Traditional Roles, Other Social Role Experiences, and Psychological Experience Themes

	$\chi^2(13)$	Age		College status			
		B (SE)	Wald	Exp(B)	B (SE)	Wald	Exp(B)
Traditional roles	56.97***	.02 (.02)	1.09	1.02	-.22 (.21)	0.97	0.80
Other social experiences	20.47	-.03 (.02)	1.40	0.97	.15 (.22)	0.47	1.16
Responsibility for self	32.81*	-.15 (.04)**	13.70	0.87	.01 (.33)	< 0.01	1.01
Responsibility for others	42.50***	-.01 (.03)	0.15	0.99	-.34 (.28)	1.49	0.71
Self-regulation	128.12***	.16 (.02)***	75.08	1.17	.88 (.26)**	11.47	2.41
Reflected appraisals	128.43***	.16 (.02)***	75.98	1.17	.71 (.26)*	7.37	2.03

Note: Analyses included controls for other demographic variables (dummy codes for female sex, race, and ethnic groups, and immigration status; mothers' highest level of education and traditional roles achieved were included as continuous variables). Significance values were Bonferroni-corrected for multiple tests.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

were quite poignant. For example, a 19-year-old White female college student wrote, “When my grandmother died in my arms and I had to be brave and tell her it was okay to go.” Two participants wrote about the death of their pets, which we had not expected and yet that previous research has indicated as a highly stressful event (e.g., Gosse & Barnes, 1994).

Psychological experiences. Also in Table 2 are lists of the psychological experience codes, the percentage of participants whose defining adult experience was coded with each, exemplary quotes, and kappa statistics of interrater reliability. Over half of the adult instances (54.0%) were coded as representing some type of psychological experience. Psychological experiences often fell into four thematic categories: *Responsibility for Self* (19.0%), *Responsibility for Others* (15.3%), *Self-Regulation* (31.1%), and *Reflected Appraisals* (5.1%). Table 3 shows the results of regression analyses looking at differences in the frequency of the psychological themes by age and college status, controlling for other demographic variables and including Bonferroni corrections for multiple tests. We found that the responses of younger participants were more likely to be coded as indicating *Responsibility for Self*, whereas older participants' responses were more likely to be coded as indicating *Self-Regulation* and *Reflected Appraisals*, controlling for college status

and other demographic variables. The responses of college students were more likely than those of noncollege students to be coded as indicating *Self-Regulation* and *Reflected Appraisals*, controlling for age and other demographic variables. Of the other demographic characteristics included in the analysis (not shown in Table 3), there was only one significant difference: the responses of female participants were more likely than those of male participants to be coded as indicating *Responsibility for Others* ($p < .05$). In the qualitative analysis below, we include quotations that represent the range of responses within each psychological code, and reflect upon statistically significant differences by age and college status.

Responsibility for self. Taking greater responsibility for oneself was often evident in participants' responses, with some participants reporting feeling like autonomous, independent decision makers, some admitting guilt when they made mistakes, and others recognizing that part of taking responsibility for oneself is asking for help when necessary.

Common among responses coded as representing *Responsibility for Self* were participants feeling "in charge" or "in control" of oneself. Consistent with the finding that younger participants were more likely to have instances indicative of *Responsibility for Self*, this feeling was achieved through taking on new responsibilities or entering into novel traditional or nontraditional roles. One of the college students, an 18-year-old White female, described moments of increased personal responsibility during the previous summer:

The day I bought my first car. I did it all by myself. That same summer I applied to college and worked everything out about my plans: my job and school, all by myself, without my parents. It made me feel grown up, in charge.

In other instances, this sense was derived from having to take action in stressful or uncontrollable situations. A 26-year-old, Black female college student described how she achieved a sense of control after being able to make her own medical decisions:

The one instance when I felt like an adult was when I was hit by car while crossing the street. When I got to the hospital, after they checked the results, I was told to stay overnight and the decision was up to me whether I wanted to leave or not. At that moment I felt like I had control over my life.

Other participants felt a sense of responsibility as they began to balance multiple roles independently, without the urging or instruction of others. For

example, a 24-year-old Asian female college student described taking responsibility for herself in her daily life:

Well, I live on my own, so everything is my responsibility—to pay the bills, to cook, clean, etc. So I have to be responsible and learn to take care of myself, [and] can't depend on others. To go to school or work, it's all on me. I don't have anyone to motivate me or anything. Sometimes, even though it's difficult, I still have to push myself to do certain things because of course anyone would just want to relax at home but in best interest for my future there are certain tasks you just cannot ignore or avoid.

In this example, the participant achieved a sense of responsibility for herself, while also exercising the self-regulatory capacities described further below.

Responsibility for others. Participants' defining adult instances also included evidence of taking responsibility for others in their lives. Opportunities to derive this sense came from a variety of contexts at different times throughout emerging adulthood, consistent with the lack of statistically significant differences in age or college status.

First, not surprisingly, the *Responsibility for Others* code was applied frequently to child-rearing experiences. An 18-year-old Latino male noncollege student, for example, described feeling like an adult when with his son:

[I feel like an adult] every time that I am around my son because, although I am still very young, I must watch him and take care of him and protect him from all dangers. Then that's when I realize what my parents were trying to do to me all along.

Parenthood required this participant to take on more adult qualities and gave him greater perspective about his own parents. Similarly, other participants cited instances in which they were able to connect with their parents on a more adult level, even taking care of them or advising them. One participant, a 25-year-old White female college student, put this quite succinctly: "Being able to help my parents, emotionally and physically, instead of them having to help me."

Responsibility for others therefore was not exclusive to instances of parenthood, and participants also described taking responsibility when helping peers. One of the college students, a 28-year-old White male, wrote,

I made sure that my friend's bills were paid on time when she was fired from her job. It made me realize that I was responsible and mature

enough to handle that for her because she is a good friend. It made me proud to be a man and accept responsibility.

Other participants reported feeling a sense of responsibility for others through their jobs. A 25-year-old White male noncollege student described this sense toward his supervisees and the company for which he works:

I recently took over as Director of Recruiting at my company. I am now responsible for seven people below me. I have to lead them in the right direction and can't take a moment off. I am responsible now for the growth and success of this company.

As illustrated above, participants' sense of responsibility to others was often not exclusive to a particular individual. Some participants reported feeling a greater responsibility to other people in general, their community, or even the country.

Other young adults described instances in which they were temporarily in the role of a parent, such as babysitting, teaching, or mentoring. Such experiences combined caring for a child and realizing the tremendous responsibility of being a parent. A 24-year-old Black female college student reflected on an experience in which she stepped in as the guardian for her nephew:

When I had to take my nephew to school, then had to attend a meeting with his teachers. At the meeting they gave me a brief description of how his grades are, how he behaved in class and his interactions with the other students. Then I had to sign some forms as his guardian/parent. After I had to make sure he had all he was supposed to have, I held his hand took him home like my own child.

Clearly, responsibility for others as a defining feature of adulthood goes way beyond taking care of one's own children. Young adults in our sample were able to derive this sense in a variety of contexts and relationships.

Self-regulatory capacities. Also common in participants' instances were evidence of the different aspects of self-regulation. Together, such instances represented participants' ability to be agentic—to set and work toward personal goals, persist in the face of obstacles, and maintain a positive outlook for the future. The empirical literature on self-regulation suggests that these capacities increase over emerging adulthood (e.g., Vukman, 2006), and likewise, in our sample older participants were significantly more likely to cite these capacities than their younger counterparts. In our analysis of the qualitative data, we noted participants' growing awareness of these capacities as well as their reflections on how they had changed over time.

One example of self-regulation came from a 34-year-old White female noncollege student, who described how she and her husband had become homeowners:

[I felt like an adult] during the purchase process of our first single family home. There is so much more thought and decision to the entire process than what you realize. I had to consider schools for my child and future children, location to shopping, highways, trains, airports, friends, family, etc. It was a really long, well-thought-out process, and it definitely wasn't a decision that was made instantly (unlike when we first got married and bought our condo, we were really young and only really cared about how far it was from our jobs).

Notable here is how the participant contrasted this experience to others she had made previously, including her marriage, and related them to her "young" age, thereby implying that her decision-making abilities had evolved over time. Another participant, an 18-year-old Asian female college student, similarly reflected on her recent decision to buy a new car, and how her actions would have been different in the past:

I think I felt [most like an adult] when I was about [to] get a new car, but my mom told me that the insurance is too expensive, so I decided to just wait until later. I was able to put myself in my mom's shoes and understood what was she trying to convey. If that happened before, I would only have thought about what I want and not others' feelings. I think this was one of the situations I felt like I grew up a lot.

In this example, the participant's greater perspective-taking abilities were evident. She was able to reflect on what her mother was thinking and use that information to inform her decision.

As with age, college status was a significant predictor of instances indicative of self-regulation. One possible explanation for this finding is that college participants drew upon these capacities in balancing their coursework with other responsibilities and stressors. For example, an 18-year-old White female college student described her efforts to regulate her negative emotions to fulfill her school responsibilities after a major stressor, the death of her father:

In August, my father passed away. I had previously made the decision to attend [the university] and had already signed the lease to my apartment. It was the hardest thing to have to leave my grieving family

behind. I felt like an adult because I had a tough skin and knew that my father would still want me to pursue a college education. I didn't just give up and take a semester off like I feel some people would have done in a similar situation. I focused my negative energy into my schoolwork. I had to cope with the loss of my father while still taking on the responsibilities of a full-time worker and college student. This helped me see how responsible and strong I can be in even such a tough situation.

Evident in the quote above was that, despite the stressful circumstances, the participant realized she had strengths that would serve her well in achieving future goals.

However, the contexts in which self-regulation was evident spanned beyond university settings. Participants described a growing sense of competence as they worked toward not only educational goals but also professional goals, which helped them maintain a positive future outlook. For example, one of the noncollege students, a 24-year-old White male, detailed an employment experience that made him feel optimistic and proud:

During a training session at work, we completed the seminar by having a challenge, where we would have to demonstrate our skills and be rated by points. Out of every individual in our entire organization, my partner and I scored the highest ever. I felt more assured of my position at work and my understanding of my job by knowing that I had done better than those who were 1, 2, or even 3 years older than [I am]. Things like this, professional advancement, make me feel the most like an adult.

Others reported that making plans for their future, and sacrificing short-term desires for the sake of long-term goals, made them feel like an adult. A 24-year-old Asian female noncollege student put it simply: "Working full time, saving every penny that I earn, and being in control of my finances. Planning and setting goals for my future."

A sense of increasing future orientation was also apparent in other situations. For example, although some participants reported feeling most like adults when abusing alcohol or substances, others reported that giving up substance abuse for the sake of their future came with a greater sense of maturity. For illustration, a 20-year-old, White male college student wrote, "When I made the decision to enter a drug rehab program in the wilderness. I voluntarily chose to go because it was in the best interest for my future to quit drinking, and I needed help to do so."

Overall, by exercising self-regulation, participants gained a sense of control over their future that increased their positive outlook and sense of mastery.

Reflected appraisals. The young adults in our sample also derived a sense of adulthood through the perspectives of others. As noted above, the responses of older participants were significantly more likely to include *Reflected appraisals* in their responses. It could be that older participants have faced more opportunities to see themselves through the eyes of others, have developed greater perspective-taking abilities, or simply appear older to those around them and are treated as such.

The other people in the instances coded for *Reflected Appraisals* covered a wide range, from strangers to family members. Often these examples represented relatively mundane events that took on a greater meaning to participants because they made them cognizant of their adult status. A 31-year-old White male from the noncollege sample recounted not being asked for identification at a bar and being addressed as an adult: "I walked up to the bar at an airport and was instantly served. He said phrases that contained 'sir' and I was offered a free cigarette." Similarly, subtle comments from others carried messages that the participant was perceived as an adult. A 34-year-old White female noncollege student described realizing her adult status through a conversation with a younger acquaintance: "When a 22-year-old referred to me as being 'old' in conversation. It was a normal comment with no joke intended. I thought, 'Wow, she's just a kid and I am all grown up.'" Not only did this participant see herself as adult through the eyes of someone else, she also gained this sense through comparing herself to someone younger.

Other participants noted that, despite their young age, they perceived others as seeing them as adults because they were given respect. Employment was a common context for these types of responses. For example, in the non-college sample, a 21-year-old White male described his interactions at his job:

I feel like an adult every day at work. I help manage one of the largest hotel properties in this part of the country. Guests always treat me with respect, although I am young, and my employer is always willing to let me progress.

Evident above is that, in letting their young adult employees advance, employers send the message that youth are capable of adult responsibilities.

A sense of adulthood through receiving respect from others also involved interactions with parents in which participants were treated differently than in the past, for example the first time they were left unsupervised or the first

time they were allowed to take out the family car. A 22-year-old White female college student reported, "When my parents went on vacation and asked me to watch the house alone for the first time. I felt like an adult because they finally showed that they trusted me completely." Other participants reported a sense of adulthood when their parents consulted them for guidance or advice. Participants gained a sense of pride in taking steps toward a more egalitarian relationship. An 18-year-old White male college student described this scenario:

My dad called me the other day to ask my opinion on a judgment call. I always go to my father for advice because I think he is a smart person and I was pleased that he wanted my advice on something in his life.

Notably, although college status was a significant predictor of instances including *Reflected Appraisals*, none of the above examples took place in a college context. Although this finding is worthy of further investigation, it is possible that perspective taking and personal reflection were developed through college coursework, or that young adults who enjoy exercising these skills are more likely to attend college.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to provide an additional perspective on how young adults reach subjective adulthood. To date, the majority of studies on subjective adulthood (e.g., Arnett, 1994, 1998, 2001, 2003) have had participants select from a checklist of options what roles, markers, and experiences are necessary for a person to be considered an adult. In addition, interview approaches have asked about the ways in which respondents have, and have not, reached adulthood (Arnett, 1998). Both approaches have found that adulthood is most often defined by individualistic criteria. To further this body of research, we used a qualitative approach wherein participants described an *instance* in which they "really felt like an adult," and coded their responses for traditional markers of adulthood (i.e., marriage, parenthood, educational attainment, home ownership, and employment) and non-traditional social roles (e.g., moving out of the parental home, financial responsibility, experiences at school) as well as experiences of psychological growth. The qualitative approach allowed for a more spontaneous generation of roles and experiences associated with subjective adulthood, access to a potentially broader range of criteria, and new insights into the complex ways in which youth come to see themselves as adults. Furthermore, in asking

participants to describe specific experiences, rather than the ways in which they had reached adulthood more broadly, we aimed to provide a new perspective on the roles, responsibilities, and psychological qualities youth associate with adulthood.

The study also benefited from a large socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically diverse sample of young adults. Participants were ethnically and racially diverse college students from an urban university as well as a comparison sample of young adults from the same metropolitan area who were neither current students nor graduates of 4-year colleges. This is in contrast to the majority of the extant research on young adults, which has included predominantly college students (Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005).

As in other studies of subjective adulthood, we first asked participants to indicate the extent to which they feel like adults in their everyday lives. For the full sample, concurrent with much of the research, the majority of participants indicated that they felt “somewhat like an adult.” However, there was some variation within the larger sample, with noncollege students and older participants more likely to consider themselves “entirely like an adult.” When we entered both variables, along with other demographic characteristics and the number of traditional adult roles achieved, age and traditional roles were significant predictors of subjective adulthood, whereas college status was not. Differences in subjective adulthood between the college and noncollege samples appears related to the latter group’s age and greater attainment of traditional markers of adulthood.

To shed light on the ways in which individuals come to see themselves as adults, we then conducted qualitative analysis of participants’ descriptions of instances in which they felt like an adult. Notably, all participants in the study were able to provide an adult instance, including those who reported feeling “not at all like an adult” in their everyday lives. Although approximately a third of participants listed traditional adult roles in their responses, more than half included nontraditional social roles. Moreover, in our regression analysis, we found no differences in the likelihood of including either traditional or nontraditional roles by age, college status, or any other demographic characteristic. These results provide further support for the notion that many individuals have moved beyond traditional roles alone in defining themselves as adults.

We did, however, find that young adults who had achieved more traditional markers of adulthood were more likely to include them in their responses, controlling for demographic characteristics. In this sense, our findings diverge from those of previous studies (e.g., Arnett, 2001), and suggest that traditional roles continue to be salient markers of adulthood for

those who have achieved them. This divergence could reflect differences in methodology; that is, young adults might draw on different criteria for adulthood spontaneously, versus when given a list of options. Furthermore, the lists might not reflect all of the roles and experiences that actually provide a subjective sense of adulthood. Of course, participants were only asked to describe one instance and therefore we cannot discern all of the contexts in which they felt more or less like adults. Likewise, just because particular roles and experiences were not expressed, does not necessarily mean that they did not provide a sense of adulthood. Yet our methodology may have permitted an exploration of the roles and responsibilities that were most easily accessible and perhaps closest to their subjective experience.

In coding the data, we also noted subtle differences in the language young adults used when describing traditional versus nontraditional roles: whereas traditional roles were often cited as clear-cut markers of adulthood, nontraditional social roles were often cited with hesitation or qualifications, suggesting that their use may carry different meanings.

Our findings also broaden the range of less traditional social roles and experiences that carry a greater sense of adulthood. Previous researchers (e.g., Arnett, 2001; Nelson & Barry, 2005) have included many of the social roles cited by our participants, including moving out of the parents' home and gradually taking on greater financial responsibility. We found additional, unexpected roles that demonstrate the diversity in experiences that provide a sense of adulthood. Driving, traveling independently, going to a bar, or merely dressing like an adult can all yield a greater sense of maturity. Stressful experiences also seem to provide an important context for adult development, perhaps pushing young adults to take on novel responsibilities or to exercise emergent psychological qualities.

Our methodology permitted an exploration of previously identified criteria for subjective adulthood while also taking into consideration the range of contexts and roles in which this development takes place. Over half of the participants cited psychological experiences, including responsibility for self; responsibility for others; self-regulation; and reflected appraisals in their defining adult instances. Approximately 20% of participants cited increasing responsibility for their own futures, a psychological experience evident in prior research (e.g., Arnett, 1997, 1998; Greene, Wheatley, & Aldava, 1992; Molgat, 2007). Younger participants were more likely than older participants to include increased responsibility for self in their responses. In our qualitative analysis, we noted that a sense of responsibility for oneself tended to stem from novel experiences (e.g., moving out of the parental home,

balancing school and work for the first time). As young people take on new experiences and responsibilities, they begin to feel greater self-determination and self-reliance, which contributes to the experience of adulthood.

Also ranking high across studies of definitions of adulthood are criteria indicative of taking responsibility for other people, including becoming capable of taking care of children, and being less self-oriented and more concerned with the well-being of others (e.g., Arnett, 2000, 2003; Molgat, 2007). In our sample, descriptions of responsibility for others occurred for approximately 15% of participants. Interestingly, there were no age differences in the likelihood of such responses, which could be due to a range of diversity of experiences in which this psychological experience emerged. For example, a growing sense of responsibility for others was not exclusive to child rearing but also emerged in employment, tending to younger relatives, paying bills, and establishing more egalitarian relationships with parents.

More than 30% of participants also demonstrated increasing self-regulatory capacities in their defining instances. Such youth derived a sense of adulthood through planning for the future, making major decisions, and regulating their emotions and motivation as they strived toward long-term goals. Scholars have noted that these types of psychological resources could facilitate adaptation and progress in the transition to adulthood, particularly as related to staying regulated and directed enough to move forward in the life course (e.g., Côté & Bynner, 2008; Schwartz et al., 2005). We found these capacities were exercised in both traditional and nontraditional roles, suggesting that both carry the potential for developing a greater sense of adulthood. However, older participants were significantly more likely than younger participants to include self-regulation in their responses. This finding is consistent with research showing that self-regulatory capacities increase over emerging adulthood (e.g., John & Gross, 2004; Vukman, 2006). Likewise, college students were more likely than noncollege students to include self-regulation in their responses, which could reflect contextual influences in cognitive growth over the transition to adulthood (e.g., Bennett & Baird, 2006).

Lastly, approximately 5% of participants derived a sense of adulthood through reflected appraisals, or the eyes of others. This notion of *reflected appraisals* (Cooley, 1992) underscores that identity development is reciprocal and happens within a social context (Kerpelman et al., 1997; Burke, 1991). In such reflected appraisals, participants were able to see their growth, whether comparing themselves to younger peers or receiving newfound respect and trust from their elders. This suggests the relational

aspect of achieving a sense of adulthood and the potential of relationships to provide signals that one has grown psychologically. We found that older participants and college students were more likely to include reflected appraisals in their responses, indicating increases over time and in a college context.

Limitations

It is important to note the limitations of this study. Although we sought to obtain a diverse sample, it is worth noting that participants were all from the same metropolitan area and there were systemic differences between participants who provided defining adult experiences and those who did not. Furthermore, it is likely that participants who responded to our online advertisement on Craigslist are not representative of all noncollege emerging adults. Therefore, the results of the study do not apply to all young adults and further research should explore the defining adult experiences in other populations.

Implications

Despite these limitations, the results of this study have implications for practitioners and researchers. Previous researchers have found that subjective adult identity is associated with a variety of mental health benefits, whereas, conversely, feeling that one has not achieved adulthood is related to depression, anxiety, and social maladjustment (e.g., Nelson & Barry, 2005). Practitioners can help young adults achieve a greater sense of adulthood, potentially offsetting these negative outcomes, by exploring their roles and relationships and identifying activities that might provide them with a greater sense of adulthood. For example, mentoring and other forms of community engagement can confer developmental benefits (e.g., Schulenberg, Bryant, & O'Malley, 2004). Lastly, simply asking young adults to describe instances in which they have felt like adults can help young adults reflect on the ways in which they have matured, despite the lack of more traditional milestones.

This work also has implications for research. By using this relatively vague, open-ended question, we were able to build upon previous research and gather new information about roles, contexts, and psychological processes anchored in described experiences from which youth derive subjective adulthood. Researchers could use this method to explore the transition to adulthood among other populations and over time. Researchers could also use measures of the psychological experiences found in this study to explore how they relate to subjective adulthood and interact with traditional and

nontraditional social roles. Teasing out some of the reciprocal relationships among role transitions, psychological qualities, and perceptions of adult status empirically might permit a deeper understanding of the psychological growth that underlies a sense of adulthood.

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