

Gender and Adulthood

An Ambiguous Relationship

[J C]

Introduction

The concept of adulthood varies between cultures. It is related to the social order of an organization, showcasing productive labor while placing reproductive labor on the backburner. Another concept that is commonplace in a society is gender, with its own rigid social order. This study explores the question, "How does gender affect perceptions of adulthood for college students?" In so doing, it will examine the stereotypical interpretations of both terms—adulthood and gender—and will seek to determine to what extent they are interrelated (if at all). This examination opens the door to even more specific questioning: Do both males and females (and all other genders as well) define adulthood differently? How do the social expectations of a certain gender alter their perceptions of adulthood? How do college students view (by gender) these societal expectations to shift in the future, when they reach their definition of adulthood?

All of these sub-questions were considered during the experimental phase of this study; this phase included three distinct anthropological methods: pile sorts, interviewing and content analysis. The sample, ten college students—from sophomores to seniors—each took part in one pile sort and one five-question interview. Their responses provided new and interesting feedback on the ways students in college perceive adulthood or the transition into adulthood. Lake Forest College students are aware of the effect that gender has on the transition into adulthood; however, concerning their own transitions into adulthood, they feel that the stereotypes they point out do not necessarily apply to

adults, new women who are now given the ability to create and sustain life inside of them

Interestingly, some studies have concluded that men's and women's transitions into adulthood are very similar; rather than dramatically different as a result of their gender. According to a study conducted by Sabrina Oesterle (et al), "men's and women's work and educational pathways in the transition to adulthood have become [very] similar," over the past century."⁶ After high school, both men and women have similar options concerning postsecondary education and entering into a work field. Oesterle's (et al) research claims that no matter which path (postsecondary education or entering directly into the workplace), individuals experience the same transitions and feelings. That being said, she also acknowledges that "few studies of multidimensional pathways to adulthood have [actually] examined gender differences," which casts a shadow of doubt on her argument.⁷ It is the lack of information that causes skewed data and inaccurate claims. It is not that gender is not a factor; it is that there is a lack of study in this area concerning its effects on the transition into adulthood. She also points out that some of the studies "have restricted analysis to women only," effectively cutting out the male experience or those of non-binary persons.⁸ Overall, it seems more likely that gender plays a concrete role in the transition to adulthood.

This role can be seen even from a linguistic perspective. For example, both the denotation and connotation of the word 'adult' tends to vary between men and women. The concept of adult may depend upon the ability to conceive a child, the ability to provide for one's family, the ability to take a wife etc., depending on one's gender. For women, the ability to conceive a child and raise children is directly embedded within the idea of adulthood, whereas for men, the ability to go into the workplace and provide financially for a family takes its place.

This information can never encompass transitions into adulthood for every single adolescent. All transitions are “disjointed and fraught with complexities.”⁹ There are different sociological factors that affect each and every young adult’s transition into a full-grown adult. Research can never fully account for firsthand experience, nor can it empathize

everyday experiences are affected by gender. From the ten students interviewed, two of them were African American and one Arab, while the other seven were of white European descent. Race and ethnicity are also a factor when concerning gendered experiences within one's transition to adulthood. African American males may very well hold completely different experiences and definition of adult than white males do. This is also a factor between white and nonwhite females. Differences in culture (based on ethnicity) creates different gender norms, thus influencing a student's perceptions of adulthood much differently than others. Ultimately, however, race and ethnicity did not have a large effect on the data that was collected during this study.

The sample was also made up of an overwhelming amount of students on track to graduate with a bachelor in arts. Only two of the students, both male, were science majors; one of whom was a double major in science and politics. This means that much of the sample could be very familiar with (or perhaps be more informed about) societal or stereotypical expectations of adulthood.

All ten interviewees were straight, cisgendered college students. This was not an intentional decision, but rather an accidental occurrence. Unfortunately, this sample of students did not include non-binary persons. Since this sample was limited in size and scope, it is difficult to make any larger observations about the Lake Forest College student body as a whole. Nonetheless, this study shed new light on how cisgender students feel adulthood and gender are related.

Methods and Data

The pile sorts were conducted first, before any of the students participated in a one-on-one interview. Five students participated in each of the pile sorts. The first pile sort was forced and saw the participant put fifteen non-gendered descriptions into two categories: masculine or feminine. It was not about categorizing them by which was a male quality and which was a female quality; it was centered on the ideas of masculinity and femininity and which descriptive words and phrases were more like one category than they were the other. There was no third pile and students could not opt out of categorizing the terms and phrases. They had to put all of the descriptions into one of the piles. The

fileend descriptions were as follows: educated, intelligent, breadwinner; lawyer; doctor; elegant, strong courageous, healthy, ambitious, CEO of a company, professor of chemistry at a community college, takes out

zero of the five participants placing the photos in gendered categories.

than the answers to the previous questions. Each student noted that a job or career was not required to be an adult, but that when they pictured themselves as adults doing everyday activities, it usually

Interview Questions and Code

Question 1: Define 'adult;' do you feel that you are currently an adult? Why or Why not?

<u>Code:</u>	
SelfSufficient:	8
Finances:	6
Responsible:	2
Age:	2
Mature:	2

Question 2 What do you think an adult looks like? Why or Why Not?

<u>Code:</u>	
Income/Job:	3
Responsible:	3
Age:	3
Looks/Clothing:	5
Confident:	4

Question 3 What activities does an adult participate in in everyday life? Why do you think this?

<u>Code:</u>	
SelfSufficient:	4
Job/Income:	7
Children:	2
Pays Bills:	2
Groceries/Food:	2

Question 4 How do you think society has played a part in college students becoming adults? Why?

<u>Code:</u>	
Age:	3
College:	5

Question 5 Where do you see yourself in ten years? Why?

Code

Graduated	2
Lawyer/Career:	10
Do Not Know	2
Family/Children	7
Chicago	2

Conclusions

Gender and perceptions of adulthood are closely related concepts,

