

Introduction

DEFINING AND GIVING CONTEXT TO THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

Most of us have a sense of what it means to become an adult. Children and adolescents imagine what their lives will be like when they “grow up.” Parents envision the types of adults their children will become and hold expectations of their children’s schooling, careers, and future families. There are many examples of coming-of-age films and novels focusing on young people on the cusp of adulthood. Often these characters are still living with their parents but are in conflict with them. They may be working part-time, earning enough for spending money but not enough to live on their own. They are perhaps imagining life after they finish school or if they are continuing their education, they picture life at college away from their parents. These characters are often interested in romance and they usually do not yet have children.

Take, for example, *Real Women Have Curves* (2002), *Dope* (2015), and *The Half of It* (2020), three contemporary coming-of-age movies. The protagonists of these movies—Ana, Malcolm, and Ellie—are all navigating their final year in high school. All of them are preoccupied with finishing school and decisions about whether and where to attend college. Romantic pursuits play a central role in their stories, as do family relationships. The protagonists also grapple with societal expectations of who they should

become. Yet we also see how their personal identities and the social contexts in which they are embedded profoundly shape their experiences. Ana is the daughter of working-class Mexican immigrant parents who are supportive of her going to college, but not at the expense of leaving the family home or in lieu of working to help support the family. Malcolm, the high-achieving son of a Nigerian father and African American mother living in a disadvantaged neighborhood, has his eyes set on Harvard, but his skeptical high school counselor suggests that a student with his background is unlikely to gain admission. Ellie immigrated from China to rural Washington with her family when she was a child, where her ethnicity and sexual identity made her a social outcast. She struggles between her desire to escape her small hometown and her sense of obligation to her widowed father. Most audience members watching these movies will probably find some aspects of Ana, Malcolm, and Ellie's stories that resonate with them. As audience members, we expect that these protagonists will learn some lessons about "growing up" by the end of the movie. However, it may be harder for us to determine exactly what becoming an adult entails. When do individuals reach adulthood? How do we know when someone has become an adult? Do all Americans have the same ideas about what constitutes adulthood? Is adulthood an inevitable outcome that results when one reaches a certain age, or do individuals have to complete certain goals in their lives in order to be considered adults?

We argue that definitions of adulthood result from interactions between personal experiences, which are often shaped by social forces beyond the individual, and societal expectations of adulthood. The contrast between what today's young people experience and societal expectations of them can make the transition to adulthood a fraught process. In 2016, "adulting" (defined as "the practice of behaving in a way characteristic of a responsible adult, especially the accomplishment of mundane but necessary tasks") made the shortlist for the *Oxford English Dictionary's* "Word of the Year"—meaning it was one of the few words that "reflect the ethos, mood, or preoccupations" of the year and would have "lasting potential as a word of cultural significance."¹ A 2019 *Parade* magazine article described the proliferation of "adulting" classes, designed to teach young people the life skills needed to be successful adults. As the principal of one such "adulting" school remarked, "Young adulthood is a frustrating place to

be—everybody’s asking, ‘Who am I?’ and ‘How do I?’”² Clearly, becoming an adult is not a seamless process for young people today, and many might wonder what it takes to be an adult.

Moreover, the American narrative of adulthood is largely based on a White middle-class ideal, but is it the case that these norms and behaviors apply to all young people? In an impressive overview of trends in the markers of adulthood over the twentieth century, Elizabeth Fussell and Frank Furstenberg examined the experiences of young people across race, nativity, and gender. They write:

Remarkably little research has focused on the experience of “average” black youth, instead, focusing on those at risk of delinquency . . . Likewise, few have looked at the experience of the foreign born, who experience the additional transition of international migration in their life course. In addition, the life-course experiences of women, especially black women and foreign-born women, [have] been neglected except for issues relating to marriage and childbearing.³

The authors highlight the lack of research that provides a “big picture” of the transition experiences that are shared by and that are distinct across diverse populations of young people in the United States. While the authors acknowledge the importance of considering racial and immigrant diversity, they were only able to focus on native-born Black men and women, native-born White men and women, and foreign-born men and women. Their reliance on a century’s worth of census data limited the breadth of racial and ethnic categories available to them.

Racial and ethnic diversity in the United States is increasing more quickly among young people than the general population, with nearly five in ten young people (ages six to twenty-one) belonging to racial and ethnic minority groups in 2018, compared to fewer than two in ten in 1968.⁴ The arrival of new immigrant groups since the easing of immigration restrictions in the mid-1960s has also contributed to the racial and ethnic diversity of the United States. In 2018, the foreign-born population in the United States exceeded forty-four million people, making up almost 14 percent of the total population. This is a remarkable increase from 1970, when the foreign-born comprised only 5 percent of the total population.⁵ Moreover, about three-quarters of today’s immigrants are from Asia

or Latin America (with growing numbers from Africa). In contrast, the vast majority of the foreign-born in 1970 were from Europe or Canada.⁶ The growth of the immigrant-origin population, as well as its racial and ethnic diversity, means that a single story of the transition to adulthood based on native-born White young people likely misrepresents and oversimplifies contemporary experiences of the transition to adulthood. Youth from immigrant families and their parents may bring different ideals of adulthood from their countries of origin.

In a rare example of research focusing on the transition to adulthood among immigrant-origin young people, Rubén Rumbaut and Golnaz Komaie provide comparisons of Hispanic and Asian first-generation (those who are foreign-born and entered the United States at age thirteen or older), 1.5-generation (those who are foreign-born and entered the United States before age thirteen), and second-generation (those who are native-born but have at least one foreign-born parent) young people, as well as third-plus generation (those who are native-born with native-born parents) White and Black young people, on various markers of adulthood.⁷ In showing how the completion of markers of adulthood varies across immigrant generations within the same ethnic group, the authors illustrate the relevance of nativity in the transition to adulthood. The study also highlights ethnic heterogeneity, challenging the conventional use of pan-ethnic categories, such as Hispanic and Asian, that tend to mask differences in experiences among groups presumed to share similar cultural attributes. Through interview data, Rumbaut and Komaie also point out the unique and serious challenges faced by undocumented immigrant young people in the transition to adulthood. Many of these young people experience frustration over their inability to get a driver's license, to finish schooling, to obtain a full-time job, or to attain many other goals.

Given that the population of current and future young adults is increasingly racially and ethnically diverse, with many coming from immigrant families, it is vital that we examine the diversity of experiences in the transition to adulthood. Prior research finds that broad social trends—such as the growth in college attendance and delays to marriage and parenthood—have affected all young people. However, these shifts are more visible for some groups than others. For example, Black young people (ages twenty to thirty-four) are more likely than their White peers to be single and to have

never married.⁸ Immigrant young people—even those who arrive in the United States at relatively younger ages—also differ from their native-born peers in terms of their experiences. At ages eighteen to thirty-four, they are, on average, more likely than their native-born peers to be full-time students, to have experienced marriage, and to have children of their own.⁹ Even though researchers and the general public are increasingly aware of how the transition to adulthood has changed for young people today, surprisingly little research has taken a systematic approach to understanding how race, ethnicity, and nativity intersect with other social categories, such as gender and social class, to affect the outcomes of young people. As such, this book examines the experiences of White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian native-born and immigrant young men and women (a fuller description of the groups examined is provided in chapter 1). Only by examining how such intersectional identities affect these young people's experiences can we determine the multitude of patterns that constitute transitions to adulthood today. These are the issues we attend to throughout this book.

DEFINING ADULTHOOD

Definitions of the stages of the life course are not fixed, but rather change according to societal context. For example, in the United States, childhood as we picture it today looks vastly different from childhood in earlier periods of American history, when children were expected to work and contribute to the family economy from an early age.¹⁰ The same is true for how we understand young adulthood in the United States. When researchers speak about the transition to adulthood, we typically mean the period of time during which young people begin to acquire new rights, responsibilities, and roles associated with adulthood. One of the reasons that the transition to adulthood sparks interest among researchers and the general public, however, is that these rights, responsibilities, and roles are no longer as sharply defined for today's young people as they were for past generations. Both research on and public perception of what constitutes adulthood tend to focus on particular accomplishments, including finishing school, working full-time, establishing residential independence (away from the parental home), getting married, and becoming a parent.¹¹ Research that

emphasizes the acquisition of new roles as markers of adulthood finds that for many young people, acquiring such roles is more difficult and takes longer now than in the past.¹² For example, in 2012, Frank Furstenberg and Sheela Kennedy found that “only about one-fifth of men and one-third of women had completed [all] transitions [by age 30], a striking decline even from the beginning of the decade Adulthood, *as traditionally defined*, is now achieved only by a minority of men and women.”¹³

Some researchers have argued that because the traditional markers of adulthood no longer seem to closely match the experiences of many young people today, we should revisit these conceptions. Psychologist Jeffrey Arnett has proposed *emerging adulthood* as a distinct life stage that occurs whenever young people experience a large gap in time between the end of their adolescence and entering “adult roles” in work and relationships.¹⁴ The period of emerging adulthood is characterized primarily by its subjective and cultural aspects. The literature on emerging adulthood emphasizes how young people think and feel about their accomplishments and positions in society relative to the idea of adulthood, especially in the context of prolonged role transitions in contemporary societies.¹⁵ Arnett argues that young people in the United States today think of the transition to adulthood in “intangible, gradual, psychological, and individualistic terms.”¹⁶ Rather than placing importance on the accomplishment of specific roles, young people today instead focus on psychological and individual characteristics such as responsibility, independent decision-making, an equal relationship with parents, and financial independence as key criteria for defining adulthood.

Of course, how young people think and feel about adulthood is difficult to measure using survey data. Moreover, there is little systematic research that compares how diverse groups of young people conceptualize adulthood. In one study, Arnett investigated how Black, Hispanic, and Asian young people (ages eighteen to twenty-nine) differed from their White peers in their beliefs about criteria for adulthood. Arnett found that young adults across groups agreed that independence in deciding personal beliefs and accepting responsibilities for one’s actions were characteristics of adulthood. However, there was less consensus on other dimensions of adulthood. Compared to their White peers, Black, Hispanic, and Asian young people were more likely to support notions of adulthood that involve

role transitions—including traditional adulthood milestones such as the completion of education, full-time employment, marriage, and parenthood. Black, Hispanic, and Asian young people were also more likely than their White counterparts to emphasize “family capacities”—such as being able to support a family, care for children, and run a household.¹⁷ These differences point to the importance of understanding patterns of attainment of traditional adulthood milestones across race, ethnicity, and nativity.

It is also challenging to separate young people’s thoughts and feelings about adulthood from the structural conditions that have placed traditional adulthood milestones out of reach for many. That is, have young people always taken an individualistic and subjective approach to defining adulthood, or has this arisen out of necessity as young people increasingly find themselves struggling to meet traditional markers of adulthood? Young people’s feelings about whether they are adults are also highly age-dependent. Even during the period of emerging adulthood (typically covering ages eighteen to twenty-nine, as in Arnett’s studies), there is much variation in whether young people consider themselves adults. In one of Arnett’s studies, fewer than 10 percent of eighteen-to-twenty-nine year-olds responded “no” when asked whether they feel they have reached adulthood. Younger people were more likely to respond “yes and no” to the question and among those ages twenty-four to twenty-nine, the majority gave an emphatic “yes” response.¹⁸ The early twenties seem to be a particularly unsettled age. Looking beyond these tumultuous years allows us to consider how young people who are more likely than not to *feel* they are adults are faring on milestones strongly associated with adulthood.

In this book, we emphasize five traditional adulthood milestones: (1) finishing school, (2) working full-time, (3) establishing residential independence from parents, (4) getting married, and (5) becoming a parent. We examine these milestones separately and also in relation to each other. We focus on these milestones for a number of reasons. First, even though these milestones may have lost some of their importance in practice, they still signify adulthood to most Americans. A recent study by Kennan Ceba and Frank Furstenberg examined American attitudes toward traditional markers of adulthood and found that individuals “define adulthood similarly and hold relatively similar views about the timing and importance of adult milestones.”¹⁹ Other research has also revisited how the accomplishment of

traditional markers impacts young people's perceptions of adulthood. Young people who have moved out of their parents' homes, who have married, or who have become parents are all more likely than their peers who have not reached these adulthood milestones to report that they feel like adults.²⁰ In other words, the experience of role transitions remains meaningful in determining feelings of adulthood. However, we want to emphasize that it is not our view that every person aspires to these milestones. In fact, two of the three authors of this book have not completed all of the adult milestones we measure, but most people (ourselves included!) would still consider us adults. We argue, however, that the five milestones are meaningful and common in widely understood narratives of adulthood.

Second, focusing on traditional adulthood milestones allows us to systematically compare the experiences of today's young people to those of previous generations. Research on how young people think and feel about adulthood is quite recent, so we know less about how young people have historically defined adulthood for themselves. However, there is a large literature on young people's attainment of markers of adulthood across different generations. Hence, we can compare the patterns seen in this book with past research. As we describe in later chapters, the most dramatic changes include the increasing length of time spent in school and in the parental home, in addition to delayed marriage and parenthood.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we argue that it is essential to look beyond individualistic explanations and toward patterns formed by intersectional group identities. Although we acknowledge young people's agency in defining adulthood for themselves, taking a purely individualistic view of the transition to adulthood tends to obscure the social contexts that shape their opportunities. Recent and ongoing economic and social changes have significantly altered how young people experience the transition to adulthood. Comparative research examining different countries and societies also reveals the relevance of social institutions and culture for young people's opportunities.²¹ Yet young people undergoing the transition to adulthood may blame themselves for failing to meet societal norms.²² Rather than castigating young people for a perceived inability or unwillingness to accept adult roles (as, for instance, when older generations complain about Millennials), we instead seek to place the shifts in how young people complete traditional markers of adulthood (i.e., finish-

ing school, working full time, establishing residential independence, getting married, and becoming a parent) within the broader context of contemporary economic and social changes.

CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The experiences involved in the transition to adulthood can change over time, as shifting educational, economic, family, and welfare institutions collide with existing cultural norms and attitudes. Jeffrey Arnett points to four “revolutions” from the 1960s and 1970s that have changed how young people enter adulthood today. First, the “Technology Revolution” transformed the American labor market from a manufacturing-based economy to a skills-based service economy that requires young people to attain more education than in the past. Second, the “Sexual Revolution” brought about by the introduction of the birth control pill allowed young people to enter into sexual relationships outside of marriage, leading to delays in marriage and parenthood. Third, the “Women’s Movement” opened up many more educational and occupational opportunities for women, and also contributed to delays in marriage and parenthood. Fourth, the “Youth Movement” cast traditional markers of adulthood (such as marriage and parenthood) less as accomplishments and more as perils to be delayed for as long as possible.²³ The wide reach of such social changes on young people’s lives is difficult to fully encapsulate, but suffice it to say that most research agrees the landscape of social norms and opportunities for young people today is vastly different from that of the past.

Young people today also experience the transition to adulthood in the context of widescale economic challenges (e.g., the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic), growing economic inequality, and significant labor market changes. A cohort that enters the labor market during a recession and one that does so during a period of economic growth experience very different life opportunities, not just at the beginning of their work lives, but throughout their careers. For example, Frank Furstenberg and Sheila Kennedy argue that one reason why “growing up is harder to do” is because the Great Recession and its subsequent slow economic

recovery have had “profound and potentially permanent consequences for the adult transitions of young men and women today.”²⁴ At the time of writing, we are in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, which will also likely have a lasting impact on the socioeconomic attainment of young people whose educational and work careers have been disrupted.

Since the late 1970s, income inequality in the United States has risen sharply. It is now at the highest level seen in the past one hundred years. The top 10 percent of American families collectively earned half of all total pre-tax income in 2015, a level of income inequality that outpaces that of other highly developed countries.²⁵ The United States also ranks high among developed countries in the ratio of wage returns to skills—that is, Americans with greater skills (usually as a result of their education) earn considerably more in the labor market than Americans with fewer skills.²⁶ This means that educational attainment is a key determinant of young people’s eventual economic success. Research shows declines in job quality among young workers since the 1970s, including lower rates of employment, lower median wages, and fewer “decent” jobs. This is especially the case for those who lack college credentials.²⁷ Even as higher education has taken on increasing importance for young people’s life chances, it has become more unaffordable.²⁸ Disinvestment in public higher education systems has increased the amount of time and money it takes to complete a college degree. Even middle-class college students can find themselves at risk of downward mobility as they are saddled with educational debt and face limited career options.²⁹ The need to be competitive in the labor market also means that more young people are pursuing advanced degrees, which further lengthens the time spent in school and possibly delays marriage and parenthood.³⁰

The economic precariousness of young people’s situations has implications for other dimensions of the transition to adulthood. A Gallup report found that Millennials (which they defined as those born between 1980 and 1996) have a hard time finding jobs they want and that their higher levels of education than previous generations might even make them overqualified for the jobs they can obtain. Millennials also express lower levels of engagement with their work and are more prone to switch jobs, an indicator of job dissatisfaction.³¹ Moreover, both their lower levels of work experience relative to older workers and the service indus-

tries in which they are concentrated make them more susceptible to economic downturns. According to an analysis by the Economic Policy Institute, unemployment rates among young workers (ages sixteen to twenty-four) in the United States rose from 8 percent to 24 percent between spring 2019 and spring 2020 as COVID-19 spread; the corresponding increase in unemployment rates among older workers was from 3 percent to 11 percent.³² Even highly educated young people experience employment challenges. Interviewed in a *Vox* article on recent college graduates struggling to find employment during the COVID-19 pandemic, twenty-four-year-old Kyle says, “I’ve probably applied to around 1,400 positions That number sounds crazy, but that’s pretty much all I’ve been doing.”³³

Young people in the United States now remain in their parents’ homes for a longer period of time compared to previous generations.³⁴ Moreover, the age at first marriage in the United States has steadily increased since the mid-1950s, reaching thirty for men and twenty-eight for women in 2019, and the marriage rate has fallen substantially over the last few decades.³⁵ It is easy to see why young people, faced with declining labor market prospects, might stay in or return to the parental home and delay or even forego marriage and parenthood. Researchers have also noted more complicated patterns in the transition to adulthood among young people today.³⁶ An adulthood milestone is not always permanent—once attained, some milestones can be revisited. For example, young people might move out of and back into the parental home multiple times or they might return to school after working for some time. Moreover, the links between markers of adulthood are increasingly tenuous. One notable change in family formation is the weakening association between marriage and parenthood, with increasing shares of births occurring before marriage.³⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharper focus the vulnerability of young people on the edge of adulthood, with many having lost their jobs and a majority now residing with their parents.³⁸ Kyle, the recent college graduate mentioned above who is struggling to find a job, voices many of the anxieties young people are experiencing today: “Will I ever own a house because right now, the positions I do qualify for barely pay enough to live My girlfriend and I have cried about it. Are we going to have a shot at a life the older generation has?”³⁹