

Constructing Adulthood: Markers of Adulthood and Well-Being Among Emerging Adults

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Abstract

In modern industrialized societies, young people face an extended period of unprecedented freedom, and challenges, en route to fully adult roles. Using the Markers of Adulthood Scale, I explore the markers emerging adults view as most important to achieving adulthood, their attainment of those markers, and how the fit between the two relates to participants' overall well-being. Results showed that the most important markers for well-being were those over which young adults have more control: relational maturity (e.g., establishing an equal relationship with parents and developing greater consideration for others). In contrast, the markers which most emerging adults had yet to attain and had relatively less control over (i.e., traditional role transitions such as being settled into a career) did not predict well-being. Overall, it appears that emerging adults construct personal conceptualizations of adulthood adaptively, although results suggested that the path to adulthood may be more elusive for females than males.

Keywords

identity, life course, transitions to adulthood, well-being, college

What defines an adult? Every society provides an answer to this question, with varying degrees of structure and explicitness. In many traditional cultures, the transition to adulthood is signaled by a rite of passage, marriage, or the arrival of one's own first child. However, many researchers have argued that as societies become more complex, the pathways to adulthood are becoming less clear, creating a more challenging developmental task for young people (Arnett, 2007a; Côté, 2000; Kloep, Hendry, Gardner, & Seage, 2010). This article explores the criteria that young adults take for themselves as markers of adulthood (MOA) and how their attainment of these markers relates to their overall psychological adjustment.

Social and economic forces at the turn of the millennium have led to a new stage of development for middle- and upper-class youth in industrialized nations: emerging adulthood characterized by an extended period of exploration (in relationships, careers, and identity) without commitment (Arnett, 2000). Some researchers view this stage as a positive development overall, one in which young adults enjoy the opportunity to focus on themselves and explore their freedom, relatively free from adult role obligations and restraints (Arnett, 2007a, 2007b; Larson et al., 2002). Their perspective aligns with that of classic developmental theorists such as Erikson (1959, 1968) who posited that exploration is a healthy concomitant of human growth. James Marcia (1967), expanding on Erikson's framework, held that exploration was in fact necessary to healthy identity development: committing to an identity (whether

vocational, religious, or in another domain) without first exploring was labeled "foreclosed," indicating a "premature" commitment. Baumeister and Muraven (1996, p. 410) go so far as to suggest that individual exploration toward self-actualization is a "moral imperative" in modern Western society.

However, empirical research shows that the "exploring without committing" status (labeled "moratorium" in Marcia's framework) also correlates with various indices of psychological distress. For example, Waterman (2007) found moratorium scores were inversely correlated with five of the six subscales of the Scale of Psychological Well-Being, and studies commonly report relatively high levels of anxiety and depression among individuals experiencing moratorium (Young, Underemployed and Optimistic, 2012). Although the end result of exploration can be healthy and adaptive, the actual processes of exploration often appear to entail a period of discomfort.

Given this, the increasingly lengthy path into adulthood is a cause for concern. More and more young adults find the traditional milestones of adulthood (completing school, beginning a career, marrying, and becoming a parent) postponed into the

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late 20s or even later. In 2010, the average age of first marriage in the United States was 27 for women and 29 for men (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012). Among young adults, 25–34 years of age, 1 in 10 women (and one in five men) lived at home with their parents (Fry, 2012). Across the ages 18–34, half reported taking a job they did not want simply in order to meet their expenses and a quarter reported taking an unpaid job in order to get experience (Young, Underemployed and Optimistic, 2012). In short, the pathways to traditional milestones of adulthood are getting longer, with the result that emerging adults spend an increasing period of time suspended in an “in-between” status, lacking the anchor of the relatively clear social roles of either adolescence or adulthood.

Aside from the stress of the extended exploration, this delay represents a second possible cost: Postponing (or forgoing) major role transitions means missing the opportunities for maturation that they offer. For example, recent cross-cultural research suggests that personality maturation in adults (specifically, changes in the “big five” dimensions) is driven partly by culturally specified age of onset for adult-role responsibilities (Bleidorn et al., 2013). Across many cultures, the personality traits of agreeableness and conscientiousness tend to increase in adulthood, while neuroticism decreases, but these changes occur earlier in cultures where young people are recruited into adult roles in families and in the workforce at younger ages. Thus, Bleidorn and colleagues conclude that it is the commitment to new social roles that fosters personality growth. Obviously, young adults who do not undertake such roles forgo one avenue of development (see also Kloep et al., 2010).

Forgone or missed roles can also incur social costs. Research has shown the power of a culturally mandated social clock, showing that adherence to or deviance from such expectations can influence adult personality development and well-being (Neugarten, 1979). For example, in a sample of American women born in the 1930s, individuals who had neither married nor begun a career by age 30 experienced feelings of personal and social inadequacy (Helson, Mitchell, & Moane, 1984). The social clock can benefit individuals who follow it, through enhanced self-esteem (SE) and social support, but it can impose costs for those who fail to follow prescribed timelines, whether through negative social sanctions, unflattering social comparisons, or fewer social support resources (Rook, Catalano, & Dooley, 1989).

A third reason for concern, and another challenge for emerging adults, is that the MOA themselves are arguably becoming less clear. In the language of life span theories of development, age-graded influences on development are becoming less and less influential in modern societies, while more individual, nonnormative influences are increasing in importance. Among sociologists, the same idea is captured in the “individualization thesis”: the idea that, in late-modern societies, the transition to adulthood is losing its traditional structure, and instead individuals are expected to “individualize” their career and life trajectories (Côté, 2000, 2002; Wallace, 1995). Surveys of young adults regarding what they consider to be the important MOA

confirm that they put more weight on more internal and psychological qualities (e.g., accepting responsibility for one’s actions; deciding on one’s beliefs and values) and very little emphasis on role transitions like marriage (Arnett, 1997, 1998, 2001). In Arnett’s view, the markers most commonly cited among today’s young adults all reflect a common emphasis on individualistic character qualities. The de-emphasis on social milestones is in some ways natural: As it becomes less normative to marry in the 20s, for example, other MOA are likely to emerge. However, the need to identify or construct alternatives represents a burden of its own.

This burden could also represent an opportunity: It provides an opening for individuals to choose markers of growth and maturation that are more personally meaningful and/or attainable. McDaniel and Grice (2008) demonstrated that a large gap between one’s “ideal” versus “real” self can be a source of distress. Moreover, Sedikides and Gregg (2008) suggested that adults attempt to manage their self-concept in ways that help maintain positive self-regard. Today’s young adults, facing a society in which both the MOA and the paths to achieving those markers are increasingly unclear, may adaptively choose (within limits) which markers to prioritize, shifting their focus to markers that are more attainable while still being personally meaningful. As a first step in exploring this possibility, emerging adults’ report of which markers were personally important was compared with their self-reported attainment of those markers. The central questions concerned (1) how close was the correspondence (or “fit”) between participants’ aspirations and attainment and (2) whether a gap between these correlated with decreased well-being, specifically life satisfaction and SE. Though many other studies demonstrated that young adults prioritize markers with more individualistic criteria, no prior study has specifically examined how the relationship between individual conceptions and attainment relates to overall well-being.

A third question concerned whether men and women might face different challenges in constructing a route to adult identities. Classic work by Levinson (1996) showed that, when constructing a vision of themselves as adults, women were much more likely than men to construct a “split dream” combining family and career. Research further shows that concerns about balancing work and family continue to influence young women’s decisions about majors in college (Chhin, Bleeker, & Jacobs, 2008). The desire to achieve in both areas may make adulthood more elusive for women, by simply increasing the number of demands and/or due to the difficulty of juggling both.

Method

Participants

For details of the larger project of which this is part, please see Reifman and Grahe (2016) and the project page at <https://osf.io/yjdaf/>. Because the goal here was to focus on the challenges facing young adults who had yet to attain clear MOA (such as completing college), participants older than 25 and

college graduates were eliminated from the larger data set. The remaining sample was still quite large: 1,133 participants (65.0% female, 84.1% White), with an average age of 20.38 years ($SD = 1.42$).

Measures and Variable Construction

The primary instruments of interest were the MOA Scale (Arnett, 2001) and the Subjective Well-Being Scale (SWB; Diener, Emmons, Larson, & Griffin, 1985). Although SWB correlated highly with SE, $r(890) = .45$, $p < .001$, preliminary analyses suggested these may play different roles for males and females: Males had higher SE ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.51$) than females ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.55$), $t(890) = 3.04$, $p = .002$, but lower SWB scores ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.30$) compared to females ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.19$), $t(892) = 3.44$, $p = .001$. Accordingly, the two constructs were analyzed separately.

The MOA Scale consists of 40 items: 20 asking respondents how important they considered each possible marker in determining whether or not a person had reached adulthood (*very to not important* on a 4-point scale) and 20 more indicating the extent to which each marker currently applied to them (*very true, somewhat true, or not true*). We combined these markers fall into four subscales following Fosse and Toyokawa (2016): Role Transitions, Norm Compliance, Relational Maturity, and Independence (see <https://osf.io/p8nqw/>).

Responses to the first set of “importance” questions were recoded to combine “*very important*” with “*quite important*” responses (relabeled “*important*”) and “*slightly important*” with “*not at all important*” responses (relabeled *not important*). For the second set of “currently true” (or “attainment”) questions, five were already scored dichotomously (e.g., married—yes/no). For the remaining questions, *very true* and *somewhat true* responses were combined to contrast with *not true* responses, under the rationale that a total absence of attaining a marker would have the most pronounced effects, whereas a “*somewhat*” response would indicate that one is at least on the pathway to adulthood.

The fit between one’s self-rated importance for, and self-rated attainment of, each marker was calculated separately, such that a score of +1 indicated importance and at least partial attainment, while a score of −1 indicated importance but no attainment. For participants who indicated that that marker was not important, the fit score was set to 0. Finally, an overall average was computed across all 20 fit scores. It was necessary to average rather than sum, as some respondents held many more markers as important than did others (range from 0 to 20, $M = 13.43$, $SD = 3.99$). The average score on the newly constructed overall fit variable could theoretically range from −1.0 (none of the markers chosen as personally important were actually even somewhat reached) to +1.0 (all personally important markers were at least somewhat reached). A fit score of 0 indicates that an equal number of personally important markers were reached as were not reached. Actual obtained values showed a fairly normal distribution, ranging from −.50 to +.95, $M = 0.18$, $SD = 0.19$, with skew of .23 and kurtosis of .69 (for

Table 1. Endorsement and Attainment of the Markers of Adulthood.

Item	Endorsement %	Attainment %	Fit <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Accept responsibility for your actions ^a	96.0	98.4	0.94 (0.28)
Make independent decisions ^a	94.8	98.6	0.93 (0.29)
Financially independent ^a	89.0	53.5	0.08 (0.94)
Avoid drunk driving ^b	87.5	96.7	0.84 (0.42)
Establish equal relationship with parents ^c	84.2	89.5	0.72 (0.57)
Develop greater consideration for others ^c	82.2	90.3	0.70 (0.58)
No longer living in parents household ^d	79.3	54.9	0.14 (0.88)
Employed full-time ^d	78.0	15.3	−0.52 (0.72)
Capable of financially supporting a family ^a	75.2	16.1	−0.50 (0.70)
Capable of caring for children ^a	74.6	54.2	0.11 (0.86)
Always have good control of emotions ^c	74.2	87.7	0.62 (0.60)
Use contraception ^b	73.2	95.1	0.63 (0.53)
Avoid illegal drugs ^b	65.7	88.8	0.60 (0.55)
Finished with education ^d	59.0	4.4	−0.53 (0.56)
Settled into a long-term career ^d	55.3	15.1	−0.38 (0.64)
Avoid becoming drunk ^b	43.6	66.0	0.31 (0.58)
Committed to long-term love relationship ^c	43.6	51.1	0.10 (0.65)
Capable of supporting parents financially ^a	42.0	8.2	−0.30 (0.57)
Have at least one child ^d	33.4	4.4	−0.20 (0.47)
Married ^d	25.9	3.5	−0.29 (0.94)

Note. Endorsement = very or quite important to achieving adulthood; attainment = very or somewhat true of the respondent; fit = fit between personal importance and personal attainment, scored −1.0 (*important but not true for self*) to +1.0 (*important and at least somewhat true for self*).

^aIndependence subscale. ^bNorm Compliance subscale. ^cRelational Maturity subscale. ^dRole Transition subscale.

the complete distribution of scores, see the supplementary files component Appendix A_Sharon at <https://osf.io/za3j5/>).

Results

Participants’ ratings of the importance of the various markers and their report of whether they had at least partially reached those markers are reported in Table 1. The overall pattern of endorsement was very similar to that found in previous research (e.g., Arnett, 1997, 1998, 2001), namely, that emerging adults’ conceptualization of adulthood emphasize more individualistic and psychological criteria over role transitions. For example, the vast majority of participants viewed it as important to accept responsibility for one’s own actions (96.0%), make independent decisions (94.8%), and establish an equal relationship with parents (84.2%). They also on average saw these characteristics as at least somewhat true of themselves (mean endorsements all $\geq 90\%$).

Table 2. Predicting Subjective Well-Being and Self-Esteem From Fit Between Aspirations and Attainment of the Markers of Adulthood.

	Males (N = 325)					Females (N = 569)				
	Fit	SWB		SE		Fit	SWB		SE	
	M (SD)	β	95% CI	β	95% CI	M (SD)	β	95% CI	β	95% CI
Role transitions	-.31 (.34)	.02	[-.34, .53]	-.11	[-.99, .02]	-.36 (.31)	-.01	[-.38, .28]	-.04	[-.61, .25]
Norm compliance	.53 (.37)	.12*	[.02, .83]	.05	[-.26, .68]	.64 (.32)	.05	[-.11, .51]	.01	[-.37, .43]
Relational maturity	.51 (.36)	.12*	[.01, .87]	.13*	[.04, 1.0]	.56 (.31)	.17***	[.32, .96]	.13**	[.24, 1.07]
Independence	.27 (.35)	-.03	[-.54, .32]	.04	[-.33, .67]	.17 (.34)	-.04	[-.44, .17]	-.02	[-.48, .31]
R ²			.037		.041			.035		.020
F			3.05		3.45			5.08		2.80
Model sig.			.017		.009			.001		.025

Note. CI = confidence interval.

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

However, other markers rated as important were far from reach. The largest gap between conceptualizations and reality arose around age-graded milestones such as being finished with one's education, employed full time, or married (see Table 1). This gap between hopes and attainment for the age-graded markers was expected, as participants were still in college. The more important question was the extent to which a gap between conceptualization and achievement, if present, predicted lower SWB and SE. This question was addressed in two ways, first looking at the overall fit scores and then subdivided by the four subscales of MOA.

For a large majority of participants (81%), the average total fit score was positive, indicating that overall, more personally important markers were at least partially attained than not. The average however was not high ($M = .18$, $SD = .20$), suggesting that many goals remained unattained. Not surprisingly, age was correlated with the fit between conceptualization and attainment, $r(1,121) = .18$, $p < .001$. Men and women did not differ in overall fit scores, $t(1,121) = 1.41$, $p = .16$, $\eta^2 = .003$.

The key question was whether the relative fit or lack of fit between an individual's personal prioritizing of markers and their own attainment of those markers would relate to their overall well-being. Pearson's correlations between overall fit scores, SWB, and SE were conducted separately by gender. Results showed that for males, fit scores correlated positively with SWB, $r(323) = .11$, $p = .05$, but not SE, $r(322) = .06$, $p = .25$. Neither relationship was significant for females, SWB: $r(567) = .05$, $p = .20$; SE: $r(566) = .03$, $p = .53$.

This lack of relationship was somewhat surprising. However, it was possible that analysis of overall fit scores may have obscured relationships between well-being and fitness across the different types of markers. Thus, responses were explored next in terms of the four subscales of the MOA.¹ We checked first to see if men and women differed in their fitness scores across the subscales. A multivariate analysis of variance on the fit subscales showed a relationship with gender, $F(4, 1,117) = 13.27$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. Follow-up univariate analysis of variances on the outcome variables revealed differences in fit scores for three of the four subscales: Role Transitions, $F(1, 1,120) = 4.83$, $p = .03$, partial $\eta^2 = .004$; Norm

Compliance, $F(1, 1,120) = 25.14$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .022$; and Independence, $F(1, 1,120) = 23.14$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .020$. Inspection of means showed that males were advantaged on Role Transitions and Independence, whereas females held the advantage in the area of Norm Compliance (see Table 2 for M s and SD s).

Returning to the question of the relationship between fit scores and well-being, analyses were conducted regressing (via forced simultaneous entry) fit indexes for the four MOA subscales on SWB and SE. Results are reported in Table 2. Most notable is the role of Relational Maturity: The fit between conceptions and attainment on this subscale predicted both SWB and SE for both males and females. In addition, for males, SWB was predicted by fit scores on Norm Compliance. (For additional analyses exploring variations by institution and race, see the supplementary files component Appendix A_Sharon at <https://osf.io/za3j5/>).

Discussion

Traditionally, research on young people's identity development has focused on important domains such as religion, vocation, and gender roles, while later research expanded to include other central aspects such as ethnic identity (see Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013, for a helpful overview). However, in modern societies where people in their 20s frequently have yet to reach many (or any) of the traditional milestones of adulthood, managing to develop an overall sense of oneself as a full, capable adult may be at least as important an aspect of identity for one's well-being and growth. In effect, emerging adults face an unpleasant choice: They can accept traditional markers as defining and necessary features of adulthood and fall short, or they can take on the task of redefining what it means to be an adult, selecting markers that are personally meaningful while still attainable. The key questions raised in this article thus concerned how emerging adults negotiate the task of constructing a sense of themselves as adults, given this necessarily in-between position in modern society, and how a gap between their ideals and attainments would relate to their subjective sense of well-being.

Replicating prior research (Arnett, 1997, 2000), participants in this large, geographically diverse sample most often prioritized more intangible, psychological qualities of emotional independence, such as accepting responsibility for their actions, while giving little priority to more traditional and clear-cut role transition markers such as getting married, having a child, or even being settled into a long-time career. This emphasis on intangibles over objective facts raises the concern that young adults, in their desire to develop a sense of themselves as adults while lacking viable access to traditional MOA, might dilute the conceptualization of adult to the point that nearly anyone could claim it. Interestingly, however, participants also prioritized the more objective markers of financial independence and living separately from one's parents. This suggests that the low endorsement of role transition markers was not simply a flight from objective markers under which they would fall short, but a genuine change in young people's sense of what adulthood means. A very interesting question for future research would be to attempt to tease out the dynamics of this change in conceptualization. It seems plausible the change could be driven by internal forces such as the need to maintain a positive self-concept. However, it is also plausible that more external and social forces also contribute; simply seeing many other young adults who are unmarried and/or childless might erode the power of traditional role models. It should be noted that conceptualizations themselves change as emerging adults reach social markers. For example, Lowe, Dillon, Rhodes, and Zwiebach (2013) found that once young adults achieved traditional role markers, they were more likely to incorporate them into their definitions of adulthood.

The primary new contribution here was to measure the fit between individual participants' personal conceptualization of the important MOA and their own attainment of those markers. The biggest gap, unsurprisingly, arose around role transitions. One might expect then that this gap would predict reduced well-being and SE. Critically, however, the fit between ideals and attainments in this area was unrelated to SWB. Instead, the strongest predictor of both well-being and SE, for both genders, was the fit between conceptualization and attainment in the domain of relational maturity—an area over which young adults have much more control. Psychological research has amply and repeatedly demonstrated the importance of feeling a sense of control in one's life. Thus, although the predictive power of the models was modest, the pattern of results suggests that emerging adults construct their conceptualizations of adulthood in ways which help maintain overall well-being. A young person who defines adulthood by qualities such as developing an equal relationship with parents, showing consideration for others, and maintaining control of their emotions, and attains those, can maintain well-being and SE while still being financially dependent on parents and far from reaching many traditional markers of adult status.

A second interesting finding concerned the differences between the genders. For males, SWB was predicted by both the overall fit between ideals and attainment and fit scores specifically on the relational maturity and norm compliance

subscales. The latter finding may be explainable by the fact that males are more likely than females to misuse both illicit drugs and alcohol (National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2013); thus, adherence to broad societal norms regarding responsible drug use represents a greater accomplishment for males. For females, in contrast, there was no correlation between the overall fit scores and well-being; connections only emerged when then fitness scores were subdivided by subscale. Recall also that females had lower fit scores for Role Transitions and Independence. (They also were only half as likely as males to label themselves as adults; for details, see the supplementary files component Appendix A_Sharon at <https://osf.io/za3j5/>). Together, these results suggest that the pathway to adult status may be less well defined for females than for males (see also Skulborstad & Herman, 2016). This could be simply because the characteristics and accomplishments typically associated with maturity are also often typed to the masculine gender (e.g., self-control). In the pithy words of one author, until recently “being an adult was considered synonymous with being male” (Gailliano, 2003, p. 104). Alternatively, it could be that conflicting societal messages about the “proper” roles of women in the workforce and at home create a greater challenge to young women trying to conceptualize what it means to be an adult.

This study did have limitations. One is that the sample was disproportionately White and female—two groups that do not represent the entirety of human experience (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). These analyses also do not address variations across the contexts of the different universities and colleges that participated in the survey, differences that (while confounded with racial and other demographic differences) may play a part as well in supporting or hindering students' emergence into adulthood. (Additional analyses providing preliminary exploration of these issues are available at the project files page, <https://osf.io/za3j5/>.)

A final limitation is that the overall proportion of variance explained in psychological adjustment scores was small. Obviously many factors contribute to healthy adjustment but given the central role of identity formation during adolescence and early adulthood and the many structural and cultural obstacles to attaining a clear transition to adulthood, it was expected that the challenge of constructing an adult identity would be particularly salient. Instead, it may be that young adults in college are more concerned with constructing more immediate identities (e.g., as a member of a particular fraternity or sorority or in terms of sexual orientation). Information on class year was not available in this data set, but future research could compare fit scores cross-sectionally or (ideally) longitudinally.

Emerging adults clearly face challenges in constructing a sense of themselves as adults, for many reasons: the lengthening pathways to traditional markers, the economic and social obstacles that may prevent many from attaining them at all, the fact that the markers themselves are somewhat in flux, and the corresponding increasing pressure to individualize one's life course. The challenges have only increased since this survey was conducted in 2004. All economic indicators since the

recession of 2008 show increased economic burdens: higher rates of unemployment, underemployment, and living at home (Casselmann, 2013). The challenge facing today's emerging adults are significant, but the results of this study give reason for some cautious optimism. It appears that many emerging adults are able to construct personally meaningful conceptualizations of adulthood that allow them to maintain a sense of well-being. Future research should continue to explore how young adults can successfully manage the challenges of emerging into adulthood in the 21st century.

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Note

1. Overall, items on the Independence subscale were endorsed most (78.6%), followed by Relational Maturity (71.1%) and Norm Compliance (67.5%), while Role Transitions were considered less important (59.5%). This pattern mirrors that found in previous research (e.g., Arnett, 1997).

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