



Reconsidering adulthood: Relative constructions of adult identity during the transition to adulthood



Christina Panagakos*

Department of Sociology, University at Buffalo, SUNY, 430 Park Hall, Buffalo, NY 14260, United States

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how peers influence the process of adult identity development during the transition to adulthood. The influence of peers leads to similar individuals adopting differing definitions of adulthood. Utilizing data from interviews with 60 young adults who are all exactly 30 years old, findings indicate that peer groups can partly explain variation in self-perceived definitions of adulthood. Respondents described how peers influence the transition to adulthood in two ways. First, they measure the timing of their transitions relative to their peers. Second, they assess the nature of their transitions relative to what they perceive to be the normative nature of that transition within their peer group. While this process was reported by respondents across gender and education level, the outcomes varied between individuals who are demographically similar. Variation in self-perceived status is due in part to the differences between peer groups, as the reference point for each individual varies from one peer group to another. These findings suggest that norms about adulthood are perceived at the group level, which can explain why differing feelings of adulthood exist among individuals who have completed comparable transitions and share similar status characteristics. As previous research has focused on adulthood norms that exist primarily at the societal level, this study expands on that work by suggesting that salient adulthood norms may be developed and referenced at multiple levels.

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As the United States shifted from an industrial to a post-industrial society during the twentieth century, the process of becoming an adult also underwent large-scale changes. The amount of time it took young people to become adults increased, in addition to the increased variation in the sequencing of events during the path toward adulthood (Shanahan, 2000). While a large body of scholarship has examined the reasons as to why today's young adults experience a lengthier and more varied transition than previous generations (Buchmann, 1989; Côté, 2000; Furstenberg, Kennedy, McLoyd, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2004; Shanahan, 2000), there has also been new

focus on the ways that young people make sense of the experience of becoming an adult. In the face of these changes, how do young adults develop their adult identity?

Much of the research on identity during the transition to adulthood has focused on age identity. Specifically, these studies have sought to understand how differences in perceived age identity, or the age that a person feels, exist across individuals with differing status characteristics. Research has found differences in perceived age identity during the transition to adulthood by race (Benson & Elder, 2011; Benson & Johnson, 2009; Burton, 2007; Johnson et al., 2007a), and gender (Aronson, 2008; Johnson, Berg, & Sirotzki, 2007a; Johnson, Berg, & Sirotzki, 2007b), socioeconomic status (Benson & Elder, 2011). While these studies have shed light on how young adults develop their adult identity, their focus has been on

* Tel.: +1 7166452417.

E-mail address: cp73@buffalo.edu

explaining the outcome of the process, namely what age young adults perceive themselves to be. In addition, their focus has been on explaining differences in self-perceived adulthood among young adults in different social locations. This study seeks to understand first, more about the process of the development of subjective age identity and second, how differences in self-perceived adulthood also exist within a homogeneous population of young adults.

To answer this question, this study frames individual constructions of adult identity in a peer group context. While some attention has been given to the ways that young people construct their age identity relative to those around them (Johnson et al., 2007b), most studies of relative age ask individuals to compare themselves to anyone of the same age. This study extends that work by narrowing the point of reference and asking young adults to focus their assessments specifically on their peers. In-depth interviews were conducted with 60 young adults who were all exactly 30 years old and lived in the United States, in the same mid-sized northeastern city. These young adults were asked to explain how they construct their understanding of themselves as adults relative to their peers. This study offers insight into how micro-level interactions with peers shape adult identity.

1. Literature review

Due to large-scale changes in the process of becoming an adult in the United States, namely increased length in transition duration and variation in sequencing (Buchmann, 1989; Côté, 2000; Shanahan, 2000), studies have sought to understand how young people develop their adult identity in the wake of these changes. Many studies have utilized subjective age identity, the age an individual feels relative to their chronological age, as a way to measure how individuals understand their adulthood status relative to others (Johnson et al., 2007a; Kaufman & Elder, 2002). In the social psychological tradition, identity is based on the definitions derived from a particular situation, including internalized role transitions and meanings (Stryker, 1991; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Wells & Stryker, 1988). To that end, social roles influence age identity such that as young people complete salient transitions, they will be treated more as adults and therefore begin to feel more adult (George, 1990; Logan, Ward, & Spitze, 1992; Neugarten, 1977). Subjective age is also contingent on chronological age, however, as the age at which a person is completing transitions can impact subjective perceptions. For example, one study found that becoming a grandparent at an early age is associated with feeling older than one's chronological age (Kaufman & Elder, 2003).

Subjective age identity varies depending on an individual's status characteristics. The timing and ordering of adulthood transitions varies due to these characteristics, such as race or socioeconomic status. For that reason, individuals who are the same chronological age may express differences in subjective age. To illustrate, research has shown that in America, Hispanics and blacks become parents at earlier ages than Asians and non-Hispanic whites (Brown, Moore, & Bzostek, 2003; Ingels, Curtin,

Kaufman, Alt, & Chen, 2002; Sanderson, Dugoni, Rasinski, Taylor, & Dennis Carroll, 1996) and this can explain why Hispanics and blacks are also more likely to describe their subjective age as older than their chronological age (Johnson et al., 2007b). Broadly speaking, young adults from less privileged backgrounds are more likely to move quickly into adulthood through the completion of selected life course markers than their more privileged counterparts (Osgood, Ruth, Eccles, Jacobs, & Barber, 2005), which may explain why they also report higher feelings of subjective age.

Another line of research has considered how age is developed relationally, focusing on it as more of an interactional accomplishment. Laz (1998) argues for viewing age as a social construction, where it is developed through interactions with others. In this way, age is viewed as something that individuals “do,” similar to the doing gender perspective (West & Zimmerman, 1987). A study of 16- and 17-year olds found that feelings of adult status are based upon treatment by others; being treated like an adult leads to feeling like an adult (Horowitz & Bromnick, 2007). Similarly, losing the safety net offered by one's parents has also been attributed to increasing feelings of adulthood (Andrew, Eggerling-Boeck, Sandefur, & Smith, 2007). Some young women, particularly those from working class backgrounds, have attributed becoming a parent and the responsibility of taking care of another person as what led to their feelings of adulthood (Aronson, 2008; McMahon, 1995).

When examining subjective age during the transition to adulthood specifically, a host of more recent research has sought to understand how young people make sense of what it means to be an adult (Andrew et al., 2007; Aronson, 2008; Benson & Elder, 2011; Benson & Furstenberg, 2007; Benson & Johnson, 2009; Burton, 2007; Hartmann & Swartz, 2007; Johnson & Mollborn, 2009; Johnson et al., 2007a, 2007b). Many of these studies have demonstrated differences in how and when young adults develop their adult identity contingent on their status characteristics. In regards to race, research has found that among all racial groups, African American young adults are the first to develop feelings of adulthood, while Asian American young adults develop an adult identity latest (Benson & Elder, 2011). African Americans may develop feelings of adulthood earlier than their counterparts because, as described previously, African Americans take on adult responsibilities at earlier ages than young adults from other racial groups (Johnson et al., 2007b). While Benson and Elder (2011) were not able to fully explain why their research found that Asian American young adults develop feelings of adulthood at the oldest age, they hypothesize that the reason may be rooted in that particular group's delays in autonomy (Fulgini, 1998). The earlier acquisition of adult roles can also explain differences in feelings of adulthood by social class. Young people from financially disadvantaged family backgrounds report developing feelings of adulthood faster than young people from more privileged backgrounds, likely due to adultification, namely needing to take on adult-like responsibilities within the family at a young age (Benson & Elder, 2011; Burton, 2007; Johnson et al., 2007a; Johnson & Mollborn, 2009). Differences also exist by gender, with

studies finding that women perceive older age identities than men (Benson & Elder, 2011), perhaps due to young women's likelihood to develop autonomy from their parents at younger ages than men (Benson & Johnson, 2009). In addition, variation in feelings of adulthood has been found to exist among groups of women, largely based on their socioeconomic status. The completion of one's education was identified as leading to greater feelings of adulthood for working class women than for middle class women (Aronson, 2008).

Previous research has also investigated which transitions are most salient to young adults' age identity. Sociological studies of the transition to adulthood have long emphasized the importance of role transitions, specifically five objective life course markers: completing one's education, obtaining full time employment, moving out of the home of origin, getting married, and having children (Mortimer & Aronson, 2000; Shanahan, 2000). With the changes in the duration and sequencing of transitions, Arnett (1997, 2000, 2007) has argued that role transitions are no longer as salient to an American young person's identity as they once were. Based on studies that asked young adults to choose from a list of transitions that included both internal and objective markers which items were necessary for a person to be considered an adult, Arnett (1997, 2000) found young people were most likely to identify internal markers (e.g. making autonomous decisions, becoming financially independent). Based on these findings, Arnett (1997) concluded that the way young people develop their identity as an adult is not based on objective transitions, but instead markers that are "intangible, gradual, psychological, and individualistic" (15).

While these findings have demonstrated the importance of considering individual qualities when assessing the development of one's adult identity, others have argued for the continuing value in examining role transitions. For example, the importance of becoming a parent (Benson & Furstenberg, 2007) and finishing school (Aronson, 2008) have been shown to influence feelings of adulthood. Shanahan, Porfeli, Mortimer, & Erickson (2005) confluence model suggests that both role transitions and individual qualities are salient to the development of a young person's adult identity. Other studies have replicated these findings, lending support to the idea that role transitions and individual markers should not be viewed as mutually exclusive markers of adulthood (Andrew et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2007b; Kenyon, Rankin, Koerner, & Dennison, 2007; Molgat, 2007). In addition, while these studies have all examined how individuals develop their own identities, research has also shown that role transitions are useful signals for others in their assessment of an individual's adult status (Schlegel, 1998).

In addition to assessments of salient transitions, normative expectations are also important in shaping how a young person constructs an adult identity. Self-defined feelings of adulthood, such as subjective age identity, are often based around normative expectations for the timing of adulthood transitions (Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965). Neugarten suggested that these age-graded expectations are dictated less by the biological clock and

more by a social clock (Neugarten, 1977). Age norms are best understood as shared prescriptions and proscriptions regulating the timing of life transitions, particularly the collective evaluations of when these transitions "should" or "ought" to occur (Marini, 1984; Settersten & Mayer, 1997; Massoglia & Uggen, 2010). In their classic work, Neugarten and colleagues describe age norms as "a network of expectations that is imbedded throughout the cultural fabric of adult life" (1965: 711). These age norms play an important role in the development of one's adult identity, as they compel individuals to assess whether their progress toward adulthood is "on time" (Settersten & Mayer, 1997).

What is still missing in understanding how young adults develop their adult identity is closer examination of *how* peers influence adult identities. In a study of the influence of age norms on the timing of leaving one's home of origin for Dutch youth, Billari and Liefbroer (2007) found network level opinions about timing to be more important than societal expectations. This finding raises an interesting question: do norms of adulthood exist elsewhere than just the cultural fabric suggested by Neugarten et al. (1965)? Relative age, a measure of how old an individual feels compared to others of the same chronological age (Settersten & Mayer, 1997), is one way to attempt to capture how an individual feels relative to their peers. One notable study utilized relative age during the transition to adulthood, but the measure used did not identify exactly who young adults were using as the basis for their comparison (Johnson et al., 2007b). While young adults in previous generations went from being entrenched in their family of origin directly to their marital family, today's young people spend many years in an "in between" state (Arnett, 1997), due to the increased duration of the transition to adulthood. Research has demonstrated that this in between period has led to an increased importance on friends in the lives of young adults, as they function where family members would have in previous generations (Settersten & Ray, 2010). This increased importance of friends, in tandem with the greater length of time between adolescence and adulthood and the lack of an obvious pathway means that young adults may turn to their peers in order to assess if their progress appears "routine" or "normal." Social comparison theory posits that individuals will observe others, then identify those who are perceived to be in a similar social context and assess how they feel they measure up to those similar others (Festinger, 1954; Mueller, Pearson, Muller, Frank, & Turner, 2010). The application of social comparison theory to the transition to adulthood opens up how research can examine the construction of adult identity, as peers may influence the feelings of adulthood assumed to come with the acquisition of adulthood roles.

This study seeks to explore the process of how young adults construct their adult identity during their move into adulthood. This analysis has two objectives. First, how do peers influence the development of adult identity? Second, while prior research has demonstrated variation in definitions of adulthood between groups of differing status characteristics (Aronson, 2008; Benson & Elder, 2011; Johnson et al., 2007a, 2007b), less is known about variation

within homogeneous groups. How can peers explain within-group variation in the development of adult identity?

2. Data and methods

Data are from 60 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with young adults in the United States. Criteria for selecting respondents required them to live broadly within one mid-sized city in upstate New York and be exactly 30 years old. The reason for controlling the chronological age of the sample relates to current research on the transition to adulthood, which has shown that the process of becoming an adult can stretch all the way from age 18 into an individual's thirties (Furstenberg et al., 2004). By concentrating the sample on young adults who are all at the tail end of the transition to adulthood, respondents were more likely to have experience with at least some of the five objective transition markers of adulthood. Recruitment also focused on meeting quotas by both gender and education level, such that analysis could be conducted within both of those groups.

I recruited respondents for this study using three methods. First, some responded to flyers posted in local coffee shops and laundromats. These flyers advertised that a research study was looking for individuals who were exactly 30 years old to discuss their experiences of becoming an adult. Second, I actively recruited individuals from locations including schools, banks, a hospital, an insurance company, and auto parts stores. These respondents were recruited using the same basic study information as was posted on the flyers in laundromats and coffee shops, but in these situations I used emails and business cards. Whenever possible, I utilized a gatekeeper within the organization to assist me in distributing information about my study. In the situations where a gatekeeper was not possible, I worked to make contact with individuals within the organization myself. Third, recruitment was supplemented with snowball sampling. Upon the completion of each interview, I asked participants if they knew of others who met the study criteria. I also followed up with respondents a week later via email, which allowed them time to confirm with potential participants that they were interested in participating in this study before giving me their contact information. Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached.

From 2012 to 2013, I interviewed 36 female and 24 male respondents. A little more than half of the respondents ($n = 35$) have high levels of education, which is defined as a four-year college degree or higher, while 25 of the respondents have low levels of education, which consists of anything less than a four-year college degree. The average number of adulthood transitions the respondents had completed at the time of the interview was approximately 3.6 transitions. The most frequent number of transitions completed by the sample was five, while the least frequent number of transitions completed was one. This indicates that while the length of the transition to adulthood has increased over time (Furstenberg et al., 2004), by age 30 these respondents are closer to adulthood than adolescence (Table 1).

Table 1
Characteristics of sample.

	Percentage of total sample (N)
Gender	
Women	60% (36)
Men	40% (24)
Total	100% (60)
Race or ethnicity	
Non-Hispanic white	87% (52)
Non-Hispanic black	3% (2)
Hispanic	5% (3)
Asian	2% (1)
Other	3% (2)
Total	100% (60)
Education	
Less than high school diploma	2% (1)
High school diploma or equivalency	35% (21)
Associate's degree	5% (3)
Bachelor's degree	32% (19)
Master's degree	25% (15)
Doctorate	2% (1)
Total	100% (60)
Marital status	
Never married	50% (30)
Married	46% (28)
Divorced	2% (1)
Widowed	2% (1)
Total	100% (60)
Parental status	
Has children	47% (28)
No Children	53% (32)
Total	100% (60)
Number of transitions completed	
One	3% (2)
Two	15% (9)
Three	27% (16)
Four	25% (15)
Five	30% (18)
Total	100% (60)

The interview guide was organized into three parts. The first section addressed norms surrounding adulthood. These questions included asking respondents to define what it means to be an adult and if they feel there is a certain age at which an individual becomes an adult. The second section used ego-centric network generators (Fischer, 1982). Respondents were asked to list everyone they “would go to about something important” at three points in their lives: age 30, age 25, and age 18. Asking this question about three points during the transition to adulthood helped to ensure that respondents would include individuals who were important at earlier stages of the transition, even if they are not important in the respondent's life today. The third section asked respondents to reflect upon each of the five objective transition markers and the influence network members had on those transitions. Respondents were urged to view the list of individuals developed using the network generator as a tool to help answer questions within this third section, but I also explained that they were not limited to only discussing the individuals on that list. While respondents could list anyone close to them, the analysis for this particular study only examines the peers who were listed.

The interview guide was iterative in nature. I began data analysis after the first ten interviews, which allowed

me to revise the interview guide based on the themes that arose from the data. The interview guide was reconfigured twice, first at the end of the initial ten interviews and again at the halfway point of data collection. This allowed the questions I asked in later interviews to build on themes that arose from interviews with early respondents.

I allowed each respondent to choose the location of our interview. Most respondents requested to meet in a public place, such as a coffee shop. While the majority of interviews occurred in public spaces, a small proportion occurred in the respondents' homes or over the phone. With the respondents' permission, interviews were recorded; no respondents declined to have their interview recorded. Interviews ranged from 30 min to 2 h, with most interviews lasting approximately 1 h. Each respondent was offered a \$15 gift card as a thank you for their time. At the completion of each interview, I wrote observation notes that included my reflections and emerging research questions.

As explained previously, analysis began during the process of data collection. The qualitative coding software NVivo 10 was used to assist analysis. Prior to analysis, some deductive codes were developed based on existing literature about the transition to adulthood; for example, one code sought out mentions about the development of adult identity (Johnson et al., 2007a; Kaufman & Elder, 2002). However, analysis also drew on the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which utilized open coding of the data not based on any pre-existing codes. This open coding led to the development of many additional codes, plus the refinement of the existing codes developed prior to analysis. To illustrate, while a code about the development of adult identity was developed based on existing research, open coding revealed that this one large code could be broken down into multiple codes: feelings of being ahead, feelings of being behind, discussions surrounding timing, and normative expectations.

3. Results

This research finds that young people experiencing the transition from adolescence to adulthood use peers as a reference when developing self-perceived feelings of adulthood. More importantly, when utilizing peers in this way, young adults who are demographically similar report heterogeneous definitions of adulthood. Confirming existing research on relative age identity, it was not solely the completion of role transitions, or lack thereof, that respondents identified as influencing their feelings. Rather, respondents described two ways that they compared themselves to their peers when forming their age identity. The first type of comparison related to timing, specifically the timing of the completion of transitions compared to when their peers completed the same transitions. The second type of comparison involved assessing how they completed a transition compared to their peers, in addition to comparing the outcome of the transition for both parties. This second type of comparison can be understood as a comparison of the perceived normative nature for transitions. Both types of comparisons demonstrate how young adults develop feelings of adulthood by assessing

their role transitions in tandem with the experiences of those around them. However, when the assessments of individuals with similar status characteristics who had completed similar transitions were compared, differences in feelings of adulthood were revealed. These differences indicate that, while the same type of comparisons are used by individuals across status characteristics, because the point of reference (peer groups) differs by individual, feelings of adulthood can also vary.

3.1. Timing

When explaining how they constructed their adult identity, an overarching theme among respondents was how their feelings of adulthood were contingent on the timing of their transition relative to others within their peer group. These young adults described feeling more adult upon the acquisition of adult roles, which is to be expected based on the existing literature. Frequently, they qualified their feelings of adulthood by referencing their peers and the timing of their transition relative to their peers. They described two ways that the timing of their transition relative to others influenced how they constructed their identity as an adult: the knowledge of being the only member in a peer group with a particular adult role and having more responsibilities as a result of that role. In this way, young adults constructed their definition of themselves as an adult by situating their feelings within a social context, specifically the context of their peers.

When asked if they felt more adult upon the completion of designated role transitions, the young adults in this study answered by explaining how their feelings were not based solely on having passed another milestone of adulthood. While having completed a transition was part of how they developed their sense of adulthood, respondents also described the ways that they considered their status relative to the timing of their peers' statuses. To illustrate, one woman described her adult identity upon entering full time employment and living independently while her close friends were completing their college educations:

I actually felt like, like I was older than them because they were still in school, going to school, talking about, oh I have homework and all this. Here I'm working and doing housework. So I really felt like more of that mom figure than I think they did at that time. It just, it's interesting because they may have felt that they were adults as well, I don't know. But I think because of what I was doing compared to what they were doing, it was just a totally different aspect. (Angela, high school diploma, four role transitions completed)

While Angela remembers the responsibility associated with completing particular role transitions as furthering her feelings of adulthood, she also associates those feelings as a result of having these responsibilities prior to her friends. Completing a transition increases feelings of adulthood, but being the first to acquire a particular adult status within a peer group is what makes that status particularly pronounced. In Angela's case, the responsibility associated with

running a household and working a full time job was important to her adult identity, but it was completing these transitions before her friends that really highlighted her feelings of adulthood. A story like Angela's demonstrates how young adults do not base their feelings of adulthood solely on the acquisition of adult roles. Rather, they assess where they fit relative to their peers and use that comparison, in tandem with the acquisition of adult roles, to develop their adult identity.

Respondents also discussed how the relative timing of transitions highlighted adult responsibilities or the lack thereof, in the cases of individuals who were late adopters. With the acquisition of adult status comes expectations for behavior, such as increased personal responsibility. For those respondents who completed transitions earlier than their peers, they explained that the process of assessing their adulthood status relative to their peers made them more aware of the responsibilities that come with being an adult. Their timing highlighted how adult they felt relative to others because they often described being the only one in their peer group with a particular set of responsibilities. The absence of others within a friend group who had completed the same transition made these early adopters feel particularly adult because they were alone in their responsibilities. They described not being able to be as carefree as their friends because of their obligations. One man described what it was like to be the only member of his friend group to have children:

Out of all my friends I was the fastest one, fastest and first to do the whole family thing. They're still the ones that are going out to bars. They don't get that you have a family and you can't come out because you're tired or you just got home from work and all you want to do is come see your family. They don't get the whole thing because they don't have a family. They don't get it.

(Brian, bachelor's degree, five role transitions completed)

Like Brian, many respondents described that the responsibilities associated with particular adult roles are more pronounced when compared to one's peers, especially those who do not have those same responsibilities. Susan described her husband's experience in medical school where he had completed more transitions than his classmates,

Their priorities were just different. When you don't have kids your priorities are just different. I think my husband was probably almost jealous of them because they only had to focus on school. He had a wife and a kid at home and that was hard.

(Susan, bachelor's degree, four role transitions completed)

These young adults explained that the expectations that came with their newly acquired roles did impact how they defined themselves as an adult. However, the significance of that role and the adult expectations associated with it were more noticeable to the respondents when they assessed their status relative to those in their peer group.

A heightened sense of adulthood was not only noticeable to a peer group's earliest adopter. While those who completed transitions first described feeling set apart because of their newly acquired responsibilities, their friends were also cognizant of this change in status and publicly acknowledged the change. In some situations, respondents described how their friends would express envy over their newly adult status. For those who were the subject of such envy, it illuminated how different they felt from their friends:

Moving out on your own, there are certain steps that people take at certain times that force you into being some kind of an adult, I feel, as you take on responsibilities for yourself and doing things on your own. It kind of pushes you to be an adult, you have to. [My friends] they were jealous. They always wanted to come over and party. [laughs] But I always did think about how much easier they have it. I definitely thought of myself as more of an adult.

(Melissa, high school diploma, five role transitions completed)

As Melissa explained, the responsibilities that came from living independently of her parents were highlighted when she compared herself to her friends who did not yet have the same household obligations. While Melissa offers an example of what it felt like to be an early adopter, other respondents described what it was like to be friends with an early adopter. For these friends, the change in responsibility level was noticeable to them as well. Nick told a story that parallels how Brian described being the first to have children, but Nick was the friend who had not yet completed that transition:

Him and his girlfriend, we couldn't all go out anymore. All of a sudden it was just me going out by myself and it was like, what the [heck]? This is sort of weird. I could only go out with one of them or they would opt to stay in and I would go to their house.

(Nick, GED, four role transitions completed)

When close friends acquired the responsibilities associated with adulthood, it was noticeable to everyone in the peer group. For those who were first in a peer group to complete a transition, the responsibilities were manifest to all members of the group. The early adopter's newly acquired adult responsibilities influenced their construction of adult identity, due in part to the fact that the responsibilities were evident to all members of the group. While the responsibilities associated with the acquisition of adult roles did influence how these respondents constructed their adult identity, responsibilities were not the only salient criterion of adulthood. Rather, adult identity was explained as a combination of those responsibilities and the timing of a transition relative to one's peers.

While many respondents described the role of timing in the construction of an adult identity in relation to being an early adopter, this theme was not only limited to those who completed transitions ahead of their peers. Another set of respondents described how, irrespective of their

chronological age, completing transitions late relative to their peer group changed their feelings of adulthood. While every member of this study was chronologically old enough to be considered an adult, for respondents who had not yet finished a transition completed by many others in their peer group, they had a difficult time labeling themselves as an adult. Michelle is a married stay at home mother who recently had her third child. She had been attending college, but left after the birth of her first child. She explained her feelings compared to her friends thus, “Seeing my high school friends, they have their careers on track and they have, it seems like they’ve done all this. It’s like, I’m kind of in the same place I was six years ago. I really haven’t made any adult changes” (Michelle, high school diploma, five role transitions completed). While Michelle describes herself at a standstill when it comes to becoming an adult, in other peer groups, being 30 years old and married with three children would clearly define someone as an adult. This illustrates how much differences in peer groups can lead to differences in feelings of adulthood. Aaron explained being in graduate school while his friends were starting full time jobs this way,

To be able to see the different lifestyles we were able to have being a graduate student versus being full time in the work force, I think in some way that did, there’s always that degree of, well this person’s making way more money than I am and they’re able to do all these things when I’m still scraping by. I can’t throw money around when we go out to a bar. So in some ways I think that does affect how you perceive yourself as an adult.

(Aaron, PhD, four role transitions completed)

Being late to complete transitions led to feelings of being behind, even when a respondent had completed the normative role transitions typically defining adulthood, as the standard for timing was set by others within the peer network.

Even when these late adopters did finally complete a transition, they described feelings of being “caught up,” as opposed to feelings of being adult. This is in stark contrast to those who were early in their transitions, who did describe feelings of adulthood upon the completion of transitions. In explaining how she felt after earning her bachelor’s degree many years after her friends, Jenny illustrated the differences in language used by late adopters,

I think what really made it for me was when I graduated. I felt like I was up to their standards because they had all graduated years ago, maybe eight years ago. So when I finally did I felt like, okay, I’m like them now.

(Jenny, bachelor’s degree, five role transitions completed)

The feelings of adulthood expected to come with the completion of transitions were not felt in the same way for those who completed transitions relatively late compared to those who completed them relatively early. For these respondents, feelings of adulthood were influenced not just by completing, or not completing, a transition. Instead,

their feelings were based on a combination of factors. The completion of a transition was important, but they also evaluated the timing of their transition relative to those in their peer group. Ava described similar feelings when recalling her engagement to her now ex-fiancé,

One of my other best friends, I went to her wedding when I was 25 and she was 25. And then, one of our other friends got engaged two months later. So it kind of felt like [getting married] is what we should be doing. Looking back, I don’t even know why I said yes to him. But I was like, this is what people are doing and I don’t want to be a late bloomer.

(Ava, bachelor’s degree, two role transitions completed) Those who completed transitions later than their friends framed the process differently, not only focusing on the feelings of adulthood associated with that transition. Because these respondents were assessing when they completed transitions relative to when their friends completed transitions, their descriptions focused more on their progress relative to others. Timing modified the feelings associated with the completion of transitions. While early adopters described intensified feelings of adulthood after being the first to complete a transition, late adopters instead focused on feelings of catching up.

3.2. Normative nature of transitions

While comparing the timing of transitions relative to others was one important way that the young adults in this study developed their feelings of adulthood, it was not the only way. Respondents also described basing their feelings of adulthood on how they completed a transition relative to others. In this way, respondents perceived an appropriate standard of how to complete a transition, or a normative nature of transitions. This perceived standard was based on how one’s peers had completed a similar transition. Respondents used this perception to explain why the completion of designated role transitions did not lead to feelings of adulthood, as would be expected based on extant theory. Some respondents also described the opposite, where they had not completed designated role transitions, but due to what they perceived to be normative within their group they did not experience a reduction in their feelings of adulthood. Others used this perceived normative nature to explain the reasons why they made a particular transition the way they did, based on what they understood to be an adult standard.

Many respondents described not feeling fully adult, even upon the completion of designated role transitions. When explaining what led to these feelings, respondents frequently attributed them to a difference in the nature of their transition, particularly in the status they acquired as a result of the transition. Due to this perceived difference, many respondents felt different and ultimately not as adult as their friends. To illustrate, two respondents told stories about not feeling adult even after securing full time employment. Steven explained:

All of my friends, they all have better jobs. And then how do you define better? They make more than I do,

which is one way that it's better. But from talking to them, it's a lot less stressful. It's not retail. When you think of the retail job you think of mostly college kids. That's how I started there, I started in school part time. So none of [my friends'] jobs are in retail and they're all making more money. So as far as relative to them? No, I feel that they're closer to being an adult than I am.

(Steven, bachelor's degree, three role transitions completed)

Andrea told a similar story:

My cousin was a little bit older than me and she was a medical secretary. I had a few friends that were bank tellers and I was thinking, I'm working at Burger King. [My current job as a receptionist] makes me feel older than flipping hamburgers at Burger King.

(Andrea, 11th grade, five role transitions completed)

What Steven and Andrea illustrate is that even though extant theory may suggest that a young person has completed a transition, in this case obtaining full time employment, they do not necessarily feel they have acquired the expected sense of adulthood. These feelings are due to how individuals perceive the nature of transitions compared to their friends. For Steven and Andrea, they understood the correct way to obtain full employment as finding a job more like the types they described their friends holding. Because their friends held jobs they perceived to be appropriately adult, it highlighted that their jobs felt more adolescent or for "college kids," as Steven described. However, these feelings extended past service industry work. Maria explained how she felt when she started a full time job while others she went to school with began medical school,

The reason I didn't feel right on time is because the plan had always been to go to medical school and because I didn't do so well on the MCAT, I got waitlisted. It was just the people in my department that were all applying to medical school. So it was a small group of 17 and we were all very aware of who got accepted, who didn't, where they were going. So there was definitely this moment of, this is not what I am supposed to be doing. You just got a job, but you need to keep trying to get better on that test so you can go to medical school.

(Maria, master's degree, three role transitions completed)

While medical school had always been Maria's individual plan, being in a group where many held similar goals exacerbated her feelings of being behind when she began working after college. For those who feel that their transition does not match up to the normative standard set by their peers, having completed a transition is not enough to develop feelings of being an adult. Rather, it is completing a transition in a manner that is normatively appropriate based on a peer network that is most important.

For some young adults, the perceived normative nature of transitions made the completion of a transition

significantly less salient to how they constructed their identity as an adult. In these situations, respondents described situations where they had not yet completed transitions, but that did not lead to a diminished feeling of adulthood. When prompted to explain their feelings about still having transitions left to complete, respondents explained ways that the normative path within their friend group overrode what it meant to be an adult, more so than basing their identity solely the completion of selected transitions. To illustrate, Nick had to move back in with his parents after the birth of his child. While this could be seen as a step backwards, he explained that it did not lead to feeling like less of an adult because it was a common step for his friends after having children,

If I didn't have those friends who had [moved home], I definitely would have thought, oh my god, what a loser, I can't do this, I've got to put [my daughter] up for adoption. If I didn't see my friends go through this, I would have thought I was a loser. I know that they're stand up guys. I really admire them sort of as role models, so I see them do it and I know they're adults and that helps.

(Nick, GED, four role transitions completed)

Again, it is this perceived normative nature that influences how these young adults describe their feelings of adulthood more so than just the completion, or lack thereof, of transitions. For Nick, his story demonstrates that moving back home after having a child did not feel like he was less of an adult because he saw many friends make the same move after the birth of their children. Steven told a story about residence that echoed Nick's sentiment. In his early twenties, he needed to move back home with his parents for a period of time. However, he described to me how having many other friends in the same situation influenced how he felt, "I think if I was the only one [living at home], then I would be thinking, what am I doing wrong? But having other friends living with their parents and still being supported by their parents in some fashion, that certainly helped" (Steven, bachelor's degree, three role transitions completed). Were the choices of Nick and Steven framed within existing knowledge of the construction of adult identity during this life stage, one would assume that they would feel they are not fully adults. However, because they are basing the way they assess their adult status on what they perceive to be normative within their peer group, decisions that appear to be objectively non-normative can take on the status of being normative within a particular context.

3.3. *Heterogeneity among homogeneous individuals*

Respondents across both gender and education level reported using both types of comparison methods to their peers when developing their feelings of adulthood. This finding uncovers more about the process of how young people develop their relative age identity during the transition to adulthood, but does not reflect at all upon the outcome of such a process. Existing research would predict that differences in feelings of relative age identity would

exist between individuals of different status characteristics, such as race or socioeconomic status. However, this research finds that even individuals who are of similar demographic backgrounds and have completed similar transitions can still report differences in their feelings of adulthood. This variation exists as a result of the peers to which they are making comparisons, as the way that individuals perceive their status varies depending on the people to which those comparisons are being made.

To illustrate, Molly and Andrea are both married. Molly finished high school, while Andrea dropped out after the 11th grade. Both women have full time employment, and while Andrea and her husband live independently, Molly and her husband live with her father-in-law, to assist after the recent death of her mother-in-law. In addition, they both belonged to peer groups where they were the first to get married. In many ways, these women fit into a similar profile and therefore it would be expected that their feelings of adulthood would also be similar. However, their reflections of how they identified themselves as an adult upon getting married ultimately revealed differences in perceived relative age. First, Molly reflected on what it felt like to be the only member of her peer group to be married,

For a long time I was ahead. It's only been in the last few years where my friends have gotten married, where I've been married for six [years] and been with [my husband] forever. So for a really long time I felt like I was ahead. For a long time we were the old married couple and I felt like more of an adult than most of my friends.

(Molly, high school diploma, three role transitions completed)

Molly's story highlights feelings of being ahead of her peers, or more adult, because she was the first to complete this particular transition. Utilizing a method of comparison based on timing, Molly's story is in many ways expected; completing more transitions is likely to result in greater feelings of adulthood. Therefore, one would anticipate that Andrea's reaction to being the first in her friend group to be married would mirror Molly's. Andrea reflected upon her feelings of adulthood after getting married thus,

I: Did you feel more adult, being one of the only married couples in your group of friends?

Andrea: Not really. A lot of our friends have kids, so it's like they're together.

They're not married, but they have kids. ... So, I never felt different.

(Andrea, 11th grade, five role transitions completed)

Andrea's story highlights the importance of considering peer groups when examining relative age outcomes. While being the first to be married created feelings of greater adulthood for Molly as a result of the status of her peers, it did not inspire the same feelings for Andrea. For Andrea and her peer group, feelings of adulthood were based less on the timing of marriage relative to others and more on their status as parents. These differences in subjective age result from the peers to which these women were drawing

comparisons. Even with many similar characteristics, differences in reference point play a big role in determining how individuals perceive their status as an adult.

Many of the young adults in this study reflected upon completing their education and the feelings of adulthood associated with that transition. Steven and Alex both have high levels of education; Steven earned a bachelor's degree, while Alex recently completed a master's degree. Alex lives with his wife, while Steven cohabits with his girlfriend. In addition, both men work in a full time capacity. In spite of these many similarities, they described differing perceptions of subjective age related to the completion of their education. Steven explained completing his education thus,

I: Were your friends still working or were they also going back to school?

Steven: No, everybody was working.

I: Did that make you think about adulthood at all?

Steven: In my mind, that was me taking another step to becoming an adult.

(Steven, bachelor's degree, three role transitions completed)

Alex described different feelings upon completing his education, however. He described his education trajectory relative to two friends who completed their education after high school,

Alex: I went on and furthered [my education] and I know it will pay off in the end for me, but, you know, it's like, okay, they didn't really have to do much.

I: How does it make you feel?

Alex: Behind. Behind. A lot of them are already moving on to their second homes that they're building. I've always felt behind in that progression of life.

(Alex, master's degree, five role transitions completed)

Completing a master's degree led Alex to feel behind his peers, because while he was in school, they were moving forward with jobs and houses. While he acknowledged that in the long run taking the time to earn additional degrees will be beneficial, because his close friends chose different pathways that allowed them to move into adulthood more quickly, Alex struggled to feel adult even with his advanced education. Based on objective markers, it would be expected that Alex should feel more adult than Steven, as he is married and has obtained a higher level of education. Even with their similarities, Alex and Steven's perception of their status as an adult differed contingent on how they viewed themselves within their peer group.

Another group of respondents demonstrated this variation in feelings of adulthood when reflecting upon their residential situations. Emma has earned a high school diploma, while Denise completed an associate's degree. Denise is not currently married and Emma was not at the time that her story takes place. In her early 20s, prior to her marriage and children, Emma needed to move back home with her parents after a period of living independently and

remembered the experience as reflecting negatively on her feelings of herself as an adult,

It was annoying because I had had independence. I definitely did not like it. It was upsetting. Once [my friends] started to finish college and move on with their lives and all the things they had done and here I am living at home, [I felt like] this kind of sucks. [laughs]

(Emma, high school diploma, five role transitions completed)

Without explicitly stating it, Emma's story indicates that living at home made it difficult for her to feel like an adult. These feelings were compounded by having to watch her friends' lives move forward, while she felt her move toward adulthood was stagnating. Emma's feelings stand in contrast to Denise, who currently lives with her mother. She described her situation to me thus, "But honestly, it's just like I'm an adult that just goes home to sleep" (Denise, associate's degree, two role transitions completed). When prompted to explain what about her residential situation made her feel like she was an adult, Denise referred back to the names she recorded during the network generator part of the interview, "[Chris] owns his own house, but [Jess] just moved out. [Rachel] is going to be moving out, but [Gina], I don't think so. [Emily], on weekends she's at her boyfriend's house." Again, due to Emma and Denise's many similarities it would be expected that they would reflect upon being in the same situation in an analogous manner. However, Emma identifies her struggle to feel adult as a result of having friends whose lives were moving forward, including moving out of their home of origin. In contrast, Denise suggests that she does not feel behind because she has many friends in her exact situation, where they still live at home with their parents. Even with many similarities, it is the peers who construct a form of reference that lead to these ultimately disparate outcomes.

4. Discussion

Building on research about the development of adult identity during the transition to adulthood, this study explores the process of developing adult identity. While a large portion of the existing research on this topic has examined how individuals understand themselves as adults relative to the completion of designated transitions, this study examined the role of peers on said process. Findings indicate that young adults do not develop their adult identity based solely on the completion of specified transitions, but also by assessing the completion of those transitions relative to their peers in two ways. First, young adults described evaluating the timing of their transitions relative to the timing of their friends' transitions. Second, respondents described evaluating how they completed their transitions relative to the way their peers completed transitions, comparing their transitions to a perceived normative transition experience within their social group. Ultimately, these young adults use individual perceptions of transitions relative to their peers in tandem with the completion of transitions to develop their adult identity.

While these findings offer support for both social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) and subjective age as relational (Laz, 1998), they also suggest that the process of assessing one's adult identity is multi-layered and may also be subject to increasing levels of individuation, much like many other aspects of the transition to adulthood. In addition, these findings broaden existing knowledge about the timing of when young people begin to identify themselves as adults.

These assessments offer support for studies that have found that not all role transitions are understood as markers of adulthood for young people (Benson & Furstenberg, 2007). More importantly, though, these findings offer an explanation as to why not all role transitions led to the previously expected feelings of adulthood. When asked why they did not feel adult after the completion of particular transitions, respondents attributed their feelings to what they perceived to be the normative nature within their friend group. They described assessing their experience against the experience of their peers, holding up peers as a reference point to which they measured their own progress. Not completing a transition in the same manner as those used as a marker led to these lacking feelings of adulthood for the individual. This finding also extended in the other direction, where respondents would describe not completing transitions. While existing research would assume that this would lead to diminished feelings of adulthood, respondents described not feeling like less of an adult because their progress was normative based on the progress of their friends. This suggests that there is more nuance to the function of role transitions in the development of adult identity than just if a transition has been completed or not.

These findings not only contribute to our understanding of how young adults construct their adult identity, but also speak to the outcome of that process. While research on subjective age identity has consistently shown that less advantaged young adults develop feelings of adulthood more quickly than their more advantaged counterparts (Benson & Elder, 2011; Burton, 2007; Johnson et al., 2007b), most research in this area has focused on differences by socioeconomic status or race. This study uses comparisons of individuals with similar status characteristics, in addition to the completion of similar role transitions, to find that variation in feelings of adulthood do exist even when individuals are similar in many ways. These findings suggest that peer groups may also be a salient unit of comparison when studying subjective age status, in addition to status characteristics. While the exact reason is outside the scope of this study, these findings indicate that the composition of peer groups may help to explain how individuals at similar places in their adulthood trajectory perceive their statuses differently. Many of the young adults in this study would objectively be considered adults, based solely on their chronological age and the number of designated role transitions they have completed. However, their sense of adulthood was determined by when and how they completed those transitions relative to their peers. While the many of them were completing the same transitions at the same ages, being the first in a peer group to complete a

transition can lead to very different feelings of adulthood compared to being the last, as these respondents demonstrated.

By suggesting that the development of adult identity is a relative process, these findings also extend extant research on the existence of social norms during the transition to adulthood. Most of the research surrounding norms during the transition to adulthood has focused on age norms, arguing that these norms exist as part of the “cultural fabric” (Neugarten et al., 1965). Following the work of Billari and Liefbroer (2007) on age norms in the Netherlands, these findings from U.S. data challenge that assertion by seeking to understand if norms about adulthood may exist at additional levels, in this case within peer groups. This study finds that when young adults assess their adulthood status relative to those around them, they perceive a normative way to complete designated role transitions. While respondents are describing statistical age norms (Settersten & Mayer, 1997) within their friend groups, they perceive them as optimal age norms (Settersten & Mayer, 1997), such that they believe the ways their friends completed transitions are truly the best way to complete them. However, what is perceived to be normative varies from one peer group to another. These findings indicate that the way one group views the “proper” way to complete a transition may differ greatly from how other groups understand the same transition. By demonstrating that perceived norms about adulthood also exist at the level of friendship groups, this study first demonstrates that adulthood norms exist outside of solely a societal level and second, raises the question as to how young adults reconcile norms from different levels of measurement when developing their feelings of adulthood. It may be that one set normative ideas about the transition to adulthood exist broadly for all young adults, but these findings indicate that a second set of perceived norms exist within friendship groups and are salient to such a degree that individuals are also using them when constructing subjective definitions of adult identity.

While these findings demonstrate that perceptions of normative behavior are linked to friendship groups, they may also be influenced by the social context in which young people come of age. The individuals who comprise this study's sample were in their mid-twenties at the time of the 2008 economic meltdown. While some may have been well enough entrenched in adulthood to not feel the effects of the economic downturn, others faced many changes in what was now considered to be normative behavior. To illustrate, some participants described moving back home as not leading to diminished adulthood feelings because many of their friends had also moved back in with parents. Even though they based their explanations around what they perceived at the group level, the reason why so many people have needed to move back home may be related to these large-scale economic changes. Further studies on this topic, particularly those that examine individuals who were a bit younger at the time of the 2008 economic crisis, would benefit from considering how perceptions of normative behavior are shaped by societal trends.

The underlying theme in much of the research on the transition to adulthood involves trying to understand how young people find their way into adulthood in a world where many of the guides used by previous generations have disappeared. Arnett (2007) summarized this line of research thus, “Theorists have emphasized how in recent decades the life course in industrialized societies has become increasingly characterized by individualization...and people are increasingly left to their own resources” (69). The findings of this study highlight peers as one of those resources and demonstrate how, in the face of a diminished societal model of adulthood, young people utilize them as a resource. Without as many institutional constraints and supports to guide the way, the ones offered at the group level become increasingly significant. By examining adult identity in a relative context, this study reveals the increasingly social nature of the transition to adulthood. In addition, it underscores the importance of treating those at this stage in the life course as social actors who are embedded within groups of friends, but also among family members, co-workers, and classmates. While status characteristics are an important determinant in how a young person becomes an adult, treating them as the main mechanism guiding the way to adulthood obscures what is happening at both the group and the individual level. By looking within groups of similar individuals, this study demonstrates how today's young people treat their peers as a resource which helps them to assess their status as an adult.

This study fills an important gap in the literature by examining how peer groups can influence the construction of subjective definitions of adult identity. In addition, this study offers new insights into variation in feelings of adulthood during the transition to adulthood and adulthood norms. However, there are some limitations that should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, this study only examines how individuals develop their identities relative to others using role transitions. Role transitions were chosen as their completion is easier to be perceived by an outsider than individual transitions. Feelings of responsibility or autonomy may be difficult to assess for someone who is not the individual experiencing these feelings. As previous research has demonstrated the importance of internal transitions in tandem with role transitions, future research would benefit from examining how a relative adult identity is constructed using both types of transitions. In addition, this study design permits individuals to describe their perceptions of their friend groups but does not allow for network level analyses about these friend groups. As these findings demonstrate the importance of understanding how an individual fits within their peer group, future studies should utilize a social networks approach to better examine the role of network composition on feelings of adulthood. Also, this study did not analytically consider the sexual identity of the study participants. While lesbian and gay individuals were included in this sample, they comprised too small of a percentage of the total sample to draw conclusions about how feelings of adulthood can vary based on sexual identity. Additional research on this topic would benefit

from more carefully considering sexual identity, as institutional constraints (e.g. illegality of same-sex marriage, adoption restrictions) make the completion of some adulthood transitions more difficult for these young adults. Finally, while qualitative data allows for an in-depth understanding of the experiences of these young adults, the small size of the sample means that these findings should not be viewed as broadly generalizable to all young adults. However, these findings make an important contribution toward understanding how young adults construct their adult identity during the transition to adulthood. Future research would benefit from examining these processes using a larger sample of young adults who are currently experiencing those transitions.

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