

# THE NEW ADULTHOOD? THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TRANSITIONING YOUNG ADULTS

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## ABSTRACT

*The discovery that the transition to adulthood is increasingly complicated and extended has prompted many social scientists to see it as a distinct phase in the life course. But while scholars have learned a great deal about the objective dimensions of this new “young” or “emerging” adulthood, we know very little about how it is understood and experienced by young people themselves. This paper begins to fill that gap, drawing on a new battery of intensive interviews with selected participants in the University of Minnesota’s Youth Development Study (YDS). Focusing on respondents’ subjective conceptions of adulthood, understandings of conventional milestones, and visions of aging and success, we suggest that young people today see themselves entering a new phase of life – a dynamic, constantly unfolding package of social roles and personal qualities. This “new adulthood” is seen as an alternative to and improvement on the static, stoic, and stagnant adulthood of their parents’ generation, although whether it is seen as a new and distinct phase in the life course remains open to question. These findings not only capture the expressed understandings of*

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*adulthood emerging among those in their late twenties, but also allow us to reflect on recent economic and cultural transformations in the post-industrial United States.*

In recent years, social scientists from numerous fields have argued that the transition to adulthood has become more complicated, multifaceted, and extended than ever before, so much so that they believe it is best understood as a distinct phase in the life course. But, while scholars have learned a great deal about the various pathways and structural forces that define this new “young” or “emerging” adulthood,<sup>1</sup> we know much less about how it is understood and experienced by the young people actually living through the stage. What do “transitioning” young adults know and think about themselves and their lives as they move into “traditional” adult roles, those of worker, partner/spouse, and parent? Are they aware of the ways in which their experiences are different from their parents? Do they think of themselves as being in a distinct life phase or period? Do they assign any particular meaning and significance to it? What challenges and obstacles do they believe stand in their way? How do they understand their lives and adulthood more generally?

Research on these more subjective, culturally oriented questions has so far been dominated by psychologists. According to such work, young Americans view the transition to adulthood as defined primarily by individualistic attributes and qualities, such as accepting responsibility for one’s self, gaining autonomy and independence, and becoming financially independent (Arnett, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2003; see also: Cote, 2000; Scheer & Palkovitz, 1994; Greene, Wheatley, & Aldava, 1992). These studies have downplayed the importance of the demographic markers that sociologists and demographers have long believed define adulthood (cf. Hogan & Astone, 1986). Indeed, in a recent contribution, Arnett (2003) has gone so far as to argue that “most young Americans regard specific events traditionally viewed as marking the transition to adulthood, such as finishing education, beginning full-time work, and marriage, as irrelevant to the attainment of adult status” (p. 63).

Sociologists have begun to re-examine these claims in the past few years, focusing especially on the salience and timing of traditional, more socially oriented markers of adulthood. A 2002 General Social Survey (GSS) module, for example, had questions about subjective perceptions of the appropriate timing of five traditional markers of adulthood (leaving home, finishing school,

getting a full-time job, becoming financially independent, supporting a family, marrying and becoming a parent). Among the most significant findings, completing school was seen as most important, with similar high priority placed on establishing an independent household and being employed full time, while less emphasis was placed on marriage and parenthood (Furstenberg, Kennedy, McCloyd, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2004). Moreover, ratings varied little by social background including sex, race/ethnicity, urban/rural, and religion, although poorer and working class respondents tended to believe that family formation should occur much earlier than respondents who were college educated and more affluent. In all, these findings support Settersten's work on the expanding awareness and tolerance of nontraditional and off-time transitions to adulthood (Settersten, 2003a, 2003b; Settersten & Hagestad, 1996).

Extending such work, Shanahan, Porfeli, Mortimer, and Erickson (2005) analyzed the relative influence of individualistic and social factors that predict when young people themselves feel like adults. In contrast to the psychologists, the Shanahan group finds that conventional family transition markers are the most consistent predictors of self-perceived adulthood. While they do not dismiss the importance of individualistic criteria, they suggest that "adult status is likely based upon a combination of personal qualities and social roles" (Shanahan et al., p. 251). Based on intensive interviews with young women in the same study, Aronson (2005) comes to a similar conclusion, though she claims that only two objective markers – becoming a parent and establishing financial independence – carry this cultural significance.

Although such work lays an important foundation, further research remains to flesh out these broad-brush renderings of subjective states and personal perceptions of young adults in the transition to adulthood. At a very basic level, we could use a better understanding of how and why young adults answer these survey questions as they do, and the deeper meaning and significance (if any) they attribute to these answers. More substantively, we need to examine the extent to which young adults themselves put emphasis on the psychological states of being and independence versus the more sociological attention to role achievement and aspirations. Even more important, we need to gather data on their broader, more synthetic views about adulthood and young adulthood taken as a whole: how do they conceptualize young adulthood in their own terms? Do they really see it as a new and distinct phase in the life course? What is meaningful or significant about it? How do they understand the relationship of this part of life to more traditional conceptions of adulthood? The goal of this paper is to draw on a new battery of intensive, life history interviews we conducted with selected participants in the University of Minnesota's longitudinal Youth

Development Study (YDS) to generate some answers to these questions and in doing so to cultivate a deeper and broader understanding of the challenges and possibilities of the transition to adulthood that emerge when we take subjective states and cultural meaning worlds seriously.

One of our goals in this chapter is to develop a broader, more synthetic portrait of subjective perspectives on the transition to adulthood and adulthood more generally. We will do this by focusing on respondent answers to questions about their own subjective identification as “adults,” their views of traditional milestones, markers and sequences, and their visions of aging and success.<sup>2</sup>

The chapter proceeds as follows. It begins with a discussion of YDS and how we selected individuals to interview for this particular paper. The main body of the chapter then presents our findings in three main parts about how early adulthood is understood and experienced in St. Paul. In the first section we demonstrate how, in contrast to the claims of psychologists, young adults understand their “emerging adulthood” as a package of social roles and personal traits that is in the process of being cultivated and constructed. In the second section, we discuss the open, optimistic, and pragmatic evaluations our respondents have about the dynamic processes of transitioning into adulthood. In the third and final section, we explore the hypothesis that what we see in these interviews may not only be an awareness of a new stage in the life course but also, and more importantly, a whole new conception of adulthood. The paper concludes with a discussion of the sources, generalizability, and implications of these findings with a special attention to the lack of planning and purposiveness about the fact that is ironically paired with these open and optimistic views of adulthood. These findings not only provide a profile of the expressed understandings of adulthood emerging today among late twenty-somethings, but also allow us to reflect on recent economic and cultural transformations in the postindustrial, postmodern United States.

## **SAMPLE AND METHOD**

Young adults interviewed for this chapter are all long-term participants of the YDS. The YDS has followed a panel of young people from St. Paul, Minnesota since 1987.<sup>3</sup> The initial YDS sample was drawn randomly from a list of ninth grade students attending public schools (1,138 students and their parents consented to participate, including 128 Hmong families). The first data collection took place in the Spring of 1988 (1,105 students

completed the first-wave surveys) when most panel members were 14 and 15 years old. Parents also completed surveys during the first year and four years later. The panel included teenagers of diverse social backgrounds although because the sample was drawn in the public schools, it does not represent the more affluent residents of the city who send their children to private or parochial schools. Excepting the Hmong respondents (whose data have been analyzed separately from the non-Hmong youth in most YDS papers), the initial panel was 75% White, 10% African-American, 5% Hispanic, and 4% Asian. (The remainder did not choose any of these categories nor did they consider themselves to be “mixed.”) Median family income was in the range of \$30,000–\$39,999; 62% of the parents reported family incomes at or below this level. Parental education was fairly high, as one might expect in this setting: 27% of the fathers and 19% of the mothers were college graduates; but 59% of fathers and 61% of mothers had not attained more than a high school education. While as in most longitudinal studies, attrition has been greater among the less advantaged young persons, non-Whites, and the non-native born. On the whole, however, the demographic profiles of the initial sample and that of the sample remaining in 2000 were very much the same (see [Mortimer, 2003](#) for further information).

The panel has been followed via annual surveys in all years (with the exception of 1996 and 2001) since 1988, which have enabled us to monitor their aspirations and plans with respect to future work and education, as well as family formation; their investment in work and education, and the quality of their occupational experiences.<sup>4</sup> In addition to this survey data, several subsamples of participants were interviewed in early adulthood. We drew participants for our current project from three specific batteries of earlier interviews. The first was a 1999–2000 study of some 69 YDS respondents who were interviewed regarding their work experiences and occupational choice ([Mortimer, Zimmer-Gembeck, Holmes, & Shanahan, 2002](#)). The sampling frame for this project was based on differing patterns of career decision-making that had been observed from YDS survey responses including those who made career decisions early, those whose decisions changed but then stabilized, and those who drifted through their mid-twenties. Twenty-four of these respondents, spread across each of the three career-decision trajectories, were re-interviewed for the present project.

The second interview-based study we used to draw our current sample consisted of 31 YDS female respondents who had indicated on their surveys that they had received AFDC during the previous five years. These young women were interviewed in 1999 about their experiences while receiving welfare ([Grabowski, 2001](#)). For the current study, 20 of these women were

re-interviewed. The final subsample of research participants were drawn from the 42 Hmong YDS subjects who responded to the 2000 YDS survey. Five Hmong men and five Hmong women were interviewed for a total of 10 Hmong respondents. About half of these respondents had been interviewed previously regarding their educational, work, and family experiences. Although the other half had not been interviewed previously, they were recruited for this qualitative study to increase the number of Hmong participants, and thus enhance our understanding of the experiences of young Hmong immigrants as they move into adulthood in Minnesota. The demographic characteristics of the 54 respondents are summarized in Table 1. It is worth noting that in contrast to the convenience samples of college student participants utilized by many researchers looking at the subjective dimensions of young adulthood, our sample is relatively diverse (particularly in its class and educational composition) and composed of young people later in the transition to adulthood.

The 54 in-depth, semistructured interviews were conducted during the summer and fall of 2001 as a part of the Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy qualitative module.<sup>5</sup> That project implemented a standardized questionnaire covering some 18 different areas of the life course for respondents from New York City, San Diego, rural Iowa and St. Paul, Minnesota. Because interviews had been done with all but a handful of YDS respondents in the recent years, a modified site version of the cross-site interview guide was developed to update previously collected

**Table 1.** Minnesota Site Sample Characteristics ( $N = 54$ ).

Gender	Age	Highest Education	Race	Marital Status	Children
Male: 13	28–32		White: 36	Single: 13	Yes: 37
Female: 41		<High school: 1	Black: 4	Married: 27	No: 17
		HS/GED: 9	Black/White: 2	Cohabiting: 9	
		2-Year college: 7	Hispanic: 1	Divorced: 7	
		Some college, no degree: 14	Native American: 1		
		4-Year college: 17	Hmong: 10	Widowed: 0	
		Masters: 4	White: 66%	Living with partner 66%	Yes: $\approx$ 66%
		Professional: 2	Non-White: 33%	Living single 33%	No: $\approx$ 33%

information and covering areas not addressed in the earlier interviews. The Minnesota questionnaire was developed by Swartz and Hartmann; the interviews were conducted by Swartz and YDS collaborator, Lori Grabowski. They averaged between 1<sup>1/2</sup> and 2 h in length and took place in a convenient location for participants, often in their homes or local coffee shops, and less often at their workplace. The fact that all subjects had participated in the YDS for over 10 years and most had been interviewed contributed to the ease and flow of interviews. All interviews were tape recorded, and descriptive and analytic field notes were written up by the interviewers to provide the necessary context information and to facilitate ongoing analysis. Interview tapes were transcribed and coded by a team of research assistants using the qualitative analysis software package Atlas.ti and working under the supervision of Hartmann and Swartz.

## YOUNG ADULTHOOD AS A PACKAGE

Our first and arguably single most important finding is that, contrary to the claims of psychologists, our respondents' conceptions of their emerging adult status and of adulthood more generally remain very much tied to traditional social roles and demographic markers. When we asked them questions about the timing of their own entry into adulthood (as opposed to the more abstract inventories about qualities and characteristics typically found on surveys), we got rich personal narratives that consistently harkened back to specific markers and traditional demographic indicators. For instance, when asked whether he thought of himself as an adult, John, a White college-educated man from working-class origins, exclaimed, "I try not to a whole lot!" but then went on to explain that he indeed thought of himself as an adult because "[I'm] 29. I have a full time job, I earn a decent wage, I own my own car, I have a fiancée, I'm looking at buying a house." For John, age and traditional markers of adulthood were important to his perception of himself as an adult.

Some of our respondents pegged their "emerging adulthood" (not a term they actually used) to a single moment or marker, such as child-bearing, setting up a household, or landing a job as might be the case when answering a standard survey. Twenty-nine-year-old Jake laughed when asked if he thought of himself as an adult. "Most of the time," he said hesitantly. When asked when he started thinking of himself as an adult, Jake, an attorney working for a large firm in downtown Chicago, said that it was on launching his law career, "Probably when I started working at a law firm,

once I was out of school.” Similarly, Scott, an undercover police officer, suggested age and work as important to his self-perception of being adult. “Probably mid-twenties.... It’s about the time I became a cop and I had to get pretty serious ... the job kind of dictated that, you get more responsibilities.” Having children in their teens or early twenties was experienced by many women in our sample as pushing them abruptly into adulthood. For instance, Alicia, a biracial poor mother of three, remembered first considering herself an adult during her senior year of high school – “right after I had my kid. ...I had no choice. I had to take care of [her], that’s my responsibility.”

A handful of young Minnesotans used some other single marker as a signal that they reached adulthood, often one related to a change in status or relationship with others. For example, one young respondent dated the moment she began to feel like an adult very precisely, linking it to a status shift within her family. It happened over the holidays two years earlier, she told us, “when my grandma let me sit at the adult table for Christmas dinner (laughs). No, really, its actually kind of funny because the kids have always had a table at my grandma’s for Christmas dinners and I got to sit with adults, it was like you know, a big deal.”

The majority of our respondents, however, found it much more difficult to pinpoint the sense of being an adult to a single event or marker and instead seemed to stress the accumulation of roles as the more salient factor. Asked if she felt like an adult, for example, Kate, a White middle-class college-educated married mother of two preschool age children, acknowledged that she thought of herself as an adult but also insisted “there are so many gradations of [being an adult]” that it was not an easy thing to specify. “Moving away to go to college for the first time, that seemed pretty grown up,” she recalled. “And then getting married, jeez, that’s pretty adult and having kids, that’s pretty adult.” Michelle, a 29-year-old White, middle-class stay-at-home mom, said she started feeling like an adult “probably between getting married and having kids ... I think that in that area of getting married and having kids. Somewhere in there, it sort of felt like, ok, you kind of take that leap, even if you haven’t lived at home for five years or whatever, it is sort of like ... you’re finally kind of your own, separate family and separate person, whatever ... not feeling so dependent on my folks.” In a similar way, Carolyn, a White woman with an advanced degree in mathematics, claimed she finally started to feel fully like an adult as she approached age 30 but it hadn’t come out of nowhere. “It’s been growing ever since I graduated since college but it didn’t really hit me until I graduated from grad school and started earning a paycheck that actually was

significant. I'm starting to realize that my students seem so young and I think that's part of it, I'm feeling much further away from the college kids." Although Ka, a 30-year-old Hmong mother of five and an elementary school teacher, stated that she sometimes thought of herself as a kid because she felt youthful and preferred the company of children, she admitted that she has gradually felt more like an adult over time through work and parenthood and the responsibilities that came with these:

"I think it's when I got my job and made money. Seeing more responsibility for myself and my family. I feel grown up that way. You're aging everyday and of course I'm becoming an adult in that way and then having kids. A person who has four or five kids, you do not consider yourself a kid, you're an adult."

Just as the accumulation of roles perceived to signal adult maturity contributed to an emerging sense of adulthood, a sense of lagging behind in achieving these supposed adult statuses challenged some young Minnesotans' view of themselves as adults. Patrice, a lower class African-American who was a part-time worker and mother of four, felt that her persistent employment difficulty and welfare dependence limited the extent to which she (and others like her) could consider her fully an adult. She commented: "No, [I'm not an adult] I'm growing. If they can only describe an adult by forty hours a week working functionally, then no." Luisa, an elementary school teacher for gifted-and-talented children lived with her parents in order to pay back her student loans. When asked whether she felt like an adult, Luisa laughed and said, "I don't. I don't know when that happens, but I don't." In explaining why she says that although she feels like an adult, she cited two things: her playfulness and the fact that she still lives with her parents when she wanted to be living on her own. "Well, living at home .... I don't know when that shift happens ... I guess when I am teaching I feel like an adult, standing up there, then it's recess and I'm all over the place."

Even those who had a conception of themselves as grown-up in many respects sometimes experienced their adult status as limited when they had not yet achieved or had lost an adult role that they themselves or others defined as a central marker of adulthood. For instance, although Kate, the young college-educated mother introduced earlier, considered herself to be an adult she felt her adult status was challenged by the fact that she now worked as a cashier at a pizza place. Even Jake, our attorney, insisted, "There are now degrees of adults." While he believed his position in the law firm legitimately granted him status as an adult where "I can behave the same in a courtroom as someone who's 50 or 60," he still hesitated to confidently declare himself an adult. Instead, his single status (when he

wanted to be married) and his residence in a trendy urban apartment (when he wanted to own a home in the suburbs) limited his own sense of himself as fully adult in the way he wanted to be. "I'm not a settled adult," he said resigning himself to his perception that he had yet to realize his view of adulthood, which consisted of a constellation of adult roles, rather than achieving a single marker.

None of this is to suggest that the psychologists are wrong to emphasize individualistic qualities and characteristics. Quite the contrary, there was considerable evidence of that discourse and discussion, especially from those who didn't feel entirely adult-like or had trouble answering the question for other reasons. For example, one White working-class Army Reservist and student said that there wasn't any single event when he suddenly felt like an adult instead traced his adulthood to a time when he made "my own decisions and kind of took control of my own destiny." A White middle-class stay-at-home mother, Tricia, defined adulthood as coming to the realization "that there is a lot of things you *can* do – you can go out to the bar, you can get trashed every night, but it's not something you *should* do. You should act like an adult. You should be more responsible." Melanie, a biracial single woman from working-class origins suggests independence as a hallmark of adulthood "Just being so independent, like totally depending upon only yourself."

The key point here is that when asked to talk about their adulthood in their own terms, young adults used the language of independence, maturity, autonomy, and responsibility, but almost always tied these concepts to social roles and statuses, experiences with others, and involvement in other and often new social positions and relationships.<sup>6</sup> What is more, many of our respondents appeared to experience, understand, and explain these more abstract attributes and qualities only insofar as they were tied to concrete social roles and experiences. Indeed, more than a few respondents resorted to individualistic qualities such as "independence" or "maturity" only after coming at a loss for words when they were prompted to describe the characteristics they believed defined adulthood.

This complex, multifaceted package of roles and responsibilities, of sociological markers and psychological attributes, is perhaps easiest to see for respondents who pegged their adulthood to a single social marker. For instance, Gao, a Hmong woman who had dropped out of high school at 17 to marry, linked her adulthood to becoming a mother at age 20: "[I began to think of myself as an adult] after I had my son ... because I was responsible for another human being, that's part of it. And the other reason was that it made me realize that I couldn't act like a child because I had this child. And

you can't act like a kid when you are a parent." Another young woman's sense of adulthood took shape when she first set up her own independent household after several years living at her mother's with her husband and son. "Believe it or not," she told us decisively, "the day I moved into my own home ... is when I became a full-fledge adult. Yes ... I had a kid and yes I was married. However, there was no one here but me, my husband and my son, it was up to me ... I'm writing the check for the house, I'm responsible to make sure that it gets there. Buying the house made me feel like an adult, not even having my kid made me feel like an adult" (Marie, 29-year-old White working-class stay-at-home mother).

Jennifer, a White married architect with no children said she began to feel like an adult only after getting married "because now we do the things that my parents do," and purchasing a home with her husband (with the down payment provided by her parents) because "what came with the house wasn't just independence, it was also more responsibility." As she put it: "You want to come home and straighten things up. It's more ownership, it feels like you care about it, feels more adult." But perhaps the best example of how young people experienced their emerging adulthood as a package of social roles and personal qualities came from a White working-class mother, Christina, who was engaged to be married for the first time to her long-term live-in boyfriend and father of her two children. Asked how she would define adulthood, this woman immediately declared that for her, adulthood was defined primarily by the "responsibilities factor," but she then soon proceeded to define those responsibilities in connection with a variety of social roles. "I have a house, a home. I have two children, I have responsibilities. I have bills that I have to pay, but I can't just shut off and say it's a public matter. That's really I think all." After a pause, she concluded by saying: "I'm doing the adult thing which is to have children and a family, I guess ...."

## **BEING POSITIVE ABOUT THE PROCESS**

It is important to emphasize that our respondents thought about and understood their early adulthood not only as a cluster of social roles and individualistic attributes but also as an ongoing, dynamic process. For these young people, adulthood was not a stagnant state that they had (or had not yet) achieved, but something they were constantly growing into or becoming. For instance, Julia, an occupational therapist, told us that she started thinking of herself as an adult as soon as she turned 20 years old but that it

really didn't take hold until much later in her twenties. "I think just more independence and being away from family and having that independence and making my own decisions. I think that continued to grow, that feeling, that maybe it wasn't quite as strong [at first]." Asked about people her age who she believed were successful, a florist we named Trina talked about those who were striving to be more financially independent, to do things they want to do, and to cultivate loving personal relationships. "I don't expect everything to happen overnight. It's kind of like small steps everyday." "In my mind," she explicitly concluded, "it's all kind of a process."

And the process wasn't always linear. Indeed, for some of our respondents becoming an adult was extremely uneven, dynamic, and often difficult to anticipate. One white, middle-class divorcee we called Nancy described her sense of adulthood as something that went "in cycles" that sometimes went "backwards" as well as forward as she moved from marriage, independent living and full-time work in her early twenties to returning to school and living with her mother in her late twenties following her divorce.

I didn't really feel like an adult when I got married. I was just Nancy. But I think really moving into our own place – probably six months into being married and really getting into that routine of what our life was, paying bills, paying rent, car payments – that [was when] I really started to feel like an adult. I had those responsibilities and went to a job everyday and felt that way for a few years and then I felt like an adult and then I felt like I went backwards a little, when I moved home [after the divorce]. Then going back to being a student, not that you can't be a student and an adult, but just the way it worked for me. It was my undergraduate, that I was living at home, that I was only working 20 hours a week again made me ... I don't know if I ever thought 'I'm not an adult,' it gave me a different perspective and then now I feel like an adult again. Back to the full-time job.

This sense of uncertainty about the progress of adulthood was expressed as well by Peter, a White college-educated man, when asked how his divorce from what he described as a stifling marriage affected his sense of his adulthood: "I was really taking charge of my own life and that was an adulthood of feeling but at the same time, I was doing it so I could maybe recapture some of the youth stuff that I had felt that I had bypassed. I don't know if that meant I was less of an adult or making myself less of an adult or if it was more of an adult decision to do."

Several young women who had retreated from the workforce in order to stay home with young children also experienced young adulthood as non-linear, but for them there was no sense of regret or remorse about backsliding. Indeed, for women with young children early adulthood was a time when they felt the need to prioritize competing adult roles. Self-described stay-at-home mothers described moving out of full-time or career-oriented

work in order to focus on childrearing (even while several still earned income through part-time or in-home work) as “embracing family responsibilities.” These women did not expect to stay home for most of their adult lives, but planned to do so temporarily while their children were young. For example Tricia, a stay-at-home mother and in-home day care provider, planned to earn a bachelor’s degree once her children enter school and hopes to eventually launch an undefined career: “When I’m all done having babies, when all of my kids are in school all day, so first grade and older, I’m going to school part-time at night. So ... when all my kids are in school, I’ll finish up whatever I have to do to get my degree and then I’ll get a job outside the home.” Kate, the college graduate who was working as a cashier at a pizza place (for the family-friendly flexible hours while her daughters were small), still expected to go to graduate school to become a school librarian when her children were a little older. She envisioned that her work hours as a school librarian would parallel her children’s school and vacation schedules, thus allowing her to balance work and family obligations. Although many of these women expressed some uncertainty about what they would be doing for work in the future, very few expressed concern that they were bypassing their career-building years or forfeiting their chance for a successful work life in the future. Whether these young mothers had well-defined career and educational plans, such as Kate or ambiguous aspirations, such as Tricia, they shared an understanding and organized their lives around the presumption that a domestically oriented life at age 30 did not preclude a career life at a later time. Adulthood, for these young mothers, was a long and open-ended process that would take shape as their work and family roles unfolded for years to come.

The fact that our respondents experienced this early adulthood as a process – gradual, multi-faceted, open-ended, and even erratic – will not be particularly surprising for scholars who have been tracking the variable and uneven attainment of traditional adulthood markers for young people in this cohort. But what is of interest here is how our young folks understand and evaluate this process in contrast to the experts.

Social analysts, cultural critics, and public policy makers have expressed a great deal of concern about the lengthy and uncertain processes by which young people in contemporary America move into adulthood (see, for examples, Cote, 2000; Shanahan, 2000). They worry about the economic self-sufficiency of young adults experiencing this “prolonged” transition, about their personal health and mental development, and about the aggregate implications (and social costs) associated with all of these changes in individual development and behavior. But what we discovered in these interviews is that

young people themselves don't think like this at all. They are not troubled by the fact that their path to adulthood seems to take longer and be more variable than once may have been the case. Not only do they accept these changes, our respondents actually appear to embrace and celebrate them as positive, progressive, historical developments.

In an earlier analysis (Swartz, Hartmann, and Mortimer, forthcoming), this optimistic assessment came through in the ambition, pragmatism, and hopefulness our respondents felt about their education, occupations, and opportunities for economic and career mobility. Though many were not wholly satisfied with their present occupational and economic circumstances, they tended to view these situations as temporary, certainly not fully determinative, nor in some cases even indicative, of their future prospects. These young adults did not feel trapped by late-adolescent decisions to forgo college or have a child or an early investment in a particular line of work that they no longer found promising or enjoyable. Rather, they mostly believed that they were the authors of their lives and, if they were unhappy with the way things were going, that they could plan for and act to change things.

For instance, after several years of practicing law focused on corporate litigation, Jake contemplated a career move because he "would feel better about myself doing [something other] than defending a large company, and a lot of times the frivolous law suits, where it's larger companies fighting each other." In order to feel "a passion for what I'm doing," Jake sought more intrinsically meaningful work. This liberal-leaning young attorney hoped to spend his energies working for the U.S. Attorney's office or another entity, which he saw as defending the common good or those with less power. Jake did not feel trapped in a career trajectory that left him unfulfilled, but felt empowered to fashion his work life to reflect his values and interests. He also believed that his talent, education, and experience would enable him to successfully make such a change.

Caitlin, a visiting professor at a mid-western university, contemplated a change in career, despite having invested a great deal of time preparing for a research-oriented academic position. Although she enjoyed research and teaching, she foresaw two major obstacles to achieving her desired career goal – problems in identifying a promising research area in her field and the challenges of landing two academic positions in the same city for her and her husband. Yet, confident in her own abilities and persistence, she remained optimistic about moving into other career paths:

C: "I can be pretty determined so that will probably help ... I'll always be able to do what I want to do to a certain extent."

I: "Why do you think that?"

C: "I think that I am reasonably good at what I do and if I change my mind about what I want to do I am determined enough to go out and learn how to be reasonably good at it."

Of course, it is one thing for a woman with a Ph.D. to say this. Predictably, we found optimism over work and financial futures prevalent for White, middle-class and highly educated respondents who believed that they had many options available to them as a result of their educational credentials, marketable skills, and general talents. Indeed life experience had taught them they were likely to encounter opportunities and attain success at most things they had attempted.

Still, optimism about the future came from the overwhelming majority of our respondents, even those who had experienced hardships as children or in adolescence. For the most part, even the more challenged young adults believed that hard work and determination would eventually pay off for them. Bo, for instance, a 30-year-old White man from a lower class family, remained very optimistic about his work future even though he had spent most of his teen years and early adulthood in dead-end, low-wage work, sometimes unable to even afford food and rent. At the time of his interview, Bo had recently been laid off from a factory job and was using his time on unemployment insurance to go to community college, hoping to eventually earn a business degree to develop a well-paying business career. When asked about the likelihood that he would achieve his ambitions, Bo replied: "I think having the credentials to be able to get a job, I think is a huge part of it and I think work ethic is a big part of it too. If I have to do something completely different tomorrow, as long as I'm willing and able to work at it, I think I will be fine."

As a single man with no dependents, Bo felt he could make sacrifices now to achieve his future goals. Poorer respondents with little education and who faced daily responsibilities for providing for dependents may have been optimistic about changing to better jobs and experiencing some upward mobility, but often found their options were more constrained.<sup>7</sup> Lee, a Hmong working-class father who works for a utilities company, for example, imagined his future after describing his difficult employment experiences including a recent incident of racial discrimination in the workplace: "I think it might be better. When my kids grow up and I can complete my apprenticeship then bring more money, then I might be able to do a lot of things that I really want to do." For the most part, lower and working class respondents, particularly those with dependent children who they had to

continue to provide for, may have expressed optimism about financial stability and even upward mobility, but their aspirations often remained modest, for example, acquiring “clean” office jobs if they currently did manual labor, opening an in-home family day care or a foster home, or increasing the commission they received from phone solicitations or bill collections.

The most typical exceptions to the general optimism expressed by the young adults were young women who had been single, welfare-dependent mothers in their late teens and early twenties. Many who had lived through this experience were cautious about what the future might bring. They hesitated in imagining what their lives would be like beyond their continued relationships with their children. “I[t] will be me and my kids, something simple,” said Alicia, a biracial, homeless mother of three. “I don’t want to get my hopes too high for nothing, me and my kids and I’m not looking at a man or male figure. Just me and my kids, everything going pretty good.” A White divorced mother of two put it like this: “I think it is going to be crazy because my kids are going to be teenagers. I think there is definitely going to be stressful points, but I think it is going to be wonderful.” While few expressed outright pessimism, several balked at sharing definite plans or hopes for the future many seemed to feel they had little control over. As Tasha, a single African-American mother of three, explained: “I have no idea because I like taking one day at a time and it’s hard to [predict] the future because I don’t want to disappoint myself. If I don’t try and predict and say what I think should happen then I won’t disappoint myself.” Similarly, when asked what she thought her life would be like in five years, Gina, a White mother of one with a second on the way, replied: “I don’t even know. I don’t even know. I’m having a kid, I know that one. So hopefully I’ll have a kid and things will get easier, that’s all I’m hoping for. I don’t know, I just want things to get easier, that’s all I’m hoping for.” Talk of returning to school to meet long-term goals or of changing careers to more meaningful or lucrative work was less prevalent in their descriptions of their imagined future. Like their peers, these young women experienced young adulthood as indeterminate and changing, and expected this to continue in the future. However, more than in the other groups we spoke with these women anticipated this unpredictability as potentially bringing future hardship rather than positive prospects.

The caution of once-welfare-dependent mothers stands in stark contrast to our Hmong respondents who also had high rates of early childbirth and economic hardship. To a person, the Hmong young adults in our sample displayed an almost boundless sense of optimism about their accomplishments in life and future opportunities. Even those individuals who had come

to the United States in their late teens, attained little education, and worked in low-wage work were hopeful about their futures and the futures of their children. Of course, Hmong immigrants constitute an exceptional if not extraordinary case. As refugees from Thailand (some recalled memories of escaping from war-torn Laos, crossing the Mekong River, and witnessing the deaths of family members who did not make it out successfully), their parents were mostly illiterate and essentially impoverished on their arrival in the United States. They had already survived very traumatic childhoods and had seen their fortunes increase dramatically over their lifetime. In view of this past, these Hmong young adults believed that they would continue to succeed in life, no matter what life threw their way. One young Hmong woman sums this up: "... considering all of the different things I've gone through, I would say that I've weathered [the] storm pretty well and life is full of possibilities but you have to be open to them and that's what I have always tried to do. For me, if one door closes, five or six open, and it's just a matter of realizing what's an opportunity. ... I know that I'm not that old but I've been through so much. I guess life is what you make it, you have to want things to make it happen."<sup>8</sup>

On the whole, then, young people viewed the transition to adulthood with all of its dynamism and uncertainty optimistically, as providing multiple options for change and improvement. Those with relatively privileged lives expected continued opportunities and success. Although welfare mothers remained cautious about their prospects, most of the young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds (or who had encountered difficult times) – including many welfare mothers themselves – also spoke optimistically about their futures, imagining a positive departure from their pasts. Many did not view the choices they made or experiences they had in late adolescence and early adulthood to determine the paths their lives would take. Although acknowledging some constraints and contingencies, they viewed the world as offering them the chance to continually reshape their life direction through reflection, planning, goal setting, and hard work.

The positive, pragmatic attitude toward the elongated and diverse pathways into adulthood was especially pronounced in responses to a question about the timing of milestones traditionally associated with adulthood. When asked to agree or disagree with whether "some people have the idea that young adults should achieve certain milestones in order, first finishing school, then getting a job, then setting up their own house, then getting married, and having kids," respondents clearly and consistently rejected the notion of a traditional pathway or set of steps that one needs to get through in order to be an adult. For example, Christina, a White working-class

woman, commented “every person is different, whatever is more important to one person is not [to] another .... Don’t push your milestones on somebody else.” Jason, a White middle-class man agreed: “No ... Because everybody does things in a different way.” Kate, a White middle-class woman, added that such expectations may put undue pressure on people: “Nope, I think it happens in different orders for different people. People get stressed out about it if it doesn’t happen in that order so I wish there were more flexibility.” Such a view was echoed by Ellie, another White middle-class woman:

I don’t think that there is one order that is going to work for everybody. I think that when there is that kind of stereotype like that put out there that it puts pressure on people and makes people feel like if ‘I don’t do it this way that I’ve done it wrong.’ For some folks I think it gets them into wrong situations, trying to do what they think they’re supposed to do.

Over and over young adults stated that they believed it was most appropriate and proper to think about the pathway to adulthood as individualized, that people reach adult milestones in different orders and at their own pace based on their own preferences and life circumstances. Even those who had seen their lives unfold according to a completely traditional pattern did not want to impose it on others. A married architect we called Jennifer said simply: “It did work out that way in my life but it didn’t need to ... I think different orders are fine for different people.”

Some respondents did qualify their advocacy for individualized trajectories by saying that following a particular pattern could make things easier. For example, several said that you didn’t need to get married or have kids to be an adult but then went on to say that if you were planning to have kids, it was a lot easier to get married first. Similarly, some mothers who had children as teenagers said that although they did not regret having their children, they had wished that they had waited until after they had completed their education so that they would have better job prospects. Yet even when they asserted that achieving some milestones before others could make things easier in a practical sense, our respondents never made a normative argument out of this. Indeed, many complained about the social pressure they felt to follow the traditional order. Trina, the florist, was one of those: “I think that everyone feels that even if you don’t do it in order, like there is always that pressure to do all of those things ....” Interviewer: “Where does the pressure come from?” Trina: “It’s everything ... I think its sort of the old fashioned way, its like the traditional way. It’s like we’re still thinking of another time when like our parents and our parent’s parents were that way.

You know, people married young, they had kids young. It's on TV... I think it's everywhere." Some of our respondents interpreted what they saw as some of their own mistakes in life as a result of internalizing these conventions of adulthood. Peter drew on his early marriage (and subsequent divorce) as a cautionary tale as to what could happen when young people feel pressure to follow normative expectations for adulthood: "Even though growing up in the 80s there's people that don't do it that way, but it is deeply ingrained .... It definitely includes deciding to get married, it was like 'Well this is what I do next.' It definitely wasn't for all the right reasons .... The marriage is the next thing that happened."

Almost without exception, the young people we interviewed were convinced that the existence of dynamic, individualistic pathways into adulthood enabled each person to choose their own way in a manner that more accurately reflected his or her true personal desires and readiness for social roles and responsibilities. Waiting to have children until after marriage, completing education before moving on to other endeavors, or attaining financial self-sufficiency – these pathways were often seen to make adult life easier, but our respondents also insisted that this was not the case for every individual, and they certainly denied that any were moral imperatives.

Such personalized, even relativist ideas and ideals should not be taken to indicate that our respondents lacked goals, direction, and initiative. Quite the contrary, as will become clearer in the next section where our respondents talk about their visions of success and for the future, most had high standards and expectations for themselves. However, their goals and visions were typically much more personalized and multifaceted and often more meaning-centered – inner-directed rather than other-defined – than may have once been the case. Asked about her own pathway in life, one woman prefaced her answer by harkening back to the social world of her own mother:

I remember reading my mom's yearbook and some of the things that a lot of the girls would write in there, what they expected to do, what their goals were, for instance would be to get married. I mean they weren't dating anybody, but that was a goal, as to get married. They didn't care who, I couldn't say they couldn't care who to, but it's just odd that they would have that goal. Definitely my goals aren't necessarily what other people's are. I like going to school, if I could just go to school and not even work I would be happy doing that because I love learning, it's just what I enjoy doing, I guess.

This wasn't an uncommon response. Many of the young adults in our study suggested that completing education was an activity that need not be confined to adolescence or even early adulthood. In this view, anyone could go

to school to change careers or do something more meaningful at any time in their lives.

Bo even went so far as to describe the variable and expansive processes of discovery and development of young adulthood as core aspects of American culture: the freedom to do what you want and continue to remake yourself anew. "I like the idea of people doing what they want to do," Bo told us in response to the questions about the timing of milestones. "I mean, that's what I love about America is the freedom to be able to do what you want and I think that's what it is about, being as happy as you can be and if that involves children, have children; and if it involves just going to school and never really even getting a job, then do that. And I think ... it would be nice if people knew what they wanted to do so they could do it and start preparing and doing what they want to do right away, but no. I think it's fun to do different things."

This deeply held belief that variability and individuality in the transition to adulthood was preferable to a clear timetable for achieving milestones not only allows for many different pathways into adulthood. It also means that the process of discovering and developing one's adulthood can stretch much further into the life cycle than many older or more traditional Americans would ever imagine possible.

### **NEW STAGE IN THE LIFE COURSE OR NEW VISION OF ADULTHOOD?**

So does this open-ended, variable, and dynamic process constitute the working, subjective definition of a new stage in the life course for these respondents, one not unlike the emergence of the category of adolescence a little over a century ago? Certainly, it is a tempting conclusion to draw and there is a good deal of evidence to support the claim that young adults themselves understand this as a new and distinct phase in the life course. For example, our respondents displayed a great deal of hesitance, qualification, and ambivalence about the suggestion (implied in our questions) that they were already adults. There is also the fact that the question asking them if they considered themselves to be an adult made many respondents uncomfortable or provoked laughter. Except for questions about race and ethnicity, no other item on the questionnaire proved so challenging for respondents to answer. (Indeed, precisely because so many respondents felt awkward or were unable to answer, we often had to probe with less personal, more abstract questions about general definitions and conceptions of adulthood in an effort to get

them talking about the topic.) In any case, we found widespread ambivalence about being an adult. As discussed earlier in this paper, in part, it seems that some respondents felt uneasy about defining themselves as adults if they had not yet achieved certain adult roles. For example, when asked if she thinks of herself as an adult: “Yes and no. I do in the fact that ... I’m 29 years old now. If I don’t consider myself an adult now I’ve got some serious issues. [But] also I look at it from a responsibility standpoint. I don’t have the responsibilities of an adult yet. I’ll feel like an adult when I have kids or once I’m married. You’re taking that next step and moving on.” But their discomfort was rooted in more than this.

Although many of our respondents could not bring themselves to declare themselves fully adult, they also did not think of themselves as children or adolescents either. Instead, they conceptualized themselves as somewhere in between. Yet, they lacked a term for it. None of the labels suggested by academics – not emerging adulthood, early adulthood, quasi-adulthood, or the transition to adulthood, and certainly not “adulthood,” as some popular press journalists have recently proposed calling it – were used. This may be because if it exists in some implicit cultural level, the category itself does not have a name in the popular vernacular. The closest any of our respondents came was this 29-year-old woman who proposed a label provisionally in her response to whether she thought of herself as an adult: “No, I don’t think so ... I think of adult, I think of my mother and father, I probably think of all of the people older than me, in my age we are not adults, but she’s (points to daughter) going to, of course, look at us as adults. I guess that’s all I see, I don’t know, *I don’t think of myself as a child anymore, young adult maybe?*” She left it at that with a laugh.

On the other hand, we want to be careful not to jump too quickly to the conclusion that these responses can be automatically interpreted or inferred to reflect a consciousness of a new stage. For one thing, it is important to recall that the data we have presented are derived from questions (and probes) asking about whether and when they began feeling like adults. We did not specifically ask respondents if they believed they were in the midst of a new, distinct phase of the life course.

Some of these responses could just reflect a familiar status anxiety or insecurity about entering any new social role or phase (in this case adulthood). Given that it would be a new state, many were simply not quite sure if they were fully there or not, or would be able to maintain the roles and responsibilities the new state required. This was the case for Peter. Although this middle-class college graduate considered himself “pretty much” an adult, he also admitted: “I still occasionally wonder when they’re going to

catch me and say hey you're not doing it right. I think it's momentary feelings of insecurity and sort of realizing to myself that I'm starting to get to an age in my own life where I can remember my parents at that age."

The reference to parents in both of the quotes above was also present in many of respondents' reflections about their own identities as adults, and is, in our view, revealing of something deeper. These young people conveyed a sense that they were not sure that they wanted to be adults, or at least not adults in the conventional cultural meaning of the term. Ambivalence about being an adult most often came out when respondents started talking about how they viewed their parents' generation enactment of adulthood. Indeed, many of our respondents ended up distinguishing themselves from their parents in their discussion of their own adult status (and even those that didn't may well have had the comparison implicit in their heads). There may be a temptation here to think that this can be attributed to some kind of a generation gap between parents and children. We tend not to support that line of thinking, however. For one thing, we know that this generation of young people is far more conformist, far less likely to think in generational terms, than any cohort of young people in the last 50 years (Smith, 2005). Moreover, in other portions of the interviews, we found that these respondents were tremendously involved and invested in developing and maintaining strong, intensive relationships and friendships with their parents, and expressed a deep respect for their parents (Swartz & Busse, 2004). Thus, we believe that this response was less about their parents per se than about the vision of adulthood they associated with their parents or that their parents' generation represented for them.

These young people viewed the conventional notion of adulthood as being too settled, too serious, too stoic, and unwilling or unable to enjoy life. This static and staid conception of adulthood often came out in discussions of their parents, or how they remembered and imagined their parents. Nancy, a White middle-class divorced professional who is very close to her mother and refers to her as her best friend, was ambivalent about labeling herself as an adult because she viewed her fun-loving lifestyle conflicting with how she remembered her parents at her age:

I know I'm an adult but you know when you're a kid and you think what you're going to do be like *when you're an adult, you think you're going to be this really responsible, stoic, never have any fun, go to your job, work eight hours, and come home and do the family thing*. I don't do that, but does that make me not an adult, no. Yeah, I am an adult but sometimes I forget I'm an adult. ... *You think that you're supposed to get serious and really mature like your parents*. Each year as I get closer to what my parents were when I remember them as [a kid], I'm not getting like that, I don't think. I probably am because

they were probably like this, professional, had a family, went to work, had a job, paid the bills and yeah they had fun sometimes on the weekend and we did cool stuff and here I am doing that stuff. They must have really had fun and you just don't view that as a kid. ... It's weird, you think you're going to work and never have fun. Oh my gosh, I have so much fun at work it's unbelievable how much fun I have. Am I really an adult? I don't know.

A few respondents acknowledged that they had indeed become like their parents in the ways that most of these young people resisted. However, very few accepted this transformation as positive. When asked if she thinks of herself as an adult, working-class stay-at-home mother Marie responded, "Unfortunately yes." When asked why she said "unfortunately," Marie explained that she saw herself taking on more "adult-like" characteristics, such as stability, inflexibility, and inactivity, "I obviously have my stern opinions and my outlook on life and I'm level-headed. It's Saturday night, my option is to stay home and have TV time, I'm not going to a party." For the most part, though, the young adults we talked with wanted to avoid being like their parents – or at least like the kind of adults they associated with their parents' generation: boring, serious, and static, but rather wanted to maintain what they saw as a free-spirited, youthful attitude that embraced excitement, enthusiasm, and continual growth.

Having fun, enjoying life, and youthful exuberance were recurring themes for more than a few respondents when probed about their tentativeness to label themselves as adults. These young people regarded conventional adulthood to be too focused on work and responsibilities to leave much room for lighthearted playfulness, simple pleasures, expressiveness, or a sense of passion about life. Jason, a 29-year-old graduate student, hesitated to call himself an adult and said that sometimes he felt like a teen because he still experienced "the joy of life" and "looks at the world as if you're trying to discover it." Although he made a point to stop short of suggesting this to be true for all older people, Jason said that there was "an impression when you get older your emotions seep out of you." Kate, the mother of two who worked at a family-friendly pizza shop part-time, believed it most desirable to hold onto some aspects of youthfulness while still fulfilling adult responsibilities: "I have to say that I do think that it's good to have a *healthy balance [between] being an adult and being a kid*. I feel like I have enough kid left that I can totally have fun with my kids, be silly, and active and not too adult." Mai, a Hmong mother of a toddler, also expressed a desire to remain youthful was concerned that she was becoming too serious or "too adult": "By the world's definition of an adult I am, I mean I have my own family, I have responsibilities that only I can take care of. ... I don't know, but I guess for myself I think I am. But

*I would hope that a part of me will always be a child.*” When asked to elaborate on what she meant by this Mai continued, “Like my son, he’s so inquisitive and things are so interesting and he gets so into his trains. You should always be passionate about something. You should always be excited about something about life and all the little things it has to offer and not to be so serious all the time. I know I get serious a lot of the time and my husband has to tell me to lighten up so much.”

Mai, Kate, Jason, and many of their peers wanted to fashion a “new adulthood” distinct from how they imagined adults to be, and one that carried on the youthful, fresh attitude they liked about themselves, with the maturity and reliability they knew they needed to successfully meet their growing responsibilities and ambitions. Whether this new vision of being adult was something our respondents wished to cultivate only in the early years of adulthood or something they hoped to sustain much further across the life course is an open question. However, their words also strongly suggested that they viewed passion, enthusiasm, and emotions “seeping out” of adults as they age as not wholly positive, and was something most hoped to avoid as long as possible, if not altogether.

Indications that our respondents may be expressing what they see as a new vision of adulthood rather than a short-term focus on a new phase of the life course could also be heard in their almost unanimous rejection of required milestones that need to be accomplished during early adulthood. Some of our respondents’ discussion of milestones seemed to morph into a much deeper and broader call for a more open and ever-expanding conception of adulthood in general. For example, Tricia, a stay-at-home mother and in-home day care provider, launched into a discursus on her 50-year-old aunt when asked about whether she thought people should accomplish markers of adulthood in a particular order: “No I think you just do what you can when you can do it. I have an aunt who is working on her doctorate in theology and she’s 50. ... She’s got kids who are older and she can do that now and she doesn’t have anybody at home to take care of besides her husband and they’re supposed to be self-sufficient at this age. So I think its great.” From the perspective of our respondents, it is not only that emerging adults should determine the order and timing of milestones of adulthood, but also adults of all ages should feel free to follow their passions and forge their own paths throughout their lives.

Perhaps, the best evidence in support of the thesis that young adults were imagining an entirely new or at least historically revitalized conception of adulthood (rather than a newly emergent and distinct phase in the life course) came in the final portion of most interviews, when respondents were

asked about aging and their visions of success. Adulthood, according to these young people, should be a journey toward happiness and fulfillment, meaning and purpose, self-actualization.

Answers to the question “How would you define success for somebody your age?” met remarkably similar responses. The first main theme these young people discussed when reflecting on success involved meeting self-defined goals. Mai, for instance, stated that she believed that people are successful when, “They know who they are, they know where they’re going, they know how to get there.” Like many of her peers, Mai stressed that individuals should discover who they really are first, they should define their own goals that reflect their true or authentic self, and then they should develop a plan of how to achieve their ambitions. Emphasis on individual choice and fulfillment was found in most respondents’ definitions of success, such as this offered by Caitlin “I would say that someone who’s successful if they’re doing what they want to be doing. That might mean that they’re not making any money but are ... doing what they want to do.” And these young people did not see this as a task of only early adulthood, but rather developing and attaining self-defined goals should continue throughout life. As Kate put it “Having a sense that you’re moving toward your goals. Certainly not having achieved them all because I plan to have a lot of life in front of me and have lots of goals along the way, but just to be moving toward those goals that really seem worthwhile.” This suggests, that in their mind, reassessing, redefining, and striving to meet personally determined goals should be a continuous task of a dynamic adulthood.

Many interviewees defined success simply as this young person did “Doing what makes them happy.” Jason stated success was “Being happy and basic harmony with where I am and the people around me”; Marie said this of success, “If you can find happiness somewhere in something, you’re successful”; or as this respondent put it: “I think at almost any age I had to define success with being happy with yourself ... I think contentment and happiness are very important in my definition of success.” Here it is important to emphasize that these were not just empty labels or meaningless rhetoric. Our respondents were actually able to expound at length on how they thought about and defined even an amorphous concept like happiness. Happiness here meant a deeper sense of contentment and satisfaction, competently fulfilling responsibilities, and doing work that was either meaningful or enjoyable in some way.

Although not as prevalent as reaching self-defined goals and happiness, some respondents included making a contribution to society as part of their definition of success. For instance, Nancy said this about success: “I think

it's an individual-based thing, I think it's just being productive in some way in your life. It's ... about being productive or making a contribution somewhere, somehow whether it's in a job you love and you do it for those people whoever that is or maybe it's a job you don't care so much about but you do something great instead, you do volunteer work." Similarly, one of our Hmong respondents talked about his aspirations to "make a [long-term] difference" in his community: "I'd like to leave a legacy that I've made a real difference in the lives of people and I think I'm on the right path, I hope I'm on the right path." Again, these reflect ambitions for a lifetime, rather than for a transitory life stage.

No matter what the specifics, however, there is no doubt that our respondents had grand, idealized conceptions of adulthood formulated in direct contrast to the stoic, static, and stagnant styles of adulthood they believed their parents' generation to represent. In this vision, adulthood was about continuous development, discovery, and growth oriented as much around meaning-centered, intrinsic goals and values as materialist ambitions. It was, in short, an ongoing process of becoming rather than an achieved state of being. Asked to elaborate on her general advice on how to achieve an open-ended sense of happiness and success so many of her peers talked about, Julia put it like this: "To explore many different, everything. Opportunities, culture, places, people, experience different things because ... you may think you're happy at something but maybe something else would make me happy too. Expanding that and being open to it and I think listening to yourself not people or society around you. That's yourself; you got to make yourself happy and live with that." Such a view resonates with Arnett's depiction of early adulthood as a period of exploration. We would only emphasize that it is not clear that our respondents view this dynamism and self-discovery as necessarily limited to a particular part of adulthood but may see it as crucial to being a vibrant and productive and interesting person throughout all of their adult years. What we may be witnessing, in other words, is a new, revitalized conception of adulthood itself.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This chapter offers two main insights into the subjective experience of the transition to adulthood, and one unresolved, albeit provocative, question. The first and most basic finding is that people in their late twenties experience the transition to adulthood as a dynamic, multi-dimensional package of new social roles and personal attributes. The second is that these young adults not

only accept the open-ended, diverse, and uneven nature of this transition, they embrace it as a condition to be celebrated, valued, and perpetuated. There is some reason to believe that these two characteristics, taken together, constitute the subjective or experiential dimensions of a distinct new phase in the life course – what scholars looking at objective markers have most commonly referred to as young or early adulthood. However, a good deal of evidence also suggests that it could be that these attitudes and understandings signal a broader and deeper re-conceptualization of adulthood itself. In this view, adulthood is coming to be understood less of a static state or a permanent status (as our respondents believe it was for those of their parents' generation) and more of an ongoing process of continued personal growth, career mobility, and the deepening and expanding of relationships with others – an ongoing process of development, achievement and discovery that extends across the life course, occurs in all domains of life, and varies from individual to individual. This is the open question.

It is probably appropriate that this chapter should end with a question because the data and analysis offered up here are themselves relatively open-ended and intentionally speculative, intended to generate questions about the subjective dimensions of the transition to adulthood as much as resolve them. (Thus, the question mark in the title.) There is a great deal more that we could say about this method as it applies to research on the transition to adulthood and the life course more generally, but we conclude simply by laying out three main sets of questions we believe our findings and interpretations give rise to: (1) where do the meaning patterns we detect come from?; what explains them?; (2) how widespread are they?; and (3) what are the consequences and implications of these new ways of thinking about the transition to adulthood and adulthood more generally?

The new conceptions of adulthood expressed by our respondents have two main sources, in our view. The first has to do with the revolutionary shifts, new technologies, and changing labor market that constitute our contemporary, postindustrial economy. Given that young people today live in an economy that is dynamic, unstable, and ever-shifting (and thus offers far fewer lifetime careers than it once did), it is both predictable and appropriate that they would anticipate and adopt parallel understandings of the meaning and practice of being a mature, responsible adult – understandings that may stress the need for core personal qualities and characteristics but that also realize these traits must be transferable and useful in whatever they might encounter in their futures. The second driving force behind these changes and transformations involves the general cultural shifts toward more expressive, individualistic, therapeutic ideals in a

postindustrial, postmodern age. We are referring here to the returned importance of identity, meaning, and intrinsic values – what Habermas (1991) calls “interiority,” or what Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985) described in the American context as “expressive individualism.” Here it is worth quoting one final respondent who answered the question about his own adulthood by saying that he felt like he and his peers were “all a bunch of kids” and then began musing about whether “society as a whole is becoming more youthful in its mindset.” But whatever we call it or however we describe it, the point here is that these changing understandings and experiences of adulthood and/or the process of becoming adult is being driven by profound historical transformations in the cultural realm as well as equally powerful (if more well-known) shifts in the material-economic foundations of modern society (see, for related discussions, Buchmann, 1989; Booth, Crouter, & Shanahan, 1999).

So how widespread or generalizable are the subjective conceptions we have put forward here? Obviously, there is a need for a great deal of more exploration and analysis of our findings and claims, especially with larger samples in other parts of the country. In their generative exploration of ethnic and racial diversity in the transition to adulthood, Mollenkopf, Waters, Holdaway, and Kasnitz (2005), for example, note that native Whites were “the only ones to mention concern for inner goals, such as being happy, being a good person, and making the world a better place to live.” Indeed, according to these scholars, “whites expressed concern that success should not be defined through material goods” which they saw as reflecting “shallowness” (p. 472).

Our study is obviously unique in several respects. One factor that may help account for the optimism and flexibility of our respondents is Minnesota itself. With its good schools, its strong economy, and its relatively generous welfare programs, the social context of Minnesota allows its young adults to be fairly confident and optimistic about their life chances, even as they are living through a period of fairly radical historical change. In his most recent work, for example, Richard Florida (2005), has singled out the Twin Cities as one of the American metropolitan areas capable of continuing to produce and sustain the “creative class” he believes is necessary to compete in the new global economy. These positive structural conditions are further complemented by a culture of self-reliance and civic commitment that also has a certain degree of regional specificity. Here also it is important to recall that the Minnesotans we interviewed for this chapter are in their late twenties (the back end of the age range usually assumed to compose early or emerging adulthood), have been interviewed before, in some cases

several times, and have participated in the YDS as they were freshmen in high school. Not only might this long-term involvement make them more articulate and reflective than peers, it could also make them more likely to highlight their successes and emphasize the positives in their lives.

All that said, we would reiterate that we made a conscious attempt to interview individuals in the study who have had a more difficult time of making the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. Our respondents included at least a dozen individuals who have not yet settled into stable, economically successful careers, and 10 representatives from the Hmong community, one of the poorest and least educated refugee populations to have come into the United States in the wake of the post-1965 immigration explosion. What is more, a full third of our respondents were former or current welfare mothers. Yet, the vast majority of even these respondents – who should be among those least likely to be positive – were still fairly optimistic about their lives and futures.

In many respects, of course, these questions about the explanations for and generalizability of our findings will probably be better addressed in comparison with the findings of scholars from other sites and studies. Here we would also suggest that the open question about whether our findings reflect the emergence of a newly claimed phase in the life course or signal a revitalized vision of adulthood itself may not be one that future research with bigger, more diverse samples can resolve. It is possible, in other words, that on this front we are witnessing an evolving cultural shift whose ultimate outcome is even less settled than the social transformations it is associated with.

The potential consequences and implications of these emerging conceptions among young people are also broad and complicated, so we conclude with two general comments. On the positive side, we believe that these results may indicate that young people moving into adulthood are uniquely situated and prepared for the changing economy and labor market and social demands that await them. It may even be that these subjective attitudes and conceptions will allow them to experience a deeper, more satisfying and meaning-filled adult life. In contrast, we are also concerned that all of this optimism about the dynamic, diverse, and extended processes of being and becoming an adult does not appear to be matched by a particularly high degree of planning and purposiveness, much less an awareness of the constraints that can make life stage transitions of any sort, not to mention life itself, challenging. Our interviews confirm the concerns that Jeylan Mortimer and her collaborators (see [Mortimer, 2003](#); [Mortimer et al., 2002](#)) have expressed previously about this cohort of young people using the

quantitative, longitudinal data from the YDS. Our respondents simply do not appear particularly realistic or planful about their futures. This lack of realism and planning – where subjectivity collapses into destiny instead of providing useful understanding and real agency – is particularly a concern for those individuals who come from the most vulnerable and disadvantaged places and populations in our study. We can't help but worry that as much as their optimism and pragmatism may sustain these young adults in the short run, it may not serve them well over the long haul of adult life. We may not know for sure which individuals will follow which of the many pathways into adulthood (or how successful they will be), but as sociologists we do know that these pathways tend to unfold in fairly predictable ways that tend to benefit those who are the most privileged and purposeful to begin with. We can only hope that, as cultural attitudes and understandings about adulthood and the transition to adulthood take shape in coming years, these realities, too, will be incorporated therein.

## NOTES

1. Key works here include: Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut (2005), Fussell and Furstenberg (2005), Mouw (2005), MacMillan and Eliason (2003), Casper and Bianchi (2002), Furstenberg (2002), Mortimer and Larson (2002), and Shanahan (2000).

2. In a previous analysis of these data conducted with Jeylan Mortimer, we reported on how these young people understood traditional adulthood roles and responsibilities in the realms of work and education, family formation and intimate relationships, and civic participation (Swartz et al., *forthcoming*). We found that transitioning young adults are both well aware of the newly emergent and multifaceted pathways into adulthood and generally optimistic about them. Indeed, young people not only embrace these changes, they appear to understand them as outcomes to be valued, celebrated, and perpetuated. At the same time, we also discovered that traditional cultural norms about work and family life and even civic participation still hold powerful moral sway on our respondents' conceptions of adulthood, and that their general open-ended-ness and optimism was not paired with a high degree of planning for the future nor a very well-developed sense of institutional structures that may either enable or constrain it. We also discovered some variations by race, class, and education in these beliefs and perceptions.

3. St. Paul, Minnesota is a mid-size city (then approximately 272,000 population), across the Mississippi River from Minneapolis (368,000), within a metropolitan area of over 2.5 million residents. The state is predominantly White, although new immigration beginning in the mid-seventies to the present has considerably diversified the Twin Cities population. By 1990, St. Paul had a minority population that was comparable to that of the nation as a whole (17.7% versus 19.7% in the nation)

albeit less diverse than most major American metropolitan areas. The composition of its public school student body was even more diverse (30% of the students in the St. Paul School District were classified as minority in 1985). St. Paul residents had somewhat lower per capita income than the United States population as a whole (\$13,727 in St. Paul and \$14,420 in the nation in 1989), and somewhat higher educational attainment. Among those 25 or older, 33% were college graduates, versus 20% of the national population of this age. Most pertinent to the concerns of the site investigators as they began this longitudinal study, the Twin Cities metropolitan area has a highly diversified economy, and its labor market offers good employment opportunities. There are relatively high rates of labor force participation (for example, 63% versus 60% of the working-age population in 1990), and unemployment tends to be lower than the national average (4.7% in 1990 versus 5.5% nationally). The teenage employment market was particularly strong when these youth were attending high school. Though this region's economic prosperity and decline parallels the nation at large, the relatively favorable employment situation continued during the nineties and through the beginning of the 21st century. In sum, then, this site may be considered as offering a relatively benign setting for a study of entry into adulthood, and especially, for the transition from school to work. Youth in St. Paul are generally not as disadvantaged as young people in depressed inner cities with poorer and more highly concentrated minority populations, or in depressed rural areas suffering high rates of bankruptcy and foreclosure. Nor are they as advantaged as many youth in the more prosperous suburbs (in Minnesota and elsewhere).

4. During the first 4 years, surveys were administered in school classrooms; those who were not present in school on the two scheduled survey days had surveys mailed to their homes. After high school, all surveys were administered by mail. To supplement the survey data, several qualitative interview studies have been conducted; for example, of women who pursued different patterns of transition to adulthood (emphasizing higher education, early parenthood, or work), of women who had contact with the welfare system, and of men and women who apparently (based on their survey responses) experienced varying levels of difficulty in choosing an occupation and establishing themselves in work.

5. For more on the Research Network, see: <http://www.pop.upenn.edu/transad>

6. See Andrew, Eggerling-Boeck, Sandefur, and Smith (2007) for a similar argument derived from focus group interviews.

7. As we discuss in another paper, the young adults' high degree of satisfaction and optimism, even in the face of unfulfilled aspirations, could be related to shifting conceptions of success at this particular stage of the life course. Some respondents reflected that their conceptions of success had expanded as they moved through this period of life, no longer so exclusively defined by work, and increasingly dependent on family relations and experiences. Thus, one can be successful even without achieving initial educational and occupational goals. Working-class mother Gina, made a typical comment, "I used to probably think it was just ... having a good job, you made a lot of money and that was being successful ... I mean it's the whole picture ... my family. Everything I do I do for the two that I'm with and that's it." It is also worth noting here that in her interviews with YDS women four and five years earlier, Pam Aronson detected more disappointment and remorse than we find here.

These differences could also be a product of selection and design (i.e., people willing to undergo multiple interviews over time becoming more positive and articulate as they continue in the study).

8. For a fuller treatment of the Hmong case, see Swartz, Hartmann, and Vang (2003).

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