

Becoming Adult: Meanings of Markers to Adulthood

RICHARD A. SETTERSTEN, Jr., TIMOTHY M. OTTUSCH, and BARBARA SCHNEIDER

Abstract

This essay examines a range of meanings and markers of adulthood, from biological to social, psychological, and legal. It describes a shift from more universal and traditional definitions of adulthood, which were also heavily gendered, to an increasingly diverse and personalized set of definitions. This shift reflects the prolonged, complex, and highly unequal spectrum of pathways that young people take into adulthood today. And yet, public perceptions of what adulthood is supposed to look like, and even the views of young people themselves, are often anchored in an earlier historical era. The clash between outdated ideas and the new realities of adulthood create a major set of contradictions for young people. Two contexts are shown to be crucial in determining individuals' actual and perceived progress toward adulthood: families and institutions of higher education. But in these contexts, too, young people receive contradictory signals about their status. The essay concludes with thoughts about the changing meanings of what it means to be "young" and "adult" today.

INTRODUCTION

Basic categories such as age often conceal subtle but complicated processes and take on complex social meanings. One of the ways chronological age becomes socially meaningful is through the definition of life phases and the age-related norms and expectations associated with them, especially as individuals move out of one phase (such as "childhood" or "adolescence") and into another (such as "adulthood"). These cultural constructs are also reinforced in the organization of research, institutions, and policies.

In the last century, phases of the life course became increasingly differentiated. Childhood was segmented into "early childhood," "youth and adolescence," and "post-adolescence"; adulthood into "early adulthood," "midlife," and "old age"; and old age into the "third and fourth ages" or the "young-old" and the "old-old"—with the latter category being further subdivided to separate out the "oldest old" as longevity has grown. It would not surprise us if "early adulthood" were soon split into "young-young"

and the “old–young” to distinguish between the front and back ends of the twenties, which are very different.

Our focus is on the juncture of becoming adult. What are the meanings and markers of adulthood today? Classic work often posed these meanings and markers as universal or, if anything, demarcated along gender lines. It emphasized a variety of markers ranging from biological, to social, psychological, and legal, which we consider in turn, and which are often contradictory.

We then briefly highlight themes of cutting-edge research, which, in contrast with the more universal assumptions about the markers of adulthood, has unveiled an increasingly diverse—and unequal—spectrum of pathways into adulthood and resulting outcomes. There is no gold standard for defining adulthood, and its meanings and markers have become highly personalized, despite pervasive public perceptions that are often anchored in an earlier era. The clash between outdated ideas and the new realities of adulthood creates yet another set of contradictions.

We then turn to new directions for research, shining a spotlight on dynamics in two contexts that are crucial in determining individuals’ actual and perceived progress toward adulthood: families and institutions of higher education. In these contexts, too, we find contradictory expectations for young people. We conclude with reflections on the changing meanings of what it means to be “young” and “adult” today, and the many signals that affirm a sense of being “no longer adolescents but not quite adults,” to use Richard Settersten and Barbara Ray’s phrase.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

BIOLOGICAL MARKERS

Historically, the most basic marker of adulthood was the onset of puberty, or reproductive capacity. In primitive societies, this was the primary event that triggered “rites of passage” for both girls and boys, community ceremonies that initiated children into adulthood. During the late 1700s and 1800s menstruation for women ranged between the ages of 15 and 16, significantly later than today’s range of 10 to 12. For boys, puberty today begins at about 12, although recent research suggests that the onset of puberty for boys is also declining. While these changes are not well understood, the movement toward earlier puberty has generally been attributed to nutritional and environmental factors.

The decline in puberty and the physical aspects of reproduction has been accompanied by a simultaneous and profound shift in the value of children and childhood. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, children were

seen as vital labor commodity. The early twentieth century, however, brought a decrease in child mortality, the regulation of child labor, the emergence of compulsory schooling, and the latter part of the century brought both delays and declines in fertility. With these shifts, children came to be seen as having psychological rather than economic value.

The decoupling of sexual capacity and reproduction has diminished the significance of puberty as a marker of adulthood, but puberty is nonetheless important in shaping how girls and boys think about themselves and how others think about them. It has also raised worries about—and the risks of—having sex or becoming a parent while an individual is still a child, culturally and socially. The negative societal responses to adolescent sexual behavior and teen pregnancy reinforce these concerns and risks. Puberty has been downgraded as a marker of adulthood in industrialized societies because men and women are expected to obtain educational and occupational credentials before bearing children. Puberty today marks the transition from childhood to adolescence more than it does childhood to adulthood, for “adolescence,” akin to “childhood,” emerged as a distinct developmental period early in the twentieth century.

SOCIAL MARKERS

Sociologists begin their work with the assumption that lives are socially structured, and that age becomes interesting as a social phenomenon. Life paths are conceptualized as being calibrated by a sequence of age-linked role transitions, when new rights, duties, and resources are encountered, and when identities are in flux. Approaches to understanding the social markers of adulthood has therefore focused on actual behaviors and on subjective notions about the “normal, expectable life,” the latter of which are a set of expectations about the timing and sequencing of life’s changes meant to act as “prods and brakes” on behavior, to use the phrases of Bernice Neugarten. Over 45 years ago, Neugarten recognized the tendency, and the fallibility, of relying on chronological age to define life phases and timetables for life transitions.

The process of becoming adult that emerged in the middle of the twentieth century came to be associated with the acquisition of social roles and responsibilities—particularly what we might call the “Big Five” traditional social markers of adulthood: (i) finishing school, which once meant high school but now generally means higher education; (ii) finding a job, (iii) leaving home, (iv) getting married, and (v) having children. This model was characterized by a relatively fast march through these markers, generally in that order and for both men and women alike, but with most women primarily in roles of wife and mother and men as breadwinners. Relative to today, young people were quick to leave home, marry, and parent. Economic opportunities

made a fast path more possible, as higher education was not required to secure well-paying jobs with good benefits. Economic independence mattered because marriage and parenthood required it, full-time jobs provided it, and cultural norms about gender reinforced this division of labor.

This model was accompanied by strong cultural prescriptions and proscriptions about the ages and sequences that these events should or should not be accomplished. It was also accompanied by social and other kinds of rewards for staying the course and sanctions for not doing so. These cultural expectations and institutional reinforcements bring to life those models of entry into adulthood that are culturally valued.

Until relatively recently, then, the social markers of adulthood were quite gendered—there was his life and hers. But in recent decades, women’s lives have converged with men’s in educational and occupational attainment (although men’s commitments to family roles and home life have not converged with women’s, despite strides toward equality). This convergence, however, has created a troubling trend to conceptualize the transition to adulthood today as if it is unisex—as if the aspirations and experiences of young men and women are the same, when they are not. There is not a generic young person. There are young *men* and young *women*.

The last few decades have however, brought radical and large-scale shifts in the transition to adulthood in the United States and Western Europe:

- Becoming an adult today involves a period of living independently *before* marriage, despite public concern about young people’s later departure from and returns to the parental home.
- The early adult years often involve the pursuit of higher education, as a decent standard of living today generally requires a college education, if not a professional degree.
- Even with college, it takes longer today to secure a full-time job that pays enough to support a family, and young people now have a greater range of employment experiences on their way to financial security.
- As a consequence of these changes, marriage and parenting are now significantly delayed. Early partnership and parenting sharply separate the destinies of young people.
- On each of these fronts, young adults often have starkly different sets of opportunities and experiences depending on their family backgrounds and resources. Young people today are also more racially and ethnically diverse than other adult age groups, which has produced gross inequalities in their opportunities and experiences.

Although these changes are occurring for young men and women alike, women are outpacing men on most indicators. Men carry most of the crisis

stories of this period of life—whether in leaving and returning home (which is viewed by some as problematic), high school and college dropout, unemployment, or being completely “disconnected” from productive roles (not in school, work, or the military).

With the emergence of longer, more flexible, and more individualized pathways, cultural norms associated with these transitions have loosened. Today, there are new freedoms to live in accordance with one’s wishes, but there are also new risks as individuals are subject to institutions and policies designed in an earlier era. These new freedoms can be fertile ground for family tension as different generations have different ideas about how the course to adulthood is supposed to look and feel. Still, traditional markers related to education, employment, and family formation matter for the well-being of individuals and societies, so it is natural to be concerned about the progress of young people. At the same time, these traditional roles may no longer be adequate for defining adulthood, or at least in determining its start—given that they now happen much later, and given that marriage and parenthood are inapplicable to or rejected by larger numbers of people who remain unmarried or childless by circumstance or choice.

PSYCHOLOGICAL MARKERS

Psychological and social-psychological inquiry into the markers of adulthood has focused on more subjective or interior phenomenon, especially an evolving *feeling* of becoming or being an adult. A sense of “emerging adulthood,” to use Jeffrey Arnett’s phrase, is bound to markers such as “taking responsibility for oneself,” “making independent decisions,” or becoming financially independent,” which reflect more abstract concepts of maturity, independence, responsibility, and personal control. This research suggests that young people use more indeterminate and individualistic criteria to frame their sense of adulthood rather than traditional social roles.

And yet, these psychological factors can be viewed as being facilitated by traditional markers rather than as conditions that are necessary for entering them. Some degree of maturity or responsibility seems necessary to assume the roles of partner or parent, for example, or at least to perform them with minimal effectiveness. And, indeed, there is evidence that many young people are now actively postponing marriage and parenthood precisely because they *want* to be ready for and do well in these roles and not take them lightly.

It is clear that building an adult identity is a process, not a discrete event. No single experience renders one an adult. Instead, it is a larger cluster of events and the gradual accumulation of experiences that eventually render one an adult in the eyes of self and other. Traditional roles, particularly marriage and parenthood, now *culminate* this process rather than start it. Because these

markers do not occur until the late 20s or early 30s, if then, it becomes difficult to say that people this age are not adults.

In light of these postponements, it is no surprise that marriage and parenting have become disassociated with conceptions of adulthood in public opinion. Financial independence from parents, however, has remained a salient marker in the United States and elsewhere, which is tied to psychological notions of independence and autonomy. The behavioral evidence seriously contradicts this ideal, however, as large proportions of middle and upper class American “children” receive sizable financial assistance well into their 30s.

The bottom line is that most young people today do not *completely* feel like adults—in some ways and with some people they do, and in other ways and with other people they do not. Young people are more likely to report feeling like adults when they are at work, with romantic partners or spouses, or with children, but they are less likely to report feeling like adults when they are with their parents and some of their friends, depending on the activity.

Independence has long been heralded as the central hallmark of adulthood, but this ideal is at odds with the reality of adult life. Adults seldom act autonomously. Instead, they generally act in ways that are highly conditioned by other people, especially family members. Social ties affect who we are and what we can become; they open and constrain opportunities and choices. Achieving a state of *interdependence*—in which you rely on others *and* others rely on you—might therefore be a more appropriate marker of adulthood than independence. The quest for complete independence seems an illusion at best, and potentially destructive at worst, if it leads young people to make decisions and assume responsibilities that undermine their futures.

LEGAL MARKERS

Most young people can give a specific age (or ages) at which they began to feel adult, but what matters is not age itself but rather the important experiences that happened at those times. These are often rights and responsibilities that are embedded in law, granted gradually during the teenage years and then culminating in emancipation at 18 and 21. Although these *legal* ages reflect growing independence and autonomy, few young people today are fully independent or autonomous with respect to the social, economic, and psychological markers described earlier. Still, these legal markers are nonetheless important signals to youth that they are moving into a new cultural category of “adulthood.”

In most countries, the legal rights and responsibilities of adulthood are explicitly structured by chronological age, although not without debate about how soon in life they should be granted. There are some cross-country

differences in the granting of particular rights and responsibilities, such as age regulations around compulsory school, consensual sex, voting, driving, drinking, working, serving in the military, marrying, making medical decisions, or seeking public offices. But there is uniformity across the globe that full legal emancipation from parents occurs between 18 and 21.

To understand just how much these legal ages matter to young people, and how arbitrary they seem, one need only ask teens and their parents. Most of these laws seem to use age as a proxy for the developmental statuses of individuals, even if the rationales are not explicit, and even though developmental research has long noted that chronological age is often a poor and rough indicator of these statuses. Most of these judgments ultimately seem rooted in assumptions about when young people are *cognitively* mature enough to make “adult” decisions. However, there is much incongruence across these experiences (e.g., voting or serving on juries at 18, but not drinking until 21; being able to enter into consenting sexual relationships, or even marry without parental consent, before 18, but in some states being prosecuted for rape if one partner has crossed the threshold of 18).

Recent brain research, especially on the development of the prefrontal cortex, raises further questions about these assumptions. New evidence suggests that this part of the brain—which is responsible for solving problems, anticipating short- and long-term consequences, and regulating emotions and behaviors—is not fully developed until age 25. For this reason, psychologist Laurence Steinberg has argued that children under the age of 15 should never be tried in courts as “adults,” although by age 22 or so it would be hard to make a case not to do so. But this evidence on brain development also calls into question the phasing in of other rights and responsibilities, and carries implications for understanding behavior and its consequences, in the transition from adolescence to young adulthood.

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

So many of the markers of adulthood discussed thus far perpetuate a sense that there is a monolithic or universal understanding of what it means to become and be “adult.” We have already noted the reality that the course to adulthood in many Western nations has become more ambiguous and occurs in a less uniform and more gradual manner. It is no longer as possible for most young people to achieve autonomy of any kind as early as they once did. Education and training are now more valuable because jobs are less permanent, work careers have become more fluid, and the economic returns to education have increased (although emerging evidence suggests that these returns have started to plateau in the United States). A declining fraction of

young adults enters full-time work before their early 20s and an increasing number do so only toward the end of the 20s.

Societies have not yet begun to address the significant ramifications of the economic and social changes that have resulted from the extension of schooling, the delay of work, and the postponement of marriage and childbearing. Cutting-edge research is probing a more complete spectrum of transition experiences and their long-range outcomes, inequalities among young people, the burden on families, and how institutions and policies might be reformed to improve pathways into adulthood.

One thing is clear: There is no normative path or gold standard for defining the achievement of adulthood today. There is much to learn about how young people manage uncertainty and delay and how they build a sense of identity as adults, especially in the face of hard economic times and limited institutional supports. There is also much to learn about the helpful or harmful processes that occur in families and schools as two primary social institutions that determine how young people fare going into and coming out of the 20s. Finally, there is much to learn about how this period of life is being transformed alongside the changing meanings of age and the reorganization of the entire life course. We consider each in turn.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

The financial and emotional support of parents is vital for a young person's transition to adulthood, especially in the United States and other Western societies where this transition is taken to be a private matter to be solved with whatever resources families have or can marshal. This stage of life is therefore creating consternation for families, who have to adjust to its slower pace and who are strained in trying to help their youth get ahead. Although parental support to young adults has been growing since the 1980s, parents are now, more than at any other time in recent history, being called upon to provide significant assistance—whether for tuition and living expenses during college, or for college debt, down payments for homes, or assistance with childcare later on. Parents also play crucial roles in helping young people get into and succeed in college, and in finding opportunities for employment thereafter.

Many parents, however, are unprepared for just how much support their children will need. Families with limited means find it difficult to provide support, while their privileged counterparts provide sizable resources. Recent data suggest that parents, *regardless of income level*, are allocating about 10% of their annual household incomes to help adult children. This signals

a new recognition across social class that young adults today need family support if they are to succeed. But it also reveals how drastically different the *amounts* of support are—10% of \$40,000, for example, is considerably different from 10% of \$80,000 or \$160,000. The media spotlight on coddled young adults leaves in the shadows those who are getting little support or none at all. And even middle-class families, who once seemed strongly positioned to invest in their young adults, have been experiencing new vulnerabilities amid the “Great Recession” that began in 2008. Those on the low end of middle income seem particularly vulnerable because they have incomes just high enough to render them ineligible for government support.

Little is known about the different expectations that parents have for each of their children, and how they make judgments about who gets what, especially in the face of strained finances. How do the unique skills or needs, or the likely success, of particular children affect the resources that parents will or will not make in them—or the conditions under which support will be given or taken away? How do parents make hard choices about how to allocate the resources they have across multiple children?

The significant support that young people now need surely affects the expectations that young people and their parents and other family members have about adulthood and how they judge progress toward it. The support of adult children by their parents is also permitted by the fact that parent–child relationships are on the whole, closer and more connected than prior generations (especially between mothers and their children), which reflects their greater alignment on core values and opinions. This closeness partially permits the later departures from and returns to the parental home that have been growing since the 1980s.

The socioeconomic standing of families makes a big difference in the opportunities and outcomes of young people. For those with resources, the longer transition to adulthood may come with the luxury of exploration and the cultivation of the self. For young people with few resources, the experience is characterized by drift and waiting for opportunity. Vulnerable populations, including those in foster care, special education, and the juvenile justice systems, are terminated from state support when they reach the legal age of adulthood, yet they often require further investments at a time when their advantaged peers are receiving significant infusions of support from their families.

There are significant social class differences in parenting styles and expectations. Lower income parents are much more likely than middle-class parents to view young adults as independent, to expect it sooner, and to provide limited support, although this is beginning to change as these parents realize that support is needed in order for their children to succeed. It is important to recognize that these dynamics are about what *parents do*, not

just what *kids get*. Why do parents give? What functions does it serve for them? What are the consequences for their lives, and their children's lives, in the short- and long-term? Extended parental support is not only an issue in white middle-class families. It is, for example, strong in immigrant families too. But in many of these cultures, there are also strong expectations that children contribute to the household, care for family members, and engage in reciprocal exchanges. We have much to learn about the effects of prolonged parental support on everyone involved or affected.

THE RISK-LADEN JUNCTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The single most important institution in which rising numbers of young adults spend time after high school is higher education. Higher education is increasingly a significant but stuttered part of the pathway into adulthood. How things play out in higher education is to a great degree determined by prior and current parental support, and it is heavily consequential for the decades of life that follow.

By senior year, about two-thirds of students in the United States plan to graduate from a 4-year college, a quarter plans on graduating from a 2-year college, and only a fraction (12%) plans on entering vocational school or joining the military. These plans differ little by gender and race and ethnicity. What matters more is social class, where over 75% of students whose parents have a college or professional degree plan to graduate from college. The bulk of high school graduates (70%) do, in fact, enroll in some type of postsecondary institution immediately after high school. A record number of over 21 million students attended US colleges and universities in fall 2013, a 37% increase from 2000, and most of this enrollment was for full-time students. These trends, which are expected to grow with successive cohorts of students, require a more thoughtful analysis of what it means to be an adult whose first and primary role is a collegiate learner.

High school students depend on parents to guide many of their academic choices and for much of their information about college. For many students, the college process is riddled with financial and academic risks, especially if they are unprepared. Even parents who attended college in the recent past recognize just how complicated the college process has become, while parents without college experience are even more disadvantaged in supporting their child. And the stakes are high: The average cost of college over the past 10 years has increased by 42% at a public university and 31% at a private institution—covering tuition and room and board, and adjusting for inflation. The average yearly cost of a public institution is \$13,600 and \$36,000 at a private institution.

Worries about the costs of college, and whether college is “worth it,” are exacerbated by the fact that wage gains to college graduates have in recent

years been slight and seem to now have reached a plateau. These worries have been heightened in the face of longer time to graduation and the real risk of dropout. The 6-year graduation rate for 4-year public universities is 57%, and the 4-year graduation rate is 20% for public 2-year colleges. It is clear, though, that the wage premium for only a high school degree has declined and one's options are numbered without further training.

Given the complexity of the college-going process, a number of high school interventions have been created to try to ease the process, particularly for low-income and minority students and students in rural areas. These students often look at fewer schools, are more financially and geographically constrained, and are more likely to go to community college first. A promising example is the College Ambition Program (CAP), a school-wide high school program designed to help students prepare for college and a career. CAP assists students by offering tutoring with college students, assistance with course planning, and information on making college choices and applications; working with parents and students on financial aid; and arranging college visits, especially for students who have never been on a college campus. Similar types of experimental programs are showing positive effects.

Innovative experiments related to financial aid information are also being conducted. One of the most promising interventions comes from Eric Bettinger, Bridget Terry Long, Philip Oreopoulos, and Lisa Sanbonmatsu. Their team employed a random-assignment research design to test the effects of two treatments that used a simplified financial aid form, and H&R Block tax professionals helped low- to moderate-income families complete the federal application for financial aid (FAFSA). In the first group, families were given an estimate of their eligibility for government aid as well as information about local postsecondary options. In the second group, families received personalized eligibility information but not help with FAFSA. Individuals in the first group, substantially more likely to submit the aid application, enroll in college the following fall, and receive more financial aid. The message is clear: Providing information and simplifying the aid forms and process improve college access and lower debt. These interventions, while scientifically designed, must confront the challenges of "scaling-up" to accommodate other populations, school types, and geographic places. Getting into college, let alone succeeding in it, entails more than filling out forms and financing. But these are critical starting points.

Another promising area in need of further research is the impact of college transition programs out of high school into college—such as summer bridge programs or dual enrollment programs between high schools and community colleges or 4-year institutions. One of the compelling reasons for these types of programs is that the college persistence rates of low-income and minority students has been disproportionately lower than more resourced

students. These programs are typically designed for students needing academic support to make a successful transition into college and potentially reduce costs. Nationally, it is estimated that slightly over one-third of incoming students at 4-year institutions and just under half of incoming students at community college require at least one “developmental education” (remedial) class to meet entrance criteria. Most of these programs are not yet being evaluated or tout findings that are simply descriptive or correlational. Quasi-experimental research is needed to learn about successful programs and undertake replications in multiple settings.

The large number of developmental programs is perhaps one signal to students that they are not really prepared to take the step into college, although the pressure to attempt college is quite intense. The “college for all” mantra reinforces the message that to become a successful adult, one must and should be able to go to college. Student deficiencies in skills and knowledge will undermine their self-determination and interfere with their success, and yet these students often do not seem to think they need remediation or feel shame in it. The success of these programs—and of similar services meant to retain students once they are in college—hinges on how programs and services are framed, whether students understand and acknowledge their limitations and needs, and whether they are willing to seek help. The alternative to not going on to higher education, however, suggests an even less robust path for achieving positive psychological, social, and economic well-being. The “value” of higher education is not only about better employment, higher pay, and access to insurance and pensions. It is also associated with better health, more stable families, more resourced parenting, and higher levels of civic engagement. It is not surprising that the college pathway reaffirms one’s identity not only as a step toward becoming a fully employed worker but also a successful adult.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Part of what it means to be “young” and to become an “adult” must be understood in light of the changing meanings of age and configuration of the life course. Prepubescent children aspire to act older, wanting to think of themselves or be perceived as teens. Teens cannot wait to leave adolescence, but do not necessarily want to become adult. Individuals who are middle-aged strive to retain a sense that they are still young. Parents may be inclined to continue treating young adults *as* children if they wish to avoid confronting the reality that they are middle-aged. Even at the end of life, people who are clearly old refuse to describe themselves as such. Being old is about lifestyle or mindset, even a quest to be *ageless*.

Where becoming adult is concerned, significant cultural contradictions abound. On the one hand, childhood is now viewed as a period that has been “adultified,” to use Jack Levin’s phrase. Children now experience adult things—such as puberty, sexual experiences, eating disorders, exposure to violence, pornography, rape, and other mature issues—at earlier ages. On the other hand, early adulthood is now often viewed as a period of prolonged adolescence in which young adults are infantilized—coddled by parents, indulged by society, and provided an extended “moratorium” from serious commitments in the name of the self-exploration. The reality that “adult children,” a phrase which is itself a contradiction of terms, need greater and longer support from parents reinforces a sense of being “not quite adult.”

There are additional contradictions in the legal phasing of the rights and responsibilities of adulthood, as noted earlier, and institutions similarly send contradictory signals about the standing of young adults *as* adults. For example, universities and colleges require that parental income be used to determine financial aid, under the assumption that parents continue to be providers as children move well into adulthood. The fact that health care reform now permits parents to cover their children up to age 26 is an example of a policy that is responsive to the protracted course to adulthood. At the same time, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) in higher education allows parents very limited rights to their student’s education records. Policies such as these convey mixed messages about students and their parents being *legally independent*, even though they are generally *not independent* psychologically, socially, or economically.

The institution of education very much organizes views of adulthood. School is a place to *get ready* for adulthood; to be *out of school* is to be adult. If individuals are young and in school, even in graduate school, they are in a role that is viewed as setting them apart from adulthood. Residential campuses, especially, become a protective shield from the rest of life. Young people who skip or fall away from higher education, or who make early transitions into work and family roles, are likely to feel adult more quickly—although feeling like an adult may also lead individuals to more quickly assume these roles.

Even the language we use to talk about this period of life suggests ambiguities, whether “adult child,” “young adult,” or “emerging adult.” How might these very labels impede the ability of individuals to embrace adulthood? At some chronological age, individuals *are* adult, even if they do not yet *feel* fully adult. What are the dangers in signaling that individuals are not adults when they are—or, likewise, in signaling that they are adults when they are not?

At the same time, “adulthood” now spans at least 50 years and as many as 80 years. It would be foolish to pretend that its meanings and markers are

the same across these decades. Age and life stage are always relative—we are younger or older than someone else, and older than our former selves and younger than a future self we imagine. Our biological, psychological, and social statuses change over time. There are common experiences in particular life periods, just as there are natural differences between periods. The labels attached to these phases are imbued with larger cultural meanings, affecting the things we do or do not strive for, how we evaluate ourselves and other people, and how other people evaluate us. Ultimately, what they mean for the individual is both personally defined and contextually sensitive.

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RICHARD A. SETTERSTEN SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Richard A. Settersten, Jr., is Professor of Social and Behavioral Health Sciences and Endowed Director of the Hallie Ford Center for Healthy Children & Families at Oregon State University. A graduate of Northwestern University, he held fellowships at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and Education in Berlin, the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern, and the Spencer Foundation in Chicago. He was a member of the MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood. Much of his recent research has examined how entry into adult life has changed historically, how it varies across populations, and how institutions and policies affect the life paths of young people. He is the author or editor of many scientific articles and books on young adulthood, aging, and the life course. Besides MacArthur, several divisions of the National Institutes of Health have supported his research.

<http://health.oregonstate.edu/settersten>

<http://www.ricksettersten.com>

TIMOTHY M. OTTUSCH SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Timothy M. Ottusch is a doctoral student in the Human Development and Family Studies program at Oregon State University. His research interests include young adulthood, higher education, and parent–child relationships.

BARBARA SCHNEIDER SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Barbara Schneider is the John A. Hannah University Distinguished Professor in the College of Education and Department of Sociology at Michigan State University. Her research focuses on how schools and families influence the academic and social well-being of adolescents as they move into adulthood, with a particular emphasis on improving educational opportunities for students with limited economic and social resources. She is the co-author of 15 books (including *The Ambitious Generation, America's Teenagers Motivated but Directionless; Becoming Adult: How Teenagers Prepare for the World of Work; and Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*) and many journal articles. Schneider was a Fulbright New Centuries Scholar (2007–2008), member of the Sociological Research Association, and Senior Fellow, at NORC at the University of Chicago. She chaired the AERA Government Relations Committee; served on the AERA Grants Board and co-edited two AERA publications: *Estimating Causal Effects Using Experimental and Observational Designs* and *The AERA Handbook of Education Policy Research*. She is previous editor of *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* and *Sociology of Education*, and was recently

elected President of American Educational Research Association (AERA).
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