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## What Marks Adulthood—Subjective Identity or Demographic Markers?

*Michael Shanahan, Erik Porfeli, and Jeylan Mortimer*

Traditionally, entry to adulthood has been marked by such events as completing school, leaving home, starting a career, marrying, and having children. With the delay in marriage and childbearing and the extension of education, however, some scholars—and indeed, youth themselves—have begun to question whether these indicators still apply.

The model of “emerging adulthood” suggests that individualistic and subjective indicators (such as a sense of autonomy, financial independence, self-control, and personal responsibility) better signal adulthood. This theory raises the possibility that the phases of life, once defined by external markers of status and roles, increasingly depend on an individual’s subjective perceptions.

Little research has tested this claim, however. Michael Shanahan, Erik Porfeli, and Jeylan Mortimer, in their chapter in *On the Frontier of Adulthood*, use data from the Youth Development Study, an 11-year panel survey of youth in St. Paul, Minnesota, to test whether traditional social roles or subjective, personal markers are more likely to denote adult status.

### Study Design

The Youth Development Study surveyed 1,139 high school students in St. Paul, Minnesota, beginning in 1988, when they were freshmen, and following them through 1999, when they were aged 25 or 26. Students were surveyed annually about work, attitudes toward work, and plans for the future. Researchers also maintained detailed monthly records on residential arrangements, educational attendance, and part- and full-time work. The authors use data from a subset of 1,010 students for their analysis.

The researchers tracked when the youth began cohabiting or married, when they bought a home, became a parent, completed college, and held a full-time job. Financial independence and a sense of personal responsibility for one’s future were included as individualistic criteria. Subjective age-identity was measured by asking youth how “adult” they felt in a range of situations (with their parents, with their own children, on the job, etc.), with responses ranging from not at all like an adult to entirely like an adult.

### Feeling Like an Adult

By age 25 or 26, many of the youth in the sample, currently or at some point, held a full-time job, had cohabited or married, or currently owned a home or rented an apartment. However, fewer than half had become parents, and very few had experienced all of the family-based transitions (marrying, having children, starting a career).

Generally speaking, 60% of the youth reported feeling entirely like an adult most of the time. They were most likely to report feeling entirely like an adult in their private lives and at work, and least likely to feel entirely like an adult when with friends (37%) and with their parents (43%).

Family-related transitions were most often correlated with perceptions of adulthood. Youth who had been married, cohabited, or had children were likely to report feeling entirely like an adult in a greater variety of situations. Financial independence was likewise related to feeling like an adult “most of the time” at work and with parents,

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although this finding changes depending on the type of statistical analysis. In contrast, a sense of responsibility for one's personal future had no effect on perceived adulthood.

Perhaps most important to the discussion of what constitutes "adulthood," traditional social roles—getting married, starting a career, having children—still matter greatly. Youth who had experienced all three events were twice as likely to report feeling like an adult than those who had not experienced all three events.

The paucity of support for personal criteria (in this case financial independence and personal responsibility), however, might be linked to the very large group of respondents who were financially independent, and who were also likely to have a sense of personal responsibility. A more sensitive measurement may be needed to study these individualistic criteria. A further limitation is that the explanatory power of the models was quite low, possibly suggesting that a different set of variables may be more closely aligned with perceptions of adulthood among the youth than the ones used. On the other hand, the results could also reflect a very slim margin between what people perceive as "entirely" adult and "somewhat" adult.

## A Third Way

Even with these limitations, however, the results are interesting for the light they shed on the notion of emerging adulthood. Although not ruling out the importance of individualistic criteria, the results underscore the continuing importance of family-based transitions. Based on these findings and past studies, perhaps a model that reflects a confluence of personal qualities and social roles is more appropriate in defining adulthood, and that the relative importance of the factors varies by age and life experiences.

*Based on Michael Shanahan, Erik Porfeli, and Jeylan Mortimer, "Subjective Age Identity and the Transition to Adulthood: When Does One Become an Adult?," in On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy, edited by Richard A. Settersten, Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming 2004.*

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The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy examines the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Significant cultural, economic, and demographic changes have occurred in the span of a few generations, and these changes are challenging youth's psychological and social development. Some are adapting well, but many others are floundering as they prepare to leave home, finish school, find jobs, and start families. The network is both documenting these cultural and social shifts, and exploring how families, government, and social institutions are shaping the course of young adults' development. The Network is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and chaired by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank Furstenberg.

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