have more opportunities to... address the same problems but in different ways. And to choose the work that we want.

Similar to other American young adults in their mid-20s, many adult children of immigrants in San Diego are fluctuating in semi-autonomy—between completing school, working full-time, departing from the parental household, and struggling to attain financial independence. But then, such quandaries are typical for most young adults who have so many goals and just as many obstacles to overcome.

NOTES

2. In 2001, AB 540, the Public Postsecondary Education Exemption from Nonresident Tuition Act, mandated that California institutions of higher education apply in-state resident fees for undocumented immigrant students who, since the fall of 2001, had attended a California public high school for three years and entered college. The law is being challenged on constitutional grounds. See www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/01-02/bill/asm/ab_0501-0550/ab_540_bill_20011061_chaptered.pdf.
4. Attewell and Lavin (2007) found that 19 percent of their female CUNY students took ten years to graduate, while only two-thirds finished within six years.

CHAPTER 5

Becoming Adult

Meanings and Markers for Young Americans

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The prior chapters of this book have reinforced the fact that the process of becoming an adult now takes longer, occurs in more varied ways, and for some young people is accompanied by significant uncertainty about the future (see also Settersten and Ray 2001a; Settersten et al. 2005). These changes have also resulted in young people relying more on others, especially their parents, for support along the way. In light of these circumstances, how do young people come to think about themselves as "adults"? This chapter unfolds young adults' perspectives on what adulthood means, what experiences mark its passage, and how adult identities are built and ultimately achieved. In contrast to the prior chapters, which focused on young adults' experiences in four distinct locations—rural Iowa, Minneapolis/Saint Paul, New York City, and San Diego—this chapter draws on interviews across the sites to gain some broader insights into how young people see and live the process of becoming adult.

THE SIGNIFICANCE AND MEANINGS OF AGE

Age matters for societies, for groups of people in it, and for individuals (Settersten 2005). The meanings and uses of age are often formal. For example, age underlies the organization of families, schools, workplaces, and leisure settings, as well as many legal rights, responsibilities, and
entitlements. The meanings and uses of age can also be informal. For example, members of a society may share ideas about behavior that is appropriate or inappropriate at particular ages, or ideas about when or in what order men and women are or are not supposed to assume social roles, such as student, worker, spouse, or parent. Individuals use age-related ideas to make plans and set goals and to judge their own lives and those of others. Age also enters into and shapes everyday social interactions, even in subtle and unconscious ways, affecting how we judge and act toward the people we encounter in our daily rounds. Age has long been a significant social dimension in the United States, yet there is also evidence that its meanings are changing and its significance is declining (Settersten 2007).

How does chronological age matter for the young people in our study as they describe the process of becoming adult?

Age as an Anchor for Meaningful Experiences

Becoming adult is inherently about age in that it is about growing up and older. It is not surprising, then, that young people associate adulthood with age and easily provide specific ages at which they began to feel adult, almost always between 18 and 26. But there is nothing magic about the ages per se. What matters is what the age indexes—important experiences that happen at those times. Most references to age are quickly followed up with examples of such experiences. For example:

[I began to think of myself as an adult] maybe when I was like 20. And really, like, got out of my parents' house and started, like, living, I mean working to pay the bills. (Female, age 24–26, from San Diego)

[I began to think of myself as an adult] um, probably at 21... I finished school. Finally working. Taking care of myself. And no longer dependent on my parents. (Female, age 24–26, from San Diego)

These examples are typical in that these individuals see themselves as accomplishing key markers of adulthood at or around this time—in the first case, leaving home and working, and in the second case, finishing school and establishing herself as separate from, and no longer financially dependent on, her parents. Age simply anchors the experience; it is a window into a larger process. The exceptions to this rule are the ages of 18 and 21, which are symbolic to many young people because they are explicitly tied to legal age norms.

Legal Age Norms as Starting Points in Becoming Adult

Not surprisingly, 18 and 21 are often given as ages of adulthood because they are embedded in laws and signal the acquisition of significant legal rights and responsibilities, such as when one can vote, drink, marry, have consensual sex, or serve in the military. For example:

[I began to think of myself as an adult at] 18, I guess... Because it seemed to be, it was the age at which I was legally able to do a lot of things. And I guess to me that had significance, so that was the age at which I could vote... and have a credit card in my own name. It was also the age at which—or was it 17?—the government informed me that I would have to register for selective service. (Male, age 30–32, from New York)

Young people, however, do not suddenly feel adult upon reaching these landmark legal ages. Instead, they view these ages as representing starting points for adulthood rather than as things that immediately render them adult. They are also quick to point out that these legal rights and responsibilities are given gradually at different ages and in ways that seem inconsistent or arbitrary.

Legal ages are also important to parents and other people in the social worlds of young adults. As youth reach these ages, other people begin to think about them in new ways. These legal markers seem especially important in situations where the young person is viewed as being adrift or as lagging behind expectations:

When I turned 21... [my parents said], you know what? You're an adult now. You should start thinking like an adult. You know, you should start setting up for your future as, you know, adult stuff that adults do... [But it wasn't until] the “Big Two–Five” [25] that I started thinking more as an adult and stuff like that. (Male, age 24–26, from San Diego)

The fact that parents and others send subtle and not-so-subtle cues to young people about their progress, or lack thereof, is consistent with dynamics described in the literature on "age norms," in which age-related expectations are reinforced by positive or negative social sanctions (Settersten 2003). Positive social sanctions come to young people who stay "on track," while negative social sanctions come to young people who stray too far from the expected course. These sanctions may be informal (for example, persuasion, encouragement, reinforcement, ridicule, gossip, ostracism) or formal (for example, political, legal, or economic ramifications).
In some instances, however, young people regard chronological age as meaningless in determining when one becomes an adult. That is, age is a poor proxy for an individual’s readiness for adult roles and responsibilities:

[Questions about age can’t really be answered] for the simple fact that the individual can be a type of person that’s not ready for society. That individual can be between the ages of 15 through 30. If that person isn’t quite ready mentally, then obviously that person can’t be separate from their parents. . . . There’s people that are older who are still childish. Assuming that the person is somewhat responsible, then I think it’s extremely important to be separate from their parents, not to have to rely on their parents for anything. To have to do everything on their own. And understand what it is to be independent. (Male, age 24-26, from San Diego)

This example illustrates a commonly expressed disconnect between the legal assumptions about when adulthood begins and the reality that most young people do not achieve psychological, social, or financial maturity until well after the ages encrypted in law.

TRADITIONAL MARKERS STILL MATTER

It will surprise some readers to know that traditional markers of adulthood continue to be important in the minds of young people. This includes what we might describe as the “Big Five” traditional markers — leaving home, finishing school, getting a job, getting married, and having children. Yet these traditional markers also bring significant tensions in how young people evaluate their progress toward adulthood. Although many young people think there is at least an ideal order (as listed above) for experiencing these traditional markers, many also acknowledge that their own lives have not gone or will not go in these ways. While the pattern may be viewed as outdated and reflective of the lives of older cohorts, young people may nonetheless see benefits to it.

I would say that’s my belief as well [accomplishing traditional markers in the traditional order] . . . even though . . . a lot of times it’s not realistic because . . . it depends on . . . your family and your growing up — how you make that a reality. (Female, age 24-26, from San Diego)

[It’s hard] living up to the expectations of being an adult. You should have a good job. You should have your own place. Should have a family. . . . It’s “What’s wrong with you?” — what’s wrong with you if you don’t have a good job, what’s wrong with you if you don’t have a family. (Male, age 30-32, from New York)

These examples reveal an awareness of an ideal sequence—in the first case, regretting that her family’s circumstances did not allow her life to happen in this way, and in the second case, feeling the social repercussions of not being able to meet the social script.

These traditional assumptions about the timing and order of adult transitions also underlie many institutions and policies—especially those related to schooling, work, and family—despite a growing awareness that these no longer fit this model. This is where new questions about risk come into play, as unusual pathways into adulthood bring new risks, many of which are not known in advance. Atypical timing or sequencing of school, work, or family experiences may leave individuals vulnerable, as they are subject to social policies that are based on outdated models of life (for example, eligibility rules for Social Security and pensions are based on having a continuous full-time work history or on having a long-lived marriage to someone who has such a work history—both of which are questionable today). From the perspectives of young people, when one’s own patterns mesh with normative patterns, the process of navigating life is also easier, and when life is easier to navigate, personal growth and development come more easily. Crafting a life of one’s own, especially when it goes against the grain, is a difficult enterprise.

Young adults also view these traditional markers as ultimately being connected to more abstract concepts such as “maturity,” “responsibility,” or “control.” These qualities are often viewed as being facilitated by traditional markers rather than as necessary conditions for entering into them. The view directly contradicts many political and public discussions. Consider marriage or parenting, for example, where it is often argued that individuals should be mature or responsible before they marry or become parents, or that the problems with marriage and parenthood today result from individuals who enter these roles before they are ready. Surely, some degree of maturity, responsibility, or control is necessary to assume these roles, or at least to perform them with minimal effectiveness. But our interviews suggest that many young people are now actively postponing marriage and parenthood because they really want to be ready for, and do well in, these roles once they get there. For many, their concerns about wanting to be ready for marriage and parenthood are also driven by the prevalence of divorce or fragile relationships among their parents—they do not want this for themselves.

Given the significant delays in marriage and parenting today, it is perhaps no surprise that recent public opinion data show that marriage and parenting are becoming disassociated with conceptions of adulthood
(Furstenberg et al. 2004), though it is clear that these roles continue to have a strong presence in the minds of young people. Indeed, once these roles have been assumed, there is the sense that these experiences, especially parenthood, are the very things that crystallize one's sense of self as an adult.

Financial independence from parents is also an important marker in the United States, reflected not just in the opinions of young people, but also the public at large (Furstenberg et al. 2004). At the same time, there is new evidence that large proportions of middle- and upper-class American “children” receive sizable instrumental, and especially financial, assistance well into their 30s (Schoeni and Ross 2005). In addition, in places such as New York or San Diego, where opportunities for housing are limited or costs are prohibitive, living independently is not a possibility for many young people. This draws our attention to the fact that the ability (and even interest) of young people to tackle traditional markers is intimately affected by regional and local conditions.

Given postponements in marriage and parenting, traditional markers related to education and work now seem to be the minimal and earliest set of transitions that young people experience as they navigate the early adult years. Markers related to education and work also seem more in one's control than marriage and parenthood, which rely on others. It is important to recognize, however, that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have far fewer opportunities in education and work than those from more privileged backgrounds. As the prior chapters illustrate, young people across the sites we have studied are both searching and striving, and their experiences are heavily conditioned by opportunities in local markets, whether those markets are related to jobs, education, housing, or marriage.

CAUGHT UP IN THE PROCESS OF BECOMING

When asked, most young people across our research sites say that they are adults. But when one looks carefully at responses to this question and others, it is clear that almost everyone we interviewed does not yet feel entirely adult, even into their late 20s and early 30s. In some ways and in some spheres they feel like adults, and in some ways and in some spheres they do not. Consider the following:

I'm still a kid... not in the sense of, you know, my mindset... I know what I need to do, you know, bring home money, stuff like that, but I still feel like a kid, meaning I like to have fun... (and) I haven't gotten married,

I haven't bought a house and all that... And I don't have kids. I bought a car; that's about as close as I [get]... [but] I think the fact that I know what to do or when to do it or, you know, basically I'm grown up. I have control of my own life. (Male, age 27-29, from New York)

I still kind of sometimes think to myself, "Oh my God, I'm a grown-up..." I don't think the adult thing will [completely] hit me until I have kids... I mean I'm responsible for myself and, yeah, I'm married and, yeah, I'm responsible for making my health payment and my car payment, but you know I'm not really responsible for any other human life or anything like that. So... I know I'm an adult because I'm 23 years old, but I... didn't wake up one day when I was 23 and think, oh, I'm an adult now... I still sometimes don't think of myself [that way]. (Female, age 27-29, from Iowa)

These quotes illustrate common distinctions between thoughts and feelings on the one hand, and actions on the other. They reveal that individuals are able to sort a wide range of possible markers in complex ways, judge their relative importance in determining adult status, and evaluate their own progress with respect to these benchmarks. In the second case, the woman has already married, but she does not yet fully think of herself as an adult—a theme that is echoed in the voices of many young people who have already attained some of these markers. In the first case, we hear another common theme: that adulthood is often equated with letting go of fun, a sense that many of life's joys must be relinquished or diminished when one "grows up" (or is forced to do so), such as no longer being able to hang out with friends, party, or have time for leisure and recreational activities.

Similarly, striving for greater control over life also emerges as a key theme in these interviews. What many young people do not seem to recognize, however, is that this is a challenge they will wrestle with throughout life, not one that will somehow be resolved in early adulthood. What is unique about early adulthood is that individuals are encountering this struggle in a significant way for the first time. This struggle often involves navigating the blurry and evolving spaces between control, autonomy, and independence, and recognizing new kinds of responsibilities and consequences. For example:

[Being 18, I knew that there were different consequences for me... so in that way I felt like an adult. But I... recognized it [age] didn't really make me an adult... I can't say there was any one event [when I suddenly felt like an adult], even after joining the army... kind of let other people kind of take care of me in a way... I'd say 23 is really when I became an adult and kind of made my own decisions and kind of took control of my own destiny. (Male, age 27-29, from Minneapolis)
This man sees the process starting at 18, though it is not until 25 that he feels more fully settled into adulthood. Even then, his sense of himself as an adult is hedged: he kind of made his own decisions, and kind of took control of his own destiny. There is tremendous awareness among young people of being caught up in the process of “becoming.” The passage above reveals that part of becoming an adult is not just knowing when one could or should take control and responsibility but, more importantly, actually doing it. There is a grace period where young people may be exempt from not taking (or not taking enough) action, partly from their own perspectives, but especially from the vantage points of others. But that grace period eventually ends:

[Do you think of yourself as an adult now?] 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 I also 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. (Male, age 27–29, from Minneapolis)

So, while it is common to not think of oneself as an adult even if some traditional markers have been attained, it is also clear that, beyond some age threshold, one simply is an adult even if he/she does not feel it. Chronological age eventually becomes a sufficient condition for adult status.

UPWARD SLOPES, TURNING POINTS, AND CYCLES

The attainment of adulthood does not come with a single event. Rather, adulthood is achieved by way of a larger cluster of events and the accumulation of experiences that come with them. The process of becoming an adult not only is about traditional markers, but also relates to a wide range of possible experiences. Three different models of moving into adulthood capture most of the views and experiences of young people across the sites: (1) upward slopes; (2) turning points; and (3) cycles.

Upward Slopes

The gradual establishment of adult identities is most often construed as being linear, and as entailing slow but ever-evolving upward progress toward adulthood. This path is also often punctuated with notable “adult moments,” as one young woman put it:

[Once] you are 25 or 26, you can't pretend you're a kid anymore. Every once in a while I do, but then you have adult moments . . . . You don't see yourself as an adult all the time. You just think of yourself as yourself, and every once in a while, you'll have an adult moment when you have to make an adult decision . . . doing things that adults do . . . Buying an apartment. That was a real adult thing. Adults do that. Not kids. (Female, age 30–32, from New York)

For many young people, adulthood is reached without much fanfare or recognition in oneself or others. For example:

I hate to think of that you know, magical time like that you pass, 21, and suddenly you're an adult. I don't think it happens overnight. I don't think it happened at midnight. I think it's been a process. I think there's still certain characteristics to my personality that are more juvenile than adult. (Male, age 21–23, from New York)

[I started thinking of myself as an adult at] maybe like 27, 28 . . . [but] nothing really happened, [it was] just an accumulation of everything. (Male, age 36–38, from New York)

The first quote is particularly important because it reveals the fact that age-related categories such as “child,” “adolescent,” “young adult,” and so forth are important divisions in the social world and in how we think about ourselves and others. They may be so central that they are taken for granted, almost forgotten about, until we catch ourselves in such moments when we recognize their salience. This awareness would seem to be greater when one reaches landmark ages or when moving between categories, in this case from the category of “kid” into the category of “adult.” Few moments mark the rest of adult life, in both number and strength, as the shift from “child” to “adult,” despite the fact that traditional markers of this transition have clearly become delayed and scrambled.

The gradual and growing nature of adult identity is also reflected in the imagined future of this woman:

[I will feel like an adult] when I accomplish everything I want to in life . . . I'll have my own place, have a family, have my kids . . . It's never ending. It's like a job, you know, there's always more to it. (Female, age 24–26, from New York)

As part of this exchange, the interviewer joked that “you'll be, like, 70 before you do [accomplish everything you want in life]!” Surely, one would hope that a sense of oneself as an “adult” will occur before seven decades have elapsed.
But this example raises an important question: Do we ever really reach a point where we feel that our development is complete? The strong focus on growth, especially psychological development, evidenced in these interviews may also be uniquely Western, and especially typical of the American middle class.

**Turning Points**

Also common are threshold models, in which one's identity as an adult again grows linearly (and gradually) until some marked point at which a more complete and integrated sense of adult identity occurs. Unlike the more subtle "adult moments" described above, these are far more significant, not only in degree but in that they leave the individual feeling qualitatively different. Once the turning point occurs, individuals think about themselves in new ways, distinctly aware of the fact that what they are now is very different from what they once were. Common turning points are marriage and, especially, parenting. Although the event may vary, its effects are the same:

[I began to think of myself as an adult] after I had my son [and not after my marriage]... because I was responsible for another human being, that was a part of it. And the other reason was that it made me realize that I couldn't act like a kid because I had this child. And you can't act like a kid when you are a parent. (Female, age 27-29, from Minneapolis)

What makes partnering and parenting such critical turning points is that individuals have new levels and types of responsibilities toward others. These responsibilities demand fundamental shifts in both thought and behavior, and solidify one's status as an adult.

From the perspective of the general public, marriage and parenthood are not as important as markers of adulthood as other things, such as completing education, becoming financially independent, working full-time, being able to support a family, and leaving home (in that order) (Furstenberg et al. 2004). From the perspective of many young people in our study, however, marriage and parenthood remain key events that transform and crystallize adult identities. Other events can also function in this way, as this woman reveals:

Believe it or not, the day I moved into my own home...is when I became a full-fledged 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. (Female, age 27-29, from Minneapolis)

What matters in these cases is that different events may prompt the transformation; it is the effect that is shared, not the cause.

Some of these turning points, in fact, are not related to specific events as much as a sudden moment of awareness when "reality hits"—a phrase echoed often in our interviews:

I guess about 23... That's when I—reality hit. I opened my eyes and the world seemed different. It wasn't the same anymore. That was at 23 when everything just changed...I mean, I saw the world different. I didn't see it as a child, I just knew, now it's time to get up, get a job, do what you gotta do, and I hadn't really...felt like that—wow. (Male, age 33-35, from New York)

I started to feel like an adult mainly after 21, people see you're adult. But you're not really adult, you know? You're still like, the mind isn't [there yet]. Like I would say around 23... reality hit me. (Laughs) I need to finish school! I can't just go around doing whatever kind of job you know? I need a career! And a sense of direction in my life. (Male, age 24-26, from San Diego)

Once reality hits, the individual is transformed and begins to take new actions, set new goals, and make new choices.

**CYCLES**

Although fewer in number, there are also views and experiences of early adulthood that are cyclical and reversible, in which certain experiences propel young people forward and other experiences set them back. This view highlights the stop-and-go nature of the road to adult identity. For example:

It went in cycles with me; I didn't really feel like an adult when I got married. I was just myself. But... moving into our own place... and probably six months into being married and really getting into that routine of what our life was, paying bills, paying rent, car payments... that's when I really started to feel like an adult. I... felt that way for a few years and then I went backwards a little when I moved home. (And) then [backwards] again, going back to being a student, [and then moving forward] to the full-time job. (Female, age 27-29, from Minneapolis)

I started backwards... I had the kids first. Then I skipped a couple of those [typical transitions]. I tell some people: you know why white people are so successful? 'Cause when they're young, this is what their parents teach them. You go to school; then, when you're done in school, you go to this college. And then, when you're done [with college, you...]—And other
adults and leave them feeling that way. As illustrated below, however, there is frequently a lag between experiences and feelings.

**CHICKENS BEFORE EGGS: EXPERIENCES, THEN FEELINGS**

The feeling of being an adult typically comes after—even many years after—one has been doing “adult” things. Consider these examples:

Once we had our first son, little by little that changed me as a parent, and as a person, as a husband, I started growing. And then I started to realize what I wanted out of life, and what I needed to do to get what I wanted out of life. So . . . by that definition alone . . . I feel I’ve become an adult [only] in the past two years or so. (Male, age 33–35, from New York)

Honestly, I would say [I became an adult] a year after my son was born. Because it took some time to get used to being a parent. Being a father. Taking time to get all those thoughts together and knowing how to deal with them. How to prioritize my time. So probably about a year [after] . . . at that point I thought I was an adult. There was no ifs, ands, or buts about it. (Male, age 27–29, from New York)

These two excerpts are good illustrations of the fact that feelings and experiences are enmeshed, and that the feeling of being an adult often grows out of experiences in adult roles. It is often only with the benefit of distance and reflection that we come to realize how we have been affected by the things that happen to us, that we develop more acute understandings of how we have grown and changed in the process. In both cases above, for example, fatherhood brings new insights into the man’s growth and self-definition but also prompts clarity in his priorities and goals. Desires, goals, and actions stem from emerging insights; they are not always known in advance. Indeed, in many cases individuals talk about these experiences in a relatively passive way: things happen to them and they respond in turn. Yet they also clearly play active roles in directing their lives, and these quotes suggest that an important part of becoming adult is about developing the capacity to reflect on our past experiences, extract lessons, and apply those lessons in the future.

The seemingly inevitable lag between experiences and feelings is surely exacerbated by the extended transition to adulthood today. Consider this reflection on the problem of lag:

I think we should treat everyone over 18 as if they were adult. We shouldn’t wait for them to feel adult. [Interviewer: Do you feel like you’re completely
grown up?] No. (Laugh) I think it may actually be a particularity of childhood to imagine that there will be a point when you feel completely adult, because it seems to me that people our age are always running around saying, “Oh, I don’t feel grown up”... and [that] may just be what it feels like to be grown up. You don’t feel it. (Female, age 30-32, from New York)

This woman so thoughtfully articulates what many in the public see as a growing social concern. Having been in graduate school for many years and only recently entering her profession, this woman feels firsthand the effects of prolonged education and delayed entry into work. Yet she does not think that avoidance of commitments or refusal to “grow up” should be tolerated: being a young adult is still about being an adult; the young part matters far less than the adult part. Being young is not an excuse to simply play and hang out.

For some young people, especially those from more privileged backgrounds, the early adult years may be an extended moratorium for development. For others, especially those from less privileged backgrounds or vulnerable populations, it is a difficult period with limited choices and opportunities. Whether about exploration or drift, the prolonged entry into adulthood today prompts two important questions: How much can be permitted, and for how long? And what consequences does it bring for individuals, families, and society?

Another wrinkle in the lag between experiences and feelings is that, while our bodies and the world around us change rapidly, our self-images are often caught up in earlier times:

Well, I’m an adult, I understand that I’m an adult, I know that I’ve reached the age of adulthood. (Laugh) But, I think we all see ourselves, unless we look in the mirror, as how we are as sort of kids or as young people. You know what I mean?... Or maybe I’m just in a state of arrested development... But, it’s like my little sister, she turned to me and she goes, “John, I’m 16. I can’t believe it, I’m 16. I don’t feel 16... When did this happen, I still feel like I’m 12.” And I said, “I know, I know how you mean.” It’s like you’re growing on the outside, but your mind and your heart and your feelings and your tastes are still the same, and it’s like, you almost feel like you can’t control your outside. And... you’re still in a different stage, mentally or emotionally. And, then later... when you’re in your 20s, (you think), “Oh, I still feel like a teenager.” When you’re in your 30s, you feel, “Oh God, I’m still in my 20s.” So, you do catch up (laugh), you do see yourself as an adult, but I think you see yourself as an adult a decade earlier. (Male, age 30-32, from New York)

This feeling is surely not unique to early adulthood. Throughout life, the age we feel seems to trail behind our actual age, and this gap seems to only increase the older we get. This feeling, however, is likely first confronted in early adulthood, with the realization that we no longer wish to be adult, as teenagers so often do, but that we now are adult.

THE POWER OF INTIMATES AND STRANGERS

One’s own feelings about whether one is an adult are often tied to the views of others. Recent survey data, for example, find that young people are more likely to report feeling like adults at work, with romantic partners or spouses, and with children (Shanahan et al. 2005). Young people feel less like adults when they are with their parents and sometimes with friends, depending on whether the activities “confirm” adult identities or are more similar to adolescent pursuits (for example, staying out late and partying). This is especially true of relationships with parents, as this quote illustrates:

I still feel like I’m not an adult completely. I hate the way my parents treat me and how my siblings treat me, too. I feel like I’m still under their control all the time and that I need guidance or something. But I feel like I don’t need guidance—they give me guidance anyway. They still call me “baby doll” (laughter), they still try to pamper me. (Female, age 21-23, from San Diego)

Reflected in this statement is a kind of semi-autonomy experienced by a woman who thinks of herself as adult but is not treated as such by her parents and siblings. From her perspective, her parents have not provided her with more of the freedom she expects as an adult. Although she laughs about the fact that her parents continue to use a nickname she dislikes, it symbolizes the struggle she is having with her parents and what seems to be their difficulty in acknowledging that she is no longer a child. She is ready to assume adult status, and she has, at least in terms of her own self-definition. Her parents and siblings, on the other hand, are unable to let her do so, at least not completely. Some of this may also reflect dynamics around birth order and gender, where, for example, the “baby” of the family is not allowed to grow up. One wonders how the mix of birth order and gender play into not only how we view ourselves as adults, but also how other family members view us, and to what extent these histories of family relationships and experiences follow us.

On the other hand, families can also send messages that pose new freedoms and become liberating:

I tell you, my parents started treating me like an adult when I came home [after being away a year in high school]... There was a definite change...
in the way that they treated me. I remember...I had a couple of beers with my dad in my house. I mean, they let me do things like that....They... really treated me as a responsible young adult, and I think that made me want to please them even more. (Female, age 21-23, from Iowa)

These tensions between holding on and letting go, which characterize parent-child relationships during the teenage years, clearly extend into early adult life. Parents want their children to show signs of maturity and responsibility (even if they may have some reservations about doing so), and young people want opportunities to do so. Successful experiences lead to further negotiations about enlarging the scope of these opportunities. These dynamics are reflected in the case above, as the parents begin to treat their daughter in new ways, and she, in turn, begins to feel and be more responsible.

It is not surprising that messages received from parents and siblings can have powerful effects on young people. But so, too, can signals received by people outside the family, especially co-workers. For example:

[I began to think of myself as an adult] about two years ago....That's when I got the job. I felt people treated me differently. They treated me with respect and they treated me like an adult, so I started acting like an adult. (Male, age 18-20, from New York)

The importance of other people's expectations and views can also extend to encounters with strangers:

[I think of myself as an adult] Sometimes, not all the time...I'm responsible I guess. I...started to think [this way] maybe a year ago. Somebody [told] me I need to quit acting like a child and be grown up. [Interviewer: Do you remember who it was?] No, just somebody off the street. [Interviewer: And that stuck with you.] Yeah. [Interviewer: Did you change your behavior, you think, because of what they said?] Yeah, I ain't as loud and wild as I used to be. (Female, age 27-29, from Minneapolis)

This woman's experience is important because it reveals that even random messages from strangers can have powerful effects on how we think of ourselves and can even carry greater weight than reactions from intimates or acquaintances. We expect parents, siblings, and others we know to share their views, solicited or not. But we do not expect strangers on the street to intervene and tell us to "grow up" and "get over" ourselves. It is clear that this encounter had a powerful impact on this woman. She did not simply brush it off and move on; it changed her.

BEYOND THE USUAL SUSPECTS: SUBTLE, UNEXPECTED, OR DIFFICULT EXPERIENCES

As we have seen, normal, expected experiences, such as the "traditional" markers of adulthood, are salient for most young people. But atypical and unexpected experiences are also very important, as are seemingly subtle shifts in everyday life and in the mind. These experiences are rarely considered in scholarship on the early adult years, which focuses on normative experiences. As a result, research on this period of life often misses critical elements, which may be as important as the usual suspects, if not more important.

Subtle Shifts in Everyday Life

Some of these more unusual markers involve subtle behavioral shifts in everyday interactions with others—say, in being invited to sit at the adult table at a holiday gathering, being included by parents in important decisions, or being taken "backstage" in family life and made privy to family secrets. For example:

[I began to fully feel like an adult] when [just two years ago] my grandma let me sit at the adult table for Christmas dinner. (Laughs) No, really, it's actually kind of funny because the kids have always had a table at my grandma's for Christmas dinners and I [finally] got to sit with the adults, it was like you know [a big deal]. (Laughs) (Female, age 27-29, from Minneapolis)

[I began to think of myself as adult when my parents] would actually like include me in, "Hey, we got a situation here. Give us an opinion on it" (mock gasp). "Me? Oh my gosh." [They began] filling me in as to things that are going on in the house and like asking opinions about it and [involving me] in that sense. (Female, age 24-26, from New York)

Subtle Shifts in the Mind

Other markers are subtle shifts in the mind, especially in insights and perceptions. These, too, are generally overlooked in scholarship on early adulthood. Repeatedly, we hear comments such as:

[Being an adult] is when your reliance starts shifting away from relying on somebody else and starts...relying on yourself...really that's what independence is, when you begin to take care of yourself in every way. I say "every real way" because people are, you know, trying to rush out of home and go be somewhere else and go do something else...But the fact is that a lot of these people are, in the end, still knowing that they can fall back on
their parents. . . . But [being truly adult is] about whether you really have that in the back of your mind. (Male, age 21–23, from New York)

Being an adult . . . [is about realizing] that there is a lot of things that you can do—you can go out to the bar, you can get trashed every night, but it’s not something that you should do. You should act like an adult. You should be more responsible. (Female, age 27–29, from Minneapolis)

In the first example, the powerful shift in mind was whether the young man could fall back on parents if something went wrong; in the second instance, it was in realizing the difference between what one is able to do and what one should do, and more often choosing the latter. Such shifts are especially important in identity-building because they leave individuals more aware of how their choices affect how they view themselves as well as how they are viewed by others.

Accelerated Adulthood: Growth from Hard Times and Unexpected Experiences

Other transformations stem from difficult experiences or periods of hardship—whether a divorce (especially of one’s parents, but even one’s own divorce), early parenting, or the serious illness or loss of a parent or sibling. These events teach young people difficult life lessons and accelerate movement into adulthood. Consider these examples related to teenage childbearing, drug use, and abuse:

My lifestyle was too wild. Doing too much. The guys that I was dating were way too abusive. I’m really lucky to be here. . . . I think my kids are part of what’s kept me from drugs and things. . . . I didn’t have any priorities, really no goals. . . . It’s a blessing that I’m not with either of these [abusive men], I probably wouldn’t have survived anyway. (Female, age 27–29, from Minneapolis)

I believe if [my son] wasn’t here, I’d be dead today. . . . Because [of] the way I grew up. I grew up with a lot of people who was doing things they shouldn’t be doing [doing drugs, having a lot of sex]. [My son] gave me a reason to not stay still and to move on with my life. I had someone that was countin’ on me to be there, to take care of him. Without him . . . I would have been just like them. . . . He has saved me a whole lot, so yeah, he’s a goodson. (Female, age 27–29, from New York)

What is surprising at first glance is that early parenting is often discussed as a positive experience, even one that is life-saving, because it forces a turnaround in destructive paths. These and other women see the births of their children, even those that result from abusive relationships, as sources of salvation. These transformative views are consistent, however, with long-standing research on teen pregnancy and new work on the meanings of motherhood and marriage among single, low-income mothers (Edin and Kefalas 2005). These mothers regard their children not as obstacles but as resources, giving order and purpose to their lives and providing a new and positive identity.

Events such as the illness or death of a parent or sibling also become turning points, although not in ways as positive as the teenage mothers’ experiences. Although most of these young people believe these experiences accelerated movement into adulthood, some also feel as if their childhoods were foreclosed. For example:

[I began to think of myself as an adult] probably [first at] 10 [when father died, and again at] 17 when I got out of high school. . . . You worry about different things when your father dies, you know, things kids shouldn’t be worried about. (Male, age 30–32, from New York)

It really hit me that I was an adult when I was 22 and I had just completed my student teaching. . . . and in all that same month, when I [thought], hey, I’m on my own. . . . my brother-in-law dies at 41 years old. I’ve got a sister at 54 who’s a widow with three boys and I’m beginning my life, so to speak, and that right there was like, holy cow. This is real-world stuff right here, real-world stuff. . . . that’s when adulthood set in for me. (Male, age 30–32, from Iowa)

Uh, my stepfather, he left my mom and I had to take care of her [she was very sick], and it made me realize that I was the only man left to take care of my mom and I had to, you know, I had a lot of responsibility. (Male, age 24–26, from San Diego)

Similar sentiments are echoed in the voices of young adults who experienced the separation or divorce of parents, circumstances that required them to take greater responsibility for themselves, for other family members, or in the household. Yet these demands can also create new “awakenings,” as one young man put it, because they heighten responsibilities or because they teach lessons about how one’s own behaviors have repercussions for others. These experiences need not be construed as negative, and are often perceived as positive, especially once one has some distance from the experience.

Hardships are nonetheless mentioned more frequently by individuals from less privileged backgrounds, and often come with a tone of resentment that young people from more privileged backgrounds can and do
rely heavily on parents to help them navigate this period. The things they are able to achieve, in contrast to their better-positioned peers, are viewed as hard-won badges of honor. Those with greater privileges are allowed to play in their early adult years, while they must instead settle in more quickly to adult roles and responsibilities without safety nets to cradle and protect them.

This leads to an important point: Although the longer and more variable pathways into adulthood today may seem, from the outside, to characterize young people from different social classes and racial-ethnic groups, the processes that drive these patterns may be quite different. For more privileged groups, these fragmented patterns are more likely the result of active choices to extend schooling, to consider more fully the range of career and relationship options and choose those that provide the best fit, or to travel and explore other opportunities—all of which may be facilitated by family resources. In contrast, for less privileged groups these fragmented patterns are not as much about choice as they are having more limited skills and experiences coming into the transition, and more limited or even foreclosed opportunities in education and work. Because these patterns are driven by very different sets of processes, their ultimate consequences are also very different. And because of their differential resources, the gap between disadvantaged and advantaged youth grows dramatically over the 20s (Settersten and Ray 2010b).

ROUTES TO ADULT IDENTITY: AN EVOLVING MODEL

This chapter has explored young adults’ perspectives on what adulthood means, what experiences mark its passage, and how adult identities are built and ultimately achieved—especially in light of dramatic changes in the social, economic, and psychological landscape of the early adult years. Across our disparate research sites—from two of the biggest cities on the East and West Coasts, a large city in the Midwest, and a small community in the heartland—some common themes emerge. And they reveal just how complex the task of moving into adulthood is in today’s world.

Most of the young people in our study do not completely feel like adults, even into their 30s. In some spheres and ways they do, and in some spheres and ways they do not. Most young people can give specific ages at which they began to feel adult, but what matters is not age itself, but rather the important experiences that happen at or about that time. Some of what age also indexes is a set of rights and responsibilities that are embedded in law, which themselves are granted gradually during the teenage years and then at 18 and 21, depending on the particular rights or responsibilities in question.

Young Americans have in their minds a wide variety of experiences that compose the process of becoming adult. They can sort in complex ways a wide range of possible markers, judge their relative importance in determining adult status, and evaluate their own progress with respect to these benchmarks. They continue to include big traditional markers of adulthood (e.g., leaving home, finishing school, finding work, getting married, having children) in the mix, despite the fact that they are aware that their experiences with these traditional markers will generally happen later and in a more jumbled way than for their parents. Yet surprisingly, young people often reference other alternative markers—atyypical and unexpected experiences, and subtle shifts in behavior and in the mind—all of which are rarely considered in scholarship, and all of which may be equally or more important to individuals than traditional markers.

Whether markers are big or small, normative or non-normative, objective or subjective, rooted in one’s own views or those of others, or in or out of one’s control, one thing is clear: No single experience renders one an adult. Instead, it is a larger cluster of events and the gradual accumulation of experiences that come with these events that eventually make one an adult. Most young people describe the process of entering adulthood as slow but ever upward, and as punctuated with “adult moments” when individuals become conscious of the fact that they are crossing over into a new social category that begins to alter how they see themselves and how others see them. Other young people describe major turning points, big and often unexpected moments of transformation when the individual suddenly feels a strong sense of discontinuity with the past. Still others, though fewer, describe the process of becoming adult as a dynamic and iterative stop-and-go process, with some experiences propelling them forward and others setting them back. Actual experiences can, of course, contain elements of each of these models. But regardless of the particular route into adulthood, there is often a significant lag between experiences and feelings. That is, a solid feeling that one is an adult typically comes well after individuals have experienced a wide array of markers.

These markers stand as symbols to others and to oneself that the young person is making strides toward complete adult status. These experiences are often associated with gains in core components of adult
development, such as maturity, responsibility, and control. These experiences, in turn, alter the subjective sense of oneself as an adult, though these feelings often come later, to a great degree growing out of and having interactive relationships with the behavioral markers. It is often not until individuals have spent adequate time in these statuses, and have the privilege of retrospection, that their experiences and feelings are consolidated into a fresh sense of self.

The privilege of retrospection serves as a reminder that the insights young people have into the process, and the understandings we gain as researchers, will depend on where we catch young people in their process. To paraphrase Kierkegaard, life has to be lived forward but can only be understood backward—and is constantly revised along the way. Our accounts must therefore be sensitive to prospective and retrospective views, and to the fact that identity is tangled up in time. Our accounts must also be sensitive to the fact that, in looking back, we often tell stories that are neater, tidier, and rosier than they probably were.

Core questions about identity—Who am I? What do I want? How can I get there?—bring challenges that must be actively confronted during the early adult years. These challenges are likely heightened by the new landscape of early adulthood, but they are, of course, challenges to which individuals will return throughout adult life. It is important to remember that the very notion of a life plan and the chance to focus on one’s own development are great privileges; in some places and for some people, these things cannot be taken for granted or are simply not possible.

Our interviews often stand in contradiction to popular psychological theories that depict this period of life as an extended “moratorium” from age-normative tasks, characterized by pervasive exploration and the avoidance of commitment (Arnett 2000). To be sure, a subset of young adults may fall into these categories. But so, too, do some older adults. Most young people are striving toward adulthood—seeking responsibility, negotiating autonomy, making commitments to education and work, nurturing connections to other people, finding ways to be involved in their communities, and expressing concern about their futures and the future of our nation and world—even though it is taking them longer to get there, and even though the routes for many are complicated and uncertain.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

MARIA J. KEFALAS AND PATRICK J. CARR

The narratives that tell the story of becoming an adult in different parts of America were gathered at the dawn of the twenty-first century, after 9/11 but before the invasion of Iraq, and several years before the Great Recession. It has become a cliché to say that 9/11 “changed everything” and that, in terms of an epoch-defining event for America, it ranks alongside the assassination of John F. Kennedy or the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Certainly the lives of young adults as well as everyone else have changed because of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the strictures of the USA PATRIOT Act, and the lurking omnipresence of the nationwide alert status. However, perhaps the most important change in the years since we conducted the interviews for this volume has been the near collapse of the financial system in 2008 and the Great Recession that ensued.

At the outset of this volume we explained how the journey to adulthood has changed for young Americans, and how larger structural changes have elongated their transition to adulthood. The prevailing culture surrounding what it means to be an adult has adapted in response to these wider forces, and so norms about marriage, parenting, and independence have evolved to respond to the new normal. However, the challenges that young adults face in the tortuously slow and thus far jobless economic recovery will have, arguably, a greater impact on this life period than the cataclysmic events of September 2001. If growing up is harder to do (Furstenberg et al. 2004), then the recession that sees
Contents

List of Illustrations vii
Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1
Mary C. Waters, Patrick J. Carr, and Maria J. Kefalas

1. Straight from the Heartland: Coming of Age in Ellis, Iowa 28
Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas

2. Transitions to Adulthood in the Land of Lake Wobegon 59
Teresa Toguchi Swartz, Douglas Hartmann, and Jeylan T. Mortimer

3. If You Can Make It There . . . : The Transition to Adulthood in New York City 106
Jennifer Holdaway

4. Coming of Age in “America’s Finest City”: Transitions to Adulthood Among Children of Immigrants in San Diego 133
Linda Borgen and Rubén G. Rumbaut

5. Becoming Adult: Meanings and Markers for Young Americans 169
Richard A. Settersten Jr.

6. Conclusion 191
Maria J. Kefalas and Patrick J. Carr

Appendix: Methods 205
References 225
Contributors 233
Index 237