



Brief report: Danish emerging adults' conceptions of adulthood



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A B S T R A C T

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Four hundred Danish emerging adults ages 17–29 were surveyed regarding their conceptions of adulthood and their self-assessments of their adult status. A majority of the 17–24-year-olds and nearly half the 25–29-year-olds viewed themselves as being adults in some ways but not others. Participants reported feeling most adult when with co-workers or romantic partners, and least adult with mothers, fathers, or friends. The most widely-endorsed criteria for adulthood were accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent. Among the least-endorsed criteria were the traditional transition events of entering marriage and parenthood, as well as “avoid becoming drunk.”

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When do young people feel they have reached adulthood? Over the past two decades, numerous studies have addressed this question (see [Nelson & Luster, 2015](#); for a review). Most of the studies have taken place in developed countries, such as Austria ([Sirsch, Dreyer, Mayr, & Willinger, 2009](#)), Argentina ([Facio & Micocci, 2003](#)), Czech Republic ([Macek, Bejček, & Vaníčková, 2007](#)), Israel ([Mayseless & Scharf, 2003](#)), and the United States ([Arnett, 1998, 2003](#)). However, recently studies have taken place on this topic in India ([Seiter & Nelson, 2011](#)) and China ([Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004; Zhong & Arnett, 2014](#)), including noncollege as well as college samples.

There have been two consistent patterns in studies of conceptions of adulthood ([Nelson & Luster, 2015](#)). One is that most 18–25-year-old emerging adults respond to the question “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?” with neither “yes” nor “no,” but “in some ways yes, in some ways no.” The second consistent finding is that the top three criteria for adulthood are *accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and financial independence*. There are some exceptions to this pattern, especially in rural areas of developing countries. Young people in India value emotional self-control, abiding by social norms, and fulfilling traditional gender roles most highly as criteria for adulthood ([Seiter & Nelson, 2011](#)), and for young women factory workers in China, learning to care for parents is the top criterion ([Zhong & Arnett, 2014](#)). These variations demonstrate that reaching adult status is culturally-defined and consequently varies depending on cultural and historical context ([Arnett, 2011; Blakemore & Mills, 2014](#)).

Two relatively unexplored topics in this area are the focus of this study: conceptions of adulthood among emerging adults in a Nordic country, and perceptions of adulthood in different social contexts. The Nordic region of Europe is distinguished from other European regions in several ways with respect to emerging adulthood ([Douglass, 2007; Frisén, Carlsson, &](#)

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Wängqvist, 2014; Moreno Mínguez, López Peláez, & Sánchez-Cabezudo, 2012). Nordic emerging adults leave home earlier, are most likely to have a “gap year” (or two or three) between secondary school and post-secondary education or training, are most likely to cohabit before marriage, and enter marriage and parenthood latest, compared to other young Europeans. These differences may influence their subjective sense of becoming adults. Although there have been recent studies of emerging adults in Sweden (Frisén et al., 2014; Frisén & Wängqvist, 2011), no studies of Nordic emerging adults have yet investigated their conceptions of adulthood.

In most studies of subjective feelings of becoming adult, the question has typically been phrased in general terms: “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?” However, it is also possible that emerging adults feel relatively more or less adult depending on whom they are with (e.g., parents, sibling, friends, romantic partner, teacher, co-workers). This is one of the first studies to explore this variation in contexts of feeling adult, and we did not have any definite hypotheses. Emerging adults report feeling a shift to a more adult-like relationship with parents (Arnett, 2015; Fingerman & Yahirun, 2014), but often continue to be financially dependent on them. Relations with friends and romantic partners could be contexts where there are mutual feelings of being equally adult, or they could be contexts where the pressure to appear adult is relaxed. Relations with co-workers was perhaps the context where feeling adult would be most likely, because these relations typically entail definite mutual responsibilities. Mainly, we viewed these context questions as initiating an important new approach to examining feelings of reaching adulthood.

Method

Participants, procedure, and measures

The participants were 400 Danes ages 17–29 ($M = 21.0$, $SD = 3.23$), 57% female. Only 4% were married and only 5% had one or more children, reflecting the high median ages of marriage and first birth in Denmark. Their social class backgrounds were diverse, as measured by mother's educational attainment: 16% *folkeskole* (through 8th grade), 10% *haandvaerkeruddannelse* (secondary-level trade school), 17% *gymnasium* (the secondary school that is considered preparation for university studies), 16% post-secondary non-university education or training, 14% university, and 27% other.

Most of the younger participants, ages 17–20 ($n = 202$), were in their last year of secondary school in three schools, two in Copenhagen in the eastern part of Denmark and one in Aalborg in the western part. These participants completed the questionnaire during a portion of a class period. Copenhagen is the largest city in Denmark, with a metropolitan population of about one million persons. Aalborg is a medium-sized city of about 200,000 persons. Of the two schools in Copenhagen, one was a *gymnasium* ($N = 84$), and the other was a *handelskole*, ($N = 60$), which provides training in commercial professions such as bookkeeping, marketing, and running a small business. The Aalborg school was a *gymnasium* ($N = 58$).

Additional participants ages 18–29 ($n = 193$) were recruited from public places in Aalborg, where they were asked by research assistants to complete the short questionnaire used in the study. These participants were sought in order to extend the age range of the sample through the twenties, and to include participants in the work force as well as those who were continuing their education.

IRB approval was obtained from the first author's institution. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

The 33-item questionnaire on markers of adulthood used in the present study has been used in a variety of previous studies (e.g., Arnett, 2003; Nelson, 2009). Participants indicated how important the criteria were for adulthood on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 4 (*very important*). In addition, participants were asked “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?” with response options “no,” “in some ways yes, in some ways no,” and “yes.” Participants were also asked how adult they felt when they were in the following relationship contexts: father, mother, sibling, friends, romantic partner, teacher, and co-worker. Their response options were “not at all,” “partly,” and “fully.” In the current study percentages were calculated for each response category, but consistent with past research, responses were also examined continuously, with higher scores indicating feeling more like an adult (e.g., Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). The questionnaire also included demographic items.

Results

Perceptions of adult status

In response to the question “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?” 27% of the sample responded “yes,” 11% “no,” and 62% “in some ways yes, and in some ways no.” Perceptions of adulthood were significantly and positively correlated with age ($r = .33$, $p < .001$), suggesting that older individuals felt more adult. In response to the question, “How adult do you feel when you are with...?”, descriptive statistics suggested that in most relationship contexts the largest percent of emerging adults reported feeling “partly adult” (Table 1). A repeated measures ANOVA with LSD post-hoc follow-up analyses (controlling for age) was conducted to determine how feelings of adulthood varied as a function of all seven relationship contexts ($F(6, 238) = 2.22$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$). There was no significant relationship context by age interaction. Higher scores were indicative of feeling more like an adult, and results suggested that Danish emerging adults felt most adult with co-workers ($M = 2.40$, $SD = .63$) and romantic partners ($M = 2.36$, $SD = .59$), who did not differ from one another, followed by siblings ($M = 2.24$, $SD = .62$) and teachers ($M = 2.22$, $SD = .64$), who also did not differ from one another. They felt least adult

Table 1
Relationship Context and Perceptions of Adulthood “How adult do you feel when you are with...”.

	Not at all %	Partly %	Fully %
Father	14	63	23
Mother	10	65	24
Sibling	10	55	35
Friends	17	58	26
Romantic partner	6	54	40
Teachers	12	55	33
Co-workers	8	44	48

with mothers ($M = 2.17$, $SD = .58$); friends ($M = 2.12$, $SD = .63$) and fathers ($M = 2.11$, $SD = .61$), who did not differ from one another (effect sizes on pairwise comparisons ranged from $d = .16$ – $.47$). It should be noted that perceptions of adulthood with mothers did not differ significantly from those with siblings or teachers.

It should be noted that some participants did not answer some context items, presumably because they did not believe the item applied to them (e.g., no current romantic partner, or not employed and therefore no co-workers). Also, for one of the samples ($n = 71$), the items on contexts were not included on the questionnaire.

Criteria for adulthood

Table 2 shows the 33 criteria for adulthood, ordered by the proportion who viewed each criterion as important. As in previous studies of emerging adults in Western developed countries, “accept responsibility for one’s self” (97%), “make independent decisions” (94%) and “financially independent” (83%) were the top three criteria. Avoiding petty crimes was

Table 2
Importance percentages and factor analyses on criteria for adulthood.

Item	% Important	Factor analysis				
		1 RT	2 BIO	3 NC	4 RM	5 IND
Accept responsibility for one’s self	98	-.17	-.01	.28	-.07	.55
Make independent decisions	97	-.13	.05	.18	-.02	.73
Financially independent	83	.16	.10	-.11	.29	.44
Avoid petty crimes	83	-.08	.10	.75	.26	-.01
Less self-oriented, more considerate	82	-.10	-.05	.21	.55	.37
Avoid drunk driving	81	.52	-.16	.23	.06	-.26
Establish an equal relationship with parents	76	.03	.04	.30	.66	.11
No longer live with parents	69	.04	.22	-.10	-.10	.26
Make lifelong commitments to others	67	.39	.02	-.15	.26	.50
Use contraception	65	.12	-.05	.59	.10	.25
Avoid using illegal drugs	59	.36	-.04	.68	-.08	.13
Drive safely	58	.10	-.03	.71	.11	-.12
Always have good control of emotions	57	.27	.03	.14	.64	-.01
Stable job	49	.59	.12	.19	-.05	.05
Finish education	46	.60	.25	.15	.01	-.03
Reached age 18	42	.11	.65	-.06	-.21	.11
Full-time work	42	.55	.26	.17	.33	.19
Have only one sexual partner	38	.55	.04	.39	-.01	.13
Allowed to drink alcohol	37	-.14	.85	.06	.18	-.01
At least 21	36	.27	.45	.03	-.21	.13
Ready to commit to a long-term relationship	33	.39	.02	-.15	.26	.50
Allowed to smoke	29	-.23	.77	.05	.13	-.06
Have had sex	28	.28	.59	-.03	.15	.19
Avoid bad language	27	.36	-.14	.39	.30	-.07
No longer closely tied to parents	25	.36	.17	.01	.04	.12
Driver’s license	23	.51	.39	.03	.25	-.04
Reaches full height	23	.32	.50	-.01	.09	-.08
Buy a house	22	.73	-.01	-.07	.16	.02
Capable of supporting parents economically	22	.31	.08	.09	.59	-.19
Military service (men)	20	.14	.59	.01	-.01	.05
Have at least one child	18	.73	-.01	-.03	.09	-.12
Married	17	.70	-.02	.03	.07	-.18
Avoid becoming drunk	12	.52	-.16	.23	.06	-.26

Note. The percentages indicate those who believed the criterion was “very important” (*meget vigtigt*) or “quite important” (*ret vigtigt*). RT = Role Transitions, Bio = Biological/Age, NC = Norm Compliance, RM = Relational Maturity, IND = Independence. Bolded numbers represent loading $> .40$ on designated factor.

favored by the same proportion as “financially independent,” and next highest were “become less self-oriented, more considerate of others” and “avoid drunk driving.” Also similar to past studies, among the least endorsed criteria were the traditional markers “having at least one child” (18%) and “being married” (17%). Unique to this sample, the lowest endorsed criteria was “avoiding becoming drunk” (12%).

Consistent with past research, we sought to determine whether these 33 items could be represented by subscales, but wanted to also allow for cultural variation. Thus, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using Varimax rotation was conducted and revealed five factors with Eigenvalues above 1.0 that closely mirrored factors found in past research (Nelson & Luster, 2015). Further, parallel analysis (PA) was conducted to determine the best fitting factor solution (Hayton, Allen, & Scarpello, 2004). Using a random data set with the same sample size and number of variables as our data set, we created 50 sets of parallel eigenvalues and compared the 95th percentile of these eigenvalues to the eigenvalues from our data. PA suggests that real data should have larger eigenvalues than randomly generated data, so results suggested that the Eigenvalues be above 1.50, 1.40, 1.38, 1.35, and 1.31, and so on. In our data, the first five factors met this criteria but the 6th factor dropped below the value from the random data (it was 1.30), suggesting a five factor solution was the best fit for the data. Three items did not load on any of the five factors, so were dropped (no longer live with parents, avoid bad language, and no longer closely tied to parents). No items cross-loaded above .40.

The first factor, which accounted for 20% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 6.34), was Role Transitions, and consisted of 10 items ($\alpha = .81$; see Table 2 for individual items and factor loadings). The second factor, which accounted for 10% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 3.27), was Biological/Age, and consisted of 7 items ($\alpha = .77$). The third factor, which accounted for 9% of the variance, was Norm Compliance (Eigenvalue = 2.89), and consisted of 5 items ($\alpha = .78$). The fourth factor, which accounted for 5% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 1.74), was Relational Maturity, and consisted of 4 items ($\alpha = .62$). The final factor, which also accounted for 5% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 1.55), was Independence, and consisted of 4 items ($\alpha = .45$). Although the alphas for Relational Maturity and Independence were relatively low, that was not unexpected given that the scales have only 4 items and that the items represent quite diverse aspects of these constructs.

Based on this factor analysis, mean subscales were created for five categories of adulthood criteria, and analyses were conducted to see if these subscale scores varied as a function of demographics. A repeated-measures ANOVA ($F(4, 392) = 498.76, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .84$) suggested that Danish emerging adults believed Independence ($M = 3.38, SD = .44$) was most important for adulthood, followed by Norm Compliance ($M = 3.00, SD = .77$), Relational Maturity ($M = 2.66, SD = .59$), Biological/Age ($M = 2.02, SD = .73$), and Role Transitions ($M = 1.98, SD = .63$), although post-hoc follow-ups suggested that the difference between Biological/Age and Role Transitions was not statistically significant (effect sizes on mean differences ranged from $d = .50$ – $.96$).

Three univariate ANOVAs were conducted to determine if mean scores for the five subscales varied as a function of gender, living arrangement (in parental home or not) and age (17–19, 20–24, 25–29). Findings suggested that females ($M = 1.92, SD = .70$) rated Biological/Age criteria as less important than did males ($M = 2.16, SD = .74; F(1, 388) = 10.87, p < .001, d = .33$), and that males ($M = 2.88, SD = .72$) rated Norm Compliance as less important than did females ($M = 3.09, SD = .79; F(1, 393) = 6.94, p < .01, d = .28$). Emerging adults who lived with their parents rated both Independence ($M = 3.30, SD = .43$) and Norm Compliance ($M = 2.89, SD = .78$) as less important than did those who lived outside the parental home ($M = 3.45, SD = .44; F(1, 390) = 11.16, p < .001, d = .34; M = 3.10, SD = .74; F(1, 390) = 7.56, p < .01, d = .28$). Finally, results suggested that 17–19 year olds ($M = 3.31, SD = .43$) rated Independence as less important than did 20–24 year olds ($M = 3.46, SD = .40$), who did not differ from 25 to 29 year olds ($M = 3.39, SD = .51; F(1, 390) = 4.56, p < .01, d = .36$).

Discussion

The results of this study add new elements to the literature on how young people view their transition to adulthood. Previous studies have found that young people in their late teens and early twenties generally see themselves as adults in some ways but not others (Nelson & Luster, 2015). This study extends previous research by finding that in a Nordic country, too, there is a pervasive sense during this age period of being on the way to adulthood but not there yet. Thus the study adds further support to the proposal in the theory of emerging adulthood that “feeling in-between” adolescence and young adulthood is one of the distinctive features of the age period from the late teens through the twenties in developed countries (Arnett, 2004).

The present study is one of the first to address the question of subjective adult status in different social contexts. Danish emerging adults reported feeling most adult when with co-workers and romantic partners, and least adult when with mothers and fathers. Notably, a recent study of young Chinese women factory workers reported similar results, despite a very different cultural context (Zhong & Arnett, 2014). Work and love are the two major role domains of adulthood (Arnett, 2015; Erikson, 1950), and Danish emerging adults feel most adult in the context of enacting these roles with co-workers and romantic partners. In contrast, people of all ages are always children in relation to their parents, so emerging adults feel less adult in the presence of their mothers and fathers than in their other social contexts. Participants also reported feeling less adult with friends, perhaps indicating that time with friends is viewed as a kind of play, when the social pressure to behave in an adult way is relaxed.

The results regarding criteria for adulthood provided a similar combination of confirming previous results and adding new information. As in many previous studies (Nelson & Luster, 2015), the top criteria were the Big Three of accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and financial independence, and among the least important criteria

were the traditional markers of adulthood, getting married and having a child. However, the least-endorsed criterion of all was “avoid becoming drunk.” Drinking alcohol is a major part of Danish cultural life. In a study that compared 15-year-olds in 43 European countries, young Danes were the most likely of them all to report having been drunk at least twice (Currie et al., 2012). Heavy drinking is a part of adult social life as well. Thus, unlike in other Western countries, where becoming drunk may be seen as a youthful adventure that should be given up once adulthood is reached, in Denmark becoming drunk is irrelevant to adult status.

With regard to the subscales, some of the demographic patterns in the results were illuminating. Young men were less likely than young women to regard Norm Compliance (e.g., avoid petty crimes, avoid drunk driving) as important for adulthood. Young men are generally more likely than young women to engage in norm-violating behavior (Norona, Preddy, & Welsh, 2014), so the gender difference on this subscale may reflect the desire on the part of some young men to see themselves as adults despite taking part in such behavior. Emerging adults who lived with their parents scored lower than others on Independence as an important aspect of reaching adulthood. It may be that, because they are not independent of their parents in their living arrangements, they measure their own progress to adulthood by criteria other than independence. Other studies have found that emerging adults who live with their parents tend to view their living situation as irrelevant to their self-perception of adult status (e.g., Arnett, 2004).

Limitations of the study

Several limitations should be noted. First, there was an inevitable confound of experience with age. So, for example, younger participants may not have considered having a child or a stable job to be a significant marker of adulthood because they have not yet had children or stable jobs. However, previous studies with American samples have found that the patterns of responses in criteria for adulthood are consistent regardless of age or experiencing life events (Arnett, 2001; Arnett & Schwab, 2013). Second, student/non-student status is another context worth exploring in relation to feelings of being adult (or not), but we did not record this information consistently across samples and so were unable to include it in the analyses. This is a variable that should be investigated in future studies. Third, we used a questionnaire developed in the United States, so we may have missed criteria that would be uniquely important in the Danish cultural context. Future studies should explore this topic using qualitative methods as well. Finally, the alpha for the Independence subscale was quite low ($\alpha = .45$), a problem that has been persistent in studies using versions of criteria for adulthood like the one used here. Further research should continue to develop this subscale in an effort to strengthen its reliability.

Conclusions

This study adds further support to the literature showing that most emerging adults in developed countries view themselves as neither adolescents nor adults but in-between, on the way to adulthood but not there yet. Most young people assess their progress to adulthood on the basis of criteria such as accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent. These are gradual, incremental criteria, which helps explain why emerging adults' sense of becoming adult is also gradual. The present study goes beyond previous studies of emerging adults in developed countries to show that the experience of feeling adult can vary depending on the social context. Future research should continue to explore the cultural and social contexts of emerging adulthood, seeking to investigate the similarities as well as the variations in various contexts.

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