Gender and Adulthood:

An Ambiguous Relationship

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Introduction

The concept of adulthood varies between cultures. It is related to the social order of an organization, showcasing productive labor while placing reproductive labor on the backburner. Another concept that is commonplace in a society is gender, with its own rigid social order. This study explores the question, "How does gender affect perceptions of adulthood for college students?" In so doing, it will examine the stereotypical interpretations of both terms—adulthood and gender—and will seek to determine to what extent they are interrelated (if at all). This examination opens the door to even more specific questioning. Do both males and females (and all other genders as well) define adulthood differently? How do the social expectations of a certain gender alter their perceptions of adulthood? How do college students view (by gender) these societal expectations to shift in the future, when they reach their definition of adulthood?

All of these sub-questions were considered during the experimental phase of this study; this phase included three distinct anthropological methods: pile sorts, interviewing and content analysis. The sample, ten college students—from sophomores to seniors—each took part in one pile sort and one five-question interview. Their responses provided new and interesting feedback on the ways students in college perceive adulthood or the transition into adulthood. Lake Forest College students are aware of the effect that gender has on the transition into adulthood; however, concerning their own transitions into adulthood, they feel that the stereotypes they point out do not necessarily apply to

themselves as individuals.

The "diverse ways young people move from adolescence to adulthood is important because different pathways have potentially important implications for functioning and quality of life later in adulthood."[1] Gender plays an important role in these diverse pathways: it influences the past, present, and future experiences of those transitioning into adulthood and it is intimately linked to the importance of productive and reproductive labor in a given society. Further, gender is intertwined into adulthood by means of productivity and progress. For example, the ideas of responsibility, timeliness, and the ability to handle stressful situations are all contained within the concept of productive labor, which is generally reserved for males. The business world often devalues reproductive labor, setting it aside for females. This devaluation of reproductive labor only harms productivity because there is an assumption that women cannot succeed in the same capacity as men. Gender is a subject that is relevant in every society and culture, each in different ways. Without analyzing this in association with adulthood, one may inadvertently neglect a crucial piece of the adulthood puzzle.

Research

Recent studies on the concept of adulthood that have "used person-centered typological approaches, such as latent class analysis, cluster analysis, sequence analysis, and trajectory analyses have suggested that participation in postsecondary education is a major dividing factor that distinguishes those who move quickly into forming their own families from those who postponed family formation, especially parenthood."[2] The very existence of college creates a gap between adolescence and adulthood, leaving this new liminal space in the center. For many, the emergence of family roles solidifies a transition into adulthood, creating new responsibility and feeling of self-sufficiency. There is also a strong link between marriage and adulthood, where those who enter

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1   Oesterle, Sabrina, J. David Hawkins, Karl G. Hill, and Jennifer A. Bailey. (2010) "Men's and Women's Pathways to Adulthood and Their Adolescent Precursors." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72, no. 5: 1436-453, 1436.

2   Oesterle, Sabrina, et al. (2010), "Men's and Women's Pathways to Adulthood and Their Adolescent Precursors," 1437.

into marriage suddenly feel thrust into adult roles, no longer living on a college campus or at home with parents.

Those who participate in postsecondary education after high school and put off possible family creation find their transition into adulthood to "differ markedly by sociodemographic characteristics, including race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status and family structure in childhood, and adolescent experiences such as school performance and involvement in substance use and crime."[3] However, this does not account for gender's effect on adulthood. "Men and women's respective levels of entropy are similar during adolescence, but sharply differ after the early twenties," putting college students right in the middle of that spectrum.[4] Marriage and family creation cannot be the only effects that are gendered concerning transitions into adulthood. There must be a connection to cultural expectations and gender when considering the idea of adulthood in a society. What a society expects of a certain individual can be greatly influenced by their gender. A "conspicuous part of becoming an adult—the initiation of sexual activity—is no longer tied to marriage as it once was in the past century," therefore, the "decoupling of sex and marriage" creates new expectations of when and why concerning sex and adulthood.[5] Sex is sometimes considered the pathway into adulthood. Those who are sexually active in their teens are labeled in different ways, many of these labels originating differing by gender. Males who are sexually active may then be considered adult men by peers and parents, while women may not be, often perceived instead as being 'loose' or having 'loose morals.' For women, this sexual transition into adulthood may not be so much related to the act of sexual intercourse itself, but rather the beginning of the menstrual cycle. In many cultures, such as that in America and many European countries, young girls who begin their menstrual cycle are considered

3   Oesterle, Sabrina, et al. (2010), "Men's and Women's Pathways to Adulthood and Their Adolescent Precursors," 1438.

4   Gauthier, Anne H. (2007) "Becoming a Young Adult: An International Perspective on the Transitions to Adulthood (Devenir Un Jeune Adulte: Une Perspective Internationale Sur Le Passage à L'âge Adulte)." *European Journal of Population / Revue Européenne De Démographie* 23, no. 3/4: 217-23, 219.

5   Furstenberg, Frank F. (2013) "Transitions to Adulthood: What We Can Learn from the West." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 646: 28-41, 31.

adults, new women who are now given the ability to create and sustain life inside of them.

Interestingly, some studies have concluded that men's and women's transitions into adulthood are very similar, rather than dramatically different as a result of their gender. According to a study conducted by Sabrina Oesterle (et al.), "men's and women's work and educational pathways in the transition to adulthood have become [very] similar," over the past century."[6] After high school, both men and women have similar options concerning postsecondary education and entering into a work field. Oesterle's (et al.) research claims that no matter which path (postsecondary education or entering directly into the workplace), individuals experience the same transitions and feelings. That being said, she also acknowledges that "few studies of multidimensional pathways to adulthood have [actually] examined gender differences," which casts a shadow of doubt on her argument.[7] It is the lack of information that causes skewed data and inaccurate claims. It is not that gender is not a factor, it is that there is a lack of study in this area concerning its effects on the transition into adulthood. She also points out that some of the studies "have restricted analysis to women only," effectively cutting out the male experience or those of non-binary persons.[8] Overall, it seems more likely that gender plays a concrete role in the transition to adulthood.

This role can be seen even from a linguistic perspective. For example, both the denotation and connotation of the word 'adult' tends to vary between men and women. The concept of adult may depend upon the ability to conceive a child, the ability to provide for one's family, the ability to take a wife etc., depending on one's gender. For women, the ability to conceive a child and raise children is directly embedded within the idea of adulthood, whereas for men, the ability to go into the workplace and provide financially for a family takes its place. In other words, the linguistic concept of 'adult' in Western society links productive labor to males while limiting roles related to reproductive labor to females.

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6   Oesterle, Sabrina, et al. (2010), "Men's and Women's Pathways to Adulthood and Their Adolescent Precursors," 1438.
7   Ibid.
8   Ibid.

This information can never encompass transitions into adulthood for every single adolescent. All transitions are "disjointed and fraught with complexities."[9] There are different sociological factors that affect each and every young adult's transition into a full-grown adult. Research can never fully account for firsthand experience, nor can it empathize or measure one's specific transition completely. That being said, there are general trends that can be discovered, trends that differ markedly based on gender.

Sample

The sample that was chosen was made up of ten college students: five male and five female.[10] The ten students were then divided in two and each set of five was given a pile sort. There were two types of pile sorts: one forced and one unforced. The forced pile sort was made up of gender-neutral descriptions of adulthood. Some descriptions were one word and others were short phrases. Of the five college students, three identified as female and two as male, all of whom were cisgendered. The unforced pile sort was made up of stereotypically gendered photographs relating to adulthood (e.g. a broom being stereotypically feminine and a toolbox being stereotypically masculine). Of the five college students who participated in this pile sort, two identified as female, and three as male, all of whom (again) were cisgendered. Afterward, these same ten students were interviewed one-on-one, in order to get more detail on their responses to their pile sorts answers.

It is important to note the demographic background of the ten individuals. The study did not have any freshman. Only two of the interviewees were sophomores, one male and one female. There were five interviewees who were juniors, three male and two female. And three students were seniors (graduating in May of this coming year), one male and two female. Those closer to graduation or older in age may have different opinions on the link between gender and adulthood, as they have had more time to uncover the ways in which their

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9   Gordan, Tuula, and Elina Lahelma. (2004) "Who Wants to Be a Woman? Young Women's Reflections on Transitions to Adulthood," 81.

10   It would have been very insightful to have had non-binary students participate as well, and information on the study was sent to a few non-binary persons, but they did not respond to any emails, and thus were unfortunately not included in this study.

everyday experiences are affected by gender. From the ten students interviewed, two of them were African American and one Arabic, while the other seven were of white-European descent. Race and ethnicity are also a factor when concerning gendered experiences within one's transition to adulthood. African American males may very well hold completely different experiences and definition of adult than white males do. This is also a factor between white and nonwhite females. Differences in culture (based on ethnicity) creates different gender norms, thus influencing a student's perceptions of adulthood much differently than others. Ultimately, however, race and ethnicity did not have a large effect on the data that was collected during this study.

The sample was also made up of an overwhelming amount of students on track to graduate with a bachelors in arts. Only two of the students, both male, were science majors; one of whom was a double major in science and politics. This means that much of the sample could be very familiar with (or perhaps be more informed about) societal or stereotypical expectations of adulthood.

All ten interviewees were straight, cisgendered college students. This was not an intentional decision, but rather an accidental occurrence. Unfortunately, this sample of students did not include non-binary persons. Since this sample was limited in size and scope, it is difficult to make any larger observations about the Lake Forest College student body as a whole. Nonetheless, this study shed new light on how cisgender students feel adulthood and gender are related.

Methods and Data

The pile sorts were conducted first, before any of the students participated in a one-on-one interview. Five students participated in each of the pile sorts. The first pile sort was forced and saw the participant put fifteen non-gendered descriptions into two categories: masculine or feminine. It was not about categorizing them by which was a male quality and which was a female quality; it was centered on the ideas of masculinity and femininity and which descriptive words and phrases were more like one category than they were the other. There was no third pile and students could not opt out of categorizing the terms and phrases. They had to put all of the descriptions into one of the piles. The

fifteen descriptions were as follows: educated, intelligent, breadwinner, lawyer, doctor, elegant, strong, courageous, healthy, ambitious, CEO of a company, professor of chemistry at a community college, takes out loan for a brand new Mercedes Benz, married and stays at home with children while significant other is at work, and married and goes to work while significant other stays at home with children.

The responses from participants were fascinating, with all five of them noting afterward that they considered perceived societal stereotypes when creating their piles. Three of the five students, two male and one female, reported that they personally identified with their masculine pile. Anna, the female who identified more closely with her masculine pile, explained that although she put the descriptions into what she felt were stereotypical piles, she identified with the masculine pile because those were the terms and phrases that society deems successful and important. Two of the five, both female, identified with their feminine pile, often placing certain descriptions they felt society would put in the masculine pile, into the feminine pile anyway because it described them best. It did not matter to them what stereotypes went with what phrases, and instead, they categorized based on how they were raised and how they viewed themselves. Before their pile sorts were concluded, participants were asked if the pile that they most closely identified with represented adulthood for their future selves. None of them felt that it did. One student, Rick, stated that he claimed that fifteen descriptions could never define one person.

This first pile sort pointed out the decrease in importance of reproductive labor. All of the students identified with the pile that did not have the phrases 'married, stays at home with children while significant other is at work' and 'healthy' in them. If all college students, no matter the gender, devalue reproductive labor, who will be taking part in it for the good of society? A society cannot function on productive labor alone.

The second pile sort was unforced and made up of fifteen stereotypically gendered clip-art photographs. It was sorted by three males and two females. The photos were stereotypically gendered on purpose in an effort to push students to see gender when making piles about adulthood; however, the result was the complete opposite, with

zero of the five participants placing the photos in gendered categories. The fifteen clip-art photographs of general gendered perceptions of adulthood are as follows: house, weight, mixer, hospital, children, office, toolbox, piggy bank, money, sports car, washing machine, broom, groceries, diploma, and books. Items like the mixer and broom were specially placed in the pile to try to force students to see these objects merely as feminine.

Instead of placing the photos into gendered piles, students placed them into three or more categories, based on the organization of everyday life. For example, the pile that was the most common was titled 'Home' or 'Domesticity' by three participants. This was the closest category related to gender, and the student who made the 'domesticity' category explained that he was not thinking in terms of gender when he named it, rather than the items were just general at-home activities and objects. Interviewees piles were also titled 'self-improvement,' 'chores,' 'work,' and 'health,' for example. One student, Arnold, only had three piles, 'youth/education,' 'adulthood/workforce,' and 'lifestyle'. When asked why he lumped the piles the way he did, he responded that it was a more current pile creation than if he were doing this years from now, and that after looking at the fifteen photos, he contended that adulthood should have its own pile.[11]

After the participants created their unforced piles and named them, they were informed that the study they were a part of was not only about college students' perceptions of adulthood, but also how gender plays a role in shaping those perceptions. The five students were shocked, each noting that they did not see the connection at all until informed of it. This was quite interesting and surprising because it informed the study that not all students see gendered societal expectations in every situation. The realization created a shift in hypothesis from stating that gender did play a role to recognizing that although students may agree that there are societal expectations that go along with gender and its relation to adulthood, they do not personally identify or agree with them.

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11 Olsen, Arnold. (2017) "Gender and Adulthood: The Ambiguous Relationship." Interview by author. November 9.

The second method that was employed was follow up interviews of the pile sort participants and then content analysis of the data that was collected. Below is a chart of all five interview questions asked and the coded responses that were given by students. The code is created by most frequent themes/responses to the question that was asked. The first question was an inquiry into what students' definition of the term adult was and if they felt they were already an adult. The most frequent definition included a sense of self-sufficiency and responsibility for one's self and possibly others. The next most popular term mentioned dealt with finances and being able to pay bills on one's own and on time. One interviewee, Sally, pointed out that maturity played a big role in being considered an adult and that it had no set age. She argued that she was "more mature than some [who are considered] adults."[12] When answering the second half of the question, whether or not they currently considered themselves an adult, all ten students answered that they did not feel they were adults just yet because they did not fit the definition that they had given.

Question two asked what an adult looked like in the minds of the interviewees. Surprisingly, the most popular first reaction was that an adult did not have a set 'look' or 'clothing'. That being said, students went on to talk about men in business suits and women in high heels, with 'looks/clothing' being the most frequently mentioned term in the code for this question. Responses mentioned having a stable income and job, being older than twenty-one years of age, and being responsible and confident. One student, Sadie, explained that an adult looks put together, like they do not have to worry about where their next meal is coming from yet because they did not fit the definition that they had given.[13]

The following question required the participants to describe activities that they felt adults participated in in their everyday lives. Most frequent responses ranged from being self-sufficient, to having a job and an income, to even going to buy groceries. In reality, these answers painted more of a picture of what an adult looked like

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12 Marcus, Sally. (2017) "Gender and Adulthood: The Ambiguous Relationship." Interview by author. November 9.
13 Kanter, Sadie. (2017) "Gender and Adulthood: The Ambiguous Relationship." Interview by author. November 9.

than the answers to the previous questions. Each student noted that a job or career was not required to be an adult, but that when they pictured themselves as adults doing everyday activities, it usually involved them going to work. Answers could not really be differentiated based on gender, which was a surprise.

The fourth question asked how society has affected how college students transition into adulthood. Every single interviewee immediately answered, without having to think, that they felt society and its expectations had a definite effect on students transition from adolescence to adulthood. The most frequently used phrases included society pushing students to be responsible, while simultaneously cocooning them within a college environment, which does not prepare them to do so. A response from one of the male students, Andy, included the weight that the price of college has on students. In his opinion, the price of college effectively creates a dependence on the government, the apparatus that can control a society.[14] The overwhelming theme of the responses was that college creates a middle section in society, between adolescence and adulthood, which in fact only elongates the transition from one to the other.

Although the final question was the most straightforward, it was one of the most complicated and frightening questions for the participants to answer: "Where do you see yourself in ten years?" At first, eight of the ten students responded that they did not even know if they would be alive in ten years, nonetheless doing anything related to their studies in college. Ultimately, the most frequently used terms and phrases included graduating from college, having a successful career (lawyer being the most-mentioned career choice), and having a spouse and children. Of the four students who explained they would like to have a spouse and children, only two of them were female. This also means that only two of the five females interviewed mentioned domestic roles in their future plans, like being a spouse or having children. This low number shows a split in where interviewees talked about stereotypical expectations and their own. This response shows that gender is perceived by college students when related to the idea of adulthood; however, although it may be projected onto them, the students do not accept such rigid gender roles when planning for their own future.

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14   Zolen, Andy. (2017) "Gender and Adulthood: The Ambiguous Relationship." Interview by author. November 9.

Interview Questions and Code

Question 1: Define 'adult;' do you feel that you are currently an adult? Why or Why not?

    Code:
Self-Sufficient:	8
Finances:	6
Responsible:	2
Age:	2
Mature:	2

Question 2: What do you think an adult looks like? Why or Why Not?

    Code:
Income/Job:	3
Responsible:	3
Age:	3
Looks/Clothing:	5
Confident:	4

Question 3: What activities does an adult participate in in everyday life? Why do you think this?

    Code:
Self-Sufficient:	4
Job/Income:	7
Children:	2
Pays Bills:	2
Groceries/Food:	2

Question 4: How do you think society has played a part in college students becoming adults? Why?

    Code:
Age:	3
College:	5
Less Rules/Freedom:	3
Responsible:	3
Good Worker:	2

<u>Question 5:</u> Where do you see yourself in ten years? Why?

<u>Code:</u>
Graduated: 2
Lawyer/Career: 10
Do Not Know: 2
Family/Children: 7
Chicago: 2

Conclusions

Gender and perceptions of adulthood are closely related concepts, especially when studied within the context of Western society and the college environment. Strict "definitions of adulthood both reflect and operate as cultural models of personhood."[15] Students, both male and female, define the term 'adult' in similar ways: as someone who is responsible and self-sufficient, both mentally and financially. Although gendered social expectations were evident to the participants, they all mostly agreed on the same themes: most notably college and responsibility. It was as if they knew what society expected of them based on the gender they held (women in the home and men in the workplace), but chose to ignore them and focus on what was most relevant to them currently, which was college and the transition into adulthood. This was apparent from the description pile sorts. Ultimately students, no matter the gender of the participant, viewed their own future pretty similarly to the other students: graduating from college and having a career. The information and data can only conclude with the realization that Lake Forest College students are aware of the effect that gender has on the transition into adulthood; however, concerning their own transitions into adulthood, they feel that the stereotypes they point out do not necessarily apply to themselves as individuals. This data calls into question the perceived value of reproductive labor in today's society, as all participants identify adulthood with actions and characteristics of productive labor.

This study originally sought to connect gender to perceptions of adulthood. The data shifted this study, leaving an answer that had not been considered. Rather than *how* gender affected students transitions into adulthood, the question should have been "*Does* gender have

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15   Silva, Jennifer M. (2012) "Constructing Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty." *American Sociological Review* 77, no. 4: 505-22, 506.

an effect on the idea of adulthood?" It can be concluded that societal expectations of rigid stereotypes concerning gender are apparent in society; however, they do not necessarily have power over all individuals. The goal of this research was to catch subliminal gendered messages from neutral pile sorts and interview questions. In practice, this method worked in the opposite direction, making an argument against the once perceived tight-knit relationship between gender and becoming an adult. There are no two set genders, but because there were not any non-binary participants, conclusions on what effects gender has on transitions into adulthood for those who identify as such cannot be made. Educator Robert J. Havighurst makes the point in his book *Developmental Tasks and Education* that although men and women are being educated and trained the same, when they leave an educational institution, they are not allowed to assume the same types of roles because of gender.[16] There is therefore a gap in being taught how to be an adult and a lack of lesson in reproductive labor. Becoming an adult must then be an individual transition, unique to each college student, while at the same time, creating a uniform society. The close and similar responses of all ten of the participants show that college may be the actual engineer of adulthood, creating uniform expectations and goals no matter the gender of the student. College students most rigid influence may in fact be the institution they belong to, rather than the larger, more complex society they perceive it to be.

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16   Havighurst, Robert J. (1982) *Developmental Tasks and Education*. New York, NY: Longman.