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Conceptions of the Transition to Adulthood: Perspectives From Adolescence Through Midlife

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Conceptions of the transition to adulthood were examined among adolescents (age 13–19, $N = 171$), emerging adults (age 20–29, $N = 179$), and young-to-midlife adults (age 30–55, $N = 165$). The focus was on whether conceptions of the transition to adulthood would be different among young-to-midlife adults compared to the younger age groups. In all age groups, individualistic criteria were the most likely to be considered important markers of the transition to adulthood, specifically accepting responsibility for one's actions, deciding on one's beliefs and values, establishing an equal relationship with parents, and becoming financially independent. However, young-to-midlife adults were less likely than adolescents to consider biological transitions to be important, and more likely than adolescents or emerging adults to view norm compliance (such as avoiding drunk driving) as a necessary part of the transition to adulthood. In all three groups, role transitions (e.g., marriage) ranked lowest in importance.

KEY WORDS: Transition to adulthood; young adulthood; individualism.

Leaving home. Getting married. Having a child. Which of these signifies the attainment of adulthood in American society? Is one more important than the others, or are all equally important—or perhaps none of them, perhaps an entirely different set of criteria? Or does it depend on one's perspective, on whether one is anticipating the transition to adulthood, or in the process of it, or looking at it from the perspective of midlife?

In the present study, conceptions of the transition to adulthood were examined in the American majority culture from adolescence through midlife. The participants evaluated the importance of various possible criteria for the transition to adulthood, in areas including role transitions (such as marriage and becoming a parent), family capacities (such as capacity for caring for children), norm compliance (such as avoiding drunk driving), and individualistic transitions (such as deciding on one's own beliefs and values), as well as legal and biological transitions. The focus of the study was on conceptions of adulthood in the American majority culture, i.e., the largely white and broadly middle class majority in American society that sets most of the norms and standards and holds most of the positions of political, economic, and intellectual power. It is recognized that American society also includes other cultures with perspectives that may differ from the one presented here.

The criteria for the transition to adulthood used in the present study were drawn from anthropological, sociological, and psychological studies of the transition to adulthood, and from previous studies (Arnett, 1994, 1997, 1998; Perry, 1970/1999). According to anthropologists, in most traditional cultures the focus of the transition to adulthood is on marriage (Schlegel & Barry, 1991). Marriage is not only an event that unites two people (and their families) in a relationship with a variety of mutual obligations, it also is the event that marks the attainment of adult status. Although traditional cultures that ascribe this significance to marriage may also recognize character

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qualities that must be developed for a person to become an adult (Arnett, 1998), it is marriage that is explicitly the crowning event of the transition to adulthood.

The process of preparing for marriage in traditional cultures involves cultivating capacities for fulfilling a variety of family responsibilities. These responsibilities tend to be gender specific, with males and females assigned discrete but complementary roles (Gilmore, 1990; Schlegel & Barry, 1991). For adolescent males, preparation for the transition to adulthood involves developing capacities such as *providing* and *protecting*: providing economically for a family, and keeping a family physically safe. Adolescent females, in contrast, are required to develop capacities for *running a household* and *caring for children* (Chinas, 1991; Schlegel & Barry, 1991). For adolescents of both genders, demonstrating these capacities is necessary before they are considered to be ready for marriage as the culminating transition to adulthood. In studies of Americans in their teens and twenties, development of these family capacities has been shown to rank fairly high among possible criteria for the transition to adulthood, but for both genders equally, not as responsibilities assigned to one gender or the other (Arnett, 1997).

Like anthropological studies, sociological studies have emphasized the importance of marriage in the transition to adulthood, along with other ''role transitions'' such as *finishing education*, *beginning* (*full-time*) *employment*, and *entering parenthood* (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999; Hogan & Astone, 1986; Modell, 1989). The focus of sociological studies has been on historical changes in American society in the timing of these transitions, and how the timing of different role transitions is related. For example, Hogan (1980) examined the ways that the order of completing role transitions is related to later occupational status, and Marini (1984) explored the reciprocal relationships between entering parenthood and finishing education.

However, several studies have shown that role transitions rank surprisingly low as criteria for the transition to adulthood in the views of young Americans in their teens and twenties. In studies using an open-ended response format, role transitions were rarely mentioned by young people responding to questions about what is important in signifying the transition to adulthood, either with reference to themselves (Arnett, 1998; Scheer & Palkovitz, 1995) or more generally (Arnett, 1998; Greene, Wheatley, & Aldava, 1992). In studies using a closed format specifying possible criteria for the transition to adulthood, most role transitions consistently rank near the bottom in importance (Arnett, 1997; Scheer *et al.*, 1994).

If not role transitions, what are the most important criteria for the transition to adulthood in the eyes of young people in the American majority culture? Consistently, psychological studies have found that the criteria most important to young people in their conceptions of the transition to adulthood are *qualities of character* that share a common emphasis on *individualism* (Arnett, 1997, 1998). Specifically, several studies have found the most prominent criteria to be *accepting responsibility for one's self* and *making independent decisions*, with *financial independence* close behind (Arnett, 1997, 1998; Greene *et al.*, 1992; Scheer *et al.*, 1994). In interviews and questionnaires, in a variety of regions of the United States, in samples with ages ranging from the early teens to the late twenties, these three criteria consistently emerge in this order as the top criteria in young people's conceptions of the transition to adulthood. Another criterion that has ranked high in questionnaire studies (Arnett, 1994, 1997), *establishing a relationship with parents as an equal adult*, also has connotations of individualism.

Also ranking high in previous studies of conceptions of the transition to adulthood is compliance with social norms. In the views of many young Americans, becoming an adult means complying with social norms by refraining from behavior such as drunk driving, shoplifting, and experimentation with illegal drugs (Arnett, 1994, 1998). Furthermore, previous studies have found that the self-perceived transition to adulthood is long and gradual for young Americans, extending for many of them not just through adolescence but through a long period of ''emerging adulthood'' from the late teens to the late twenties (Arnett, 1997, 1998, 2000).

All studies on this topic to date have focused on adolescents and emerging adults. What does the transition to adulthood look like from the perspective of adults in young-to-middle adulthood (ages 30–55), and how does it compare to perspectives in the earlier age periods? This question is the focus of the present study. The study was conducted on the basis of a research question rather than a specific hypothesis because there are several reasons why young-to-midlife American adults' conceptions of the transition to adulthood may differ from the perspectives of younger people, and an important reason why they may not.

One reason why young-to-midlife adults' conceptions may differ is that many of them will have experienced the events that are only anticipated by many adolescents and emerging adults. For example, entering parenthood ranks low as a marker of the transition to adulthood among most adolescents and emerging adults, except for the ones who have become parents, who rank it as the most important event in their own transition to adulthood (Arnett, 1998; Galinsky, 1981). Because the majority of young-to-midlife adults have had at least one child, they may rank the role transition of entering parenthood more highly than younger people do. Similarly, because most young-to-midlife adults have finished their education and settled into a career, they may be more likely than younger people to rate these role transitions as important.

Another reason to expect a difference in conceptions of the transition to adulthood between young-to-midlife adults and younger people is that for younger people issues of independence are fresher and may for that reason be more salient. Because adolescents and emerging adults have just experienced or are just about to experience transitions such as becoming financially independent, these transitions may appear more momentous as transitions to adulthood at younger ages than they appear from the perspective of young-to-middle adulthood.

Cohort differences may also exist. Some scholars have argued that American society has become more individualistic in recent decades (e.g., Alwin, 1988). If this is true, one might expect a less individualistic conception on the part of young-to-midlife adults, who grew up in a less individualistic time.

However, it is also possible that the individualism in young people's conceptions of the transition to adulthood reflects a cultural perspective that is shared by young-to-midlife adults no less than by adolescents and emerging adults. Perhaps the individualism of the American majority culture leads to a rejection of marriage and other communal criteria in favor of individualistic criteria for the transition to adulthood, in the views of persons of a wide range of ages who are part of that culture. To modify the research question stated earlier, we may ask: Do young-to-midlife adults in the American majority culture share the individualistic conception of the transition to adulthood articulated by adolescents and emerging adults, or does the conception found in the responses of young-to-midlife adults differ significantly?

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 519 persons in a midsized Midwestern community, including 171 adolescents (aged 13–19), 179 emerging adults (aged 20–29), and 165 young-to-midlife adults (aged 30–55). Background characteristics of the sample are shown in Table I. With respect to ethnic background, the sample was 84% white, 10% black, and 6% from other ethnicities. Employment and school enrollment patterns reflected age differences, with adolescents mostly in school full time, emerging adults working full time or in some combination of work and school, and young-to-midlife adults mostly employed full time. Father's education was included to represent participants' family socioeconomic status (SES) background, and by this standard, family SES background was similarly diverse in all three age groups. Proportions of participants who were married and who had become parents varied as expected with age, with few of the adolescents and the majority of the young-to-midlife adults having made these role transitions, and with the emerging adults in between the other two groups.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through a procedure known as the "consumer intercept" technique (DiFranza, Eddy, Brown, Ryan, & Bogojavlensky, 1994). Research assistants approached potential participants in public places and asked if they would be willing to fill out a brief questionnaire on the transition to adulthood. Over 90% of those approached agreed to participate. The questionnaire took about 15 minutes to complete.

Measures

Participants indicated their conceptions of the transition to adulthood on a questionnaire used in several previous studies (Arnett, 1994, 1997, 1998). There were 38 items on the questionnaire, and participants were asked to "Indicate whether you think the following must be achieved before a person can be considered to be an adult." They could then indicate "yes" or "no" for each item. All items are shown in Table II. The items were originally based on the

Table I. Background Information

Characteristic	All	Teens	20–29	Midlife
Age (mean, sd)	27.1 (11.8)	15.9 (1.4)	23.8 (2.7)	42.0 (7.4)
Female	62	60	63	62
Ethnicity (% white)	84	76	87	86
Currently in school full-time	47	89	46	4
Currently employed part-time	30	46	34	10
Currently employed full-time	44	2	48	82
Highest level of education completed				
High school degree or less	52	84	11	24
Some college	27	6	53	21
College degree or more	31	0	37	55
Father's education				
High school degree or less	39	33	33	50
Some college	18	18	21	16
College degree or more	45	49	46	34
Married	32	2	25	65
Children (at least 1)	33	6	15	79

Note. All numbers in the table are percentages except for the ages.

literature (reviewed above) in anthropology, sociology, and psychology (see Arnett, 1994, 1997, 1998; Arnett & Taber, 1994), and on pilot studies. The questionnaire was designed to include a wide range of possible criteria for the transition to adulthood. Items were distributed in a random order on the questionnaire.

Participants were also asked on the questionnaire, ''Do you think that you have reached adulthood?'' Response options were ''yes,'' ''no,'' and ''in some respects yes, in some respects no.'' In addition, a variety of questions concerning background and demographic information were included.

RESULTS

The frequencies for the items on the questionnaire will be presented first, organized into subscales. This will be followed by analyses comparing the subscales, and then by analyses comparing the three age groups.

Frequencies

The first step in data analysis was to organize the items into subscales. Comparisons of individual items would have involved a prohibitively high number of analyses. Instead, the items were combined to form subscales based on conceptual and theoretical criteria taken mostly from the literature described above. The subscales included Individualism, Family Capacities, Norm Compliance, Biological Transitions, Legal/Chronological Transitions, and Role Transitions. Internal reliabilities for the subscales averaged .70.

Organization of the subscales was guided by theoretical criteria rather than by a quantitative statistical approach such as factor analysis. A theory-based approach was viewed as preferable because many of the items on the scale were drawn from specific literatures. In particular, the items of the Family Capacities subscale were all drawn from the anthropological literature, which has identified gender-specific criteria used in many traditional cultures as criteria for the transition to adulthood (e.g., Gilmore, 1990). Similarly, the items on the Role Transitions subscale were all drawn from the sociological literature, which has long used a series of specific role transitions as the defining criteria for the transition to adulthood (e.g., Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999; Hogan & Astone, 1986; Marini, 1984). Also, the items on the Individualism subscale have been discussed in previous studies as forming a distinctly American middle-class conception of the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 1997, 1998). Thus it was considered preferable to keep the items from these literatures together in subscales, to enhance discussion and interpretation of the results, rather than to conduct a factor analysis in which items from the same literature may end up in different categories. The internal reliabilities of the subscales were Individualism (.57), Family Capacities (.88), Norm Compliance (.84), Biological Transitions (.76), Legal/Chronological Transitions (.55), and Role Transitions (.60).

Table II. Endorsement of Items on the Transition to Adulthood, by Subscale

	Necessary for Adulthood? (% Indicating Yes)			
	All	Teens	20–29	Midlife
Individualism				
Accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions	90	87	93	90
Decide on personal beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences	80	73	83	83
Establish a relationship with parents as an equal adult	75	74	73	77
Financially independent from parents	71	69	72	71
No longer living in parents' household	57	57	61	53
Family capacities				
Capable of keeping family physically safe (man)	67	73	62	68
Capable or running a household (woman)	64	68	62	63
Capable of running a household (man)	61	59	60	65
Capable of keeping family physically safe (woman)	58	59	53	60
Capable of supporting a family financially (man)	57	59	54	59
Capable of caring for children (woman)	55	61	39	58
Capable of caring for children (man)	54	53	47	62
Capable of supporting a family financially (woman)	43	43	39	46
Norm compliance				
Avoid committing petty crimes like shoplifting and vandalism	70	63	70	77
Use contraception if sexually active and not trying to conceive a child	63	59	61	69
Avoid drunk driving	63	57	65	67
Avoid using illegal drugs	54	50	51	62
Drive an automobile safely and close to the speed limit	38	32	35	46
Have no more than one sexual partner	36	33	32	43
Avoid becoming drunk	29	23	27	38
Avoid using profanity/vulgar language	26	19	23	38
Biological transitions				
Capable of fathering children (man)	50	60	48	41
Capable of bearing children (woman)	45	53	43	39
Grow to full height	32	35	30	29
Legal/chronological transitions				
Reached age 18	47	40	50	52
Reached age 21	37	34	34	43
Obtained driver's license	36	49	33	25
Role transitions				
Employed full-time	32	39	30	26
Settle into a long-term career	30	34	27	29
Finished with education	26	34	20	25
Married	13	13	10	15
Have at least one child	9	9	7	11
Other				
Make lifelong commitments to others	38	33	39	43
Not deeply tied to parents emotionally	22	25	17	24
Have had sexual intercourse	16	22	14	12
Purchased a house	14	20	9	11
Committed to a long-term love relationship	13	17	10	11
Learn always to have good control of your emotions	57	63	53	55

Note. For each itme, participants were asked to "Indicate whether you think each of the following must be achieved before a person can be considered an adult," and they responded by indicating yes or no. The numbers in the table indicate the percentage of participants responding "yes" for each item.

The frequencies for the items in the subscales are shown in Table II. The four most widely endorsed items were all part of the Individualism subscale: ''accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions,'' ''decide on personal beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences,'' ''establish a relationship with parents as an equal adult,'' and ''financially independent from parents.'' These criteria ranked high in all three age groups. Also endorsed by a majority of participants (57%) was an individualistic role transition, ''no longer living in parents' household.''

Other widely endorsed items were the gender-specific items in the Family Capacities subscale (specifying capabilities for keeping a family safe, running a household, supporting a family financially, and caring for children). For the most part, the rankings of the gender-specific items were similar whether they specified a man or a woman. The one exception to this was ''capable of supporting a family financially,'' which was endorsed by 57% of participants when a man was specified and only 41% when a woman was specified.

Also widely endorsed were several of the items in the Norm Compliance subscale. In contrast, the items on the Biological Transitions and the Legal/Chronological Transitions subscales received low to moderate endorsement. Ranking especially low were five of the items concerning Role Transitions: ''finished with education,'' ''employed full time,'' ''settled into a long-term career,'' ''marriage,'' and ''have at least one child.'' None of these items were endorsed by more than one-third of the overall sample, and ''marriage'' and ''have at least one child'' were two of the three least-endorsed items.

Subscale Comparisons

The mean subscale scores for each age group are shown in Table III and illustrated in Fig. 1 (based on the sum of the subscale items, no = 0, yes = 1, divided by the number of items in the subscale). Analyses were conducted on the subscales to examine participants' overall evaluations of the importance of each of the areas included in the subscales. To compare the subscales, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted with Difference contrasts, with gender, father's education, and age category (adolescence, emerging adulthood, and young-to-midlife) as covariates.

Gender was a covariate because some of the items on the questionnaire were gender-specific, (e.g., ''capable of supporting a family financially'' was two separate items, one specific to males and one specific to females). Similarly, father's education was used as a covariate (representing family SES background) because the timing of some events (e.g., finishing education, marriage) varies by social class, with higher social class associated with higher median ages of the transitions (Marini, 1984). Also, some previous studies have shown relationships between SES and certain criteria for the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 1997).

Table III. Age Comparisons in Views of the Transition to Adulthood

Subscale	All	Teens	20–29	Midlife
Individualism	.74	.72	.76	.75
Family Capacities	.56	.58	.52	.59
Norm Compliance	.47	.42	.45	.55
Biological Transitions	.42	.50	.39	.36
Legal/Chronological	.40	.41	.39	.40
Role Transitions	.22	.26	.19	.21

Note. The numbers shown are the mean item scores for each subscale for each age group. For all items, participants were asked to ''Indicate whether you think the following must be achieved before a person can be considered to be an adult.'' They could then indicate ''yes'' (= 1) or ''no'' (= 0).

Subscales were entered into the Difference contrasts in order of their overall mean ranking (as shown in Table III). The Difference contrast compared each subscale except the first (Individualism) to the combined mean of the previous subscales. So, the first contrast compared Family Capacities to Individualism, the second contrast compared Norm Compliance to the combined mean of Family Capacities and Individualism, and so on. The Difference contrast was chosen because contrasts involving repeated measures should be orthogonal (Norusis, 1990), and among possible orthogonal contrasts (Difference, Helmert, or Polynomial) the Difference contrast was considered most appropriate because it began with the top-ranked Individualism subscale that was of particular interest.

All five contrasts were significant at $p < .001$. Figure 1 illustrates the pattern, with the items on the Individualism subscale ranked highest in all three age groups, and degree of endorsement descending through the other subscales, with Role Transitions lowest.

Age Comparisons

Of primary interest in the study were the age comparisons in conceptions of the transition to adult-

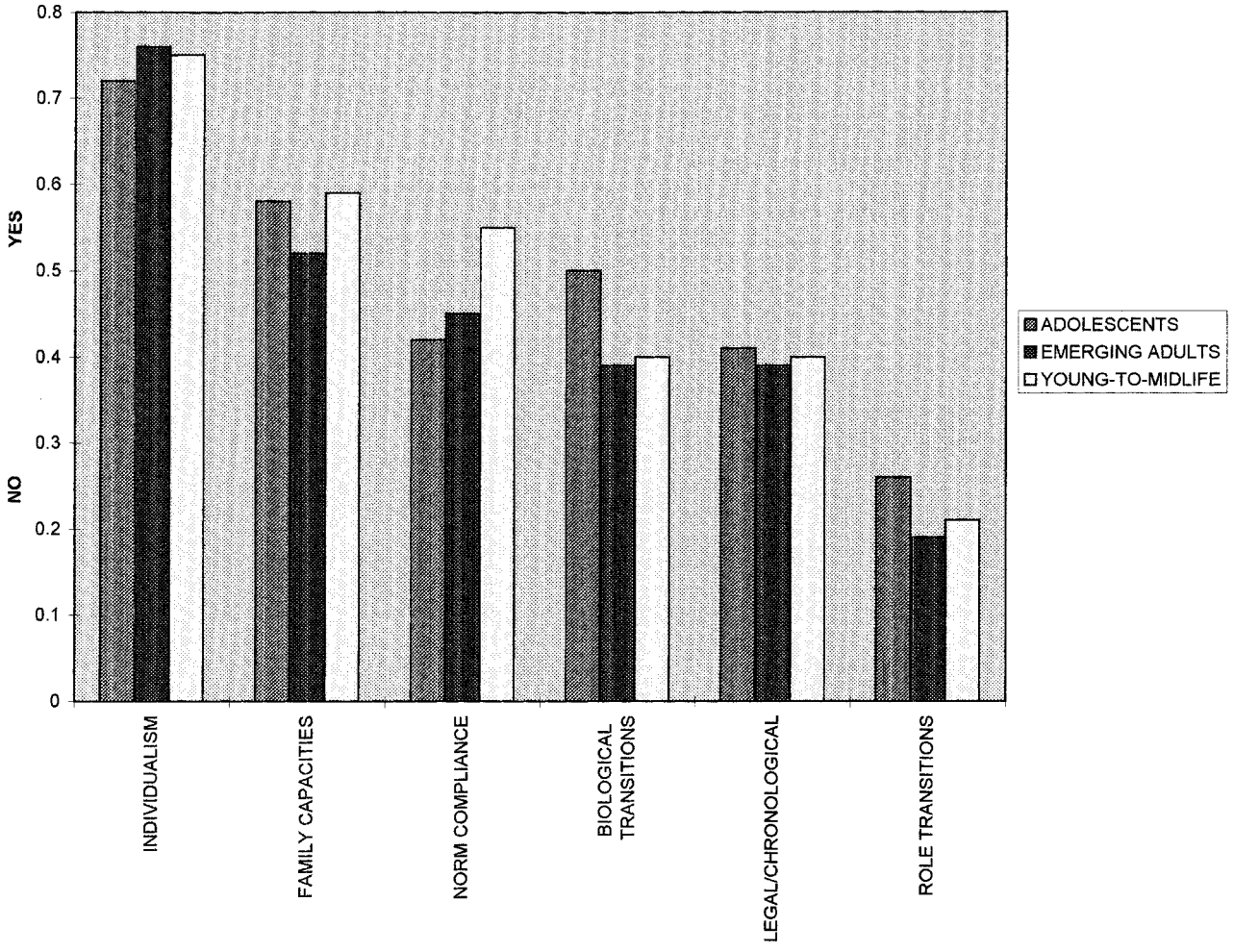

Fig. 1. Age comparisons in views of the transition to adulthood.

hood between adolescents, emerging adults, and young-to-midlife adults. Age comparisons were conducted on the subscales using ANOVAs, with a priori contrasts comparing young-to-midlife adults to adolescents and to emerging adults. Gender and father's education were included as covariates. However, results of the ANOVAs using the covariates were no different than without the covariates, so the results are reported below without the covariates.

In the ANOVAs there were no age group differences for Individualism, Family Capacities, or Legal/Chronological transitions. For Role Transitions, the overall F test was significant ($F(2,511) = 3.96$, $p < .05$), but the contrast comparing young-to-midlife adults to adolescents was of only borderline significance ($t = -1.90$, $p = .06$), and the contrast comparing young-to-midlife adults to emerging adults was not significant. The means in Table III (illustrated in Fig. 1) show that young-to-midlife adults rated Role Transitions as slightly less important compared to adolescents.

With respect to the Biological Transitions subscale, the overall F test was significant ($F(2,433) = 5.55$, $p < .01$). In the contrasts, there was no difference between young-to-midlife adults and emerging adults, but young-to-midlife adults were significantly less likely than adolescents to endorse the criteria on this subscale ($t = -3.19$, $p < .01$). Age differences were also found for the subscale on Norm Compliance. The overall F test was significant ($F(2,511) = 7.26$, $p < .001$), and young-to-midlife adults were significantly more likely to view these criteria as important compared to adolescents ($t = -3.67$, $p < .001$) and compared to emerging adults ($t = -2.78$, $p < .01$).

Participants' responses to the question of whether or not they felt they had reached adulthood are shown in Fig. 2. Eighty-six percent of the young-to-midlife adults felt they had reached adulthood, compared to 46% of the emerging adults and only 19% of the adolescents. One-third of the adolescents responded "no," compared to only 4% of the emerging adults and 2% of the young-to-midlife adults. For both adolescents (48%) and emerging adults (50%), the highest proportion of responses was for the response option "in some respects yes, in some respects no," whereas only 12% of the young-to-midlife adults chose this response. The Pearson chi-square statistic comparing the responses of the three age groups to this question was 198.69 (4,514), $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

Do young-to-midlife adults in the American majority culture share the individualistic conception of the transition to adulthood articulated by adolescents and emerging adults, or does the conception found in the responses of young-to-midlife adults differ significantly? This was the question posed at the outset of the study described here. The results indicated that the individualism found to be prominent in studies of adolescents' and emerging adults' conceptions of the transition to adulthood is shared by young-to-midlife adults. However, the results also showed age differences in conceptions of the transition to adulthood that appear to be related to the developmental characteristics of the three age groups.

Age Similarities: The Prominence of Individualistic Criteria

The individualistic criteria that figured prominently in the results of previous studies (Arnett, 1997, 1998; Greene *et al.*, 1992; Scheer *et al.*, 1994) also emerged as the top criteria for the transition to adulthood in the present study, with a high degree of consistency. The consistency existed across age

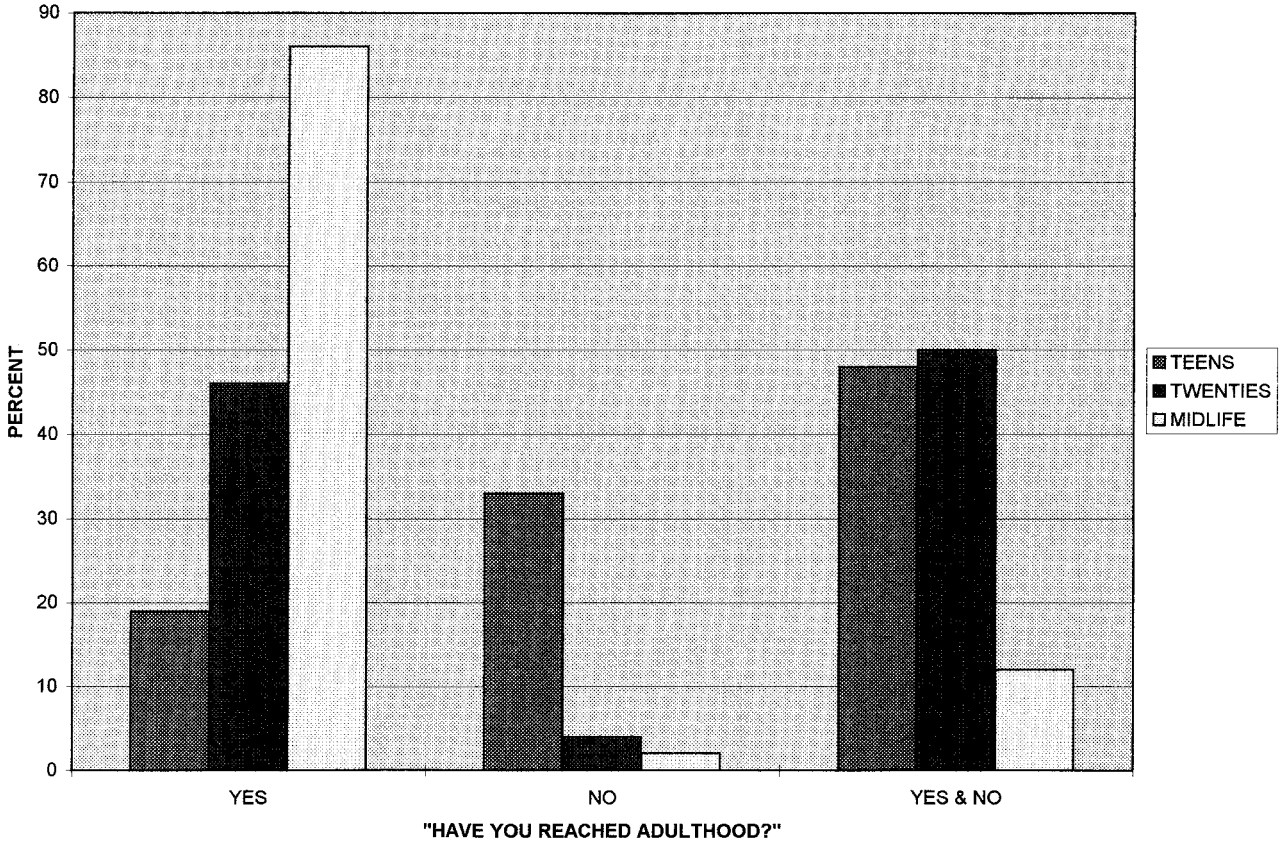

Fig. 2. Responses to question, "Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?"

groups, with each of the three age groups endorsing individualistic criteria more than any other criteria. Consistency also existed in the order of the criteria, with ''accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions'' at the top followed by ''decide on personal beliefs and values,'' with ''establish a relationship with parents as an equal adult'' and ''financially independent'' close behind. These same criteria have now been found to be preeminent in a variety of studies using a variety of methods (Arnett, 1994, 1997, 1998; Greene *et al.*, 1992; Scheer *et al.*, 1994). In combination with previous studies, the results of the present study suggest the existence of a widely shared conception of the transition to adulthood among people in the American majority culture. The present study extends the findings of previous studies by showing that this conception of the transition to adulthood is held by people across a wide age range, from early adolescence through midlife. Becoming an adult in the American majority culture means ''learning to stand alone'' as a self-sufficient individual (Arnett, 1998).

However, individualism was not the only component in the conception of the transition to adulthood held by the participants in this study. Although individualistic transitions ranked highest in all three age groups, family capacities and norm compliance also ranked quite high at all ages. The transitions specified as family capacities and norm compliance involve responsibility to and consideration for others. The prominence of these transitions indicates that the individualism of the participants' conceptions of the transition to adulthood is balanced by social and communal concerns (Arnett, 1998; Jensen, 1998).

Role transitions and legal/chronological transitions received relatively low endorsement from all three age groups. The legal/chronological transitions were endorsed by a somewhat higher proportion of participants than the role transitions, but were nevertheless endorsed by half or fewer of the participants in each age group. Turning 16, 18, and 21 may have great significance in the American legal system, but the results here indicate that for most people these age milestones have little significance as markers of adult status.

Perhaps even more striking than the limited endorsement of legal/chronological transitions was the low endorsement of the role transitions. Of the five role transitions—marriage, parenthood, finish education, employed full time, and settled into career—*none* was endorsed by more than one-third of the participants, and marriage (13%) and parenthood (9%) were two of three least-endorsed items out of the 38 items included in the study. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Arnett, 1997, 1998; Greene *et al.*, 1992; Scheer & Palkovitz, 1995), and is in contrast to the emphasis on role transitions as the definitive criteria for the transition to adulthood in sociological and anthropological studies (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999; Hogan, 1980; Marini, 1984; Modell, 1989; Schlegel & Barry, 1991). Notably, role transitions were endorsed little more by the midlife adults than by those in the younger age groups. Evidently, reaching a stage of life in which the major role transitions have been completed does not elevate the prominence of these transitions as key criteria for adulthood.

Age Differences and the Immediacy of Experience

Although the results of the study were consistent across age groups with respect to individualistic criteria, family capacities, and legal/chronological transitions, distinct age differences emerged with respect to biological transitions and norm compliance. One possible interpretation of these age differences is that the immediacy of experiencing certain transitions influences the extent to which participants endorse them as criteria for the transition to adulthood.

With respect to biological transitions, adolescents endorsed these transitions to a greater extent than did young-to-midlife adults. It may be that being in the process of reaching physical maturity and the capacity for sexual reproduction makes these transitions somewhat more salient and important for teens than for adults. However, it is important to add that even for adolescents, the biological transitions were not among their most widely endorsed criteria for the transition to adulthood.

There was also an age difference with respect to norm compliance. Young-to-midlife adults endorsed the norm compliance items as part of their conception of the transition to adulthood considerably more widely than either adolescents or emerging adults. Consistently across a wide range of behavior, from drunk driving to drug use to using profanity, young-to-midlife adults were more likely to view violations of social norms as incompatible with adult status. Here again the immediacy of experience may be involved. Adolescents and emerging adults are more likely than young-to-midlife adults to engage in numerous types of norm-violating behavior (Arnett,

1999; Jessor, Donovan & Costa, 1991). It may be that they would like to believe that they can engage in such behavior and nevertheless attain adult status. In contrast, young-to-midlife adults, who are less likely to take part in norm-violating behavior, may see it as something a young person must ''grow out of'' as part of completing the transition to adulthood.

Changes in Self-Perceptions of Reaching Adulthood

Substantial age differences were also found in responses to the question ''Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?'' As expected, adolescents were least likely to respond ''yes'' to this question (19%), with young-to-midlife adults most likely (86%), and emerging adults in between (46%). For both adolescents and emerging adults, the most common response to this question was the ambiguous ''in some respects yes, in some respects no'' (adolescents 48%, emerging adults 50%). This can be explained in part by the intangible quality of the characteristics they consider to be most important in marking the transition to adulthood. Because criteria such as accepting responsibility and deciding on one's own beliefs and values are intangible and develop gradually (Arnett, 1998), they are difficult to assess explicitly and precisely. There is unlikely to be any definite day or month or year that can be identified as the time when a crucial threshold in their attainment was passed. Furthermore, the results of the present study show that the transition to adulthood is multidimensional, and at any given point in their teens and twenties there may be many people who feel they have attained adulthood by some criteria but not by others. Adolescence and adulthood are connected in the American majority culture by a long bridge of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 1998, 2000), during which the qualities most important in marking the transition to adulthood are gradually attained.

Even among young-to-midlife adults, 12% did not consider themselves to have reached adulthood. This, too, may be explained by the intangible and individualistic nature of the most important transitions. Some people may prefer to see them as processes that continue throughout life, part of the individual's continuing personal development with no final destination (Arnett, 1998).

Limitations of the Study

Two limitations of the study should be noted. The data were all collected in a single mid-sized American city. Although the results closely resembled other studies conducted in other parts of the United States using different methods (Greene *et al.*, 1992; Scheer *et al.*, 1994), there may be regional differences that have not been adequately explored by the combination of these studies. Second, the participants were all part of the American majority culture. It would be desirable in future studies to explore conceptions of the transition to adulthood in minority cultures in American society, as well as in cultures outside the United States.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In sum, the results of the present study indicate that the conception of the transition to adulthood held by young-to-midlife adults bears considerable similarity to the conception held by adolescents and emerging adults. In all three age groups, individualistic criteria rank highest in importance, especially the character qualities of accepting responsibility for one's actions and deciding on one's own beliefs and values. This common view could be said to reflect the individualism of the American majority culture, in which independence and self-sufficiency are highly valued (Triandis, 1995) and are stressed in socialization throughout childhood (Alwin, 1988). By the time they reach the transition to adulthood, young people have accepted the importance of learning to stand alone (Arnett, 1998). However, the prominence of criteria involving family obligations and compliance with social norms indicates that the individualism of the American majority culture is not unbridled, but is tempered and balanced by concerns for others.

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