Critically exploring transitions towards adulthood through a
thematic analysis of the perspectives of individuals aged 18-25

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore the perspectives of individuals aged 18-25 in how they constructed adulthood and the transition towards it. The ages of adolescence and adulthood are still a point of contention in research, and this study compared the lived experiences and perspectives of those aged 18-25 to some of the predominant models and studies of transitioning from adolescence towards adulthood. A thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with four participants aged 18-25 found that adulthood was frequently constructed as a process of gaining independence and using this newfound independence to drive exploration and self-discovery. Participants' descriptions of themselves suggest a distinctly transitionary phase towards adulthood, separate from traditional models of adolescence and adulthood and characterised by practising the skills necessary to attain full adulthood. The participants also typically constructed adolescence as a negative domain, and at times resented the notion that people thought of them as adolescents. While this study suggests the presence of distinctly transitional life stage in approaching adulthood, further research should explore how vulnerable populations experience this transition and if social support traditionally reserved for those under 18 should be extended to a later age in vulnerable populations.

KEY WORDS:	ADULTHOOD	ADOLESCENCE	EMERGING ADULTHOOD	THEMATIC ANALYSIS	SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Introduction

The age at which someone becomes an adult is often constructed as relatively simple; a government guide to safeguarding children quietly defines adulthood as beginning at 18 in the introduction and pays no further heed to the matter (HM Government, 2015). This assertion that adulthood begins at 18 seems an oversimplification, as recent research by Sawyer et al. (2018) suggests adolescence extends to the age of 24. Additionally, Arnett (2000) posited that transitioning to adulthood now constituted its own distinct phase of the lifespan between 18 and 25 which he termed 'emerging adulthood', defined by a fluid and exploratory lifestyle. Critically, the term 'adulthood' itself lacks a clear definition. Adulthood has been explained in terms of physical and cognitive maturity (Klimczuk, 2016), social relations such as independence from parents (Jiang et al., 2016), personality traits such as responsibility (Twenge and Campbell, 2018) and life events such as entering employment or having children (Cohen et al., 2003). While fulfilment of all these characteristics would likely indicate adulthood, the situation when an individual fulfils some criteria but not others creates ambiguity as to whether they are an adult, or to what extent they are an adult. These varying criteria for adulthood indicate the assertion that adulthood suddenly begins the moment of one's 18th birthday is reductionist at best. Furthermore, while our modern conceptions of the age of adulthood might appear to us as a long-standing truth, adulthood can be at least partly explained as a social construction formed from our cultural perceptions (Hammack and Toolis, 2014), and historically speaking this perspective is rooted in very recent developments.

While many small events and changes contributed to an evolving view of adulthood, perhaps the most significant factor was the end of the Second World War. Post-war society in the UK brought about unprecedented and sustained full employment, and with the proportion of people marrying increasing while the average age of marriage decreased, women were increasingly pressured into being full-time housewives and mothers (Thane, 2012). Due to these factors along with increasing socioeconomic expansion, the two decades following the war created conditions allowing for the vast majority of the population to experience identical transitions into adulthood in a linear order (Mary, 2013). This unprecedented uniformity created an idealised depiction of transitioning accessible to all, setting a standard of attaining self-sufficiency and a stable family by the time an individual reached their early twenties (Mary, 2013). It is this idealised standard that is the basis for Erikson's classical model of the lifespan in which young people transition from adolescence directly into adulthood (Erikson, 1968, cited in Dunkel and Harbke, 2017). Unfortunately for many, the concept of full employment would prove short-lived. In the 1970s, an economic crisis led the USA and the UK to dismantle much of the industry that sustained full employment; many local manufacturing and industry jobs were transferred overseas (McGuigan, 2014). Despite this huge upheaval of the social and economic conditions that facilitated transitioning to adulthood, the classical conception of this transition persisted and is still discussed to this day (Dunkel and Harbke, 2017). These economic developments ultimately grew into what is termed neoliberal capitalism, an ideology centred on the free market and limited government which views adults as rational, self-interested actors and entrepreneurs (McGuigan, 2014). These new definitions and conceptions of adulthood are those still prevalent today (Brown, 2009; McGuigan, 2014) and they continue to inform both perceptions of adulthood and of the transition towards it.

Neoliberalism measures individuals by their capacity for self-reliance and makes the individual fully responsible for themselves (Brown, 2009). With the advent of neoliberal capitalism came the emergence of the neoliberal self (McGuigan, 2014). Through a sense of obligatory individualisation, young people are now forced to find their own way in life and take sole responsibility with little in the way of guidance or state support (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; McGuigan, 2014). With the conditions facilitating transitioning to adulthood now radically different from their idealised post-war form, new methods and modes of transitioning have emerged. Adulthood in the West has been increasingly conceptualised as attaining a state of full personhood, autonomy and self-determination, completely distinct from adolescence (Blatterer, 2007a). It is likely these changes that brought about Arnett's (2000) theory of emerging adulthood. Like the findings of Sawyer et al. (2018), Arnett (2000) suggested that the age of adulthood had been pushed back to around 25 but Arnett did not agree with the notion that adolescence should be extended. Arnett characterised this period as distinct from both adulthood and adolescence, describing it as a time for exploration in which people felt a need to establish self-reliance and define themselves as individuals. The conditions that allowed young post-war individuals to settle down no longer exist, and it seems young people have taken this as an opportunity to go the opposite direction and explore. McGuigan (2014) and Brown (2009) would suggest this also stems from neoliberal pressure on the self to be a productive, self-interested individual.

Research and statistical evidence largely supports the basic premise of the claims by Arnett (2000) and Sawyer et al., (2018) that classical constructions of adulthood are often non-applicable for those aged 18-24. Individuals aged 18-25 report that neither they nor their parents regard them as adults (Nelson and Barry, 2005; Nelson et al., 2007; Kleop and Hendry, 2010). Twenge and Campbell (2018) indicate young people in Western individualistic cultures are slower mature to adulthood and assume adult responsibilities. The age at which people are marrying or having children has increased considerably since post-war times; the Office for National Statistics (2018) indicates that the average age of marriage began to increase around 1970 and continues to climb to this day with the average age recorded as between 35 and 37 for heterosexual couples in 2015. Similarly, the Office for National Statistics (2019) reports that the average age of mothers and fathers of all babies continues to rise, with 69% of babies born in 2017 having fathers aged 30 years and over. More people are applying to and being accepted into higher education (Bolton, 2018) rather than entering work. Additionally, biopsychology suggests that an individual in their late 20s has only just reached cognitive maturity in the frontal lobes (Johnson et al., 2009). This premise can also be observed in institutions, such as the UK National Living Wage only being for those aged 25 and over after a 2015 amendment to the 1998 National Minimum Wage Act. These factors taken altogether demonstrate that individuals aged 18-24 no longer embody many of the characteristics and traits typical in classical theories of adulthood and are treated differently than those aged 25 and over. The major point of contention is then how we understand and treat individuals aged 18-24, whether we treat them as adolescents (Sawyer et al., 2018), emerging adults (Arnett, 2000) or whether there is a more suitable model yet to be described.

It is of great importance that we thoroughly investigate the extent of adolescence and the emergence of adulthood, as these factors form the basis for many governmental and institutional reports and acts. As mentioned earlier, the guidelines for

safeguarding children currently only apply to individuals under the age of 18 (HM Government, 2015). The vast majority of children in public care leave care by their 18th birthday with a tiny fraction remaining in care (Department for Education, 2018). Entitlements for free healthcare treatments such as prescriptions and dental care are also limited to those under 18 (NHSBSA, 2018a; NHSBSA, 2018b). As such, if the age of adolescence was raised to 24, many of these social and health services would likely need to raise the age of eligibility and the cost of this would no doubt be enormous. Though this change in policy would be significant and costly, continuing to assert that adulthood begins at 18 may lead to the abrupt removal of adolescents without parental support from the child welfare system (Keller et al., 2007); we may in fact be pulling out the safety net from under vulnerable people right when they need it most. Additionally, this change in policy could have considerable implications for the way we treat young people in general. The idea that adulthood suddenly begins at 18 likely affects how parents treat their children, how employers treat their employees and how academia treats students (Nelson et al., 2007). An increased age of adolescence may be seen as an indication of the necessity of increased support for those under 24 in professional and academic environments. Equally as important is how young people conceptualise themselves, adulthood brings with it a unique set of expectations (Blatterer, 2007b)**,** and Arnett (2000) and Sawyer et al. (2018) would suggest those aged 18-24 are not entirely ready to meet these expectations. Struggling to meet these lofty expectations may then result in potential harm to young people, Hardie (2014) demonstrates that failing to meet goals and expectations transitioning to adulthood is at times associated with higher depressive symptoms. Thus there are many significant implications if as Sawyer et al. (2018) suggests we are presently treating adolescents aged 18-24 like adults.

Conversely, if Arnett's (2000) theory more accurately describes individuals aged 18-25 than the claim from Sawyer et al. (2018) that adolescence extends to 24, an increased age of adolescence could impose false limits on young people by denying them the independence, responsibility and opportunity for growth that is afforded to adults. Some individuals aged 23 have already completed a degree and entered employment or postgraduate studies and may resent the assertion that they are still adolescents. Furthermore, Arnett (2000) stressed that the 18-25 period was a crucial time for exploration and self-discovery, and research suggests the characteristics of emerging adulthood are conducive for increased mental wellbeing relative to adolescence (Inguglia et al., 2014). Contrary to Hardie's (2014) findings regarding failing to meet goals, Reynolds and Baird (2010) stated that their research indicated negative mental health consequences resulted from low attainment alone and not from the perceived gap between attainment and expectation. This implies young people having high expectations for their transition to adulthood may be a positive characteristic, encouraging drive, bold goals and achievement. Additionally, raising the age of adolescence to the extent that individuals aged 13 and 23 are considered to be in the same period of the lifespan is troublesome for several reasons. One only needs to look at the two side by side to see how different they appear in physicality, and with cognitive differences well acknowledged also (Veroude et al., 2013) there is a tremendous potential for imbalance and disparity in power if we lump together young teenagers with people in their early twenties as adolescents all (Wake and Reed, 2019).

Clearly then, there are potential benefits and harms to both theories depending on their validity and we cannot afford to be rash when exploring modern transitions to

adulthood. For this purpose, this research paper intends to conduct a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) using semi-structured interviews with individuals aged 18-25 so that they might have a voice and share their perspectives of their journey through this contentiously defined transition. The research aims are to explore how people aged 18-25 conceptualise themselves in the transition to adulthood and how they feel they are perceived by others. Specifically, this paper aims to investigate the merit of claims from Arnett (2000) and Sawyer et al. (2018) regarding how we should conceptualise this transition societally and institutionally. If Sawyer et al. (2018) are correct that adolescence now extends to 24, this should be reflected in how young people conceptualise themselves and this would lend credence to the notion that social and cultural support reserved for those under 18 should perhaps continue to a later age. As such, this paper aims to use semi-structured interviews to give the participants the opportunity to define themselves and to highlight areas of congruence and incongruence in their experiences.

Methodology

Ethics

This study adheres to the code of ethics and conduct outlined by the British Psychological Society (2018) and an ethics submission was approved and signed by the research supervisor (Appendix 1). The study did not involve conditions necessitating insurance (Appendix 2).

Participants

Four individuals responded to a request for participants aged 18 to 25 through the University Participation Pool. The age criteria was enforced in order to recruit participants currently transitioning towards adulthood. The participants chose pseudonyms to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Two participants were male and two were female, John (22 years old), Turk (22), Alex (21) and Michelle (20). Additionally, Michelle lived in an East Asian country and moved to the UK in early adolescence while the other three participants have lived in the UK from birth. John is a recent graduate in games development now working full-time in a restaurant. The other three participants are currently studying a psychology undergraduate degree; Alex works part-time alongside her degree while Turk and Michelle do not.

Data Collection Method

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with participants as they allow the interviewer to deviate from the pre-determined questions if the interviewee wishes to expand on something not already covered (Wengraf, 2001). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews allow for a more conversational approach than structured alternatives (Wengraf, 2001) which may facilitate participants feeling at ease. The ontological and epistemological assumptions of qualitative approaches such as semi-structured interviews are often aligned with philosophies such as constructivism and interpretivism (Slevitch, 2011) which prioritise subjective constructions and interpretations of phenomena as opposed to empirical measures. Qualitative methods should then allow this study to explore how perceptions of adulthood differ in definition and meaning between individuals.

To ensure a basic structure and prompt participants, twelve questions detailing aspects of adulthood were arranged prior to data collection (Appendix 3).

Participants were asked "To what extent do you think other people see you as an adult?" and "To what extent do you consider yourself independent, and has that changed recently?" along with other questions exploring both how individuals perceived themselves and how they felt they were perceived by others in relation to adulthood.

Once participants accessed the study through the Participation Pool, they were presented with a digital copy of the information sheet (Appendix 4). After agreeing to participate in an interview, participants met the interviewer in a meeting room on a university campus. This location was chosen as it provided a quiet room suitable for recording an interview in a public space. Before beginning the interview, participants were asked to read the information sheet carefully. Participants then gave informed consent by signing consent forms (Appendix 5) explicitly stating that they consented to take part in the study and that they knew the interview would be recorded and transcribed. Participants were also made aware that they could withdraw from the study during the interview or at any time afterwards and provided with contact details for the researcher and the research supervisor.

The interviews were intended to last for around 30 minutes and ranged in length from 20 – 40 minutes. After the interviews were completed, participants were debriefed on the specific research aims of the study and given the opportunity to ask questions. Interview audio was transcribed in verbatim, with effort made to preserve pauses and emphasis as well as indicating the use of non-verbal gestures where possible. A sample of the transcript is available in Appendix 6.

Data Analysis Method

While this study sought to obtain individualised and personal perspectives of adulthood, it also aimed to compare and contrast the transcripts to highlight areas of congruence and incongruence in perceptions of adulthood. To do this, thematic analysis was employed as its flexibility is suitable for analysing perceptions of a complex concept such as adulthood (Braun and Clarke, 2006**)**. Furthermore, thematic analysis itself is in many ways independent of the epistemological assumptions prevalent in other methods of analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As such, thematic analysis seems appropriate for minimising the effect of the experimenter's position and preserving the detailed and complex perspectives of the participants. For example, thematic analysis is suitable for both essentialist and constructionist paradigms (Braun and Clarke, 2006) ensuring participants perspectives can be preserved in analysis.

Once all interviews had been transcribed, they were read through in completion before being individually coded. The transcripts were then read through a second time, and additional coding began to draw together the broad themes. Prominent codes throughout all transcripts were representations of independence and self-discovery, with specific codes including 'Emotional Independence', 'Self-Improvement' and 'Individual Differences in Coping and Consequences'. Once reading, re-reading and coding the transcripts was completed, the codes were listed together and arranged into prevalent or significant themes.

Quality Criteria

To ensure a high level of validity in this study, Yardley's (2000) criteria for qualitative research were considered in the design of the study. To highlight the social context

of the interview and analysis procedure, and to ensure transparency, a reflexive analysis is presented after the discussion. The importance of shedding light on this topic was made clear in the introduction and this research aims to encourage discussion on the topic of adulthood. In trying to share the voices of the participants, the intention of a thematic analysis was not to deconstruct their experiences but to highlight congruence and incongruence and explore the complexities of the transition to adulthood (Yardley, 2000).

Analysis and Discussion

Themes and Codes

Three main themes were identified. The first and by far the most prominent theme is 'Independence and Self-Reliance', a significant factor across all transcripts constructed from the codes of 'Financial Independence', 'Emotional Independence', 'Self-Reliance' and 'Individual Differences in Coping and Consequences'. The second theme is 'Exploration and Self-Discovery', made up from the codes 'Self-Exploration', 'Self-Improvement', 'Career Exploration' and 'Physical Exploration'. The third theme is 'Expectations and Perceptions of Adulthood', made up from the codes 'Expectations of Self', 'Expectations from Others', 'Perceptions of Adulthood', 'Perceptions of Transitioning' and 'Incongruence Between Self-Perceptions and Perceptions from Others'.

Independence and Self-Reliance

Across all transcripts, the transition to adulthood was most frequently characterised by values relating to independence and the responsibilities that it entailed. Independence itself was constructed in a number of ways, such as the process of becoming emotionally independent as demonstrated by Michelle when discussing leaving home to come to university.

> *"I would cry my eyes out every single time I had to leave and had to go here, because I live quite far away - I don't know what happened but this year when I came here, like um, this September, I was surprised with myself like, hold up I'm not crying or I'm not sad"* – Michelle

When Michelle left home to attend university, the physical separation from her family left her so homesick that it brought her to tears. Having developed a secure attachment to her family and being dependent on them, the process of being cut off from those dependencies was emotionally challenging and this may imply a persisting adolescence as suggested by Sawyer et al. (2018). However, while these feelings did persist for a time, Michelle notes that recently she was herself surprised to find that her negative emotions were absent.

> *"It's kind of like I've gotten used to it but also like, I don't even know how to explain it, it's just that feeling of like… just like, you're not… lonely. You're like, confident to just being alone. Because like, there's a difference being lonely and being alone"* - Michelle

Michelle constructs this experience as a process, a journey towards feeling emotionally independent and secure driven partly by having had the opportunity to get used to it. In this regard, Michelle's reflections seem far more in line with Arnett's (2000) theory that the last few years have been a process of adapting to values

considered integral to adulthood. The claim that adolescence should extend to 24 is further complicated by Alex's experiences of emotional independence.

> *"probably because my parents are divorced, like I remember when we went on a school trip in year 6 and it was like residential for a week, and loads of the kids really struggled with being away from their parents - I have never ever got home sick in my life - I think it's because as a child I was really used to being either away from my mum, or away from my dad"* - Alex

> *"I'd practised this - I was so ready to leave, I didn't miss my parents at all until a really long time into university and I didn't feel like I needed them because, I knew how to handle myself"* - Alex

While Alex's experiences differ in that she hasn't struggled with emotional independence in the way that Michelle did, both accounts describe this skill as something gained through practice. This highlights how individual differences shape the journey to adulthood and supports Arnett's (2000) claim of emerging adulthood as a time in which young people are learning and practising the skills necessary to attain full adulthood. Furthermore, independence and leaving home were things Alex felt ready for several years before the age of 24 and this contrasts with the notion that Alex should be treated predominantly as an adolescent (Sawyer et al., 2018).

Something particularly interesting from Turk's transcript was the idea that he did not regard himself as an adult, and often felt he wasn't regarded as an adult by others, but was afforded a measure of adulthood through independence.

> *"I say this to my friends all the time and I carry on saying it to most people I meet, I still feel the same as a person as when I was fifteen, I don't feel grown up at all."* – Turk

> *"I've had so many people… probably in the last one or two years think I'm still eighteen or seventeen, maybe even younger. And people say it's a blessing but I don't think anyone really views me as an adult to be honest"* - Turk

> *"maybe she [participant's mother] does think I'm an adult - I've had a lot of personal things go on in the past… three or four years really and I think that transition… those events have ultimately resulted in this change in me and my mother's relationship – she's… begun to understand that once again I have more responsibilities now, that I need to take care of myself - be responsible for myself rather than her being responsible for me"* – Turk

Turk felt that he was not perceived as an adult and that this impacted on him negatively, others frequently thought him younger than he was and though they described this as a positive characteristic, Turk did not perceive it this way. Turk goes on to describe how through the process of becoming independent from his mother and becoming self-reliant, he felt that now someone saw him as an adult and as responsible. Again this creates concern with the notion that adolescence should extend to the age of 24 (Sawyer et al., 2018); being perceived as an adolescent was a negative experience for Turk whilst harnessing independence and self-reliance afforded him a means of feeling like an adult which was a positive experience. While Turk's comments do highlight the role of individual differences in the journey to adulthood, the opportunity to be independent was nonetheless a beneficial experience at times.

> *"I work in fast food at the moment while I'm looking for a new job, to me I'm like I'm still free, I'm independent to go do what I want, that's not tying me down. If I wanted to stop there and find a new job, I could do that, that's up to me, that's entirely up to me." – John*

John's thoughts on the value of independence highlight how it positively affects his conceptualisations of his future. Knowing he wasn't tied down or bound by any dependencies left John in a position where he felt he was in charge of his life and his future, indicating that harnessing independence can foster feelings of agency. Through all transcripts, independence and self-reliance were constructed as factors enabling growth and exploration which is in-line with Arnett's (2000) theory of emerging adulthood.

Exploration and Self-Discovery

> *"once I started being an adult, where you're in this process of finding your adulthood, you're more likely to take in information about yourself and what people notice, what works for you and what doesn't. And you just like, shape to everything to be more positive."* - Michelle

> *"personally my twenties are a time of discovery and experience - because you spend like what twenty years in education, you know… - why not for like ten years be able to do what you want"* - John

With their newfound independence, participants frequently described this period as their life as characterised by a desire to explore and grow. For Michelle, this included increased self-awareness and harnessing this awareness to better herself, finding what worked for her as an individual and creating positive outcomes. For John, life had been structured by formal education for such a long period that he now yearned for a significantly unstructured period to be able to discover what he wanted out of life as an individual. This is consistent with Arnett's (2000) theory of emerging adulthood in which people aged 18-25 remain fluid in their goals and unlikely to settle, and also corroborates the notion of the neoliberal individualistic self (Brown, 2009; McGuigan, 2014) where individuals are compelled to carve their own path in life. Furthermore, Michelle referring to being in the process of finding her adulthood supports Arnett's (2000) theory of an emerging and distinctly transitional phase, and highlights the oversimplification in broadly extending adolescence to 24 (Sawyer et al., 2018).

> *"at the end of the day, you could prepare forever and ever and ever and not feel ready, or you could prepare… and not feel ready and just fucking do it anyway and if you… you know, if there's things you've forgotten you'll work it out on your way along"* – Alex

It might be fair to say that someone aged 18 is not yet ready to be an adult, but Alex would likely suggest they should make an attempt nonetheless and learn by doing rather than remaining firmly in adolescence. John, Alex and Michelle all approached their transition to adulthood understanding they were not full adults but with a significant desire to work towards becoming adults whilst tolerating uncertainty. In essence, their adulthood is emerging just as Arnett's (2000) model predicts, and this is often a consciously driven and exploratory process. A desire to engage in exploration and self-discovery was also constructed as a driving factor in delaying the age of marriage and having children.

> *"I will want to do this sort of stuff here before I settle down, because once I do, that's it, life sort of slows down. You've got a kid, you've got a family. It's like, you know, it's less, obviously you still look after yourself and do your stuff but it's less you and more 'us', you know"* - John

> *"But I also want to live my life for me for a little while before I am… before I sort of devote my whole life to someone else - I also want to make sure that I've done enough for me"* – Alex

For both Alex and John, the concept of forming dependent relationships with partners and children ran contrary to their desire to live their lives as individuals. This is consistent with McGuigan's (2014) descriptions of the neoliberal self as individualistic and independent in nature, and may help to explain the rising age of marriage and childbirth in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2018; Office for National Statistics, 2019). It is also important to note that Turk's experiences differed significantly from the other participants in terms of how exploration and adulthood were constructed.

> *"Well I think… my opinion of myself when it comes to why I don't think I'm an adult is tied in with my hobbies - I like to… collect things, paint things, I like to play video games all the time - So I think once those things that I've so strongly associated with my childhood have been replaced with more… erm, needing things like taking care of family and a child for instance, that's when adulthood begins."* – Turk

> *"It's all these stigmas other people put on you, and all these expectations that you need to achieve. I think it's hard to get over that and just… feel happy in the way you're… directing your own life."* - Turk

Turk's experiences appear more in line with the predictions of Sawyer et al. (2018); Turk did not view himself as an adult and implicated his firm attachment to aspects of his childhood in this. Adulthood for Turk began at the point of settling down which left him feeling cut off from adulthood. This feeling of prolonged adolescence is not characterised positively but as a sense of arrested development; having not achieved these markers, Turk has been negatively affected by a sense that he is failing to meet the expectations of others and this leads him to feel that he is not an adult. As such, even if Sawyer et al. (2018) are correct and some individuals undergo a prolonged adolescence, this may be experienced as a failure to attain adulthood and something which ultimately limits exploration and growth.

Expectations and Perceptions of Adulthood

Critical in how the participants experienced their current stage of life was the impact of the expectations of others on their perceptions of themselves. This was frequently constructed as a negative experience, as seen in excerpts from Alex and Turk's transcripts.

> *"I think others have expected me to do a lot more than I have, they expect be to be a lot more hard working than I have been and… I've tried to do that in the past through high school and college and it just left me absolutely exhausted, so I'm going to do the best I can but I'm not going to try and meet the expectations of others any more. It's just too tiring."* – Turk

> *"You know, I work really hard, I worked two jobs… from in year 1 and year 2 - I feel like they expect me to be a typical uni student and like oh you know, bet you're just taking all the drugs and drinking all of the drinks and it's like actually no, do you actually… do you even know anything about me or do you just think I'm a stereotype"* – Alex

Interestingly, both Turk and Alex commented the negative impact of other's expectations, but approached it from opposite positions. For Turk, others have expected him to worker harder and perform better than he feels he has managed to, an experience he describes as 'exhausting'. This is possibly an effect propagated by the neoliberal self (McGuigan, 2014), a feeling of failing to have met expectations in a society that demands self-reliance. Conversely, Alex felt that because of her position as a university student others sometimes expected her to be irresponsible and display characteristics more typical of adolescence. This conflicted with her perceptions of herself as responsible and hard-working, and again signals that the claim adolescence extends to 24 (Sawyer et al., 2018) is likely an oversimplification. Additionally, perceived expectations were also sensitive to social contexts.

> *"the expectations varies as well, obviously my parents would be like expecting me to… to be like 'Oh you should be studying hard in university' and stuff like that while my friends would be saying like 'Oh no you should be into fangirling and stuff like k-pop'"* - Michelle

Michelle's experiences of differing expectations and the incongruence in Alex and Turk's experiences highlight the role of individual differences and circumstances in perceptions of adulthood. This in turn implies that attempting to define a universal or even national age of adulthood (Sawyer et al., 2018) is mired in folly and may never be accurate for everyone. Arnett's (2000) notion that transitioning to adulthood now constitutes its own distinct life stage then seems increasingly valid given these findings, and this finding is further corroborated by John's contributions.

> *"Yeah you know, I've gone to Uni, I've graduated a year ago, almost a year ago now, so to them, "He's grown up", to them it's like 'He's become more of an adult', but that's the thing that people say, they say MORE of an adult so… what is an adult?"* - John

> *"Maybe there's a different category that should be defined, for in-between, of like 18 to 28 or, do you know what I mean? Those ten years of like, 'cause like, people see your twenties as a time of discovery, so maybe you are like… I don't know, I don't know what it'd be called"* - John

John's experiences as having been described as 'more' of an adult highlight a distinctly transitional method of attaining adulthood, something that one becomes accustomed to over time. Furthermore, John states outright that perhaps a new category is needed to describe people aged 18-28 defined by discovery which is incredibly similar to Arnett's (2000) model. However, John did not indicate any awareness of Arnett's model and could not think of a name to properly describe this stage of life indicating that the model of emerging adulthood is not well understood by everyday people experiencing the transition to adulthood. Furthermore, John expressed uncertainty as to what adulthood even constituted, and this uncertainty on the definition of adulthood gave rise to individual perceptions of what adulthood entailed.

> *"for men at least, we're still going through puberty for a few more years, and then your brain doesn't stop maturing until you're like 28 so are you really an adult yet?"* – John

> *"Um… they say adults are just… children pretending to be adults, and I think that's very true in a sense, because I doubt anyone really you know… at a time in their life, feels like they're an adult until probably when they start a family you know, and you have family responsibility"* – Turk

> *"I don't think anyone's ever prepared, you just do it anyway - and just be scared, and to me that's what being an adult is."* – Alex

These descriptions differ significantly, and align with the differing definitions of adulthood presented in the introduction. For John, adulthood was constructed at least in part by the dimensions of reaching physical and cognitive maturity (Klimczuk, 2016). For Turk, adulthood was something bound to life events such as starting a family (Cohen et al., 2003). For Alex, it was aspects of personality such as a willingness to tolerate uncertainty and being scared that defined adulthood for her (Twenge and Campbell, 2018). Together these excerpts reinforce the notion that adulthood lacks a clear definition, and constructions of adulthood and the transition towards it likely differ between individuals.

Closing Thoughts

The intentions of this paper were to examine the perspectives of Arnett (2000) and Sawyer et al. (2018) by comparing their models of adolescence and adulthood against the lived experiences and perceptions of those they claim to describe. Participants repeatedly characterised their transition as one fundamentally driven by attaining a sense of independence and self-reliance, and this newfound independence was crucial in affording the participants an opportunity to explore and discover themselves. These experiences largely support Arnett's (2000) model of emerging adulthood, and indeed John specifically stated that his experiences suggested the need for a new stage of life between adolescence and adulthood. The suggestion that adolescence extends to 24 (Sawyer et al., 2018) is somewhat consistent with Turk's experiences, although Turk stressed that being perceived as an adolescent was a negative experience for him indicating he too wished to be seen as an adult.

One significant factor that could not be measured here due to ethical constraints is experiences of transitioning to adulthood in vulnerable populations, such as those who have spent their lives in public care and have no family to rely on (Keller et al., 2007). The intentions of Sawyer et al. (2018) are not to demean young people but to extend care and social support where it is necessary, and for this reason research should explore how vulnerable populations experience transitioning to adulthood. For the participants in this paper however, Arnett's (2000) model of emerging adulthood aligns closely with descriptions of independence, exploration and a distinctly transitionary experience. This research suggests that we should not treat those aged 18-25 as adolescents but neither should we treat them as full adults, we should understand that they are undergoing a transition between the two stages and support them appropriately in practising independence and discovering themselves.

Reflexive Analysis

The transition to adulthood is undoubtedly something I personally relate to. Being 28 myself, my perceptions were that I had only truly begun to feel like a full adult very recently and this likely informed the way I approached this topic. Having researched the findings of Arnett (2000) and Sawyer et al. (2018) previously, I felt that Arnett's model of emerging adulthood more accurately described my own experiences of a transitionary stage characterised by practising independence to fuel self-growth. The incongruence between the claims by Arnett (2000) and Sawyer et al. (2018) led me to seek the experiences of others to better understand how people conceptualised adolescence and adulthood. Due to the somewhat conversational nature of semi-structured interviews, it is possible that my own beliefs and experiences may have at times directed the flow of conversation. Additionally, though I have done my best to accurately capture the perspectives of the participants and this study is intended to champion their voices above my own, reducing the transcripts down to three themes means the way in which their stories are represented is my own telling of their experiences.

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