# What is an Adult?: Attributes Voted Most Central to the Construct of Adulthood

Katie Russell; Paris Green ; Allie Walter; Cara Ray; Maya Pillon; Yanna Weisberg

Linfield University, McMinnville, Oregon

## Introduction

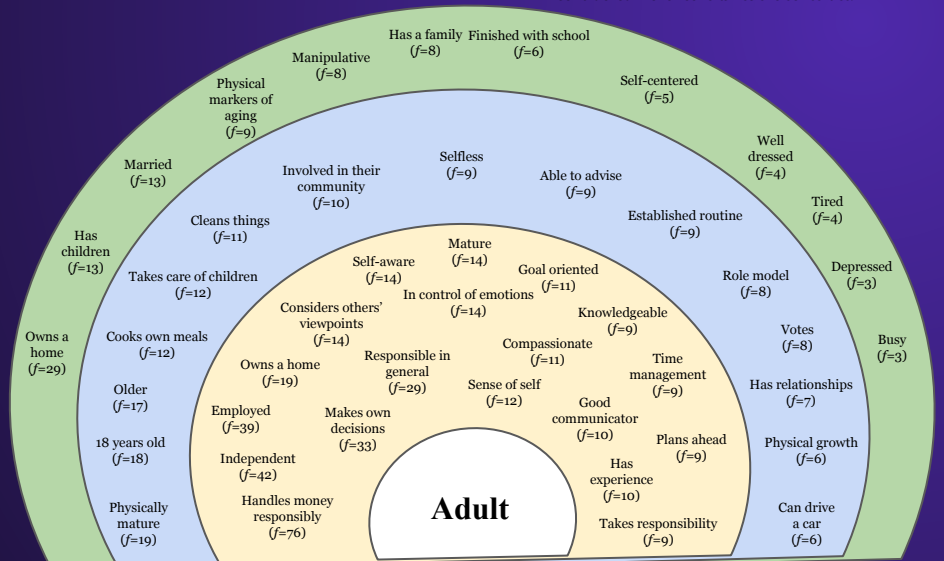
To understand the transition into adulthood, it is necessary to have a definition of what an adult is. Prototype analysis employs a bottom-up approach by identifying individual features of the construct and grouping them based on linguistic and conceptual similarity (Kearns and Fincham, 2004).

The importance of this exploratory study is to contribute to the literature of perceptions of adulthood. It could also have potential to be applied in intervention work designed to help adolescents through the transition to young adulthood.

## Method - Prototype Analysis Approach

- Phase 1
  - Participants (n=122, 70% female, 76% White, mean age=21.9)
  - Questionnaire asking, "What is an adult? Please list all the attributes of an adult that come to mind."
  - Attributes were coded into attribute categories if they were judged to have the same meaning (e.g. "Career", "Employed", "Job", and "Work" were placed into the category of *Employment*) (κ=0.65).
  - 97 distinct attribute categories
- Phase 2
  - Participants (n=148, 64% female, 72% White, mean age 30.0)
  - Rated importance of 96 attributes (phase 1) on a likert type scale:
    - 1= "Not at all important"
    - 2= "Not very important"
    - 3= "Somewhat important"
    - 4= "Important"
    - 5= "Very important"

*Figure 1:* Sample of attributes rated "important" (yellow), "somewhat important" (blue), and "not very important" (green) to the concept of "adult". Frequency of mention from Phase 1 included.




## Phase 2 Results

- Majority of attributes considered "important" to construct of adulthood (see Figure 2).
- None considered "very important" and only one was considered "not important at all".
- No correlation between frequency of attribute mentioned (Phase 1) and centrality of attribute (Phase 2) ($r$=0.05, $p$=0.644).

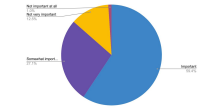



*Figure 2*: Percentage of centrality ratings

- Sample divided into "emerging adults" (ages 18-25 as defined by Arnett, 2000) and "adults" (26+ years old). MANOVA analysis showed differences in centrality ratings for attributes below, Pillai's Trace= 0.914, $F(96,27)=3.002$, $p=0.001$, partial $\eta^2=0.914$.
- Emerging adults rated attributes below as more central to the concept of adulthood compared to adults, except for "Votes", which was rated higher by adults.
  - Achiever
  - Organized
  - Leader
  - Hard Working
  - Selfless
  - Patient Person
  - Votes
  - Imperfect
  - Authoritative
  - Goal Oriented
  - Self-disciplined
  - Opinionated
  - Able to advise
  - Established routine
  - Knows difference between wants and needs

## Discussion

- Since frequency of attribute and importance (centrality) were not related, perhaps attributes generated in Phase 1 included stereotypes of adults.
- Majority of emerging adults were in school full time (90%), whereas only 7.5% adults were in school full time. Current school status could impact perceptions of adulthood (not just developmental stage).
- "Votes" may be considered a more important element of adult status by adults (compared to emerging adults) if they are more stable in their political identities.
- No attribute rated as "very important" could illustrate the difficulty of defining adulthood.
- Due to the large number of centrality averages being the same (and 4), this likely contributed to frequency and centrality not being related. Increasing response options to the centrality ratings would allow for more variability.
- No attributes rated a 2 or 3 had a frequency > 30, whereas multiple attributes rated 4 did.
- The curious cases of "owns a home" (high f, low c) and "is safe" (low f, high c) may relate to probabilities of achieving these outcomes - owning a home is difficult,

Scan QR code for full table of results!

## References

Arnett, J. (2000). Emerging adulthood. A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *The American Psychologist, 55* (5), 469-80.

Kearns, J. & Fincham, F. (2004). A prototype analysis of forgiveness. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 30*(7), 838-855.