

Adolescence Terminable and Interminable: When Does Adolescence End?

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The question of when adolescence ends and young adulthood begins is considered. Throughout, it is addressed in terms of the theory of broad and narrow socialization, which emphasizes the cultural context of development. The question is approached from cognitive, emotional, and behavioral perspectives, then from the perspective of role transitions (such as marriage and parenthood). The idea of an extended path from adolescence to adulthood is discussed, and the concept of emerging adulthood is presented. It is suggested that in most non-Western cultures the entrance to adulthood is socially defined and marked by a social event, usually marriage. In the contemporary West, however, where there is a strong emphasis on independence and individualism, the entrance to adulthood is defined and marked individually. Consequently, it is likely to be based on the achievement of residential and financial independence as well as on the attainment of cognitive self-sufficiency, emotional self-reliance, and behavioral self-control. Thus in the contemporary West the passage from adolescence to young adulthood is a process that is gradual and may take many years.

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INTRODUCTION

Do you set your name in the scroll of youth, that are written down old with all the characters of age? . . . Is not your voice broken, your wind short, your chin double, your wit single, and every part about you blasted with antiquity? And will you yet call yourself young? Fie, fie, fie, Sir John!

—Chief Justice to Falstaff, 2 *Henry IV* by William Shakespeare, Act 1, Scene 2

The point at which a person has left adolescence and become an adult is subject to various definitions by cultures, and within some cultures, by individuals. Falstaff, nearing age 60 as Shakespeare portrays him in *Henry IV*, lays his claim to youthful status in spite of his chronological age, partly because he still considers himself “young” in heart and mind and partly because he has successfully resisted making the role transitions typically associated with adulthood—gainful employment, marriage, and parenthood. He may convince few in his time or ours, but what of a person in the contemporary West who is 18 years old? 20? 25? In a culture that allows individuals a great deal of latitude in when and how to make the transitions to adulthood, it is difficult to designate a particular age or even age range that signifies the end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood. The majority culture of the West grants such latitude to individuals, and has done so to one degree or another for centuries.

Any discussion of the boundary between adolescence and young adulthood should be framed by considerations of culture and history, by comparisons between cultures and across history. Although adolescence is generally considered to begin with the biological events initiating puberty, the end of it is not biologically but culturally defined. Thus the criteria for attainment of young adulthood, and the timing of entry into adult status, are likely to differ from one culture and one era to the next. In this paper, we seek to make explicit the cultural context of the transition to adulthood by analyzing theory and research in the area using a cultural model of socialization and by presenting examples from a variety of cultures.

SOCIALIZATION AND THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

The central theme of this paper is that cultural differences in the timing and variability of the transition to adulthood reflect differences in cultures’ socialization practices. In particular, they reflect the characteristic *broad* or *narrow* socialization practices of cultures (Arnett, 1992a, 1992b; in press). According to the theory of broad and narrow socialization, socialization takes place on seven different dimensions: family, peers/friends, school, neighborhood/community, media, legal system, and cultural belief

system. Cultures characterized by broad socialization encourage independence, individualism, and self-expression. In contrast, cultures characterized by narrow socialization hold obedience and conformity as the highest values, and deviation from cultural expectations for behavior is condemned and punished. This is not meant to suggest that all cultures fit neatly into one of the two pure types. Each culture can be examined for the degree to which it is broad or narrow on each of the seven dimensions. However, within a particular culture, socialization tends to be consistently broad or narrow on the various dimensions. The cultural belief system underlies socialization on the other dimensions, so that cultures that have a cultural belief system reflecting the values of broad socialization tend to have relatively broad socialization on the other dimensions as well, and cultures that have narrow socialization on the cultural belief system tend to have narrow socialization on the other dimensions. It is also possible (but rare) for a culture to be relatively broad on some dimensions, relatively narrow on others. This kind of flexibility in the evaluation of socialization on the seven dimensions makes it possible to accommodate the great diversity in the socialization practices of different cultures, while also making distinctions between different general types of socialization.

Broad socialization is “broad” in the sense that a broad range of individual differences in the routes of development taken by members of the culture is allowed and even encouraged, as a reflection of the emphasis on individualism and self-expression. Narrow socialization is “narrow” in the sense that individuals are pressed toward conformity to a certain culturally defined standard, so that the range of variability in the routes of development allowed and approved in such cultures is narrower. The contrast between the two types of socialization will be applied in this paper to the end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood.

Throughout this paper, the term “the contemporary West” will be used. This term refers to the culture that is currently the dominant, majority culture in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe—largely white and middle class—and that sets most of the norms and standards and holds most of the positions of political, economic, intellectual, and media power in these countries. Each of these countries contain other cultures that exist alongside the majority culture. These other cultures may be defined by racial, ethnic, religious, or other criteria, and they may have some similarities to the majority culture, but the term “contemporary West” is not intended to include them. Broad socialization is characteristic of the majority culture of the contemporary West (to varying degrees, of course, in the different countries and on the various dimensions), while in many of these other cultures, socialization is narrower than in the majority culture.

The theory will be used below to critique ideas and generate hypotheses concerning cultural comparisons in the areas of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and role transitions to adulthood. Following this, we will address the larger question of when adolescence and young adulthood begins, from a cultural perspective.

THE TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD

Cognitive

Piaget's assertion that the use of formal operations develops by the end of adolescence (Inhelder and Piaget, 1958) has been heavily modified in recent decades (including by Piaget himself; Piaget, 1972). Adults are generally more proficient than adolescents at devising hypotheses and deducing solutions to problems, but even most adults do not use hypothetico-deductive reasoning in all aspects of their lives and many do not use it at all (Keating, 1990; Kuhn, 1979). As such, the full attainment of formal operations is a dubious criterion for marking the transition to adulthood.

In the past two decades, theory and research on the difference between adolescent and young adult cognition has moved away from conceptualizing adult thinking in terms of the *closed system* assumed in formal operational thinking, where a finite number of known variables results in a clearly defined outcome. In contrast, it has been stressed that *postformal* adult thinking takes place in an *open system*, in which many of the "variables" are social—friends, co-workers, family—and the problems involve a great deal of ambiguity and imprecision. To Labouvie-Vief (1985, 1986), for example, what distinguishes adult thinking is that it includes not only logical reasoning but also a subjective element of feelings and personal experience. Becoming a parent has been cited as one experience promoting cognitive growth in young adulthood (Feldman *et al.*, 1981; Galinsky, 1981), because of the way it promotes a sense of responsibility to others and interdependence within a larger social system. More generally, Schaie (1982) distinguished cognitive development in young adulthood from earlier cognitive development by stating that childhood and adolescence constitute a *period of acquisition*, during which information is accumulated and problem-solving techniques are learned, but without much application to the young person's life. In contrast, young adulthood is an *achieving stage*, involving the application of acquired knowledge in pursuit of adult role-related goals.

Theory and research on cognitive development from adolescence to young adulthood have been based almost exclusively on the majority culture

of the West, particularly in the United States, and tend to assume that the pattern that exists in the American majority culture is ontogenetic—the natural and universal outcome of development given a reasonably healthy environment—rather than the result of a particular kind of socialization. However, the influence of socialization is evident in the theories that have been developed in this area and the interpretations that have been made of the research.

Specifically, a sense of responsibility and a recognition of interdependence may accompany the advent of parenthood in the West, where broad socialization promotes individualism in earlier development, but in societies characterized by narrow socialization a sense of responsibility and interdependence is inculcated from the first years of life. Among the Amish, for example, duty, submission to authority, and sacrifice on behalf of others are the cultural beliefs that underlie their narrow socialization from infancy through adulthood in the family, in the school, and in the community (Hostetler and Huntington, 1992). Mutual responsibility and interdependence are central to their socialization throughout life. Similarly, Schaie's designation of childhood and adolescence as a period of acquisition may be valid for the contemporary West, but in many other times and places there is not such a clear demarcation between the two. In many preindustrial cultures, children and adolescents have responsibilities that are vital to the well-being of their families (Whiting and Whiting, 1975). From early on they apply what they are learning to important duties such as hunting, fishing, gardening, tending livestock, food preparation, and child care. There is no clear break between a time of acquiring knowledge and a time when the knowledge is applied; acquiring and applying knowledge occur in tandem throughout childhood and beyond adolescence.

In both industrialized and preindustrial cultures, there is a certain narrowness to the socialization of learning in childhood. In industrialized countries, all children must attend school in the grade corresponding to their chronological age (Hogan and Astone, 1986; Kohli, 1986). In preindustrial societies, some children may attend school but all children must learn the work duties characteristic of their culture. In adolescence, however, the variance broadens in industrialized societies as individuals vary widely in when they complete their education, while in preindustrial societies the socialization of learning tends to remain narrow through adolescence. Few adolescents in preindustrial societies remain in school, and virtually all are deeply involved in the work activities of the adult men or women of their society (Schlegel and Barry, 1991). Their education takes place through their participation in this work, as they observe and are instructed by adults. There is little variance among them in their cognitive activities, as all are involved in gender-specific work, and it could be pre-

dicted on this basis that there is less variance among them in their cognitive development in adolescence and young adulthood, compared to cultures characterized by broad socialization.

The relation between socialization and adolescent–young adult cognitive development in the majority culture of the West can also be seen in the study reported by Perry (1970). This study was presented as a description of healthy intellectual development from adolescence to young adulthood, but it is also possible to interpret it as a description of the outcome of broad socialization on the dimension of the school. American college students were interviewed extensively during each of their four years at Harvard/Radcliffe. It was reported that in the course of these four years the students moved through a series of identifiable stages, from believing in absolute truths, to relativism, to a commitment to a particular *individualized and self-chosen* set of values and points of view. This outcome, however, is not the natural and inevitable result of cognitive development in young adulthood but the result of exposure to schooling that is characterized by the values of broad socialization. Individualism is promoted in Western universities, self-expression highly valued, conformity a vice to be overcome. As a consequence, the variance among individuals in their opinions and values is likely to be great, much greater than in a culture where conformity is the *goal* of education, not the primary impediment. Broad socialization on the dimension of the school is part of the intellectual heritage of the West, not a developmental universal. Do students at the University of Teheran in Iran see their beliefs in the absolute truths of Islam dissolved in the course of their time at university, replaced by an individually constructed belief system? It seems unlikely. The cognitive development of university students there (and in other narrow-socialization cultures) could be expected to differ accordingly from that of students in the West.

Emotional

Theories and research on emotional development in the transition to adulthood generally stress *autonomy* and *intimacy* (Erikson, 1963; Frank *et al.*, 1988; Levinson, 1986; Loevinger, 1976). Emotional autonomy from one's parents is to be established—not a complete separation, but a movement toward mutuality and reciprocity as equal adults (Grotevant and Cooper, 1986). Emotional and physical intimacy is to be established with a chosen partner (Erikson, 1963; Levinson, 1986). In an early and influential statement of this view, Erikson (1963) described young adulthood as a stage of *intimacy vs. isolation*, during which the primary developmental challenge

is for young people to commit themselves to enduring relationships with others in love, work, and friendship, or risk being isolated and alone. Most importantly, this entails establishing an intimate committed love relationship with one other person.

However, the role of socialization is evident in these descriptions of what is implied to be ontogenetic. Emotional autonomy from parents is considered an appropriate goal for young adults in the majority culture of the contemporary West, not because this is the only possible appropriate goal for young adult development but because this goal is consistent with a culture characterized by broad socialization, in which autonomy and self-reliance are highly valued. In cultures outside the west, autonomy is not necessarily an expectation for young adults. In India, for example, upon marriage—which is usually arranged by the parents—the typical pattern is that the new husband brings his young bride home, where they live in the household or compound of his parents (Roland, 1988). This is not merely a transitional arrangement, but one that lasts indefinitely, even if there are several male children and they all marry. A young husband, then, is unlikely to be more autonomous than he was as an adolescent; a young wife has left her parents, but her new living arrangement is hardly conducive to autonomy. On the contrary, she transfers her dependency (and her subordinate status) from her family of origin to her husband and his family. This pattern, of young married couples living with the husband's parents, is a common one worldwide, and it is an arrangement that promotes emotional (as well as physical and financial) interdependence between generations rather than independence for young adults.

Similarly, establishing emotional intimacy with a chosen partner, learning to share feelings and confide vulnerabilities, is not a universal expectation but an ideal that is part of the contemporary West. In Japan, for example, even in modern times close to half of marriages are reported to be arranged (known as *miai* marriages), and arranged marriages tend to be lower on communication and emotional expressiveness (Blood, 1967; Hendry, 1981). Nevertheless, husbands in *miai* marriages report higher marital satisfaction than husbands in “love matches” (although wives in arranged marriages report slightly lower marital satisfaction; Blood, 1967). Among the Sambia of new Guinea described by Herdt (1987), husbands and wives rarely spend time in each other's company except for brief episodes of sexual intercourse.

In Mediterranean societies, the characteristic pattern is that the lives of adult men and women are strictly defined and separated (Gilmore, 1982). Men are expected to spend their free time *with other men*, in public places, not at home with their wives. The emotional lives of men and women, even for the most part among husbands and wives, are “two sepa-

rate worlds that pass without touching” (Davignaud, 1977, p. 16). In such societies, the narrow socialization pressures to conform to a particular gender role are intense, and cannot be avoided without ridicule and ostracism; these gender roles discourage emotional intimacy between men and women. In societies characterized by broad socialization, in contrast, the intimacy in young adult love relationships is like to be much more variable, based less on socialization pressures and more on the characteristics and preferences of the individuals involved.

Behavioral

Arguably, one part of becoming an adult is the firm establishment of impulse control (Douglas and Arenberg, 1978; Vaillant, 1977). Hart (1992) notes that one common theme in theory and research on development from adolescence to young adulthood is that becoming an adult means attaining self-control and complying with social conventions. One way this might be demonstrated would be in a lower frequency of engaging in various types of pleasurable (Arnett, 1992a) but somewhat reckless activity, such as (in the contemporary West) driving while drunk or at high speeds, using illegal drugs, and committing other types of law-breaking or norm-breaking acts. By this measure, adolescence in the United States lasts for many people at least through the early 20s, as most types of reckless behavior for which there are age-related data do not begin to decline until the late 20s. People in their teens *and* their early 20s are more likely than older persons to drive at high speeds (Jonah, 1986), while intoxicated (Jonah and Wilson, 1984), and in other reckless ways (Jonah, 1986), and the rate of automobile accidents and fatalities rises through the late teens and early 20s, declining only in the late 20s (Whitfield and Fife, 1987; National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 1991, Fig. 7-1). Illegal drugs use also rises from the teens through the early 20s and then declines (Gans *et al.*, 1989). The rate of most types of crime remains high through age 20–24, before declining steeply in the late 20s and beyond (Wilson and Herrnstein, 1985, chap. 5).

It can be predicted that the narrower a culture’s socialization, the narrower and lower will be the age range at which most individuals in the culture cease to behave in reckless and antisocial ways. The broad age range of participation in such behavior in the United States reflects the broad socialization of the American majority culture. Individuals vary greatly in when they make the transition to adulthood in this respect, reflecting the diversity of individuals’ inclinations for and enjoyment of reckless behavior. Some never participate in such behavior, others do so occasionally in their teens but not beyond, still others do so frequently

through their middle 20s. In cultures characterized by narrow socialization, tolerance for reckless behavior is likely to be much lower, partly because children and adolescents in such cultures are often required to assume responsibilities of importance to the family or community (Whiting and Whiting, 1975).

Among the Netsilik Eskimos described by Balikci (1970), for example, boys assist their fathers in hunting and fishing while girls assist their mothers in child care, sewing, and cutting fresh ice, with the collaboration becoming closer as the children grow into adolescence. Such responsibilities leave little time for recreational recklessness. In their analysis of adolescence in preindustrial societies, Schlegel and Barry (1991) reported that societies in which adolescents typically worked alongside adults—societies, that is, in which adult monitoring of adolescents was almost constant—had lower rates of reckless and antisocial behavior among adolescents. In such societies, rates of adolescent reckless behavior are low and the variance narrow. Furthermore, reckless behavior is no more prevalent among adolescents than among adults, because any developmental inclination toward reckless behavior in adolescence has been suppressed by the narrowness of these cultures' socialization. There is no need to make a transition out of the recklessness of adolescence to the more restrained and respectable behavior of adulthood.

In societies characterized by narrow socialization, during adolescence socialization pressures may be applied with particular intensity to boys (Gilmore, 1990). In virtually all societies in which systematic records are kept, boys have higher rates of antisocial behavior than girls do (Wilson and Herrnstein, 1985, chap. 4). This is a pattern that is true from infancy and is no doubt at least partly related to gender differences in socialization, but after puberty the corresponding physiological enhancements in strength and aggressiveness that occur especially in boys increase their potential as a source of disorder. In implicit recognition of this potential, many societies make particular efforts to direct these developmental potentials to socially constructive ends. Gilmore (1990) describes the ways in which numerous societies in diverse parts of the world have manhood challenges for adolescent boys that require skill, endurance, stoicism in enduring pain, and socially approved (not socially disruptive) risk taking. Among the Masai of East Africa, for example, the path to adulthood for boys begins at about age 14 with an unanesthetized circumcision during which the boy must remain absolutely still, and continues for a period of about 10 years, during which the boy must prove himself worthy of manhood by helping to hunt lions, scare away rhinos, steal cattle from neighboring groups, and defend his own people against such raids. Pressure on boys to participate in and succeed at the challenges constructed by these societies is intense, nearly

irresistible. By intensifying socialization pressures in this way, societies enhance the likelihood that their adolescent boys will internalize a strict impulse control and direct their energies into socially constructive channels.

Societies that lack such culturally-structured and adult-sanctioned manhood challenges—such as the contemporary West—suffer higher rates of antisocial recklessness among their adolescent boys and young men (Arnett, 1992a). The exuberance and energy of youth, left undisciplined by broad socialization, expresses itself in a wide variety of ways, some of which are disruptive or destructive. Under such conditions of socialization, the transition to adulthood, in the sense of exercising impulse control and refraining from antisocial recklessness, is more extended and less certain. However, even in the West, most people eventually make the transition from the relative impulsiveness of adolescence to the relative self-control of adulthood. A certain conformity to the standards of society prevails eventually for most people, even in a culture characterized by broad socialization, and this includes complying with prohibitions on reckless behavior (see Jessor *et al.*, 1991). It simply takes longer under broad socialization, as people come to compliance with these prohibitions more at their own pace (and so with greater variance among them), rather than having it imposed on them rigorously at a young age as under narrow socialization.

Role Transitions: Historical Patterns in the United States

Over the course of the past century, statistics on various role transitions to adulthood in the United States have been collected, including the completion of schooling, marriage, and becoming a parent. Data on these transitions indicate a different pattern for the completion of schooling, compared to the other transitions. The median age for completing schooling has risen steadily in the past century, while the median age for marriage and becoming a parent declined from the turn of the century until about 1960 and has risen steeply since that time (Tables I and II). A similar distinction is evident when variance, rather than median, is considered: the variance for school completion has steadily increased during the past century, while the other transitions have followed a pattern of a narrowing of the variance between the mid-19th century and the mid-20th century, followed by a broadening of the variance from 1960 to the present (Modell *et al.*, 1976).

Changes in the variance of the role transitions to adulthood between the mid-19th century and the mid-20th century have been described by Modell *et al.*, (1976). Using a statistic termed *spread* to refer to the period

Table I. Educational Enrollment, 1890–1985^a

	Percent enrollment, selected years					
	1890	1900	1920	1940	1970	1985
High school	6	10	30	70	90	95
College	2	4	8	16	48	57

^aFigures for high school enrollment indicate percentage of 14–17-year-olds in the United States in high school during the year indicated. Figures for college indicate percentage of 18–21-year-olds in the United States attending college during the year indicated, except for 1985, which indicates the percentage of high school graduates that year who went on to obtain at least some college education. Sources: Elder (1987), Horowitz (1987), U.S. Department of Education (1988).

Table II. Median Age of First Marriage and First Birth, 1890–1993^a

Year	Marriage		First birth, women
	Men	Women	
1993	26.5	24.5	NA ^b
1988	25.9	23.6	23.7
1980	24.7	22.0	23.0
1970	23.2	20.8	22.1
1960	22.8	20.3	21.8
1950	22.8	20.3	22.5
1940	24.3	21.5	23.2
1930	24.3	21.3	NA
1920	24.6	21.2	NA
1910	25.1	21.6	NA
1900	25.9	21.9	NA
1890	26.1	22.0	NA

^aSources: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1993)—marriage; and U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (1990)—first birth.

^bNA = not available.

of years it takes 80% of the members of a cohort to make a particular transition, they found that the spread for leaving school increased substantially in the mid-20th century compared to the mid-19th century. Specifically, the length of time for 80% of a cohort to complete this transition was over two years greater in the mid-20th century. However, the spreads for marriage and for establishing an independent household were considerably smaller in the mid-20th century compared to mid-19th century. Furthermore, the combined transitions of ending school, marrying, and

establishing an independent household tended to be concentrated into a smaller period of years in the mid-20th century, primarily because the number of years spent in school was greater for most people by that time than it had been a century earlier. Hogan (1981) used a different statistic and different data to arrive at a similar conclusion.

In contrast to the narrowing of the variance in age at marriage and becoming a parent that took place in the first half of the 20th century, the variance in these transitions has broadened considerably in the past few decades. Modell (1989) described how the *annual likelihood of marriage* for unmarried persons declined between 1960 and 1980 for young men (aged 19–28) and young women (aged 17–26). A decline in this statistic indicates a broadening of the variance; i.e., an increase in the variability in age at marriage will be reflected in a decline in the annual likelihood of marriage. During this period it was not simply a modest and gradual decline, as Modell notes: “The decline in marriage probabilities for white men at the central marriage ages was nothing short of spectacular” (p. 48). A similar decline took place in annual likelihood of first birth, comparing white women married in 1955 to those married in 1970.

How are these historical patterns in the role transitions to adulthood related to changes in socialization? The evidence is more plentiful and compelling for explaining the increase that took place in recent decades in the variance of the timing of the role transitions to adulthood than it is for explaining the contraction in variance that took place in the first half of the century. Studies on changes in socialization on the dimension of the family in the United States during the past half century (e.g., Alwin, 1988; Waters and Crandall, 1964; see Wilson and Herrnstein, 1985, chap. 16) generally find a trend toward parenting that is less likely to demand obedience and more likely to encourage independence. Similar changes have taken place on the other dimensions. Modell (1989) presented a comprehensive analysis of changes in the timing of the role transitions to adulthood in the United States during the 20th century and how these changes were related to socialization by peers, schools, the media, and the cultural belief system, also taking into account historical events such as the Great Depression and the two world wars (also see Elder, 1974, 1986). His analysis suggests a trend toward broader socialization in the past half century, as “conformity to (adult) expectations . . . has come to matter less. One’s own identity has come to matter correspondingly more” (p. 331). As children and adolescents grew up with broader socialization, then, the variance in the timing of their role transitions to young adulthood increased.

A comparison of two studies, one published in 1965 and the other in 1984, reflects the broadening of variance in the role transitions to adulthood that has taken place in recent generations and the concomitant

changes in socialization in relation to these transitions. In the early study, Neugarten *et al.* (1965) found a great deal of consensus—upward of 80% on most items—among Americans of both genders and of various ages and geographical regions when asked to designate the appropriate ages for life events concerning occupation, family cycle, and leisure. This consensus was taken to reflect a collective sense of a social clock, i.e., of what it means to be “on-time” or “off-time” with regard to finishing school, marrying, becoming a parent, and other life events. In the more recent study, however, using concepts and methodology similar to Neugarten *et al.* (1965), Passuth *et al.* (1984) reported that by the time of their study the consensus on the appropriate age for various transitions had diminished considerably. For the norms concerning the appropriate age for a man or woman to marry, the consensus in the more recent study was barely half of what it had been in the earlier study, and for the “best age for most people to finish school and go to work” the consensus in the more recent study was less than half of what it had been in the earlier study.

Role Transitions: Cultural Perspectives

Several recent ethnographies on adolescence in non-Western societies provide insights into the variability among cultures in the nature of the transition from adolescence to adulthood. These ethnographies not only describe the transition to adulthood as it occurred traditionally, but also how the variance in the age of role transitions from adolescence to adulthood has expanded as these societies have changed in recent decades toward greater economic complexity, increased Westernization, and broad socialization.

Davis and Davis (1989), for example, describe how Moroccan society has changed from girls marrying shortly after puberty and nearly all girls being married by age 21, to many girls being married by age 20 but many others waiting until their mid 20s or even past age 30 to marry. The basis of these changes lies not only in increased educational opportunities but in changing expectations for marital relationships as a result of exposure to ideals of romantic love presented in popular songs and television shows from the United States, France, and Egypt. Schooling and media-based expectations have also promoted an increase in the variance in the marriage age for boys, although the expansion in variance has not been as striking as for girls since even traditionally boys did not marry until their early 20s. The change in the variance in the age of marriage has been accompanied by similar changes in the variance in ending formal education, assuming adult work, and becoming a parent.

Traditionally in the society of the Inuit (Eskimos), families lived most of the time as isolated units finishing and hunting on the ice floes, except for yearly community festivals (Condon, 1988). Adolescents were married shortly after puberty in matches arranged by their parents, and thereafter were considered to have attained adult status as they joined the husband's family in the adult work required for survival in the harsh arctic environment. For the current generation of adolescents, however, life is much different. The days of subsistence fishing and hunting are over and families are gathered into stable communities. Adolescents spend a great deal of their time with their peers, not only in the context of school but in leisure time as well, socializing and (among the boys) playing sports. Adolescents take their heroes and models from the people portrayed on television, radio, newspapers, and magazines, as they are exposed daily to media from the Canadian and U.S. majority cultures, particularly television. The consequence of all of these changes is that adolescents no longer marry at puberty and begin adult work and child rearing shortly afterward, but make these role transitions to adult status at various ages depending on their desires and characteristics as individuals.

Among the Sambia described by Herdt (1987), a constant state of war or preparation for war was the basis of an extremely narrow system of socialization in which boys were pressed from an early age to adopt the characteristics that would make them good warriors. At the center of this socialization was a series of six initiations marking the passage from childhood to adulthood, extending from about age 7 to about age 25 and involving thrashing, nose-bleeding, ritualized homosexuality, and the inculcation of the cultural belief system. The cultural belief system was the adhesive that joined the initiations together, and consisted centrally of a belief that ingesting semen was necessary for a boy to grow, become strong, and develop the courage and ferocity of a warrior. The cultural belief system also mandated absolute obedience to the elders of the community and mandatory participation in the initiation rites, at times decided upon by the elders.

Early stages of initiation marked the boys' induction into participation in adult work and warfare. In the latter stages, the initiations included marriage to a young woman from another village whom the elders of the villages decided upon and whom the husband-to-be had never met. The final initiation took place with the birth of a young man's first child, and was considered the final and crowning certification of adult status. Since the 1960s, however, the government has clamped down severely and successfully on the age-old warfare between the Sambia and neighboring communities. Its *raison d'être* gone, the series of initiation rites and the cultural belief system that supported it have declined in importance and power;

although initiations used to last for months, they now last for only days, and they are less and less frequent. Simultaneously, formal education has been introduced on the primary school level, some Sambians have emigrated to larger cities for further education and job opportunities, and young people have come to have a choice in when and whom to marry.

In all of these societies, spread about the globe though they are, a certain common pattern can be seen (see also Burbank, 1988; Hollos and Leis, 1989). A broadening on several dimensions of socialization increases the variance in the ages at which role transitions to adulthood may be made. Underlying the changes in socialization is that the increased complexity of a society's economy as a result of integration into the world economy means a greater range of possible occupations, which makes increased education desirable. An increase in time spent in formal education has the effect of delaying entry into the other transitions of adult work, marriage, and parenthood. Also, as these societies open themselves up to external economic influences, they open themselves to external media influences as well (and as the technological sophistication of a society rises, indigenous media are also produced). The new media fan adolescent imaginations with new possibilities of ways to live. At the same time, the extent and rapidity of the changes on these societies mean that the cultural belief systems, which developed to serve a different society, decline in emotional power and run the danger of becoming irrelevant to the new society emerging. A new belief system based on the primacy of individual choice (rather than the subordination of the individual to the community) begins to compete with the traditional cultural belief system. The changes in all of these dimensions of socialization—school, community, media, and cultural belief system—push simultaneously toward broader socialization and an expansion in the variance among young people in the timing of their role transitions to adulthood.

The changes taking place in these cultures illustrate the importance that the economic basis of a culture plays in socialization and the timing of role transitions to adulthood. Preindustrial cultures, which tend to be characterized by narrow socialization and tend to have a relatively early end to adolescence, tend also to have economies that are simple enough that they do not require extended training in order for individuals to serve a useful role. Whatever skills are needed for hunting, fishing, foraging, agricultural cultivation, or food preparation can be learned by the late teens, enabling the person to take on an adult economic role at that time. Children and adolescents make important economic contributions even before then; a strong incentive exists for including all who are able in the economic activity of the community, because their labor is needed. In the contemporary West, and increasingly in formerly preindustrial societies, the op-

posite pattern holds. It takes longer for adolescents to learn the skills that are useful in a complex economy, and in any case their society has no pressing need for them to assume a contributing role to the economy as soon as they are able, because sophisticated technology performs much of the work that would be assigned to children and adolescents in other cultures (food preparation, fetching water, gathering firewood, etc.). Also, adolescents and young adults in the complex, affluent economy of the West are less likely to be financially dependent on their parents, and so are less obligated to accede to their parents' wishes regarding the timing of their role transitions to adulthood, more likely to be free to decide for themselves. Thus economic complexity and affluence contribute to extending the length of adolescence and expanding the variability in the timing of the role transitions to adulthood.

WHEN DOES ADOLESCENCE END?

Let us return now to the central question: When does adolescence end and young adulthood begin? The weight of the cultural perspective presented above suggests that there is no single, universal, ontogenetic answer to this question. Rather, each culture has an answer of its own, and the answer is based on the characteristics of socialization in that culture. Although each culture's answer may be unique in some respects, in general the answer provided by cultures characterized by broad socialization is different than the answer provided by cultures characterized by narrow socialization.

Under broad socialization, because individualism and independence are esteemed, the end of adolescence is individually defined to a large extent, and is reached to the extent that a person has achieved independence and self-reliance in various aspects of his or her development. In terms of role transitions, most young people in such cultures may first consider themselves to be entering adulthood when they begin to establish residential and financial independence. This means relinquishing the role of dependent child and taking greater responsibility for themselves: washing their own clothes, paying their own bills, and making their own day-to-day life decisions. This increased personal responsibility can take place while still living in the parent's home, but it is usually accompanied and promoted by residential independence (Flanagan and Schulenberg, 1993). Thus the crucial role transition to adulthood in a culture characterized by broad socialization involves moving out of the role of dependent, subordinate child, and into the role of independent, self-sufficient member of society.

However, more important than any role transition in a culture characterized by broad socialization may be the more ambiguous and gradual cognitive, emotional, and behavioral transitions. The more individualistic a culture becomes, the more the transition to adulthood is individually rather than socially defined. It takes place subjectively, individually, internally, in an individual's *sense* of having reached a state of cognitive self-sufficiency, emotional self-reliance, and behavioral self-control. Cognitively (from this perspective), adults anticipate the consequences of their actions, and plan for the future rather than just living for the pleasures of the moment. Adults also decide on their own beliefs and values, independent of parents or other adults. Emotionally, adults do not rely too much on anyone else for their happiness, in particular they do not run to their parents with every minor emotional up or down, but are capable of regulating their emotions on their own. Behaviorally, adults exercise self-control over their alcohol use, their driving habits, and their sexual behavior rather than being led around by their impulses. They take responsibility for the consequences of their actions rather than expecting their parents or other adults to (sometimes literally) bail them out.

For the transition to adulthood in the contemporary West, the focus is on these individual and subjective transitions rather than on social commitments, and this is to be expected in a culture characterized by broad socialization, where individualism and independence are stressed. In most other cultures, however, adulthood is defined and marked communally rather than individually. Becoming adult means not only taking new responsibility for oneself but also taking on new responsibilities for others; it means not achieving independence but *taking on new interdependencies* (Kurtz, 1992), particularly the interdependent relationship of marriage. Shlegel and Barry (1991), analyzing adolescence in 186 preindustrial societies worldwide, report that it is marriage that constitutes the definitive entrance into adulthood in most cultures. In preindustrial societies socialization is often narrow, and the welfare of the group (family, clan, community, ethnic or religious group) takes precedence over the autonomy of the individual. As a consequence the transition to adulthood is socially and not individually defined and marked, and it is marked by a single event, the role transition to marriage.

Not only the individualism of the contemporary West but also the increasing median age of marriage has contributed to the decline in the significance of marriage as a transition to adulthood. As marriage recedes further into the life span for many people, it may take place too late to constitute a crucial or central transition to adulthood. In times and places where marriage has taken place in the late teens for women and the early 20s for men—and according to Schlegel and Barry (1991), this is the pat-

tern at most times in most places—it coincides with the other changes that mark adulthood, role changes as well as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes. However, if marriage takes place at 25, or 28, or 33, or later, as it does for many young people in the contemporary West, it may take place well after the individual's sense of having reached adulthood is established.

In the contemporary West, where the transition to adulthood is not marked so much by a single event as by the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes described above, it may be many years between the time adolescence ends and the time a person considers him or herself to have become fully adult. Keniston (1971) suggested the term "youth" for a young person's status during these years. However, "youth" has been used in the psychological literature mainly in reference to adolescence and late childhood (e.g., Chandler and Moran, 1990; Parish, 1991), rather than to a period that follows adolescence. Also, Keniston described "youth" as entailing "tension between self and society," "refusal of socialization" and other characteristics that reflect the social upheaval of the time in which he was writing rather than any inherent characteristics of the transition to adulthood. Levinson (1978) observed that it takes about 15 years to complete the transition to adulthood occupationally and interpersonally, and termed this period the "novice phase." However, "novice" has a somewhat pejorative connotation, although Levinson did not intend this or describe it in this way. Also, Levinson's focus was on work and marriage/family, and we believe in the contemporary West the focus is better placed on cognitive, emotional, and behavioral transitions.

Instead, we suggest the term *emerging adulthood* to refer to the period between the time a person considers him/or herself to have begun the transition to adulthood and the time when a person considers him/or herself to have become fully adult cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally. Emerging adulthood is intended to apply mainly to cultures characterized by broad socialization, where the achievement of adult status is individually defined. Gradual cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes beyond adolescence take place in cultures characterized by narrow socialization as well, of course, but they are not as likely to be considered relevant to adult status because adult status is marked and defined socially rather than individually. In the contemporary West, however, adulthood emerges gradually over many years, and there is no specific age or event when emerging adulthood can be deemed definitely to have ended and full adult status definitely achieved. In an individualistic culture, adult status has been achieved when the individual believes him- or herself to have achieved it.

The idea of emerging adulthood may be of use in describing a developmental status that is some ways beyond adolescence and in some ways

not fully adult. The term reflects the difficulty, in the contemporary West, in assigning a specific age to the end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood. That very difficulty invites the attention of social scientists to exploring the complexities of leaving adolescence and becoming adult on the threshold of the 21st century. The opportunities beckon not just in the majority culture of the West, but in the many cultures that thrive in Western nations alongside the majority culture, and in the many societies worldwide where patterns of socialization are changing rapidly as a result of economic modernization and increasing exposure to Western cultural influences.

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