

# What Does it Mean to be an Adult? Perceptions of Young Men in Residential Care

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**Abstract** It is widely accepted that young people residing in residential care transition to independence and adult responsibilities earlier than peers living within their family of origin. There has been a lack of literature examining the way young people in care construct this transition. In response, in-depth qualitative interviews, guided by grounded theory, were conducted with nine young men ( $M = 15.9$  years) residing in an Australian residential care program. The construction of adult identity was aged dependent, and represented by the attainment of self- and other-responsibility and behavioural maturity. Rites or role transitions signifying adult identity were also explored. Program and policy implications are tabled.

**Keywords** Residential care · Identity development · Construction of adulthood · Rites

## Introduction

The transition from childhood to adulthood is a challenging process for children and young people residing in out-of-home care. Many of these young people present with complex and often unmet mental health problems (Sawyer et al. 2007) and have backgrounds of trauma and maltreatment (Hughes 2004). In comparison to young people living within their family of origin, not only do these young people leave supported care earlier, but they do so with limited adult support and they often experience ongoing social exclusion once they leave the care system (Moslehuddin and Mendes 2006). Within many Australian jurisdictions, the care systems transition young people to independent living prior to the age of 18; the point where mandated service provision ceases. The life outcomes of children and

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young people who have been in care are poor (Cashmore and Paxman 2006; Daining and DePanfilis 2007).

There has been increasing interest in Australia (Clare 2006) and internationally (Daining and DePanfilis 2007) to improve the outcomes of young people transitioning from the care system. While a number of agencies employ educational and independent living programs to aid this process, only cautionary support is provided for the utility of such services (Iglehart 1994; Montgomery et al. 2006). Traditionally, services provided to young people transitioning from care have focused on skill-building, improving family connections and providing housing and basic needs (e.g. Nickerson et al. 2007).

While not discounting the importance of these areas, a neglected area of service provision relates to the psychological processes by which young people adjust to and make sense of their transition to adulthood. A young person's future orientation of adulthood, or the way they perceive their transition to adult roles, is fundamental to the way in which they negotiate this developmental process. It provides a cognitive map (or schema) which influences their expectations and experiences of adult roles and behaviours (Nurmi 1991; Seginer 1992). Subsequent experiences in adulthood may serve to either validate or dispute these earlier expectations (or cognitive maps). Experiences that are congruent with an individual's future orientation are likely to validate their identity status and have a positive impact on their self-concept. Conversely, experiences that are contrary to this map are likely to lead to an experience of dissonance, and foster role or identity confusion (Erikson 1968), which together, may translate to less optimal and more problematic future outcomes. Considering the importance of these early constructional processes, the aim of this study is to understand the way in which young men residing in residential care understand and construct adulthood.

### Emerging Adulthood and the Social Construction of Adult Identity

Erikson (1968) viewed identity as both a process and an outcome of developing an integrated resolution to the questions: "who am I", "where do I fit into this world" and "where am I going". This later question concerns the transition to adulthood and is a process that has been extensively researched by Arnett (1998, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2007). Arnett (2000, 2007) suggests that adolescents in Western society transition through a developmental period titled "emerging adulthood" prior to reaching an identity state of adulthood. Arnett notes that this period is characterised by variability, instability and change, and high levels of exploration.

In review of the literature, Arnett (2000) notes that there are a number of roles and behaviours by which young people in industrialised societies conceptualise adulthood. He suggests that the top three criteria for the attainment of adulthood is "accepting responsibility for one's self", "making independent decisions" and "becoming financially independent" (Arnett 2000, p. 473). Together, they are representative of young people becoming self-sufficient (Arnett 1998) and symbolise individualistic criteria for adulthood (Arnett 2001).

### Constructing Adulthood through Role Transitions and "Rites"

A related means to understand the construction of adulthood is through role transitions (e.g. obtaining a job, having children, purchasing a car) and "rites" that signpost the attainment of adult statuses (e.g. voting, legal drinking). The popularised "rites of passage" was first described by the French anthropologist van Gennep (1909/1960). Van Gennep noted that in a large number of pre-industrial societies important rituals (rites) or

ceremonial events frequently accompanied changes in social conditions or identity. Within Western society, socially constructed rites of adulthood have been linked to pregnancy, nightclubbing, religious practice, school graduation, obtaining a driver's licence, independent living, sexual consent, marriage, alcohol consumption, voting and parenthood (Davies 1994; Fasick 1988; Mahdi et al. 1998; Northcote 2006; Stevens 1994).

In comparing a range of markers of adulthood, Arnett (2001) found that individualistic factors (e.g. self-responsibility, self-sufficiency) have the most important role in defining adult identity for adolescents and emerging adults. He noted that for American adolescents, role transitions, for instance turning 18, were less important markers of adult identity attainment. Instead, in review, Arnett notes that role transitions have been found to have higher overall importance in anthropological and sociological studies. Despite this, the important function of role transitions continues to be broadly reported within the literature (e.g. Kenyon et al. 2007; Molgat 2007). Together, there is strong literature support that the construction of adulthood must be understood in relation to global constructs (e.g. self-responsibility) as well as specific rites or role transitions (Molgat 2007).

#### Summary: Construction of Adulthood

The way young people construct adulthood remains central to their identity development. This is a socially constructed process that is mediated by parents, society, culture, social conditions and socio-economic status. As reviewed by Kenyon et al. (2007), the majority of the research examining this process has (1) been restricted to the use of closed-ended questionnaires, (2) relied on convenience samples, often limited to university populations and (3) generally surveyed "emerging adults" (over the age of 18) as opposed to adolescents. There is an identified need within the literature to understand the construction of adulthood as it relates to distinct adolescent population groups.

#### Young People in Residential Care

To the authors' knowledge, no previous research has examined the construction of adulthood as it relates to young people within the residential care system. However, young people within residential care are a distinct population group. First, they present with disproportionately higher levels of emotional, behavioural and conduct-related problems (Delfabbro et al. 2002). Second, residential care environments are traditionally characterised by a high ratio of complex young people to adults, a rotating staff team, institutionalised structure and routine, and may include elements of being emotionally charged or volatile. Third, within many jurisdictions, including Australia, young people in residential care are transitioned to independent living between the ages of 16–18, or prior to the cessation of statutory service and care. Fourth, unlike traditional families (Cohen et al. 2003), young people leaving the care system have restricted opportunities to transition back to more dependent or childlike states (e.g. return home) if the independent living process proves problematic. Finally, there is strong, but preliminary, support that the identity development process for young people residing in residential care is qualitatively different and has the potential to be more challenging compared to adolescents residing within their family of origin (McDermott 1987; Yancey 1992).

## Rationale for Study

Considering the aforementioned points, there is strong reason to believe that the way young people in residential care construct their transition to adulthood will be distinct. However, the exact nature of any potential differences is unknown. As noted, an individual's future construction of adulthood has a mediating impact on both their expectations and experiences of adulthood (Seginer 1992). Research in this area would appear to offer applied utility to practitioners working with young people transitioning from the residential care system to adult roles and independence.

## Aim of this Study

The primary aim of this study was to undertake a child-centred and exploratory analysis of the way young men in residential care constructed their transition to adulthood. A grounded theory qualitative methodology was used to explore the young men's construction of adulthood, and in doing so, answer three questions. What developmental stage do the young men perceive that they are in? At what point is adult status obtained? What qualities, roles, behaviours and rites define adulthood (e.g. what is an adult)?

## Method

### Design

This research was part of a larger qualitative study that examined the processes and outcomes of identity development for young men in residential care. A grounded theory design was chosen as it provided the opportunity to undertake an exploratory analysis of the subject area, be responsive to the sensitive nature of the participant group and maintain a child-centred discourse. This research design involves a process of inductive analysis where both the elements of the research area, as well as the linkages between the elements, are explored and described in detail (see Glaser and Strauss 1967). This method places the individual at the centre of investigation, and assumes that there is an interdependent relationship between both the area of interest and the individual.

### Participants

Selection criteria were developed to recruit a homogenous cohort of young men who were in a stable placement and approaching the transition to independent living and adulthood. Criteria included males who (1) were over 14 years 6 months years of age, (2) had resided within their current residential care facility for a period of at least 6 months, (3) had not lived full-time with their biological family for a period of at least 12 months and (4) were on a current Care and Protection Order. All young people residing in the South Australian residential care system were identified and assessed against the selection criteria with the support of agency management. Twelve participants fitted the research criteria and nine participants, average age 15 years 9 months (range 14 years 11 months to 17 years 0 months), were interviewed. The participants had been in their current placement for an average period of 18 months (range 6–37 months). Each participant was remunerated with a \$30.00 gift voucher.

A feature of the participant group was that, on a whole, they had entered the care system within the past 7 years, having spent a considerable part of their early childhood (from age 0–7) residing with an identified family member. Agency feedback provided to the first author indicated that the participant group represented a cohort of young men who were relatively stable, and presented with low to moderate levels of challenging and at-risk behaviour.

### Setting

The participants were drawn from four residential care facilities in Adelaide, a medium sized Australian city. Residential care is a placement option used by a number of Australian jurisdictions to provide care and support to young people with challenging and complex needs. The residential care system is governed by a state funded child protection agency that has a statutory mandate to support and care for young people until they reach 18 years of age. Each residential care facility accommodates between 8 and 11 young people and is staffed by a rotating team of youth workers. At the time of the research, the residential care system was moving towards an attachment model of intervention and had increasing access to psychologists.

### Interview

A semi-structured interview template, designed to elicit open-ended responses, was used to tap the young men's construction of their transition to adulthood. Guiding questions included: "what is an adult", "describe an adult in your life and why are they an adult", "when will you become an adult", "what things will you be doing as an adult" and "what part of your life are you in at the moment". Follow-up and dynamic questions were used to generate deeper content depth and to clarify specific constructions. As part of the broader study, the future orientation, or life direction of the young men as it related to their care experience, was also examined.

### Procedure

The study was approved and reviewed by ethical review panels from both the Department of Families and Communities and the University of South Australia. Both participant and guardian consent was obtained. Face-to-face interviews were conducted by the first author with all participants in a quiet and confidential location within each participant's residential care facility ( $M = 85$  min in duration). The first author discussed the emerging themes with the second author on regular intervals. In line with the grounded theory methodology, after the second interview, slight changes were made to the interview template to obtain greater content depth and underlying meaning. The remaining interviews evolved as per the grounded theory approach and were assisted by the second author providing supervision and feedback.

At the conclusion of the nine interviews, the first two participants were re-interviewed incorporating the updated line of questioning. This provided a further opportunity to validate the emerging themes. All of the interviews were audio-taped and externally transcribed.

## Analysis

The first stage of data analysis involved a line-by-line analysis of each transcript. Each line was evaluated and manually coded using the constant comparative method in respect to precise content, code properties, code relationships and underlying meaning (implicit and explicit). Codes were then assigned to nodes in which in the first instance clustered around two core categories, responsibility and maturity. Subsequent data-analysis and sampling, as guided by the grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss 1967), identified a number of further sub-categories. Throughout the interview process diary notes were kept that included theme development and informal observations. Internal validity was achieved through the second author cross-checking the codes and themes that emerged from a sample of the transcripts. Six weeks after the conclusion of the interviews, all of the participants (eight participants attended) were invited to participate in a group feedback session and provide critique and analysis of the themes. This provided a final validity check.

## Results

In the context of the discourse generated within the broader study, an overarching theme was that there was a lack of content depth as it related to the young men's construction of adulthood. Nearly half of the young men indicated that during the interviews they had not previously reflected upon the nature and roles of adulthood. Of relevance, the findings of the broader study indicated that the young men exhibited a preference to approach and understand their life experiences within the context of the "here and now".

### Current Life Stage

All of the young men, when asked to describe what phase of life they were currently in, referred to themselves as either a "teenager" or "adolescent". For two respondents they qualified this by also including the descriptor of "child" and "young adult".

### Responsibility

The aspect of "responsibility" was a central theme by which the young men constructed adulthood. This was comprised of two aspects.

*Self-responsibility:* Adulthood was characterised as the achievement of self-responsibility and independence. This included the opportunity to live independently, make important decisions, or as described by one respondent as: "taking care of yourself". Adulthood was also constructed as the individual being responsible for their own actions or behaviours, as shown by this example:

An adult is someone that has responsibility for their actions. They can't say, oh no, I don't know better, I don't know right from wrong. Adults know right from wrong.

*Other-responsibility:* Adulthood was also constructed as a role defined by the provision of care and support to others, including children, wife, family or dependents. The role descriptions frequently overlapped or mirrored the observations and descriptions the young people had made of their youth workers from their residential units. In short, the youth workers appeared to be an important reference point for how the young men constructed adulthood.

## Behavioural Maturity

Adulthood was also constructed as the attainment of behavioural “maturity”. The young men readily suggested that their own behaviours were different to the behaviours expected from or performed by adults. The young men’s current behaviours were an important reference point for future growth. Adults were constructed as figures that had “grown up and taken the next step in life”, including exhibiting greater self-control, communicating more “seriously” or as described by one respondent, no longer “joking around” with others. One respondent described an adult as:

Doing the right things—does not do stupid stuff, as he would have when he was a teenager. Like not walking like an idiot, like just walking normally, sensibly.

## Age Dependence

Age was a central defining factor into how the young men constructed adulthood. When asked the open-ended questions: “what is an adult”, or “why is [name of individual] an adult”, six of the nine respondents constructed adulthood in the context of age. That is, an individual who was either “older” than themselves or over the age of 18. When queried when they themselves would become an adult, eight of the nine respondents indicated that they would be an adult when they reached 18 years of age. This age-related construction of adulthood would appear to be, in part, socially constructed through the care experience. The young men were able to articulate clearly that their current levels of case management and care would cease when they reached 18 years of age.

## Summary of Primary Themes

The young men’s construction of adulthood was centrally defined by age, responsibility and behavioural maturity. While it was not the intent of the study to examine the relative importance of each theme, there appeared to be no obvious or significant differences between the themes. The following quote is provided to highlight both the inter-relatedness of these themes and show a typical response set as it related to age and adult construction.

Q: So when will you become an adult?

A: When I turn 18, when I become independent, when I take up the responsibility of living by myself and knowing right from wrong.

Q: So you’ll be an adult when you turn 18?

A: Yes.

Q: So the day before you’re 18, you won’t be an adult, is that ...?

A: Yes.

Q: The day you’re 18 you will be an adult?

A: Yes.

Q: So how else will you be an adult?

A: The way you behave, you behave like an adult, maturity wise, language. Like some adults swear but the younger generation swears nearly every sentence, six times a sentence. And yeah, you don’t see many adults swear. They can have a normal conversation without saying a swear word.

## Behavioural Representations of Adulthood

This study also elicited responses designed to understand the young men's concrete and behavioural representations of adulthood. While secondary to the previous themes, the young men constructed adulthood as facilitating the means to access additional activities or opportunities, or engage in activities that were perceived as distinct from childhood (e.g. no longer "doing kiddy things"). The young people described a number of social roles, behaviours or rites that were related to adulthood.

The behavioural marker most associated with adulthood was driving a car (77%), followed by the consumption or purchase of alcohol (66%) and undertaking employment and work (66%). Interestingly, the majority (55%) of young people also defined adulthood in the context of physical appearances (e.g. larger muscle tone, differing facial appearance and/or facial growth). Adulthood was described in terms of occupying or owning a house (44%), and being able to access gambling (33%) and adult sexual entertainment (33%). Cigarette smoking and nightclubbing, and the social roles of marriage/parenthood were mentioned as behavioural rites by two respondents.

## Discussion

This study set out to understand the way in which young men in residential care constructed adulthood. The young men perceived themselves as teenagers or adolescents who were approaching the transition to adult roles and responsibilities. The construction of adulthood was characterised by three distinct, but equally important themes: responsibility, behavioural maturity and age dependency. Each is examined in turn.

The theme of responsibility was related to both self and others. In support of previous research, self-responsibility is a central criterion for the attainment of adulthood within Western societies (Arnett 2000) and is representative of an individual becoming self-sufficient (Arnett 1998). Individualistic societies, like Australia, readily socialise and value self-responsibility, self-sufficiency and independence.

Adulthood was also constructed as the attainment of other-responsibility, which is representative of both providing for and caring for others. Previous research has found that "family capacities", which represents caring and support roles provided within a family context, as an important construction of adulthood (Arnett 2001; Kenyon et al. 2007). However, within this study, the caring and providing role was a more global construct that related to relationships in general. The descriptions within this theme overlapped the young men's descriptions and observations of their caregivers from within their residential care facility. This point warrants further comment. This study found that the young men's understanding of adulthood lacked content depth. The young men had a propensity to live within the context of the "here and now". Therefore, when confronted with an ambiguous construct like adulthood, it is hypothesised that the young men used their caregivers as a readily accessible reference group to provide clarity on the nature of this role. Therefore, residential care workers would appear to have a central role in providing important observational feedback as it relates to the construction of adult roles. One may speculate that as the young men move closer to their transition to independence and adulthood, the role and importance of the caregiver reference group will become more important. There is overwhelming support within the literature that the quality and function of staff-client relationships has enduring qualities for young people in residential care (Elson 1996; Johansson and Andersson 2006; Moses 2000).



Behavioural maturity was an important criterion for adulthood. The young men's current behavioural disposition was a reference point for future maturity and growth. Areas of future behavioural maturity related to communication, self-control and interpersonal relations. Within the wider literature, a related behavioural construct that has an important role in signifying adult identity is "norm compliance". This construct taps moral reasoning (knowing right from wrong), in particular as it relates to the maintenance of social norms and pro-social behaviours (Arnett 2001; Kenyon et al. 2007). In contrast, within this study, current behaviours, as opposed to social norms, were the agent of growth and maturity. In the context of the broader study, the young men were found to exhibit "sensitivity to their behavioural traits". That is, the evaluation of behavioural traits featured heavily within the young men's discourse, and this appeared linked to a number of cognitive biases in information processing. This study provides preliminary support that these cognitive biases may also extend to the young men's development of adult identity.

The young men's construction of adulthood was age dependent, with 18 years of age being a significant chronological marker for adult identity. Within wider Australia, this chronological transition also corresponds with the legal consumption of alcohol, voting rights and adult legal responsibilities. The age dependent nature of adulthood is in sharp contrast with the emerging adulthood literature (Arnett 2001). Arnett found that the majority of American young people aged from 18 to 25 do not identify with the identity status of "adulthood". Instead, adult identity is often not reached until young people are in their late 20s and early 30s. It is worthy to note that these differences may also reflect the nature of the study. This study undertook a prospective evaluation of adulthood, while the emerging adulthood often taps a retrospective evaluation. While acknowledging this, the differences noted are more likely to reflect ecological factors. That is, the late attainment of adult status is frequently found in social groups that afford ongoing family financial dependence and the opportunity to postpone adult roles and responsibilities (Arnett 2000). In reflection of this, it is common for young people in many Western societies to initially transition to independence (e.g. leave the family home), but to then transition back to more dependent or childlike states (e.g. return home) (Cohen et al. 2003). In contrast, young people in residential care are socialised and supported to obtain independence prior to the end of intensive mandated service provision (18 years of age). The experience of being in residential care would appear to significantly mediate an individual's understanding of adulthood and foster an age-dependent construction of this transition.

While the paper to date has described the attainment of adult identity as a "process" or "transition", the age-dependent nature of adulthood questions the "process" nature of this developmental task. Instead, the young men constructed the attainment of adulthood in terms of a polarised transition that occurs rapidly or overnight, as if a "switch" is set off at age 18. For the young men in this study, the attainment of adult identity at 18 years of age would appear to represent a foreclosed identity status (see Marcia 1966).

This study also identified a number of social markers or behavioural rites that validated the transition to adulthood. The most important prospective social markers included driving a motor car, alcohol consumption and employment/work. The question is posed: what happens to the young men in residential care who are unable to access important and pro-social markers of adulthood, for instance access employment or purchase a car? While some commentators suggest that young people may be drawn to alternative or less socially desirable rites (e.g. alcohol consumption, criminal behaviour) (Dawes 2002; Tacey 1995), the evidence supporting such propositions remains unclear (e.g. see Ogilvie 1996). Instead, what is known is that work and employment are strong predictors of both (1) resilience for young people who have left the care system

(Cashmore and Paxman 2006) and (2) an individual's readiness for independent living (Iglehart 1994). While there are a number of routes between work and positive outcomes for young people, this research provides preliminary support that the obtainment of work may validate adult identity states, which may lead to improved self-concept and self-esteem. Furthermore, it is likely that the obtainment of other behavioural rites (driving a motor vehicle, alcohol consumption) will also validate adult identity. Therefore, there is need for young people in residential care to be supported to access pro-social markers of adulthood.

#### Limitations of Research and Future Directions

The generalisability of the study is limited by the nature of the sample group. The sample was a relatively homogenous male respondent group who presented with low to moderate levels of challenging or at-risk behaviours. The identity literature suggests that there are more sex-related similarities than differences in the construction of identity (Moshman 2005; Seginer and Halabi-Kheir 1998), so the generalisability of the study's findings to a female cohort is cautiously supported. Despite this, there are likely to be sex-related differences in the behavioural markers or rites of adulthood (e.g. pregnancy, see Stevens 1994). Owing to the exploratory nature of this study, further validation through the use of rigorous and quantitative evaluation processes is required. In addition, this study has further highlighted the importance of understanding adult identity development within a broad ecological perspective.

#### Program and Policy Implications

Young people who leave the care system have significantly worse outcomes than those who reside with their family of origin (Cashmore and Paxman 2006). There has been increasing interest in Australia (Clare 2006) and internationally (Daining and DePanfilis 2007) to improve the outcomes of young people transitioning from the care system. This study offers a number of program and policy implications. First, young people in care require reality-based guidance and support to better understand their transition to adulthood. Adults, but most importantly residential care staff, have an important role in supporting young people construct adulthood through their interactions, conversations and role modelling. Second, young people in care should be supported and encouraged to obtain pro-social markers or adulthood (e.g. employment, driving a car, financial independence). To this end, consideration should be given to the application of innovative programming or interventions that promote positive adult identity development. Some commentators have called for a re-appreciation of the rites of passage process (Scott 1998) and there would appear preliminary support for the application of such programs for foster care youth (Gavazzi et al. 1996).

As an important point of summary, for young people living within many industrial societies, the transition to adulthood is supported by interdependent adult relationships, where young people experience both autonomy and relatedness with family (Cohen et al. 2003). In contrast, young people in residential care are socialised and supported to obtain independence, which is largely at the expense of the continuity of relationships with significant caregivers. As highlighted by this study, the importance and value of relationship continuity for young people leaving the care system cannot be overstated.

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