

Adulthood: Yes, but how?

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Abstract

European and North American societies have a lot to share regarding their youth, notably the absence of consensus on the objective nature of social adulthood. As mainstream culture shifts (generations are replaced, migration flows augment, not to mention the media offer), normative adulthood adjusts itself. Are the traditional markers of adulthood (to leave school, to get a job and married) still relevant to study the transition to adulthood and its outcomes?

We analyze the Canadian panel Survey on Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID) and measure the “adult” population via focusing on three aspects closely tied to the parent-child relationship: (1) Financial independence (2) Emotional independence and (3) Residential independence. The objective of this paper is to create a composite indicator of adulthood by the combination of those three markers, and to evaluate their relevance to study the transition to adulthood nowadays.

With this traditional approach of the transition to adulthood, results show that only a small proportion of 16-30 year-old Canadians can be considered as adults, and that this pattern varies when we break the data by migratory status. Concluding remarks aims to reconcile the study of adulthood *per se* and the indicator to do so.

Keywords: Transition to adulthood, Statistics Canada, SLID, Canada

Extended abstract

More than a hundred years after Stanley Hall’s *Adolescence* (1904), we are still very uncomfortable to trace the frontier between adolescence and adulthood. If biological maturity is attained by puberty, there is no common threshold or events to mark *social* adulthood-- neither even if the transition is universally acknowledged, regardless of when it occurs nor where.

Research on the transition to adulthood frequently addresses events such as leaving the parent’s home, getting a full-time job or getting married as red-letter days in one’s transition to adulthood. Things have not changed a lot since Hogan & Astone (1986) wrote: “many studies have focused on one kind of transition at a time, largely neglecting population-level cultural and institutional influences on, and the social historical context of, the process.” Curiously, only a handful of studies address the transition to adulthood as a whole, habitually as a theoretical puzzle to solve.

In high-income regions (countries such as Canada, the United-States or the European Union), the completion of the transition to adulthood is traditionally summarized by the co-occurrence of three form of permanent independence towards one's parents: (1) financial independence, (2) residential independence, and (3) emotional independence. As biological factors, the latter are easily computable --opposed to developmental tasks such as formal operational reasoning.

The objective of this paper is to create a composite indicator of adulthood by the combination of those three markers, and to evaluate their relevance to study the transition to adulthood nowadays. We will conclude that traditional indicators need to be refreshed, and we will present how Arnett's (2000) theory of 'emerging adulthood' can give a second life to the field of research on late adolescence. Also, we will proceed to differential analysis of our sample, according to gender and to migratory status.

The data and research methods

To make our point, we will use data of the Canadian panel Survey on Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID), from 1996 to 2001. The questionnaire of this survey was administered up to 12 times within those years, to 17 000 Canadian families. Out of this total sample, we have selected 2165 16-30 year-old Canadians that were in the 2001 sample, and that had begun (or completed) their transition to adulthood between 1996 and 2001.

To summarize, in 1996, none of them reported to be financially, residentially nor emotionally independent, and they were still in the 2001 sample. We will analyse their coming of age regarding those three issues.

Operationally, financial independence was considered accomplished when the respondent was paid for more than 1000 hours of work; residential independence completed when the respondent had no filial relation to its roommates; and emotional independence was concluded when the respondent was reported engaged in a committed relationship (with a partner or to raise a child).

Obviously, those indicators are not perfect (we will discuss that later), but they can give us a broad picture of the transition to adulthood in Canada at the dawn of the century.

Findings

Preliminary results show that a not-so-surprisingly small proportion (less than half) of 16-30 year-old Canadians can be considered as adults in 2001. The lengthening of schooling, the delay of marriage, the variety of new union-types, the boomerang-kids phenomena – less is to say that the transition to adulthood in North America has live d various mutations within the last hundred years (Husén 1987; Rajulton and Ravanera 1995; Arnett 2002).

That being said, we can break down the different groups on behalf of their attainment of independence (adults, almost-adults, and non-adults). It will be now very interesting to examine which group attains what kind of independence first: males or female? Those with the longest family history in the country or the most recent immigrants?

Analyses on these issues show that financial independence is acquired earlier within old-stock Canadians, emotional independence is acquired relatively at the same time for old-stock and second-generation Canadians and no pattern seemed to emerge regarding residential independence within old-stock, second-generation and first-generation Canadians. Gendered analyses are still to come.

Those results are very interesting but need to be interpreted with carefulness, due to small samples.

Conclusion

The transition to adulthood is a universal process with biological, social and cognitive components. Yet if the transition intrinsically leads to household formation, workforce survival and population replacement, the social indicators of adulthood traditionally used to describe it seems to need a makeover.

This research aims to show explicitly the obsolete character of those marker and to bring attention on Arnett's (2000) theory of 'emerging adulthood'. His approach combines cognitive transition (e.g. to accept responsibility for one's action) to traditional role transition (e.g. becoming a worker, a father, etc.) that we use in demography.

Visibly, the integration of non-observable indicators in questionnaires is a call for audacity, but also stresses an important challenge to consider in survival analysis: adulthood is a subjective state.

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