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A Narrative Exploration of Adulthood Through the Experiences of Youths Enrolled as Adult Learners: Disrupting and Redefining What it Means to be an Adult

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Abstract: The purpose of this research was to explore the lived experience of adult basic education students, ages 18 to 25, and their construction and performance of adulthood. Findings did not support theories of development based on age-graded normative markers, indicating that traditional development theories should not be packaged as a normative path to understanding.

Background and Purpose of this Research

The field of adult education is lacking research on contemporary perceptions, understandings, and definitions of young adulthood. While psychological and social theories of adult development have been addressed at length, little adult education literature addresses what it means to be an adult from the perspective of youths enrolled as adult learners. According to the American Council on Education and the GED Testing Service (2011), since 2005, 16- to 24-year-olds comprised more than half of the General Education Development (GED) test population. Considering both the gap in adult education literature and the matriculation of younger students into adult basic education (ABE) programs, it is relevant to reconsider what it means to be an adult from the perspective of youths transitioning as adult learners and examine the meaning of adulthood with regard to their personal construction and performance of it. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the lived experience of adult basic education students, ages 18 to 25, and their construction and performance of adulthood.

Theoretical and Methodological Orientations

This work is situated within an interpretive and narrative framework and draws upon the interdisciplinary perspectives of postmodernism (Lyotard, 1984) and critical social theory (Agger, 2006). Narrative served as the primary methodological orientation and fits well with the postmodern and interpretive frame for this study; it focuses on the individual and acknowledges that narratives are always partial and contextual because they put temporal experiences into order and generate personal understandings, which are always open to re-reinterpretations (Usher et al., 1997). Narrative provided a way to introduce and re-represent the stories participants shared about their transition to adulthood and their identity as adults. Narrative captures the uncertainty and contradiction of experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and has the potential to reshape discourse (Foucault, 1978) in ways that other methods do not. Through capturing the construction and performance of adulthood in participants' narratives there is potential to emend the historic ways adult educators construct and understanding this phase of life.

Research Design

This research took place in the spring of 2012 and was designed to address the changing meaning of adulthood for youths matriculating into adult basic education programs and to foster new understandings of the changing meaning of adulthood. The following research questions served as the focus of this study: (1) What is the lived experience of adult basic education students, ages 18 to 25,

transitioning as adult learners? And (2) How do 18- to 25-year-old adult basic education students construct and perform adulthood?

As a qualitative researcher I recognize the importance of acknowledging my own position with this research. I adopt Noddings' (1992) argument that identity is always connected to context. Therefore, before beginning this work I considered my own assumptions by reflecting upon my positionality including personal philosophy of education, experience in the field, and how my position would affect my interpretations and re-representations of the data.

Participants, Data Collection, and Analysis

Participants included twelve GED students, seven females and five males, ages 18 to 25, enrolled in local non-profit adult education programs. To negate the power inherent in naming others (Bourdieu, 1991), participants chose their own pseudonym for the study. Nine participants self-identified as African American and three identified as White. Ten of the twelve participants identified as low-income. Each participant acknowledged leaving school between the ages of 15 and 18. I interviewed participants aged 18 to 25 for the following reasons: (a) the Workforce Investment Act defines an "adult" as 18 years of age or older (WIA, 1998, Title II, Section 101); (b) age 25 is the benchmark for many adult educators when identifying non-traditional adult students (Kasworm, 2010); and (c) ages 18 to 25 have been referred to as a the period of youth transition when individuals are caught between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

Participants were interviewed individually regarding their experience of leaving high school, their transition into a GED program, and their construction and performance of adulthood. A semi-structured interview protocol guided each interview, and participation was voluntary. Member-checking interviews (Glesne, 2010) were conducted with five of the twelve participants. Data sources included interview data, field notes, and my research journal. Data analysis was carried out at multiple levels with all data sources, utilizing descriptive and in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2013) and included structured narrative analysis (Labov, 1972) and thematic analysis (Glesne, 2010) to provide layered re-representations of the data.

Findings

In this paper, I present the interpretations of data related to the second research question, how 18- to 25-year-old adult basic education students construct and perform adulthood. There were three prominent themes generated during data analysis and patterned across participant narratives regarding the construction and performance of adulthood: (a) independence, both personal and financial, (b) responsibility, caring for self and role of provider, and (c) age and experience as they relate to defining adulthood. Adulthood was described in the narratives as the "real world" and "real life." I interpreted becoming an adult as overwhelming for many of the participants because terms such as "real world" and "reality" used to refer to adulthood suggested to me that participants viewed life as getting harder as an adult and more "real" than being a younger person. It is with that delineation in mind that I offer my interpretations.

Independence

Across participants' narratives, I heard stories of independence discussed in terms of personal and financial independence, often one allowing for the other. For example, Matt referred to independence as "you got to handle everything yourself…bills, where you live, getting a job." Booman remarked, "I

would say I was an adult, because I stay on my own. I don't never ask him for nothing. I feed myself. I live my own life. I don't ask my momma for nothing really." For Matt and Booman, independence incorporates both personal and financial independence. Similarly, Susan described the transition to adulthood by implying that personal and financial independence are what it takes to be an adult. She referred to these independences as moving out of a parent's house, paying bills, and working. Personal independence was referred to by many participants as being "on your own" and was connected to having one's own living space, not asking others for help, and making one's own decisions.

Financial independence incorporated having a job, paying bills on time, and being financially stable. Kayla stated adulthood was "[h]aving your own place, having a job, not having to lean on other people to pay for your bills and stuff." Booman asserted, "I consider myself an adult because I pay bills and I don't depend on nobody really." While construction of adulthood may be tied to being financially independent and not depending on anyone to "pay your bills," the reality of performing financial independence was described as a hard reality.

Some participants commented on a darker side of financial responsibility. Marie said:

Having to take care of yourself, having to take care of your own bills, and then when you have kids, you have to take care of them, and it's just stuff you don't realize is a reality…I wouldn't wanna be here [public housing] the rest of my life or have to go back and live with my parents. [A GED] is something that has to be done 'cause I'm gonna have handouts my whole life and going to ministries and mission centers to get diapers or food. I wanna go do it on my own. One day I wanna be able to go spend $668.00 out of my pocket rather than in food stamps.

Marie, along with Susan, Lisa, Kayla, and Juice, saw financial independence as a marker of adulthood but not one that was necessarily positive.

Stories like Marie's are not uncommon in the transition to adulthood, especially for vulnerable populations such as youths who face multiple challenges and are served by multiple systems, including youths who are school leavers, homeless youths, foster care youths, youths reentering the community from juvenile justice, and youths served by the mental health care system (Osgood et al., 2010). As Foster et al. (2005) noted, there is an overrepresentation of poor in the population of vulnerable youth, and this makes the transition to adulthood more difficult than for college-bound middle-class youth. Many of the participants in this study were youth caught in state systems that were more difficult to navigate once they crossed the arbitrary line of adulthood because they were then being served by adult-focused programs that may or may not meet their specific needs (Foster et al., 2005).

Responsibility

Each of the participants interviewed expressed an understanding that adulthood brings with it new responsibilities. An adult was constructed as someone who was "responsible" and had "responsibilities." Jack and Blacq' Barbii referred to being responsible as being able to "take care of things" regardless of the age. Performance of adulthood was also marked as having responsibilities. For example, responsibilities were described by differentiating between adult responsibilities and teenage responsibilities. Juice compared the two:

As an adult, you got responsibilities, got to keep up with your bills, and make sure your child's needs are met, and just doing a lot of other stuff, having responsibilities. People who ain't adults, they got responsibilities, but these are more kiddish responsibilities, like, clean your room and

stuff. You gotta make sure you get to work, make sure you got kids taken care of, and find a job. To me those are adult-like responsibilities.

The comparison made by Juice is an example of how participants constructed adult responsibilities as different from responsibilities they constructed for non-adults.

Being responsible and having responsibilities were closely connected with the responsibility of caring for oneself and others. Alan remarked that he had been taking care of himself since he was a kid "because nobody else was there to take care of me." He explained that it was "being alone and feeling like you have no one will make you grow up." Caring for oneself, carrying out the role of a provider, caring for a child, caring for siblings and even caring for a parent, were described by participants as ways in which they performed adulthood. These were the experiences that made them "grow up fast" and moved them into adulthood sooner than they expected. As Susan put it, "[S]ome people have no choice" but to become adults. Carly said that caring for her alcoholic mother was an experience that "made her grow up fast." Juice also explained her situation, "My dad has a lot of kids in his life. I was responsible for cooking for them, making sure they fed and stuff like that. Being in that situation, made me an adult."

The idea expressed here of caring for others is not necessarily new to the construction and performance of adulthood. Arnett and Tanner (2011) found that emerging adults from lower socio-economic backgrounds listed being able to support a family and being able to care for a child just behind attaining financial independence as an indicator of adulthood. Osgood et al. (2011) also pointed out that low-income young people without a high school diploma are more likely to become parents at an early age and more likely to relate to becoming a parent as a marker of adulthood than college-bound middle-class youths. For those participants who were parents, making the decision to care for their child was part of their performance of adulthood.

Age and Experience

Age and personal experience were salient across participant narratives. In the U.S., age underlies laws and policies that structure education, work, entitlements, and rights. At the same time, society holds common notions about the timing of experiences, roles, and behavior (Settersten, 2011). Several participants used the term "of age" in reference to turning 18 and being considered a legal adult. Although age was referenced, personal experience importance diminished its, and participants did not view age as a true marker of adulthood but instead found it arbitrary. For example, JeVaunte remarked, "The government defines [adulthood] by age but I define it by being maturity." Alan also felt strongly about age and its relation to adulthood, "I really don't think nobody becomes an adult off of age. I think it's life experiences and what you've been through makes you an adult. Government age is not important when we talk about adults." Booman expressed that being an adult only depends on who a person is. He stated, "I believe somebody can become an adult at age ten if they went through certain conditions." Like Booman, Kayla commented on experience meaning more regarding adulthood than age:

I don't think [adulthood] has nothing to do with age, because some people, probably 30, 40 years old, still acting like big kids. It just depends on the person. Some people have to be an adult earlier than 18. Experience has a lot to do with becoming an adult. Like having kids and getting your own place, stuff like that that comes with being an adult.

These examples reveal an awareness of legal age as a socially constructed marker of adulthood that underlie institutions and policies. However, within these examples adulthood is tied more to abstract concepts of responsibility, maturity, behavior, and mindset.

Implications for Adult Education

This research contributes to adult development literature because it sheds light on the social construction of adulthood from an adult education student perspective, an emerging point of view that is important if adult educators intend to take up a broader perspective of adult development. The implications for this type of research begin at the local level and have the potential to address grand change. It is better to improve understanding of transitions to adulthood in the particular (Abu-Lughod, 1991) rather than attempt to make generalizations that have the potential to be universally misapplied (Pollock, 2008). First, the demographic change in the adult basic education presents an increasing need for adult educators to consider the changing meaning of adulthood, which is fundamental to developing programs and policies that will address the needs of these younger learners (Wyn & White, 2000).

Next, these participants constructed and performed adulthood in a way that makes personal and financial independence paramount, and findings suggest that those who did not identify as adults did so because they were not financially independent or still lived at home. Therefore, GED programs need to begin thinking about the next step for students after they obtain their GED, focusing on extended services that help students move from GED to the workforce or higher education. Though there is a federal push to focus on this transition, extended services would help younger students gain the independence and financial freedom they are seeking in their move toward adulthood.

Finally, it is not surprising that a group of GED students like the participants in this study have not necessarily met normative age markers of development. More consideration should be given to the resources that are available for people who "hit those marks" at a younger age. The more important questions to ask might be: *What type of system and services are in place for them? How can adult education and its connection to workforce development, social services, grant funding, and so on, create change?* This is a place where policy might intervene and focus on college recruitment and retention for this group (Maralani, 2011). Policy makers have recently focused their attention on programs designed for the early years in a child's life, just before entering public school; it is equally important to offer services and support networks for youths transitioning to adulthood. Social institutions and structures need to be refashioned to better reflect the changing nature of adulthood because "whether by choice or circumstance, adulthood no longer begins when adolescence ends" (Settersten & Ray, 2010, p. 36).

Conclusion

Development cannot and should not be packaged as a normative way of understanding as adulthood is a social construct and situated within social, political, cultural, and historical structures and "no single experience renders one an adult" (Settersten, 2011, p. 189). The importance of this study's findings is not found by focusing on which adult development model is more attractive, fits the greatest norms, or can best help adult educators understand their students, but rather that the importance is in the lived experience and how adulthood is constructed and performed. Just as "there is not a rite or event that signifies unambiguously that a younger person has attained adult status" (Arnett, 2001 p. 73), development cannot be encapsulated within one model or generalized across race, class, and educational level. Personal experience and construction and performance supersede any specific model of psychosocial development. It is through stories of lived experience that the very individualized process of development may best be understood. As adult educators better understand how personal experiences influence development in younger students, the better they can serve the changing demographic matriculating into adult basic education programs. The findings presented here set up interesting implications for practice and policy.

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