

# What is an Adult?: A Prototype Analysis of Attributes of Adulthood

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# Introduction

- Currently no agreed upon definition of adulthood
- RQ: What are prototypical attributes of the concept of “adulthood” according to individuals in the United States?
- Aims: Apply a bottom-up approach to defining adulthood
  - Allows participants to generate what they believe adulthood means
  - Employs a prototype analysis approach modeled after Kearns and Fincham’s (2004) investigation of the concept of “Forgiveness”

# Method: Participants

- $n = 122$
- 72% female, 19% male, 1% non-binary
- 18-62 years old
  - Mean = 21.9
  - SD = 7.84
- Recruited through snowball sampling on social media sites and classroom advertisements



# Method: Procedure

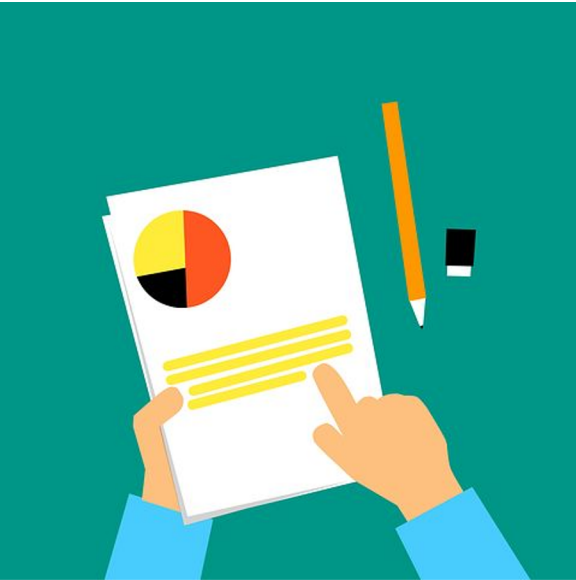
- Online survey:
  - “What is an adult? Please list all the attributes of an adult that come to mind (up to 20). Allow yourself up to 15 minutes for this task.”
  - “From your perspective, please rate each feature of an adult you listed in terms of its positivity.” 1= extremely negative, 4= neither negative or positive, 7= extremely positive
  - Demographic questions included age, gender, ethnicity, and educational attainment

# Results: Linguistic Units (LUs)

- Procedure for extracting LUs:
  - Monolexemic units were identified
    - Distinct, single attributes (often one word)
  - Judged phrases for number of LUs
    - $\kappa=0.96$

<b>TOTAL Linguistic Units</b>	<b>Average Linguistic Units Per Participant</b>
1890	15.59

# Results: Prototype Analysis



- Procedure for creating attribute categories
  - LUs were placed into attribute categories
    - Same category if modified by adjectives
    - Same category if judged to have the same meaning
- 168 distinct attribute categories
  - Originally 248, but 80 idiosyncratic were discarded

# Top 10 Attribute Categories of Adulthood

Category Name	Percentage of Participants	Positivity Rating Mean*	Positivity Rating Standard Deviation
Responsible/ responsibility	63%	6.43	0.94
Has a career/ is employed	49%	5.49	1.3
Independent/ takes care of themselves	49%	6.1	1.1
Mature/ maturity	48%	6.19	0.99
Pays bills/ budgets	43%	5.29	1.5
Old/ aged	35%	4.32	1.42
Caring/ cares about others	34%	6.36	0.95
Makes decisions	26%	6.21	0.98
Has experience/ is experienced	26%	5.94	1.14
Owens a house/ has a mortgage	23%	5.74	1.52

\*1= extremely negative, 4= neither negative or positive, 7= extremely positive

# Discussion: Interpretation of Results

The concept of adulthood is described by many attributes!

- More attributes of adulthood (168) than Kearns & Fincham's (2004) prototype analysis of "forgiveness"(78)
- Overlaps with previous conceptions of adulthood (Arnett, 2003):
  - Responsibility, Independence, Paying Bills, and Makes Decisions → Arnett's Independence
  - Cares about Others → Arnett's Interdependence
- Differences previous conceptions of adulthood (Arnett, 2003):
  - Owns a House and Employed" frequently mentioned
  - Maturity and Has Experience not captured in Arnett's markers
    - Advantage of bottom-up approach
    - Fuller description of the concept of adulthood



# Discussion: Future Directions

- Are certain categories more important to the concept of adulthood than others (e.g. “centrality”)?
- Is positivity of attribute related to frequency of mentioning the attribute?
- Assessing demographic variables: Are there age differences, gender differences, or ethnic differences in which categories of attributes are most frequently mentioned or considered most important?



# References

Arnett, J. J. (2003). Conceptions of the transition to adulthood among emerging adults in

American ethnic groups. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 100, 63-75.

Kearns, J.N. and Fincham, F.D. (2004). A prototype analysis of forgiveness. *Society for Personality and Social Psychology*, 30(7), 838-855. DOI:

10.1177/01446167204264237

# THANK YOU!



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