'CONTESTABLE ADULTHOOD': VARIABILITY AND DISPARITY IN MARKERS FOR NEGOTIATING THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD'

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1

Brief biography of authors.

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ABSTRACT

Recent research has identified a discreet set of subjective markers that are seen as characterising the transition to adulthood. The current study challenges this coherence by examining the disparity and variability in young people's selection of such criteria. One hundred and fifty-six British 16-17 year olds were given four sentence completion cues corresponding to four different contexts in which adult status might be contested. Their qualitative responses were analysed to explore patterns whilst capturing some of its richness and diversity. An astonishing amount of variability emerged, both within and between cued contexts. The implications of this variability for how the transition to adulthood is experienced are explored. The argument is made that markers of the transition to adulthood are not merely reflective of the bio-psycho-social development of young people. Rather, adulthood here is seen as an essentially contested concept, located within the discursive interactional environment in which young people participate.

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INTRODUCTION

From a traditional perspective, one of the main goals of successful development during adolescence is to ensure that young people are steered on a path into healthy adulthood (see for example, Adams, 2000). Much focus is placed on the dynamic biological, psychological and social influences which shape this transition. The research tends to be on troubled and troubling youth, with a view to helping these young people resist the pull of behaviors such as drug, cigarette and alcohol use (e.g. Madu & Matla, 2003) and sexual activity (e.g. Besharov & Gardiner, 1997), even if some of these are normative in adulthood.

In the United Kingdom, understanding the ways young people make the transition to adult life has become a major government-funded research priority. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) recently completed a programme of research on young people which explored the support and resources they need to become effective citizens, participating fully in society (see Catan, 2004).

Another strand of research has focused on changes in the length and complexity of the transition to adulthood in contemporary life. For example, Furstenberg (2000) argues for both an earlier entry into and a later exit from the transitional phase. Meanwhile, there is an increasing consensus within the field that radical social change has transformed the transition to adulthood from a relatively clear-cut, linear pathway to a complex, fragmented and individualized process dependent on the ability of each

young person to navigate their way through a set of landmark events (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; Dwyer, Smith, Tyler & Wyn, 2003). This observation has led commentators, such as Galambos & Leadbeater (2000) and Wyn (2005), to charge researchers to place participants' voice at the centre of the research process in order to properly encapsulate the experience of life during these transitions.

Contemporary sociological theorising takes our understanding one step further. Strauber & Walther (2002) see the transition as not only prolonged and destandardized but also uncertain and reversible. This 'yo-yo-ization' of post-traditional life-courses sees young people as having to manage shifts between dependency and independence and back to dependency, as a result of switching trajectories, either through personal choice or forced, for example through unemployment or relationship breakdown (EGRIS, 2001). From this perspective, changing states of semi-dependency have replaced the dichotomy of dependency in youth and autonomy in adulthood (Biggart & Walther, 2006), explaining why 18-25 year olds tend to describe themselves as young and adult at the same time (du Bois-Reymond & Stauber, 2005).

In trying to understand this extended and heterogeneous life transition, the question "when does adolescence end?" (Arnett & Taber, 1994) has become a key issue for research in the new millennium. Arnett has undertaken a prolific series of studies addressing this issue. His findings point to a consistent pattern, leading him to conclude that markers of the transition to adulthood are "intangible, gradual, psychological and individualistic" (Arnett, 1997 p. 15). Arnett (2000) sees the time between adolescence and adulthood as being separate from either period, labelling this new developmental stage 'emerging adulthood': an empirically distinguishable

phase when young people see themselves as being too old to be adolescents but not yet fully-fledged adults. This construct has begun to take hold, inspiring conferences targeting it, survey instruments measuring it (Reifman, Arnett and Colwell, 2004) and a tendency to use it unquestioningly as a synonym for the 18-25 age group (for example Arnett & Jensen, 2002; Arnett, 2003; Arnett & Tanner, 2005; Lefkowitz, 2005; Sinclair & Milner, 2005). Criticisms of Arnett's new stage, where they exist, have tended to be from sociologists who feel that the importance of structural factors have been downplayed (e.g. Bynner, 2005).

Research into emerging adulthood has highlighted that young adults reject traditional role transitions in their conceptions of adulthood and instead place importance on responsibility, decision making and autonomy (Arnett, 1997, 1998, 2003; Greene, Wheatley, & Aldava, 1992). In Arnett's (1997) fixed-choice questionnaire the item "Accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions" was the most popular of his 40 items as being necessary for adulthood. Cross-cultural replications of Arnett (1997, 2001, 2003) have revealed that this emphasis on responsibility and other markers of independence is not confined to white Americans (e.g. Mayseless & Scharf, 2003; Facio & Micocci, 2003). Similar findings have been reported using qualitative, open-ended data-collection techniques (e.g. Arnett, 1998; Greene, Wheatley & Aldava, 1992), leading to a consensus amongst many that the transition to adulthood is marked by a coherent set of criteria. However, it is this picture of coherence that the current paper seeks to challenge.

ADULTHOOD AS AN 'ESSENTIALLY CONTESTED CONCEPT'

In this paper, we draw on the philosophy of Gallie (1962, 1964) to propose that adulthood is an 'essentially contested concept'. Gallie (1964 p. 161) lays out five

conditions for what he calls essentially contested concepts. (I) the concept concerns a valued achievement - it is '*appraisive*'; (II) it is comprised of a collection of features or elements - it is '*internally complex*'; (III) it is '*variously describable*', in that there are many ways the concept can be defined, each giving primacy to different elements; (IV) changing circumstances elevate changing definitions of the concept to cultural ascendancy (in a way that cannot be predicted in advance) - its depiction is '*open*'; and finally, (V) users of the concept show awareness that their formulations must be contested against those of others, who employ a competing set/ordering of criteria: it is '*used … both aggressively and defensively*'.

Gallie's (1964) applies his notion of essential contestability to a series of examples, including 'art', 'religion' and 'democracy'. However, his interest is predominantly philosophical and historical rather than empirical. To this end, he adds two additional "historically justifying conditions" to these five "defining conditions" (p. 177). Our emphasis, however, is on the empirical investigation of young peoples' lives, prompting us to leave aside the two additional conditions and avoid too much philosophical debate. Before undertaking such an investigation, however, we would like to highlight the contribution that conversation analysis and discursive psychology can make to such an enterprise.

Baker (1984) points out that during 'adolescence', persons can seriously be described, not only as *either* 'child' or 'adult', but also as *neither* child *nor* adult - as something 'in between'. A similar quality of in-between-ness is proposed by Arnett (2000) as one of the fundamental criteria of his emerging adulthood stage. However, Baker (1984) takes a conversation analytic perspective to ponder the consequences of such in-between-ness for the management of "biographical identity" (Baker, 1984 p. 305)

(i.e. where one is in the life-course). She argues that it is the very fuzziness of this categorical boundary that makes biographical identity particularly in need of management and, consequently, a particularly frequent topic of conversation for people at this stage of the life-course. Thus, the accomplishment of an 'adult' identity becomes a kind of "conversational program for 'adolescents' in our culture" (Baker, 1984 p. 306), involving the deployment of a range of markers that speakers treat as indicative of the biographical identity categories at stake (see Garfinkel, 1967: "the documentary method of interpretation").

This leads us to propose that, not only is the category 'adulthood' an essentially contestable concept, but also, any individual's membership of the category 'adult' is only contestable during a certain period of the life-course. Before and after this time, it would be ridiculous to claim (before) or deny (after) membership of the category. Thus, essential contestability provides our definition for this experientially distinguishable stage of the lifespan. This stage corresponds very closely to Arnett's (2000) 'emerging adulthood', but this is no accident: the period during which one's adult status can be seriously questioned, is liable to be closely tied to the period at which the answer to "Do you think that you have reached adulthood?" is more likely to be "in some respects yes, in some respects no" than either "yes" or "no" (Arnett, 1997). From our perspective though, this stage would be more appropriately named 'contestable adulthood': the period between adolescence and incontrovertible adulthood, when claims to adult status become matters of contention and dispute.

The contestability of membership to the category 'adult' leads us from conversation analysis to discursive psychology – the latter approach having made the rhetorical nature of discourse one of its distinguishing features. Widdicombe (1998) maintains

that in everyday interaction, a great deal rides on the ascription and resistance of categorizations, making categories a hotbed of negotiation and debate. This, then, is Gallie's (1964) appraisive element of essentially contested concepts (I). Meanwhile Edwards (1997 p. 193) emphasizes that contrasting "conceptual resources" provide exactly the sort of "rhetorical affordances" that allow people to manage "the action-performing, accountability-oriented, rhetorical 'witcraft' of discourse." (The 'witcraft' that Edwards is referring to here, is a conception by Billig (1996) which involves the art of argumentation and spirit of contention.) This observation, highlights three of Gallie's (1964) other conditions: the multiplicity of features comprising a concept (II); their status as alternatives for description (III); and their competitive deployability in attacking and defending against contending positions (V).

The above discussion requires that, in order to argue that the category 'adult' is essentially contestable at a certain stage of the life-course, the markers of adulthood must be multiple, contradictory and rhetorically deployable[1]. However, research within the Arnett paradigm has presented a very different picture – of a coherent and cohesive pattern of markers. We have cause to question this representation, and turn to Potter & Wetherell's (1987) discursive critique of social psychology in order to do so. They argue that the pre-coding of quantitative responses into a limited set of options and the post-coding of qualitative responses into mutually exclusive broad themes tends to suppress the variability and disparity of participants' responses. We propose that the finding of coherence amongst the markers of the transition to adulthood might be just such an artefact. This premise has led us to adopt an alternative analytic strategy towards the markers of adult status: designed to reveal rather than suppress multiplicity and inconsistency. Here is where research into the transition to adulthood and Gallie's philosophy can be mutually enriching. We offer

an empirical, rather than philosophical, investigation of some of Gallie's conditions[2], presenting a practical application of essential contestability in one field of enquiry. Meanwhile, to a literature on emerging adulthood, which has come to conclusions about the coherence of subjective markers of adult status, we offer an important challenge: one which has extensive implications for understanding young people's lives during this period of the life-course.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The sample comprised of 158 British young people. Of these 97 (62%) were aged 16 and 59 (38%) were aged 17. There were 84 (54%) females and 72 males (46%). The pupils all attended one large, co-educational high school in the North of England, considered broadly typical of its type. On average, 50% of pupils at this school gain 5+ A*-C GCSE grades, compared to the UK average of 55.7%[3].   The school is situated in a predominately white lower middle-class neighbourhood. In the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2004, the area was ranked at 5,604 out of 32,482, where 1 was most deprived and 32,482 the least deprived[4]. The sample was recruited on a visit to a local university. The visit was open to all pupils of that age at the school, with the aim of raising aspirations and encouraging greater participation in Higher Education from their region, where uptake is traditionally low. It is not known how many of the pupils intended to go on to University. This sample was selected on the basis that their age and stage of educational transition would make the issues under investigation particularly live, relevant and consequential.

MATERIALS

Participants were presented with six open-response stimuli - four sentence completion cues and two open-ended questions - as follows:

Q1 You know you're an adult when …

Q2 You stop being a child when ...

Q3 Your parents treat you like an adult when ...

Q4 Society treats you like an adult when ...

Q5 What are the good things about growing up?

Q6 What are the bad things about growing up?

Each of these six stimuli was followed by half an A4 sheet of blank paper, allowing participants to write as much as they liked. A front sheet to the questionnaire reassured participants that their responses would be anonymous and confidential, offering space, time and freedom from criticism. It also included the researchers' details and contact information, to allow participants access to further information about the study if they should wish it.

PROCEDURE

The group of participants were approached during a lecture, which was part of their day's experience of a university environment. After introducing themselves and their interest in young people's ideas, the authors explained the questionnaire to the participants. Participants were assured that their teachers would not read their responses and that the study had nothing to do with their visit to the university. Participants were encouraged to spend as much time on each cue or question as they wished and to freely express themselves. They were discouraged from talking during data collection.

CODING, CATEGORISATION & ANALYTIC GOALS

For the purposes of the current analysis, only the responses to the four sentence completion cues were examined.

The aim of the current analysis was to capture some of the richness and diversity in the data, whilst at the same time detecting patterns of variability both within and between participant responses to the stimuli. To this effect, a non-exclusive coding strategy was applied to the data, with responses being allocated any and all codes appropriate to their content. This non-exclusive coding strategy contrasts with previous qualitative analysis in the area, in which the entirety of a participant's response to an item is coded as a whole into a single discrete category[5] (e.g. Tilton-Weaver, Vitunski & Galambos, 2001; Galambos, Barker & Tilton-Weaver, 2003). A random sample of 5% of the scripts was examined together by two raters in order to develop an agreement on coding. On completion of coding an inter-rater reliability test showed an 83% concordance on a random sample of 30% of the scripts. Two scripts were spoiled (1.26%) and subsequently dropped from the analysis, resulting in a useable sample of 156 participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the four sentence cues revealed 33 distinguishable criteria in the data. Between them, 1155 instances of such criteria were recorded. Amongst the 156 participants in the study, only five individuals completed all four cue sentences using the same criterion[6]. The remaining 151 participants mentioned multiple criteria in

their responses, up to a maximum of 16. The mean number of criteria included in a participant's response to the sentence cues was 6.29 (SD = 2.60).

This is clearly a very different image of the transition to adulthood from that proposed by Arnett and followers (Arnett & Tanner, 2005). Rather than focusing on the prominence of three similarly themed markers, we would argue that the range of markers mentioned by participants is one of the most striking features of the data. This initial observation points to both the internal complexity (II) and the alternative describability (III) of adulthood as a concept (Gallie, 1964).

CATEGORIES OF CRITERIA: THEIR NATURE, FREQUENCY AND PATTERNING ACROSS CONTEXT

The criteria discerned within the data were further analysed using the following procedure:

1   The sense of each individual criterion was explored qualitatively and illustrative examples were selected in order to build a detailed picture of what each entailed.

2   The criteria were grouped with other, related, criteria into a series of seven categories.

3   Frequencies of each criterion and category were recorded by cued context and in total.

4   These frequencies were then used to discern patterns within and between the cued contexts.

INDEPENDENCE

The most frequent category arising in the data overall was "Independence", which was mentioned 339 times across all four cued contexts. In order of frequency, this category was made up of responsibility, autonomy and decision making.

Responsibility (153 mentions) was the most frequently arising criterion total (across the four contexts). Most often it was used with reference to "yourself" or "your actions". For example, one 16-year-old male felt that childhood ends when "you take responsibility for yourself"(Q2), whilst a 17-year-old male held that parents treat you as an adult when "you can show you can act responsibly"(Q3). Meanwhile, knowing you are an adult occurs for one 16-year-old female when "you are given the responsibility to do what you want" (Q1).

The responsibility theme appeared not only as a singular noun, but also as a plural noun, an adjective and an adverb. This diversity, along with the phrasing surrounding the term, may be of significance. There may be quite different implications and consequences, if as in the data above, responsibility is seen as something you "are given" versus something you "take" or something you "show". Such diversity within even a single criterion would, we suggest, merit further analysis beyond the scope of the current article.

Autonomy (109 mentions) was particularly highlighted with reference to independent action and not relying on others. For example, according to one 16-year-old male, you know you are an adult when "You can do things on your own and think independently without needing help all the time from others" (Q1), whilst a 16-year-old female felt you know when you "Take control of your life and don't rely on anyone for anything" (Q1).

With decision making (77 mentions), the emphasis fell heavily upon the opportunity to make one's own decisions. Thus, a 16-year-old male equates adult status with when "… you are allowed to say what you do with your life …" (Q1) whilst, for a 17-year-old male, parents' treatment as an adult occurs when "They respect your decisions and don't tell you what to do or try to influence you into doing something you don't want to" (Q3).

Implications: Independence

Amongst these three markers of independence, a clear pattern of response between the four contexts emerged. Responsibility was in the top five responses for all four cued contexts and thus a very popular theme. However, it appeared almost three times more often in the Adult context than in the Society context.. Autonomy and decision making also appeared with great frequency in most contexts. However, almost no mention of either marker was made in the Society context.

On the face of it, such findings concur with much of the previous American and cross-cultural literature in the field (e.g. Arnett, 1994, 1998, 2004; Arnett & Galambos, 2003; Greene & Wheatley, 1992). However, when a range of contexts is offered to participants, and open responses are elicited, some of the internal complexity (II) and varying describability (III) of even these major criteria is revealed. When asked about society's acceptance of one's adult status, as opposed to knowing your status yourself or being treated as an adult by one's parents, the importance of all three criteria of independence diminishes radically (to almost zero[7] in the case of two of the three criteria).

QUALITIES

The second most prevalent category of response from the four contexts was "Qualities" (224 mentions). This was made up of five core qualities cited as denoting adult status. The most frequent was actions (112 mentions), which was the third most frequent criterion total. Actions included both the ability to "act like" an adult and a range of actions exemplifying the status. For example, one 16-year-old female described that parents treat you like an adults when "You start acting like one, in their eyes. They treat you as an adult when your behaviour coincides with their ideas of how an adult behaves" (Q3), whilst a 17-year-old male felt that you stop being a child when "You stop watching children's television …" (Q2).

The next most frequently mentioned quality was competence (64 mentions), in which a wide variety of abilities was cited as being indicative of adulthood, including "You use your own initiative" (male, age 16 Q1), "… are able to distinguish between important things and trivialities" (female, age 17, Q2), "…have some self-control" (male, age 17, Q4) and "You learn to question what society and adulthood are …" (male, age 16, Q4).

This was followed in frequency by feelings (27 mentions) - either feeling "like an adult" or feelings presented as implying adultness. For example, one 17-year-old female explained that you know when you're an adult when "You feel confident enough to face situations and people you would have found difficult before" (Q1), whilst another described how "you feel good about your life and environment" (Q1).

The specific adult quality of respect for others appeared 16 times, both in relation to parents "You show them respect …" (female, age 16, Q3) but also society "… treat society with respect" (female, age 17, Q4). Although not arising very often, the

criterion "You Prove It" (11 mentions) captured allusions to qualities that could demonstrate adult status, as one 16-year-old explained "… you sometimes have to prove this maturity" (Q3). Finally, the quality of experience was occasionally cited (5 mentions), as this 16-year-old male eloquently states "… when you can define innocence from experience and consider yourself the latter…" (Q2).

Implications: Qualities

In the two contexts which asked when third parties "treat you like an adult", actions were frequently proposed as markers of adult status: actions were the most frequent criterion cited in the Parents context and the third most frequent in the Society context. However, in the remaining two contexts, where participants were asked about self-judgements of adult status, very few actions were proposed.

Competence was the fifth most frequent criterion for self-judgements of Adult status but rarely mentioned in the Parents or Society contexts. Feelings, meanwhile, were only frequently cited in the Adult context.

When qualities are compared between the four contexts it appears that you *know* you are an adult when you possess certain competences or feelings, but you are *treated* as an adult when your actions denote your status. This again highlights the markers of adulthood as "rhetorical affordances" (Edwards, 1997) rather than objective guideposts. Qualities such as competences and feelings appear particularly effective for arguing that *you* "know you're an adult", whilst highlighting the quality of your actions seems equally well designed for arguing that *others* should treat you as one. This finding is again highly supportive of adult status as an essentially contested concept: with a variety of characterisations (II), any of which can be given prominence (III). These findings also suggest that there may be competitive debate as

17

to their applicability (V), indeed, a few participants even explicitly acknowledged the defensive power of qualities by highlighting the need to "prove" your maturity/adult status.

CHRONOLOGY

Chronological markers were another frequent category of response to the four contexts (223 mentions). These were made up of statements of a particular age and the proposal of a range of social and legal age restrictions.

Of the 118 specific mentions of age, 18 years was most often proposed (83% of age responses). However, other ages were also cited. Of these, only 16 and 21 years appeared more than once (7 and 3 times, respectively), whilst 3, 14, 15, 17, 20, 24, 32, 35, and 83 years were mentioned once each.

In some cases (8 mentions), no specific age was stated, instead, age markers were simply highlighted as relevant. For example, childhood ending when you "Pass various ages" (male, age 16, Q2) or society treating you as an adult when "You are the right age" (female, age 16, Q4).

Reference to some sort of age restriction was the fifth most frequent theme in the data (105 mentions). Sometimes a single age restriction was presented but, more usually, a series of them were listed in the same response, quite often with a relevant age for each restriction given alongside it. So, for example, you know you are an adult when "you can drive, vote, pay tax …" (male, age 17, Q1), or society treats you as one when "You turn a certain age at 16 - smoke, have sex ,17 - drive, 18 - vote all of which slow change you from being a child to becoming an adult" (female, age 16, Q4).

Implications: Chronology

Age appears to be an important marker in all four contexts studied, being cited amongst the top 10 for each and the second most frequent criterion mentioned overall. However, it appeared more than three times as often in the Society context as in the others, and was the most cited criterion for Society in the data.

Age has not previously been highlighted as an important subjective criterion of emerging adulthood. Most notably, in the Arnett questionnaire paradigm, the relatively low endorsement of the items "Reached age 18" and "Reached age 21" in comparison to criteria relating to independence, has contributed to the individualistic, intangible and psychological conception of the transition (e.g. Arnett, 1998). However, perhaps endorsement of *an* age attained, as in our data, rather than dividing responses according to *which* age is attained, would provide a clearer picture of the importance of age as a criterion. No data is available from the Arnett paradigm articles indicating how many of a sample endorsed at least one "Reached age …" option. The current findings suggest that such information may reveal that the importance of age has been underestimated.

However, an emphasis on the contestability of adulthood suggests that there are other details of note in these findings. Firstly, perhaps the overall preponderance of chronology is a product of the age of our participants – 83% of those who mentioned an age chose 18, and it seems no coincidence that this is an age they are just about to attain! Secondly, we again see a notable difference between the cued contexts, and thus both internal complexity (II) and varying describability (III) for the concept of adulthood. Age is clearly seen as a priority for Society's treatment as an adult, but not quite so crucial to the other contexts.

There was a high endorsement of Age restrictions in two of the four contexts – Society (second most endorsed) and Adult (third most endorsed) – but it was mentioned ten or less times in the other two contexts (at least a quarter as often). Such diversity again points to the internal complexity of the concept of adulthood (II), and the variable applicability of its measures (III). This suggests that the criteria found in our data should be seen as resources for arguing people into and out of the category adult, rather than as simple markers on a journey to maturity.

CONDUCT OF OTHERS

Participants particularly noted three main ways in which the conduct of others around them constituted markers of adult status: treatment by others, trust and respect from others.

Treatment by others (47 mentions) was most often cited in the general context of being (or not being) "treated like" an adult/child. One 16-year-old male declared that "You are old enough to start [to] be treated less like a child and be appreciated more" (Q1), whilst a 17-year-old male resolved "I'll leave home so they can't treat me like a child" (Q3). However, some specific examples of treatment indicative of adult or child status also appeared: "You are not told what to do all the time" (male, age 16, Q1); "People start giving you freedom" (female, age 16, Q2).

Trust (32 mentions) was such a common variety of treatment by others that it merits separate examination. Two female responses to when parents treat you as an adult, were: "They can then trust you to take part in activities e.g. weekends away with your friends." (age 16, Q3) and "You show you can be trusted by being responsible and trustworthy. For example, they lend you the car and it comes back in one piece." (age 17, Q3).

Respect from others (25 mentions) also appeared frequently enough to warrant separate scrutiny. One 16-year-old female felt that parents treat you like an adult when "you gain respect for good decisions you have made" (Q3), whilst a male of the same age highlighted that you stop being a child when people "… respect your opinions" (Q2).

Implications: Conduct of Others

Treatment by others was not frequently mentioned in response to either the Parents or the Society context (6 or less times). This is unsurprising, given that both sentence cues already target others who "treat you as an adult". Nevertheless, it was quite often endorsed in the remaining two contexts. Both respect for others and trust were common themes in the Parents context, however, they appeared only very infrequently in the other contexts (6 times or less).

When our participants choose the conduct of others as a criterion marking the transition to adulthood, they are locating the transition in inter-personal space, rather than the inter-psychic space that has been the usual focus of developmental psychologists. Instead of indexing the cognitions/behavior of those in transition as markers, they point to the cognitions (such as trust or respect) and behavior (specifically treatment) of others with whom they interact. We suspect that referencing the cognitions and actions of others in this way might prove particularly effective for making rhetorical contrasts when juxtaposed with young peoples' *own* cognitions and actions.

Here, for example, is the entirety of one 17-year-old male's response to the first cue: you know you are an adult when "you are given a significantly greater amount of responsibility than previously. The difference in the way people treat you - family

and friends or otherwise. You feel as though you <u>should</u> be treated differently and can justify this." The first detail to note is the way that responsibility is packaged. When Arnett (1997, p. 15) considers responsibility and his other two most frequently endorsed questionnaire items, he offers the following conclusion: that such markers are "processes that are largely internal and psychological … and the ultimate attainment of them is … a judgement that individuals make largely for themselves rather than one that is conferred upon them by others." In the above response, our participant contradicts such a conclusion, presenting responsibility precisely as something that *is* conferred by others. Following this, in the second of his two sentences we see other people's conduct juxtaposed with your own feelings about that conduct, in a way that displays some contrastive tension between the two. Finally, to link these two alternative markers together, a third marker is referenced with "you can justify this". This is a marker of competence, tellingly, the competence to engage in interpersonal rhetoric: the ability to persuade others that your feelings about inclusion are legitimate grounds for their actions to include you. Gallie's fifth condition for essentially contested concepts (1964 p. 161) involves the requirement "to recognize that one's own use of it has to be maintained against … other uses". The above participant's reference to the ability to "justify this" provides an excellent empirical example of just such a recognition. Our findings concerning the conduct of others thus provide further support for the contestability of adult status for young people.

DEVELOPMENT

The notable developmental markers cited across the four contexts (91 mentions) were all concerned with maturity. Although a number of citations made no specification as to what attributes were mature (14 mentions), most specified either behavioral/mental maturity (50 mentions) or physical maturity (27 mentions).

Behavioral/mental maturity was most often expressed with reference to being "mentally mature" or tending to "act mature", although sometimes particular acts or cognitions were specified, as this 17-year-old male explained, "You can see things and discuss them with a more mature attitude" (Q1). References to physical maturity tended to fall into two types – firstly pubertal signs, for example "Hair in strange places … body parts become rather large" (male, age 16, Q1), and secondly looking older in general, for example "When you 'look' like a respectable person (outward maturity)" (male, age 17, Q4).

Implications: Development

When all three types of maturity are taken together, they were most prevalent in the Child context, making up the second most common criterion for that context. When the total appearance of maturity is looked at in the other three contexts, we also see quite high frequencies – from fourth highest in Society to ninth highest in Adult. This resulted in maturity ranking as the sixth most frequently appearing total.

However, finding that this criterion was generally important to our sample does not mean responses were uniform. For example, it was very rare for physical maturity to be mentioned in the Parents context (2 mentions), whereas behavioral/mental maturity was, on its own, the sixth highest criterion for that context. Once again, qualitative analysis which captures the richness and variety of meanings for a criterion leaves one wary of making generalisations which obscure the room for contention. Clearly, research is warranted which examines how the various characterizations of maturity are utilized rhetorically, whether in contrast to other markers (e.g. one's age versus one's maturity), or whether one interpretation of maturity is juxtaposed with another (e.g. physical versus behavioral maturity).

DEMOGRAPHY

Four demographic markers of adulthood arose in the data, although with low frequencies (77 mentions). These were education & work; leaving home; sexual status; and marriage.

Education & work taken together made up the most frequently cited of the demographic markers (39 mentions). For example, this 16-year-old girl stated that for her, society treats you like an adult, "… When you are in work/respectable job and are no longer in education. As a school student society treats you as a child." (Q4).

Leaving home (16 mentions) was a second demographic marker, for example "When you're not living with your parents (you don't get treated like a child when this happens)" (female, age 17, Q1)

The way that sexual activity (also appearing 16 times) was referred to in the data suggested that it should be categorized as a demographic marker, as demonstrated here by a 16-year-old female "You lose your virginity and enter into a sexual relationship. That is the last tie to break from childhood" (Q2). This 17-year-old male wrote how society treats you like an adult when "It recognizes your right to consent to sexual intercourse" (Q4). Finally, marriage was mentioned only six times in the data set.

Implications: Demography

The only demographic marker that emerged with any frequency was education & work. It was more likely to appear in the Society context than in the other cued contexts. In line with other research in this area (e.g. Arnett, 2000), none of the other

demographic markers that appeared in the data occurred very often in any given context.

It would be easy to infer that these findings reflect some sort of value system where traditional, civic-minded milestones are no longer important aspirations for young people. In contrast, we argue that our data does not measure whether these things *matter* to young people, but rather that such demographic criteria were not *deployed* by our participants to mark the transition to adulthood. From our analytic approach it is suggested that the participants in this study may be eager to prove their readiness to join the adult 'club'. Thus, they may choose intangible markers of adulthood such as 'acting responsibly' precisely because they stand a chance of demonstrating them in the here and now. In contrast, markers such as marriage and leaving home are likely to place our sample of school attending 16-17 year olds firmly outside the 'club'. Furthermore, their contemplation of entry to university (evidenced by the visit from which they were recruited) is liable to place the attainment of such markers way into the future.

Gallie's (1964) fourth condition for essentially contested concepts involves its 'openness', whereby changing historical circumstances bring differing definitions to the fore. The current analysis has not thus far considered this condition, predominantly because our sample does not include any historical data with which to compare the contemporary responses. However, the finding of generally low frequencies of demographic markers, suggests that openness is at work. It may be that the delayed achievement of previously relevant demographic markers (Bynner, 2005; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997) has devalued their usefulness as indicators of adult status for our young sample[8].

25

RESISTANCE & EXPEDIENCY

The sentence cue for each of the four contexts was phrased so as to elicit markers of a transformation from childhood to adulthood. However, a number of participants resisted the implicit assumption in these cues of the 'fact' that such a transformation exits (62 mentions). They either rejected the transformation itself, or suggested that the transformation could be made at will, as a means to an end: for either others' expediency or one's own expediency.

Of those that rejected the transformation from child to adult (40 mentions), many said adulthood "never" occurred, while others said that only a partial transformation occurred. For example, asked when you stop being a child, this 16-year old female wrote "never, you are always slightly childish" (Q2) and in reply to the parent prompt, this 17-year old female replied, "You're always a child to them, never a 'full' adult." (Q3).

The second way in which the fact of a transformation was rejected was through characterising it as purpose driven rather than externally marked. Some participants suggested that entry into the status of adulthood occurred due to others' expediency (16 mentions): "They want something" (male, age 17, Q3) or "when it feels like it - when it benefits society" (female, age 17, Q4). A small group suggested that adult status could be claimed according to one's own expediency (6 mentions), as these two young people explain "Whenever you want to - hopefully never!" (female, age 17, Q2) and "Everyone can put on a more adult front to get what they want from society" (female, age 16, Q4).

Implications: Resistance & expediency

Responses that rejected the transformation from child to adult were particularly apparent in the Child context (fifth most frequent criterion) and quite common in the Parents context (seventh most frequent criterion), but infrequent in the other two contexts. Such references to the incomplete or non- entry into adulthood indicate, once again, the contestability of the concept.

Expediency was not a very common criterion overall, and indeed it was never mentioned in either the Adult or Child context. However, its existence demonstrates an awareness, amongst at least some of our sample, that the adult construct is strategically deployable (V), for them or for others[9].

GENERAL DISCUSSION

From this very rich and complex data set three main points will be highlighted. The most important is the wide disparity and variability of markers expressed by the participants of this study, which lend themselves to essential contestability. Secondly, the findings suggest that the stage immediately prior to adulthood is best defined as the period when adult status is contestable. Thirdly, details within the findings show that not only is adult status open to contestation, but so too are each of the criteria themselves - some more than others.

DISPARITY, VARIABILITY & CONTESTABILITY

The multiplicity of the data is starkly demonstrated in that 97% of participants included two or more markers in their responses, with an average of over six per participant. Importantly, this finding does not reflect a uniqueness in our data *per se*,

but demonstrates how analytic refocusing can bring to light what has previously been obscured. For example, a reanalysis of Arnett's (1997) questionnaire responses would indicate that, on average, participants affirmatively endorsed almost ten different markers apiece[10]. The wide range of markers mentioned by our participants therefore supports our assertion that adulthood is an internally complex concept(I).

The high incidence of intangible and idiosyncratic markers found in the current data, seems to support previous research (e.g. Arnett, 1997; 2000; Galambos, Kolaric, Sears & Maggs, 1999; Tilton-Weaver et al., 2001). However, the coherence of this pattern is disrupted by similarly frequent citation of entirely *tangible* and *normative* cultural markers, i.e. chronological age and legal or institutional age restrictions. What is more, some of the ways in which our participants expressed these markers, when given free reign (rather than closed options), challenges conclusions about how "internal and psychological" (Arnett, 1997) such markers are. Responsibility, for example, was conveyed in our data not just as an autonomous self-judgement, but also as contingent on the conduct of others.

Inconsistent responses between the four cued contexts reveal some of the variable describability (III) of the concept of adulthood and begin to suggest how these markers might be put to use 'aggressively and defensively' (V) in contesting adult status during interaction. To summarize: in all four contexts responsibility was often highlighted. However, in the Society context this criterion appears much less useful for arguing one's way into adult membership than referencing age, age restrictions, actions or maturity. With respect to the Parents cue, participants pointed up *demonstrating* adult status, in the form of actions, trust and maturity more than in the other contexts. This suggests that such markers offer an especially strong rhetorical

28

potential for contesting adult status with parents. Knowing you are an Adult mostly

mirrored previous findings as to the importance of independence. However, a

similarly high incidence of externally imposed age restrictions, challenges the

assumption that the transition is subjectively determined. Instead, room for

contention and contrast is opened up with self-judgements being juxtaposed against

societal dictates. Most notable in response to the Child cue was the number of

participants who challenged the presumption in the cue that one *does* in any simple

way 'stop being a child': it appears that even the implicit assumptions in our cues are

open to controversy and debate.

Discrepant patterns of response between the contexts we explored thus suggest that,

when participants respond that they are adult in some respects but not in others

(Arnett, 1997; du Bois-Reymond & Stauber, 2005), they are referencing the internal

complexity (II) and varying describability (III) of the concept of adulthood.

CONTESTABLE ADULTHOOD

Having argued that the multiplicity and disparity of our data reflects the contestability

of adult status, we wish to emphasize the consequences of this contestability for

young people. As Baker (1984) highlights, the exigencies of the dynamic, rhetorical

environment of everyday interaction regularly impose on young people the

requirement to be ready and able to accountably claim (or deny) an adult status for

themselves, at any given moment of interaction. Such a requirement therefore

permeates the experience of this stage of the life-course, making it distinguishable

from other stages. It is a stage best characterized as 'contestable adulthood', rather

than emerging adulthood, as the latter suggests a rather inevitable transition, existing

outside of rhetoric and social purpose. The resources young people can use to

manage contestable adulthood are what our analysis has documented. It now remains for studies of situated discourse to examine precisely how such resources are put to use and the pragmatic functions they achieve.

CONTESTABLE INGREDIENTS

If we acknowledge that 'contestable adulthood' is a stage dominated by the need to accomplish an adult identity, we would expect people to make strategic replies to our cues. In this light, it is not surprising that our sample have chosen intangible criteria that tend to include them as adults, rather than criteria, such as full-time employment, marriage and home ownership, which exclude them (now, for the foreseeable future or even permanently).

However, such intangible markers are a double-edged sword: young people can use them to argue for inclusion in the adult category in the absence of more concrete markers but their very intangibility leaves enormous room for contest and debate. Thus, not only is the concept of adulthood itself inherently contestable, but so too are many of its criteria[11].

CONTESTABLE ADULTS IN INTERACTION

In conclusion, we propose that arguing one's way into adulthood is the central occupation for contestable adults. What distinguishes this stage in the life-course is the fact that, at any point, the individual can come under inspection for how far they demonstrate 'adult' qualities. Clearly there is a lot at stake in arguing oneself into (and out of[12]) adult status. So too is there much at stake for the other parties to the interactions (e.g. parents and teachers) who may be denying or facilitating adult status in young people. We recommend that explorations of the nature and texture of such

interactions would provide important insights into the lives of young people,
answering such questions as: what concrete uses are the markers of contestable
adulthood put to; how is adult status then adjudicated (including investigations of
young people's power over their membership status); and what are the consequences
for contestable adults of the continuous questioning of their adult status.

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[1] Adulthood would also need to be an appraisive concept (I). Sacks (1972) provides a very detailed *theoretical* case that would support such a contention, in which he argues that life-stages involve a value hierarchy and sets out how to divine whether a category is higher versus lower in such a value hierarchy than another related grouping. Thus, in agreement with Arnett (2004), we provisionally treat the value of attaining adult status as a given for the purposes of the current analysis.

[2] The empirical analysis which follows focuses on some of the five conditions more than others. In particular, we leave to future empirical work the exploration of adulthood as a valued achievement (I).

[3] Source: Department for Education & Skills, 2001-2005.

[4] Source: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2004.

[5] Arnett (1998) uses a strategy that falls between these two extremes. As with our own strategy, Arnett allocates multiple codes to a given response. However, unlike the current strategy, he has pre-delimited the scope of these multiple codes: they are the same 38 items from the questionnaire his participants also received in the study.

[6] In four out of these five cases (three females and one male), every cue elicited the identical response of "you're 18". In the fifth case, age was also the criterion of response, but here, three different ages were given across the four contexts – "18" for Adult, "16" for Child, "20" for Parents and "18" again for Society.

[7] There were three mentions of decision making/autonomy in the Society context.

[8] Signs of a similar openness are also evident amongst researchers: Dwyer et al., (2003) argue that, as contemporary young people do not meet previous demographic criteria of adulthood, this should prompt a reconceptualization of adult status, rather than treating them as making 'faulty' transitions.

[9] Four additional criteria were distinguished in the data. However, they fit into no obvious category and none were mentioned above 8 times by participants.

[10] Calculated by summing the percentages reported for each questionnaire item and dividing by the number of items.

[11] Connolly (1983) makes a similar point about the concept of politics.

[12] See Widdicombe & Wooffitt (1995) and Widdicombe (1998) for analyses of the interactional achievement of *non*-membership to social identity categories (in their case, of subcultural identities). Although the current analysis has treated the accomplishment of adult status as a valued achievement, our conclusions do not require that it have a positive valence on all possible occasions. Gallie's (1964) appraisive condition does not require universal agreement on *positive* valence (e.g. 'democracy' in the USSR is unlikely to have been valued positively). Indeed, given the cut and thrust of contestation and dispute, we would expect instances where it is rhetorically prudent to reject adult status, even though the category normatively holds a positive value. This expectation opens up another avenue for future investigation: when, how and why do young people sometimes resist being classed as adults?