Chapter 1
Transition to Adulthood: Introduction

The transition to adulthood involves, for most individuals, moving from school to work, establishment of long-term relationships, possibly parenting, as well as a number of other psychosocial transformations. These are not small changes in individuals' lives. Indeed, some aspects of the transition to adulthood, such as the establishment of long-term relationships or parenting, result in permanent or enduring transformations. The transition to adulthood is not only a period of "coming of age" but a time during which major choices are contemplated and decisions are made.

Supporting the transition to adulthood through counseling involves appreciation of the current social and political conditions as well as the central approaches or frameworks used to understand the transition to adulthood. This chapter begins by defining the transition to adulthood that guides each of the chapters in this book. Then, current conditions are outlined, pointing out the constraints and affordances individuals face as they plan for and move into adulthood. Finally, the disciplinary approaches to understanding the transition to adulthood are described along with a critical evaluation of these approaches and an explanation for using a new approach, action theory, in this book.

Definition of Transition to Adulthood

What is the transition to adulthood? It is the movement from childhood to adulthood. Or, the transition is the change from the category of child to adult. The "hoods" are age periods or stretches of time associated with age categories assigned to individuals within a particular culture. The importance or salience of age groups and the ages at which life periods begin and end varies widely across cultures. Cultural variations in age groups (see Project A.G.E., Keith et al., 1994) highlight how age periods or the "hoods" are socially constructed (Kessen, 1979).

In this book, the transition to adulthood is not viewed as a step from a lower stage (i.e., childhood) upward to a more sophisticated or higher stage (i.e., adulthood) as is implied by some psychological perspectives (e.g., Arnett, 2000, 2004). Rather, childhood and adulthood are age periods across which developmental change occurs

R.A. Young et al., *Transition to Adulthood*, DOI 10.1007/978-1-4419-6238-6_1,

© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2011

through both ontogeny and goal-directed actions of individuals and the people around them. These age periods are defined by the cultural settings in which individuals live.

Among researchers and practitioners in North America and Europe, the period associated with the transition to adulthood varies. Transition to adulthood is viewed by some as the period after adolescence and before entry into adulthood (e.g., Arnett, 2000; Nelson et al., 2007; Scharf, Mayseless, & Kivenson-Baron, 2004). For others the transition to adulthood is the period of adolescence (e.g., Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005; Haase, Heckhausen, & Köller, 2008) or youth (e.g., Côté & Allahar, 2006) which refer to the period following childhood and prior to adulthood.

The definition of the transition to adulthood assumed in this book is focused upon the population of youth in North America. We view the transition to adulthood as beginning at the end of childhood and extending across adolescence. This preparatory period is a stretch of time and not an upward developmental change from one level of development to another (see von Glaserfeld & Kelley, 1982). It is the period of time during which individuals and the people around them are concerned with preparing for entry into the adult social, economic, and legal realms. This process generally extends across the second and part of the third decade of life.

North American Cultural Context

Interpretations of the current state of the transition to adulthood in North America include notions that children are "growing up too fast" or "growing up slowly." These two metaphors, although appearing incongruent, are related. The two metaphors and the associations between them are discussed next to illustrate the current North American cultural context.

Those who suggest that children are growing up too fast (e.g., Bjorklund, 2007; Elkind, 2001; Hymowitz, 2000; Postman, 1994) critically highlight the cultural tendency to hasten children into adulthood. Children are pressured into early academic achievement, expected to engage in complex decision-making processes associated with schooling and career tracks, exposed to media portrayals of sexually precocious young teenagers, and are targeted in marketing strategies to influence buying of goods ranging from clothing to media to their parents' automobiles. The pressure to grow up early is not accompanied by accelerated maturation. Rather, it seems that children may experience stress (Elkind, 2001) and increased chances of mental health problems (Bjorklund, 2007).

Although concerns about growing up too quickly have been expressed by researchers (e.g., Luthar & Latendresse, 2005) and practitioners (e.g., Rosenfeld & Wise, 2000), there are criticisms of this view. The central criticism is that the majority of children are not hastened through childhood and adolescence (Lynott & Logue, 1993). The idea of a foreshortened childhood is not born out in data from large samples. Nonetheless, the metaphor of growing up too fast appears in both academic and popular literature which suggests that it is salient in North American culture and is, for some, a concern.

The suggestion that children are growing up too fast appears, at first, to be incongruent with growing up slowly. But the two metaphors may be linked by the cultural context of achievement in North America. Growing up fast is, in part, about the attempts to accelerate learning and cognitive maturation in order to achieve in competitive academic and work environments (Bjorklund, 2007; Elkind, 2001; Hymowitz, 2000). Growing up slowly is centered on the lengthy academic preparation needed to succeed in an increasingly complex workforce (e.g., Arnett, 2000, 2004; Côté & Allahar, 1994; Larson, 2002). Time spent in educational institutions compliments the pressure to achieve. Lengthy education is perceived as ensuring a “good” start in the workforce with better economic prospects (Aronson, 2008a; Côté & Allahar, 2006; Kerckoff, 2002). Entrance into post-secondary education and that lengthy but profitable education comes with costs – including pressure for some to achieve in early school years (Elkind, 2001; Hymowitz, 2000; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Rosenfeld & Wise, 2000). In short, the two metaphors suggest that there is pressure to grow up fast in order to slowly, but (supposedly) successfully, enter adulthood.

The long transition into adulthood, or growing up slowly, has evolved over the past century. Several social and economic forces contribute to the emergence of the long transitional period. Formal educational systems have expanded accommodating more individuals for longer periods of time. Colleges and universities are no longer for the elite but are mainstream institutions. Along with the increasing access to education came the demand for more credentials as well-paid jobs for unskilled or semi-skilled workers began to disappear (Furstenberg, 2008). The relationship between school and work has been altered.

The transition from school to work has become tenuous due to declines in permanent employment and a paucity of formal pathways (e.g., apprenticeships) for youth (Furstenberg et al., 2005; Shanahan, Mortimer, & Krüger, 2002). The nature of the transition from school to permanent employment makes it difficult for most youth to gain the economic and psychological autonomy of their counterparts in the first two thirds of the twentieth century (Furstenberg et al., 2005). Economic autonomy is much more difficult for youth from lower social classes to attain with the decline in the influence of trade unions in securing well-paid jobs for unskilled or semi-skilled workers (Furstenberg, 2008). Youth from lower social classes face many more challenges to attaining education and establishing permanent employment than youth from middle and higher social classes (Côté & Allahar, 2006; Staff & Mortimer, 2008). Youth from lower social classes do not have the parental provision of material and nonmaterial assistance that enables the completion of post-secondary education or independent living enjoyed by youth from middle and upper social classes (Schoeni & Ross, 2005; Swartz, 2008).

Other markers of adulthood in North America are associated with household formation and family relationships. Compared to 50 years ago, there are delays in home leaving and establishing a household (Cherlin, Scabini, & Rossi, 1997; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999). First marriage and transition to parenthood are also occurring at later ages (Fussell, 2002; Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005). These familial markers, though, have symbolic significance. Empirical research suggests that men and women are more likely to perceive themselves as adults when

interacting with others if they have established a household and a long-term relationship (marriage or cohabitation) and begun parenting (Shanahan, Porfeli, Mortimer, & Erickson, 2005). Finishing school and beginning full-time work are not associated with feeling like an adult.

There is a considerable variability in the timing and sequencing of entry into adult roles such as entry into the work force, establishment of a household, marriage, and childrearing (Mouw, 2005). The variability signals a great deal of individual choice rather than a set progression through a series of role changes that was easier to identify in the earlier part of the twentieth century (Shanahan, 2000). The expansion of individual choice, while appearing to generate a sense of freedom, comes with risks because the outcomes are less predictable (Côté & Allahar, 2006). Additionally, individuals have fewer systematic or formal processes to guide decision making than previous generations (Furstenberg et al., 2005). With few information sources or supports for making decisions, individuals assume responsibility for consequences of their choices. The responsibility for outcomes of life choices may generate strains on individuals, particularly because they are faced with numerous decisions regarding educational pursuits, employment, life partners, health, and well-being (Schwartz, 2000, 2004). There is, however, no array of limitless choice for these pursuits. The constraints and affordances of the context, such as employment rates or familial ability to pay for post-secondary education, bound the process (Bynner, 2008; Hendry & Kloep, 2007). In addition, individuals' choices create their own constraints. For example, pursuing a career in the military, while providing longer-term employment, removes individuals from their intimate social networks for a period of time for training and work.

In summary, the transition to adulthood in late modern North America is not a linear progression from school to work to marriage and family formation. The economic and social context has helped contribute to a complex set of potential trajectories. Furthermore, individuals are faced with making an array of salient decisions as they move between educational institutions and workplaces, and negotiate relationships with family and peers. Few clear guidance strategies or institutions are available to help individuals navigate their way into adulthood.

Perspectives on the Transition to Adulthood

The following overview of the dominant approaches to the transition to adulthood points out the major contributions and limitations of these approaches. This summary helps to distinguish why we approach the transition to adulthood from a lifespan action theoretical perspective.

Life Events

Life events, such as becoming a parent or finishing school, help mark the changes in individuals' lives that signal the transition to adulthood. Tracking peoples'

achievement of life events is often used in sociology and demography to study the timing of the transition to adulthood. Researchers examine the achievement of social markers such as leaving home (Mitchell, 2004), starting a full-time job (Aquilino, 1996), starting a long-term union or marriage (Myers, 2000), and becoming a parent (Hogan & Astone, 1986; Shanahan, 2000). Moving beyond studying the achievement of certain life events, researchers using a life course approach (e.g., Mouw, 2005) examine how socially structured opportunities and limitations explain differences in the duration (e.g., length of schooling) and sequencing of events (e.g., leaving school, starting a full-time job, starting a long-term union) associated with the transition to adulthood. Historical comparisons (e.g., Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005) of the timing and sequencing of events that signal engagement in adult roles contribute to current understanding, across disciplines, of the increasing length of the transitional period in late modern societies.

Rites of Passage

Social markers, such as adult roles, signal the status of individuals to the larger community. One way of highlighting a social marker is to structure events that publicly recognize changes in individuals. These events are meaningful ways of acknowledging individuals' entry into the adult world (see Turner, 1967). Structured events highlighting public recognition of change are frequently termed *rites of passage* (see van Gennep, 1909/1960). In the case of the transition to adulthood, the events are frequently referred to as coming-of-age rituals.

Communities' cultural practices shape the passage from childhood to adulthood through rituals recognizing and celebrating changes such as puberty (e.g., Markstrom, 2008) or the completion of high school (Best, 2000). However, events associated with the transition to adulthood are difficult to detect in late modern societies because of individualization. Individualization is the term used to characterize societies that have few institutional constraints and supports propelling people through specific pathways over the life course (see Shanahan, 2000). Some practitioners concerned with the possibility that the absence of rituals gives way to youths' adoption of activities that signal adulthood, such as being in a gang or using illegal substances, have constructed rites of passage as interventions (Gavazzi & Blumenkrantz, 1993; Horrowitz, 1993; Warfield-Coppock, 1992). However, embedded in late modern societies characterized by individualization, these specialized coming-of-age rituals are subject to competing with larger forces.

Taking a slightly different approach to understanding rites of passage, Northcote (2006) points to the ways that youth may create their own informal rite of passage through leisure-time pursuits. Leisure activities, such as nightclubbing, allow for enactments of ritual behaviors associated with being adult. Engaging in these ritual behaviors supports exploration of an adult identity. This perspective views the individual as much more agentic than the traditional view of rites of passage that focuses on the actions of the community.

Psychosocial Maturity

In contrast to life events marking adulthood and recognition of adult status through rites of passage, there are approaches to the transition to adulthood that focus on internal processes of maturation. Psychosocial maturity includes autonomy (Seiffge-Krenke, 2006), commitments to future career goals or work (Hargrove, Creagh, & Burgess, 2002), capacity for intimacy (Scharf et al., 2004), and responsibility for others (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002). From this view, development involves the transformation from a lack of maturity to full maturity albeit with individual differences in the process and outcome. Although the emphasis is on internal processes, the impetus for change or development is a combination of ontogeny and contextual influences.

The transition to full psychosocial maturity, or the transition to adulthood, emphasizes optimal achievement of developmental tasks. Achievement of maturity is both the goal and the signal of the transition to adulthood, particularly in the recent conceptualization proposed by Arnett (2000, 2004). Developmental progression toward adulthood involves the gradual passage from one period of the lifespan (emerging adulthood) to another (adulthood). Entry into adulthood occurs when maturity has been achieved and self-recognized.

Summary

Taken together, these various perspectives offer important information about the transition to adulthood. First, the transition to adulthood is clearly a process over a period of time. Even studies tracking events or markers associated with adulthood (e.g., marriage) understand that there are periods of preparation (e.g., in the case of marriage a period of courtship and planning) preceding these events. Rites of passage rituals symbolize the processes involved in transition. These rituals publicly move individuals through a period of preparation prior to the formal recognition as an adult and incorporation into the adult social spheres (Turner, 1967; van Gennep, 1909/1960). Psychosocial maturity is the slow transformation from immaturity to maturity. Each perspective portrays the transition to adulthood as encompassing gradual processes.

Second, the entry into adulthood is not clearly demarcated particularly in advanced industrial societies (Furstenberg et al., 2005; Hendry & Kloep, 2007; Knepler, 1974). Not everything in individuals' lives changes uniformly, nor is the process a linear transformation. For example, an individual's commitments to a career or type of work might precede the transition from school to work but the maturation of capacity for intimacy might extend well beyond entry into full-time work. The variation in change across domains of functioning is reflected in state governance over adult activities in advanced industrialized counties. State governance, or restrictions, over activities is designed to protect the well-being of young citizens. The protection ends with the lifting of restrictions – and marks an age of

"adulthood." Chronological ages for the lifting of restrictions vary across life spheres. There are differences in the ages at which individuals may cease their schooling, obtain an automobile drivers' license, enter armed forces, marry, or politically vote. These differences make the entry into adulthood ambiguous. There is no definite point at which an individuals' status changes (Wyn & White, 1997).

Looking across these various approaches to studying the transition to adulthood, the focus seems to be on the individual. However, a closer look reveals that the transition to adulthood is a social process. According to the rites of passage perspective, recognition from others, either informally or formally, helps to affirm individuals' completion of maturation or achievement of life tasks related to adulthood. Within the life events and psychosocial maturity perspectives, individuals enter new social realms, such as work or intimate relationships, leaving behind old social realms, such as school. Some social relations, such as family, retain their configuration. But the dynamics of the social relations are assumed to change due to the transformation from child, or immaturity, to adult, or maturity. Therefore, the process of moving from childhood to adulthood is not an individual enterprise. The transition to adulthood is a social process.

In summary, the various perspectives point to the transition to adulthood being an extended and nonlinear process with no clear indication of completion. The perspectives also suggest that the transition to adulthood is a social process. However, across these perspectives there are some aspects of the transition that tend to be overlooked. These are described in the next section.

Why a Different Approach?

Why a different approach to the transition to adulthood in this book? Current perspectives tend to overlook the agency of the individual and the social nature of the transition to adulthood. In this section, the use of an action theoretical perspective is explained.

None of the approaches to conceptualizing the transition to adulthood would deny the agency of individuals. Indeed, the notion of the "blank slate" is no longer an accepted conceptualization of socialization. However, individual agency is inadvertently overlooked across a number of theoretical perspectives on human development (Pinker, 2002). How is agency overlooked? Any emphasis on assessing outcomes (e.g., educational achievement, leaving home, maturity) as a function of social supports tends to overlook what individuals are contributing to their own development. Additionally, attempts to understand what forces, social or psychological, are influencing the transition to adulthood tend to pass over individuals' contributions to their own development. There are exceptions, such as Northcote's (2006) work on youths' construction of informal rites of passage. But such exceptions do not fill in the gaps in our knowledge about individuals' contributions to their transition to adulthood.

To understand individual agency during the transition to adulthood, it is useful to turn to action theories of human development. Action theories allow for

an understanding of the ways that individuals act on their own development (see Brandtstädter, 2006; Brandtstädter & Lerner, 1999). In this book, the action theory used (von Cranach, Kalbermatten, Indermühle, & Gugler, 1982) enables us to understand the actions of individuals and the meanings they give to those actions. This process is explained in greater detail in the next chapter of this book.

In addition to overlooking agency, current perspectives tend to overlook the social nature of the transition to adulthood. Current perspectives on the transition to adulthood recognize the importance of social relationships. Social supports are critical for helping individuals make the transition, particularly during rites of passage. Additionally, the transition to adulthood involves changes in social relationships. The transition to adulthood, as noted earlier, is a social process. But, other than rites of passage, there is a tendency for the other perspectives to treat the actions of other social actors as background information (e.g., parental financial support for educational achievement). Further, individuals' interactions with other social actors are not attended to when addressing life events marking adulthood or psychosocial maturity. To address this gap, this book attends to the very social nature of the transition to adulthood by using an action theoretical perspective that addresses joint actions and meaning making. The use of the word joint means the individual is acting together with another person or group of people in the co-construction of the transition to adulthood.

The complex nature of the transition to adulthood is often simplified because theoretical and research foci often limit our perspective to a limited number of outcomes or influences. But youth's lives are much more complex than efforts to make a decision about a romantic relationship or move out of the familial home. By using the action theory approach we are able to observe the complex lives of youth. Take for example, a young woman named Emily who lives with her parents and two siblings. Emily is in her first year of community college but contemplating whether or not to put her studies on hold for a year or so. She has the sense that her college education is not leading her anywhere although she feels that education will be important for her longer-term future goal of owning a business. While going to college, Emily is working part-time, taking dance lessons, and going clubbing with friends in the evenings. Her dance lessons, paid by her parents, are not leading to a dance teaching career as Emily had hoped. She has spent years training but now feels that her goal of teaching may not be possible. Her part-time employment involves being alone at work late in the evenings which her parents think may be unsafe. But Emily wants to keep this job because the work schedule allows her to continue dance lessons and spend time with friends at clubs. This young woman is acting on her goals for work, education, family, peers, career, and safety. These goals and actions are not independent from one another. They are interconnected and linked to other people. For example, work and physical safety are important concerns for her parents from whom Emily receives emotional and financial support. But Emily and her parents also want to promote her growing autonomy. Her parents want her to work and attend school but she is not sure about where her education is headed. Nor is she sure that she wants to work while attending school because she also wants to maintain her dance lessons and time with peers.

By observing Emily's actions and goals for her actions, we can see who is involved and the salience of relationships during the transition to adulthood. We also observe how the past and future are impacting Emily's current decision making about her dance teaching career goals. Our observations also reveal the complexity of Emily's goal-setting and the ways in which her actions are productive and counterproductive. Emily's transition to adulthood is not a linear progression of decision making leading to change. She is not working with a list of pros and cons. She is talking to family and peers about whether to continue dance lessons and college or switch to bartending school. Additionally, Emily is responding to her own emotions and cognitions such as the realization that she dislikes geography and loves dancing. Reflecting the everyday life of a young woman growing up in North America, Emily's situation is not unusual. What is unusual is our approach to the transition to adulthood. Rather than focusing on decision making for the future, we observe the actions and the meanings for actions of youths and their social networks. We attend to the ways that aspects of daily life are interwoven with each other. We try to understand how the past, present, and future play key roles in the transition process. Our action theoretical approach moves us away from a narrow emphasis on a few aspects of the transition to adulthood to an in-depth look which facilitates effective counseling.

Finally, calls to attend to the effects of modernity and economic structuring on the transition to adulthood (e.g., Côté & Allahar, 1994) highlight problems associated with labor markets, social engagement, and socio-emotional well-being. Suggestions for ameliorating the negative effects of modernity and economic restructuring on the transition to adulthood focus on institutional and social change (Côté & Allahar, 2006; Pittman, Diversi, & Ferber, 2002; Settersten, 2005; Tyyskä, 2001). We agree with many of these suggestions, such as strengthening education-to-work linkages, but also acknowledge the importance of supporting individuals and the significant other people in their social networks. Such support can be provided through counseling. The action theoretical perspective presented in this book is well suited for counseling during the transition to adulthood.