Abstract

Adulthood holds a paradoxical position in sociology. It is a central category in so far as it provides the unarticulated background to a majority of social inquiries, but it is largely defined by default, as the taken-for-granted status of the social actor, and the middle stage of life. The meaning of adulthood is rarely addressed directly. In keeping with sociological expositions of individualisation as a defining aspect of contemporary modernity, those researchers that do address adulthood tend to note its transformation from a social to a psychological category.

This paper suggests that the meaning of adulthood continues to rely on its social constitution. To this end it is suggested that (I) the recognition of individuals’ full membership in society is the meaningful constant of adulthood; (II) that proponents of the ‘prolonged adolescence’ thesis — an ideal construct intended to illuminate social scientific and everyday discourse about young people who are reputed to defer or reject adulthood — rely on an anachronistic model of adulthood; and that (III) social trends in many young western adults’ practices at the heart of the prolonged adolescence thesis can be more adequately conceptualized as arising from present-day relations of social recognition. It is concluded (IV) that new forms of adulthood are marked by an intersubjectively constituted recognition deficit which is symptomatic of the emergence of new norms out of the practical negotiations of contemporary social conditions.