Reconceptualising an Uncontested Category: Contemporary Adulthood and Social Recognition

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Over the last three decades academics have consistently marvelled at the lack of sociological analyses of adulthood.\(^1\) Psychology, on the other hand, abounds with material on adult development,\(^2\) an area of interest since Freud’s pioneering insights.\(^3\) Few sociologists have sought to redress this situation, and those who do are indirectly influenced by Freud via Erikson’s notion of ‘ego development’, a process that is said to unfold on individuals’ journey through successive life stages.\(^4\) This social-psychological literature invariably privileges individual perception. From this perspective adulthood is little more than a state of mind and as such it is sometimes portrayed as highly commensurate with late-modern forms of individualism driven by the reputed excesses of mass culture.\(^5\) On the whole there is a decided shortage of sociological research concerning the meaning of adulthood as a social category. My research, and indeed this forum, is intended to go some way towards filling this lacuna.

I suggest that we need to focus on individuals’ practices and the meaning they attach to them; and clearly we do need to pay attention to the self-understanding of individuals, to what they understand by being an adult. But importantly, we need to continue to try and fathom how this self-understanding is socially framed, how it is mediated by economic, political and
cultural-aesthetic contingencies. The aim, in other words, is to investigate the other half of a well-cemented psychological edifice, and hence to contest an uncontested social category.

In what follows I elaborate the social constitution of adulthood by means of a critique of an established approach to the practices of young people in order to bring into relief current conceptual problems and to enable me to ground an alternative perspective. I begin by (1) outlining the status of adulthood in sociology and in everyday discourse and identify a standard model of adulthood against which individuals’ practices are prevalently judged. (2) I then outline the prolonged adolescence thesis, an entrenched perspective in sociology as well as in everyday discourse that posits an increasing number of individuals as inhabiting an attenuated state of adolescence while they reputedly defer or reject adulthood. Finally, (3) I propose an alternative view and reconceptualise adulthood along recognition-theoretical lines to more adequately grasp its contemporary redefinition — a redefinition in which precisely those ‘twenty and thirtysomethings’ who are said to reject adulthood are actively engaged as co-producers of a new adulthood of their own.6

1. ADULTHOOD AS A TAKEN-FOR-GRAANTED CONSTRUCT

Adult behaviour as well as adulthood as a life-stage are implicit in all sociological analyses. From the sociology of everyday life to the analyses of global processes; from ethnomethodology to systems theory; from the sociology of knowledge to Critical Theory to the cultural turn; the actor — whether conceived as individual, as decentred subject or as system — is an embodiment of adultness. Unless children or old people are the explicit focus of investigation the adult constitutes the model actor who commands centre stage for much of the sociological enterprise. This ideal individual is akin to the homo philosophicus of classical philosophy ‘who’, as Norbert Elias puts it, ‘was never a child and
seemingly came into the world an adult? Even when sociologists are explicitly concerned with childhood, adolescence, youth or old age, adulthood is always present as a point of reference; it is both neglected by sociologists, as well as constituting an ever-present default category, a heuristic background to the analysis of all manner of social action. Generations of sociologists have pointed to this anomaly, few have turned their minds to theorising it.

In everyday life too adulthood is no mystery; it is the taken-for-granted middle period of the life course. Its taken-for-granted status is evident in the representations and practices through which it is reproduced: working nine to five and beyond, dinner parties, jury duty and voting, marriages, mortgages and children, the family sedan, adultery and divorce, investment portfolios, retirement plans, life insurance, writing a will, and so forth. At the same time, there is considerable confusion concerning adulthood, particularly as an idea that normatively frames individuals’ practices. Statements such as ‘young people don’t grow up anymore’ and ‘kids grow up too fast today’ are evidence of this perplexity, one that is compounded by the fact that modern societies do not provide definite answers as to when adulthood begins. This is so with respect to officialdom as well as everyday life.

To be sure, the law sets the age of majority as a threshold connoting full competencies and thus bestows the full gamut of rights and obligations to legal subjects. But this is the culmination of a journey during which it is assumed that competencies accrue, rather than arrive all at once, with physiological and psychological maturation. We also know that reaching the age of majority does not guarantee equal access to justice, nor does it guarantee full citizenship rights.

A cursory glance at the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) — Australia’s equivalent to Britain’s National Statistics, the U.S. Census and Germany’s Statistisches Bundesamt — confirms that there is no official agreement as to what
age marks the beginning of adulthood. Definitions and delimitations vary according to specific areas of analysis and their relevant publications. Thus the Bureau differentiates between ‘young people’ (15–24), ‘population 25–64’, and ‘older persons’ (65+). Elsewhere it refers to those under 35 as ‘young people’ without further differentiation, while at the same time labelling ‘adult’ all those 15 and over.8

There are aspects of adulthood, however, that can be articulated with a measure of certainty. As lay participants in everyday life we evaluate, mostly by reflex, individuals’ attainment or non-attainment of adult status according to objective achievements such as stable fulltime work, stable relationships, independent living and parenthood. These social markers of adulthood are embedded in western societies’ framework of valuation, or social recognition, which also provides reference points as to what constitutes a ‘finished’ adult ‘human being’ as opposed to an ‘unfinished’ adolescent ‘human becoming’.9

As noted above, adulthood is also a common topic in the psychological literature: terms such as independence, responsibility for self and others, commitment and maturity, come to mind. From the viewpoint of developmental psychology adult individuals are expected to have made the vital decisions that give them a direction in life; to have acquired a set of stable preferences, life-guiding principles and a range of social competencies.10 Stability in, and commitment to, work and intimate relationships — ‘the capacity to work and love’ as Freud called it — are other related criteria that are central to the psychological approach to adulthood as a life stage.11 This school of thought dominates the social scientific purview, including that of sociology. In the few relevant works with a sociological bent — particularly in recent writing — adulthood is seen as dependent on individuals’ self-understanding,12 or conceived as primarily a psychological state.13 By and large, these views are underpinned by a long-standing belief that adulthood lies at the end of a journey of
basic psychosocial development. And although this does not preclude adult development as such, adulthood understood as a life stage continues to be posited as following adolescence or post-adolescence as the case may be. What is of particular interest to me is the fact that sociologists today still use this conventional, teleological model of adulthood as the template for the evaluation of young peoples’ practices and orientations. Following Nick Lee, we may term this model standard adulthood.14

**Standard adulthood**

Picture this: a man and a woman in their mid-twenties. The woman holds a baby in her arms; a small child — say four years old — clings to her father’s hand. The woman wears an apron, her husband his work-overalls. There is a ‘Sold’ sign perched on the fence that surrounds the freshly painted house. A generously sized car sits in the driveway.

No one could ever mistake the man and woman in this romanticised picture for adolescents, and few would be tempted to suggest that they were not adults. But something about this image jars against the present. Just like the choice of frame for a painting or photo, so the right time frame too helps integrate representation and reception. With this in mind, I suggest that no period in the history of western societies has been more conducive to the institutionalization of a particular model of adulthood (of which the above image is one possible representation) than the era historian Eric Hobsbawm has called the ‘Golden Age’, namely the time between the end of the Second World War and the oil crises of the early 1970s.15 No period has provided more favourable conditions for this model to become lived experience for a majority; no period has shown a more faultless synthesis of ideal and reality.

After the Second World War the industrialised economies experienced unprecedented affluence and stability. The period from about 1945 to the early
1970s saw a concerted effort by business, government and unions to prevent a recurrence of the Depression, the harrowing experience of which still haunted decision makers. Although more wealthy nations (Western Europe, North America and Japan) had their own macro-economic agenda, public spending, full employment and universal social security provisions were given priority by all to ensure internal demand and hence economic expansion. The then prevailing mode of management and organization, what came to be known as Fordism, has since come to denote more than that — it signifies a once prevalent ‘total way of life’ that congealed around goals of long-term stability and economic growth. Typically, businesses valued employee loyalty, which was generally rewarded with promotions in hierarchically constituted organizations. For employees and families this meant that there were planable career paths with predictable milestones on the way, and a known destination: retirement on guaranteed government pensions. In the world of work, the accumulation of experience with age was viewed as a valuable asset and was seen to increase, rather than inhibit, job security. According to one sociologist’s interpretation of the times — exaggerated for illustrative purposes — these economic and work-related aspects alone ‘created a society in which people’s lives were as highly standardized as the sheet steel from which the cars were welded together’. These social conditions corresponded to a value system that remained mostly unchallenged in its normative validity until the rising discontent of the 1960s. Open same-sex relationships were extremely rare and same-sex parenthood (as opposed to guardianship) was unimaginable. The heterosexual nuclear family prevailed as the ideal. It is during this time that early marriage and family formation came to be lived experience for many adults. Add to this opportunities provided by the labour market: once ‘adult’ and employed, one could expect to stay ‘the same’ for the rest of one’s life in a range of ways; one’s identity was stabilized by sharing the work environment with more or less the same
people throughout one’s working life; the geographical area one lived in would remain the same since the organization one belonged to had set down firm roots in that area; and, even if one were dissatisfied with one’s job, one would not have to seek a position with another organization (in another place with different people) because time and effort would bring the reward of career progression.22

Then, becoming adult was a matter of following a life course that resembled a veritable march through the institutions of marriage, parenthood and work. By today’s standards these objective markers of adulthood were relatively fixed, achievable and supported by a far-reaching value consensus. Sharply delineated structures of opportunity rested on culturally and socially reproduced normative foundations that were, for a time, rarely questioned. With fulltime long-term work within reach for a majority, and with early marriage and family formation so common, what being ‘grown up’ meant was clear. The fulfilment of what I call classic markers of adulthood — family, stable relationships, work and independent living — brought in its wake the social recognition necessary for adult status to become a meaningful achievement. The experience of affluence and stability after the Second World War thus added its fair share of bedrock securities to a particular vision of adulthood at a time when there was a high degree of commensurability between norms and social practice.

This simplified schematic equation — economic stability plus an explicitly sanctioned normative consensus equals a stable adult identity — is not intended to be positive nostalgia.23 However, real differences in life experiences notwithstanding, standard adulthood held normative status as the ultimate ‘guiding model of adult maturity’.24 Crucially, then, our contemporary associations of adulthood with stability arose from that generation’s experiences and expectations.

Today, standard adulthood as a norm remains robust, though it may be increasingly counterfactual for many. After all, it is still associated with the ideals of stable relationships, stable work and income, a family of one’s own and independent living. Framed in the language of maturity, standard
adulthood promises greater self-understanding and the self-confidence that comes with the accumulation of social competencies. In these terms settling down is not to be shunned: for when the experience of opportunity, possibility and stability is passed from one generation to the next and is focused in a notion such as adulthood, it stands to reason that this cultural idea should become a powerful ideal.

2. THE PROLONGED ADOLESCENCE THESIS

When contemporary social trends, such as prolonged stay in the parental home, relatively late or forfeited marriage and family formation, and short-term goals, are compared against the standard model the conclusion is a fait accompli: these days, an increasing number of individuals take longer to reach adulthood than was the case for previous generations. Often social scientists evaluate these trends negatively. Thus, what they perceive as problematic is the transition to adulthood, rather than the nature of this presumed destination. That is to say, as far as adulthood is the focus of sociological analysis at all, it is its reputed deferral or rejection that attracts attention. The meaning of adulthood, let alone the possibility that what is understood to lie at journey’s end is itself undergoing profound changes, remains by and large unarticulated.

Discourse in the media does no better. Although the reputed refusal to grow up is high on the agenda, rarely do reports proffer opinions that go beyond a generation’s alleged attitudes and consumer behaviour and address changing social conditions. This individualising drift comes replete with sense-making labels. And so we see the reputed rise of ‘adultescents’ and ‘kidults’ in the US and Australia; Nesthocker in Germany, KIPERS (Kids In Parents’ Pockets Eroding Retirements Savings) in the UK, Mammone in Italy and Boomerang Kids in Canada. Along similar lines we hear about a ‘Peterpandemonium’ that is said to hold many twenty and thirtysomethings in its thrall. In fact, a
good measure of cross-fertilization between social-scientific and commonsense views promulgated in the media ensures the reproduction of taken-for-granted assumptions which I subsume under the ideal-type prolonged adolescence thesis.

In one respect marketers, journalists and social scientists have a point: something is indeed changing. Many individuals in their twenties, thirties and beyond appear to be leading lives that are hardly comparable with what has been traditionally understood by adulthood. We may think here of the trend of young people staying in the parental home for much longer than used to be the case; many of them drift from job to job and eschew marriage and family formation; many appear to be living in the present with little concern for the future; indeed, some revel in experimental living and risk-taking with scant regard for stability. These are practices and attitudes associated with adolescence, at least the way this phase of life is culturally framed in western societies. Consequently, providers of expert knowledge to the public take these practices as key indicators of behavioural change on a generational scale and identify an ever later onset of adulthood. For example, such eminent US research organizations as the National Academy of Sciences and the Macarthur Foundation respectively peg the end of adolescence at 30 and 35 years of age, while the US Society for Adolescent Medicine proposes with some certainty that adulthood begins at 34. Citing an array of writers, Furstenberg sums up the social scientific consensus: ‘the transition to adulthood extend[s] well into the third decade of life and is not completed by a substantial fraction of young people until their 30s’.

This discourse is one of long standing in the social sciences. Academics have noted for decades that young people no longer ‘grow up’ the way this is commonly understood. ‘Postadolescence’, first proposed by the Viennese psychoanalyst Peter Blos in the 1940s, is a common term used to encapsulate the stage inhabited by individuals who, as Keniston put it some thirty-five
years ago, ‘far from seeking the adult prerogative of their parents … vehemently demand a virtually indefinite prolongation of their non-adult state’.31 Others stress a historical reversal of intergenerational values: from children’s obligation to parents to an increased period of obligation of parents to children. This transformation is said to have taken place in the period following the Second World War, when protracted schooling, lower marrying age and a softening of parental authority coincided.32

These notions have become well established in social science taxonomy, not least in the sociology of youth and social psychology where variations of a common theme are in evidence. For example, Côté refers to an ‘arrested adulthood’ or a ‘youthhood’ lived-through by contemporary ‘half-adults’.33 Elsewhere he identifies a ‘perpetual adolescence’ that is marked by ‘a tendency to avoid making commitments’ as a function of the demise of ‘adult roles’.34 Likewise, Calcutt speaks of an ‘arrested development’ and an ‘erosion of adulthood’,35 while Furlong identifies a ‘protraction of youth’.36

These pronouncements about young people’s practices have one thing in common: they implicitly use the model of standard adulthood as their benchmark. Here, adulthood as a stage of life remains conceptually fixed, unproblematic and thus escapes articulation, let alone analysis. What is seen as worthy of analysis, however, is the failure to reach a taken-for-granted standard at a time of life when this is conventionally deemed most appropriate. In fact, research into the timing of the transition to adulthood has shown that today the realization of the classic markers of adulthood is still expected by most people to occur between the ages of 21 and 26.37 The non-attainment of these markers by people in their twenties, thirties and beyond is thus taken as a sign that their adolescent state is prolonged, that they in fact defer or reject adulthood for a time. Yet, the promises contained in an ideal, while retaining an orienting role,
are in tension with social reality. There is, then, a normative lag between expectations and realities.

Analysis of this normative lag is perhaps nowhere of greater urgency than in those policy domains that deal with young peoples’ transition from education to work. In this context, Australian researchers Peter Dwyer and Johanna Wyn assert:

Relying on our own past … establishes a predetermined expectation about what happens in the lives of the next generation. It takes for granted a linear model of development which assumes that young people progress through a pre-set series of separate stages in their lives which involve innate processes of maturation and normative forms of socialization within stable families and an age-based education system, leading at the proper time to a movement from dependence to independence, from school to work, from young peoples’ status as adolescents to their eventual achievement of a stable and secure adulthood.38

This illustrates the point that the normative lag marks a policy gap between the ideology of increased educational participation and the persistent uncertainties of outcomes for the post-1970 generation — a gap, that is, that takes the linearity of a previous generation’s transition to adulthood as the evaluative and policy-forming benchmark by which young peoples’ successes and failures are judged. Thus there is good reason to rethink our notions of adulthood. In fact, Maguire et al make the uncommon and therefore all the more pertinent point that

[t]he idea of a ‘refusal of adulthood’ potentially carries within it the notion that there is a ‘normal’ version of adulthood which (some) young people are rejecting. There are significant dangers in this interpretation. First, that those who are ‘refusers’ are in some ways deviant or ‘other’ and secondly, that there is a fixity in adult status.39

These critical remarks are exceptions to the rule. Indeed, the largely uncritical manner in which the prevalent perspective is employed by social scientists means that often it simply mirrors the sentiments expressed in the popular press by marketing and advertising specialists. How, then, can adulthood be more adequately conceptualised?
3. ADULTHOOD, PERSONHOOD AND SOCIAL RECOGNITION

The very centrality of adulthood goes hand in hand with a particular ideology that is vital to the experience of not only adulthood, but to the experience of childhood and old age as well: the equation of adulthood with full personhood. Eisenstadt supports this when he contends that ‘[t]here is … one focal point within the life span of an individual which is to some extent emphasized in most known societies, namely the achievement of full adult status, or full membership in the social system’. More recently Hockey and James attended to this ‘ideological dominance’ of adulthood in their investigation of forms of marginalization based on age and ability. According to their analysis, ‘personhood in Western society is symbolised through the ideas of autonomy, self-determination and choice’; and it is precisely these constitutive aspects of what it means to be a full person, a full member of society, that are in their very association with adulthood ‘edited out’ of conceptions of childhood and old age. That is to say, our culturally specific framing of childhood and old age depends on the withholding or non-attribution of autonomy, self-determination and choice from the very young and the very old. The writer Eduardo Galeano puts it more strongly still: ‘Old age is a failure, childhood a threat’. Indeed, so powerful is the association of adulthood with personhood that adults who do not embody ideals of full competence, such as adults with disabilities, the infirm and frail, are through processes of infantilization relegated to the margins, to a quasi-childhood.

[the] passage through the life course … involves the wielding and attribution of personhood at different times and … power is asymmetrically wielded as individuals move between marginal and central social positions, between different conceptions of personhood. Parents, for example, are persons in a way which small children are not; adults are persons in ways that ‘the elderly’ no longer are. And in each relationship, power is unevenly exercised.

This is not to say, however, that adulthood qua personhood becomes yet another key to unlocking the core of social inequality in modern societies.
Rather, it highlights the great complexity of extant power asymmetries, particularly when the notion of personhood is cast against the more established categories of gender, social class and ethnicity. As introduced above, reaching the age of majority, for instance, does not guarantee full membership in society as long as distinctions according to other criteria persist. And so, whether it is the infantilization of the old and disabled, the social construction of childhood as a time of vulnerability as well as harbouring the vestiges of ‘delinquency’. or the infantilization of women or non-whites (e.g. the black ‘boy’); whether it is the gradual attrition of working class ‘precociousness’ and the universalization of middle-class childhood, adulthood is a metaphor for membership in society through the attainment of full personhood. Thus, adulthood as a metaphor cuts across divisions of gender, ethnicity and class while its experience is, at the same time, always contingent on these drivers of social inequality.

Adulthood, then, denotes individuals’ status in society as ‘full partners in interaction’. It is from this perspective that what has been called the ‘recognition-theoretical turn’ in Critical Theory provides useful conceptual foundations.

**Social recognition: a selective overview**

The question ‘who am I?’ is as central to contemporary individuals’ self-understanding as this question has become increasingly pressing in the course of modernity. But it is a question that cannot be separated from another: ‘who am I in the eyes of others’? Our self-identifications and self-perceptions, our self-placement in our social environment, in fact our very constitution as social beings, hinges on validation by others. From the moment we realise that our infantile omnipotence is no more than a pre-social fantasy, and that our autonomy relies on our becoming active collaborators in the mutual constitution of the mother-child bond, we depend on those social dynamics that
engender a sense of self. In turn, we use our own estimation of others to
categorise them in order to anticipate the likely ‘rules of engagement’. As
Goffman wrote some decades before social recognition became a discreet
research area in sociology: [w]hen a stranger comes into our presence … first
appearances are likely to enable us to anticipate his category and his attributes,
his ‘social identity’ … We lean on these anticipations … transforming them into
normative expectations, into righteously presented demands.49

These are the more intimate moments of social interaction. They may be seen as
replicating on the micro level those institutionalised and legislated forms of
recognition that, for modern individuals, have become the social foundation
upon which their individual and collective self-understanding rests. Thus
knowing who we are is also inseparable from ‘knowing’ who we can be, and
from having as part of our ‘natural attitude’50 an understanding of the
normative possibilities for our flourishing as human beings. This basic precept
forms the foundation for the notion of social recognition in sociology. Indeed,
from this view, recognition is a fundamental human necessity; its presence or
absence (in the form of disrespect or ‘misrecognition’) informs our self-
understanding as humans.

George Herbert Mead elaborated this position from his social-psychological
perspective on identity formation.51 His analysis constitutes one of Honneth’s
conceptual springboards and as such represents a fitting entry point to an
elucidation of the notion of recognition. In Mead there is a tension between the
socially projected ‘Me’, and the subjective viewpoint of the ‘I’. Individuals
internalise the way ‘significant others’ act towards them and in so doing they
take on the expectations of others as normative. Our interpretation of who we
are in the eyes of others constitutes Mead’s Me without which neither social
action nor identity formation is possible. The ‘I’, the source of unique, creative
impulses, is in constant reflexive tension with the Me. It reacts to the
perspectives of significant others and learns that not only conformity but also acting against the norms of the Me is possible. The successful reconciliation of I and Me results in an integrated self — a self, it must be noted, that is both socially generated and individually developed. This interaction of social environment and individual self-identification is pivotal to theories of social recognition.

There is another, complimentary sense in which social recognition can be understood. Voswinkel puts it succinctly when he suggests that recognition ‘is the medium of social integration that translates social norms and values into subjective identities’.\textsuperscript{52} Once again, the mutuality of individual and social processes is emphasised here. For recognition, as the \textit{medium of integration}, ensures that individuals assimilate the prevalent cultural norms. In practice, this assimilation is a matter of prevailing \textit{relations or dynamics of recognition} (\textit{Anerkennungsverhältnisse}). This is important to Honneth who is concerned ‘to show that the distinctively human dependence on intersubjective recognition is always shaped by the particular manner in which the mutual granting of recognition is institutionalized within a society’.\textsuperscript{53} However, ‘assimilation’ is not synonymous with ‘adaptation’. For through their practices — from the banal and not so banal actions of everyday life to the actions of social collectives — individuals make claims for recognition and thus contribute to change in the relations of social recognition.

As some theoreticians point out, there always the possibility that some criteria for recognition lag behind social practice, and that ‘the “old order” can become the yardstick against which new conditions, new promises and their agents are measured’.\textsuperscript{54} The possibility of rupture between new conditions and old standards represents a conceptual link to, and facilitates the elaboration of, the normative lag between standard adulthood and contemporary practices.
Adulthood and social recognition

Personhood cannot be divorced from relations of social recognition; for the centrality of adulthood in modern life ‘has less to do with its position mid-way through the span of human life than with its apparent desirability’. Thus, in our attempt to fathom the social constitution of adulthood, the crux is this: our cultural association of adulthood with personhood is the meaningful constant of this social category even though social actors are continuously redefining its content. By extension, the actual deferral or rejection of adulthood as claimed by proponents of the prolonged adolescence thesis would entail a deferral or rejection of personhood. I suggest that this is not so. Rather, I propose that what is taking place is a redefinition of the normative ideal of adulthood; of its most entrenched expectations and representations at the level of practice, while the equation of adulthood with personhood remains the orientating reference point. The more closely our practices and behaviours match the normative expectations of adulthood, the more comprehensive will be the granting of social recognition, and the more deeply etched in individuals’ self-perception and bearing will be their self-understanding as adults.

Above I identified some classic markers of adulthood, such as marriage, parenthood, work, and independent living. These markers can be assigned specific criteria for ‘adult recognition’, that is, criteria for the validation of adult status that were particularly entrenched in the postwar era and have residual force today. Thus marriage attracts social recognition as evidence of commitment and responsibility; parenthood is associated with what Erikson called ‘generativity’; work entails recognition for one’s productivity and performance; while independent living signals individuals’ capacity to creatively realise their productive competencies in tangible form.

Importantly, adult recognition implies that being grown-up is not something we can simply claim for ourselves. As far as these classic markers of adulthood
are concerned, adult status is achieved in so far as the things we do and say, the attitudes and beliefs we hold and express (our habitus) match the social norms or criteria and expectations of what constitutes adult behaviour and attitudes in society. Subjective identifications and social validation intertwine.

As I pointed out above, the classic markers of adulthood were more than ideals for the post-War generation; they were achievable milestones for the majority of individuals who constituted the cultural centre of western societies at that time. Standard adulthood coalesced in the social imaginary as a normative ideal; it came to epitomise what being ‘grown up’ meant.

Today markers of transition to adulthood have become personalised, subject to individuals’ retrospective assignment of significance to their own particular passage to adult status. Attaining a drivers’ licence, any number of ‘firsts’, experiences of profound trauma or joy may be named as signifiers of transition. In other words, these transitions are deinstitutionalised and therefore do not constitute markers of adulthood in the narrow sense. In this context it has been proposed that ‘people are expected to carve out major aspects of their own adulthoods by means of self-directed maturation processes’, and that therefore, ‘adulthood is now more a psychological state than a social status’. How then can we reconcile the personalization of adulthood — growing up as a private endeavour — with the notion that the achievement of adult status relies on social (that is, collective) recognition? In order to explore this issue we must investigate ‘the particular manner in which the mutual granting of recognition is institutionalized’.

We can make first conceptual inroads if we take into consideration recent, and not so recent, structural transformations. For instance, the altered terms on which intimate relationships are based contribute their fare share of temporal uncertainty and their own set of insecurities as a trade-off for more equality. As for work, long-term careers in one organization are not only very rarely
possible, they also no longer attract positive acknowledgement as in the heyday of standard adulthood. On the contrary, the labour market favours those who are flexible, mobile and willing to change, and thus discriminates against those who want stability and linear, predictable work careers. Structural shifts from full-time to part-time work underpin these trends throughout the OECD. Moreover, there is some evidence that the desire for stability framed in these terms is also waning.

The commodity market too is a prime mediator between what might be called the ‘supply and demand’ structures of recognition. Weber’s considerations of status as central to social inequity were an early acknowledgement that consumption and consumer lifestyles were important factors of social recognition in modern societies. However, today the lines between age-appropriate or inappropriate consumer choices are particularly blurred and continue to blur. Market relationships render the boundaries between adolescent and adult behaviour especially fluid and increasingly anachronistic.

I suggest there are particular subjective orientations that enhance individuals’ chances for social recognition in the prevailing structural and cultural conditions, especially but by no means exclusively for individuals in their twenties and thirties. Simply put, the more the social imperative of flexibility becomes normalized, the better people are equipped to deal with the conditions of recognition in various social milieux. The overarching criterion for adult recognition is to be that which society posits as the logical subjective consequence: to be flexible, amenable and open to change in order to fulfil the exigencies of plural social environments, each one of which may be subject to considerable internal instability and flux. The redefinition of contemporary adulthood can thus be situated in a prevalent fluidity and pluralization of the terms of recognition concerning a social category that for so long has meant the
opposite of flexibility; that has meant — and still connotes — ‘settling down’, being at ease with your place in the world, happy to commit to work and love, ready to take responsibility for yourself and especially for others. Today, individuals’ ability to gain recognition is at least partly linked to their competence in negotiating their biographies within a frame of reference that is marked, in Bauman’s words, by a ‘fragility of bonds … in-built transience and “until-further-noticeness”, coupled with temporariness of commitment and revocability of obligations’.64 And so the normative ideals that constituted the criteria for adult recognition at a time when these ideals were commensurate with social practice have come to be incommensurate with present social realities. Yet, these standards continue to compete with the current fluidity of recognition. The implication here is that the normative basis for adulthood is no longer fixed.

The redefinition of contemporary adulthood can, metaphorically at least, be seen as ‘a struggle for recognition’65 that is marked by the assertion of social practice against residual normative ideals. This is not a collective struggle of a self-conscious class of individuals advancing claims for recognition. Rather, these are unspoken, even unintentional demands, elicitations that flow from everyday engagements with the uncertainties of contemporary modernity.

**From prolonged adolescence to a new adulthood**

I briefly indicated above that growing up could be understood as a process of integration into the world of adults. This is the consensus view in the social sciences which, however expressed, is accepted or at least implied by historians, developmental psychologists and others. Stanley Hall’s early work, and Erikson’s writing on identity formation can be cited as paradigmatic in this context.66 Lay knowledge also takes its cues from the notion that the ‘troublesome years’ of adolescence find resolution in adulthood, in which work
and love take precedent over more self-centred pursuits. Thus both at the social and psychological levels the road to adulthood can be described in terms of integration — integration of the self, and integration with the world of adults.

To utilise others’ more general conceptualization of recognition, adult recognition can be conceived as the medium for integration of individuals.67 However, the relations of social recognition are such that a once-and-for-all attainment of adult status is rarely possible. In highly differentiated societies social validation can be, and is, achieved in many different ways and in different spheres of social life. Furthermore, as Holtgrewe et al maintain: ‘The differentiation of spheres of recognition also means that should individuals experience a recognition deficit in one sphere, they can compensate for this with contrary experiences in another’.68 With regards to adult recognition this can be exemplified in the following way. Individuals may be highly competent at their work as far as the instrumental execution of tasks is concerned and gain recognition for this, but at the same time be deemed socially inept; they may be considered wonderful parents but unable to attain employment; they may be married, have a family and a home of their own but be unable to empathise with their partners and children; or they may be single and unemployed and still be a source of inspiration and comfort to their peers, and so forth.69

We may ask here: hasn’t it always been thus? The answer is both ‘yes’ and ‘no’. Yes, because competence in the public sphere has never necessarily gone hand in hand with competence in the private sphere. No, because often the force of recognition through the unequivocal acknowledgement of full personhood was such that those deemed responsible adults were for that very reason often in positions of unchallengeable power in the private sphere and were recognised as such by legislation. Recognition at work, for men at least, was often paralleled by recognition as the sole breadwinner and family authority which included the possibility that, as Erich Fromm put it, ‘[h]e might be a nobody in
his social relations, but ... king at home'.70 Also, individuals’ exposure to diversity was once relatively limited, and therefore those ways of life that were led by the majority remained largely uncontested by other claims for recognition, just as the opportunity and necessity to move in very different spheres of recognition too was limited.

The discourse around ‘prolonged adolescence’ fails to account for the differentiation of the relations of recognition, and the degree to which the validation of adult status has become fragmented in its reliance on various milieu-specific standards. Rather, certain roles are selected, generalised across the lives of a whole generation and then equated with immaturity. This allows the identification of an unfinished state of integration because it confuses what individuals do in particular spheres (e.g. prolonged stay in the parental home, deferral of family formation, etc.) with individuals’ self-identification and stance towards the world per se. This perspective, in other words, conflates meaning and function, identity and roles.71 Moreover, just as the adjective ‘adolescent’ is in common parlance usually a pejorative term,72 labels such as ‘adultescents’ and ‘kidults’, and also the social-scientific notions of ‘prolonged adolescence’ and ‘postadolescence’, convey the negative connotations that have congealed around the word adolescent. This naming enacts generational dynamics of disrespect, and is but one reason why this perspective requires reconceptualization.

I suggested that those actions and sensibilities that are most attuned to the contingencies of the present and best suited to the contemporary imperative of flexibility are those which stand to reap the rewards of social recognition. Thus practices that are most conducive to the navigation of uncertain social relations are likely to be reproduced as ‘rational response[s]’ to systemic uncertainty.73 This is no different when it comes to the specifics of recognition with which I am concerned. Forms of adult recognition have changed from the social
validation of modes of life conduct orientated toward certainty, predictability and long-term planning, to the validation of uncertainty, risk-taking and short-term projects. And so it is precisely those social trends invoked to be indicative of a prolonged adolescence, which are highly congruent with contemporary dynamics of adult recognition. These are practices that are part of the social grammar of a new adulthood that is emerging from the mutual constitution of social conditions and practices. This implies that far from living a prolonged adolescence, new adults are in effect particularly well integrated in a world that is radically different from the past.

However, the relations of adult recognition underpinning the emergence of a new adulthood are riven with contradictions. Practices may be at once structurally rewarded and discursively misrecognised because the normative ideals of another time remain most readily associated with what it means to be an adult, a ‘full person’. In other words, while labour and commodity markets help produce, reward and reproduce mobile and flexible selves, journalists, market researchers and social scientists misunderstand the affinities between social realities and life conduct. Thus, the new adulthood is marked by a recognition deficit.

But neither is this recognition deficit the result of one-way social constraint. Many new adults tend towards the practical rejection of standard adulthood. Their desire for stability in the long run often conflicts with proclivities for openness and mobility in the present. Thus, the recognition deficit is intersubjectively constituted. Importantly, it does not mark a deficit in adult status per se. Rather, it is symptomatic of the normative changes that underscore the redefinition of contemporary adulthood; it is a consequence of the tension between new practices and old norms, which is productive of social change and hence of new modalities of adulthood. And so, the fit between the
practices of young people and their social conditions renders matchless actors in time of uncertainty.

NOTES

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6 The history I sketch, and from which I draw, is the history of the economically dominant countries of the global North, which following Eduardo Galeano, rather than a neat geographical partition here denotes the ‘carving up of the global pie’ into two unequal parts in several senses of the word. See: E. Galeano (2000), Upside Down: A Primer For The Looking-Glass World, trans. M. Fried, New York: Picador, p. 26.


8 ABS (2001), Western Australian Statistical Indicators. ABS, Canberra; ABS (2003), Population by Age and Sex, Australian States and Territories. ABS, Canberra; ABS (2003), Year Book Australia. ABS, Canberra; ABS (2004), Year Book Australia. ABS, Canberra.


10 D. Smart & A. Sanson (2003), Social competence in adulthood: its nature and antecedents. Family Matters, 1, 4-9.

11 For a succinct summary of the ‘ages and stages’ approach to the ‘life cycle’, as the life course was then known, see A. Rosenfeld & E. Stark (1987), The prime of our lives. Psychology Today, 21, 62-72.


21 However, as Cheryl Merser reminds us, we should bear in mind that what became the standard for normal adulthood was ‘statistically as well as practically abnormal’. Merser shows, for example, that ‘at no point, in American history at least, did people marry and establish households as young as they did in the 1950s and 1960s.’ (C. Merser, “Grown Ups”: A Generation In Search Of Adulthood, New York: G. Putnam’s, 1987, pp. 68-72).


23 Firstly, standard adulthood was highly gendered in an era when men, as breadwinners, were overwhelmingly favoured by the labour market. Secondly, this was also the Cold War period, during which the total annihilation of the world’s population was a very real possibility, a fact that was brought home by the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, to name just one significant historical moment. Finally, it would also be a gross historical misrepresentation were this image to be generalised to include marginalised groups. Indeed, the kind of stability and predictability of life suggested by this model of adulthood is based primarily upon the experiences of white middle-class males — experiences that were lived in ‘mainstream’ families, and reproduced in mainstream culture.


26 e.g. M. Griffin (2003), “Tomorrow’s conversation topics today.” Sunday Age 7 Sep., p. 3.


32 Cunningham in O. Galland (2003), Adolescence, post-adolescence, youth: revised interpretations. Revue française de sociologie, 44.


42 ibid. p. 3.


45 ibid. p. 46.


56 E. H. Erikson (1950), *Childhood And Society*.


See, for example, M. du Bois-Reymond (1998), I don’t want to commit myself yet: Young people’s life concepts.

M. Danesi (2003), Forever Young.


ibid. p. 3.

This proposition should not be stretched too far, however. ‘Compensation’ must be understood in terms of relative equivalence: ‘You cannot, to give an example, compensate for being useless on the labour market by being a good [amateur] tennis player’. Honneth in A. Pedersen & R. Willig (2002), An interview with Axel Honneth: The role of sociology in the theory of recognition. European Journal Of Social Theory, 5, p. 272.


