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Growing Up to What? On the Grounded Theory of Adulthood as the Goal of Growing Up

Abstract: Adulthood is a complex social and cultural phenomenon. Although socially obvious, it is fluid in terms of its determinants and the time at which it occurs. The article attempts to answer the question what is it that emerging adults grow up to, and what is the goal of the process of growing up? The guiding objective was therefore to reconstruct a grounded theory of adulthood. For this purpose that qualitative research embracing semi-structured interviews was designed and carried out. The findings are locally embedded and aim to reconstruct the concept of adulthood prevailing in contemporary Polish culture, built on the experiences and opinions of Poles of different ages. The social construct of adulthood that emerges from our research constitutes the sum of economic independence, responsibility for oneself and for others, and emotional self-control. These features are also the opposite of the stereotypical image of childhood, as a time of dependence, carefreeness, and vulnerability. This means that growing up in our culture is a long-lasting process of transition between two extremes, but a process that only prepares one to a small degree for such a revolution in one's life, and this has its psychological and social consequences.

Keywords: Grounded theory of adulthood, emerging adults, social construct of adulthood, transition between childhood and adulthood, adolescent rebellion

Introduction

When posing the question about “reaching adulthood” and the phenomena or problems associated with it, we primarily have to determine what this “adulthood,” seen as the goal of growing up, actually is. After all, the term happens to be highly ambiguous. Adulthood has many dimensions; it can be talked about in a legal sense, when a specific age is understood as the moment of transitioning from the status of child to that of adult, this age varying historically and culturally. The currently almost universal age of majority, at 18 and the same for both women and men, is a relatively recent “invention”; it only became an international standard (with minor exceptions) with the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989.

Alongside this particular dimension of adulthood, no longer everywhere or always unambiguous, there are others. It can also be understood as the biological state of the human body (in which context the term “maturity” is mainly used, frequently—though not always

correctly—identified with the concept of adulthood). However, the phenomenon of physical maturity itself is also internally varied; an individual reaches maturity in different respects (e.g. sexual or neurological) at different stages of their life, and in addition different individuals do so at their own individual pace. Let us add to this yet another layer of ambiguity: adulthood in the psychological sense. This denotes a certain set of personality traits manifested by a person acknowledged in a given culture as an adult (traits that happen to have been rather arbitrarily established); this set varies not only between cultures, but also historically. Moreover, it is possible for a particular individual—despite reaching physical maturity and adulthood in the legal sense—to never become an “adult” in the psychological sense.

Finally, adulthood can also be discussed in sociological terms. In this context, it refers above all to the social roles played by an individual recognized in a given culture as an adult. Every community has a number of roles reserved for its adult members, and inaccessible to those with the status of children. Performing these roles, or having the social consent to do so, are signs of one’s social status changing to “adult.” The roles in question concern family life, work, ways of spending free time, various responsibilities and entitlements, public activity, and so on. They delineate what one could describe very briefly as the “typical life of an adult in a given community.” And this aspect of adulthood therefore has its normative dimension, and indicates the “social goals” to be pursued by an individual growing up.

Adulthood is therefore a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that is difficult to grasp both in terms of its determinants and the time at which it occurs. This begs the question: when do we really become adults? What is it that determines the social status of an “adult” in our culture? This article is based on the findings of research aimed at recreating the concept of adulthood prevailing in contemporary Polish culture, built on the basis of experiences and opinions of Poles representing different generations: from children in their early school years (from 7 to 10 years old), and emerging adults (aged 18 to 25) (Arnett 2006: 303; Petrogiannis 2011: 124), to “proper adults” (persons of productive age, in the age bracket of 35 to 55) and seniors (persons aged 70 and over). The age categories were adopted arbitrarily due to the research requirements. It should be noted that the research conclusions apply only to people in the age group from 18 to 55. This article is based on the analysis of respondents’ statements who participated in semi-structured interviews with a pre-prepared list of questions. A group of children in their early school years was subjected to uncontrolled observation, and seniors (persons aged 70 and over) participated in a focus group interview. Material collected using these techniques has not been included in this study. Our goal was to reconstruct the grounded theory of adulthood—though “socially transparent” (due to its obviousness)—social categories. The findings of the pilot study for a broader research project thus conceptualised have been used in this paper. Our interest focused exclusively on the psychosocial aspects of adulthood, and we did not address issues related to growing up in the physical or sexual sense.

Initiation in Primitive Cultures and the Contemporary Transition to Adulthood

Initiation rituals were frequently organised in traditional societies to enable the transition of an individual or group from the age of childhood to adulthood, which marked a total

change in status. Individuals who did not undergo these rites did not reach the status of full adulthood in their communities, and as such were permanently excluded from numerous rights and responsibilities. Because of this, submitting to the initiation rituals of maturity was desirable to the vast majority of youngsters. There was no rebelling against adulthood or the prevailing norms due to the gravity of tradition and the high status of elders. The rites of passage performed the function of social communication, informing both novices and their community that an important social change was taking place (Markstrom, Sera and Amick 2015).

In traditional societies, initiation into maturity could vary in its course and the length of time could differ—perhaps one day, or even a few years [Van Waters]. Initiation differed between boys and girls, as too did how they were prepared, mainly due to the inability to capture the moment of physical maturity in boys, as opposed to the *menarche* for girls. Because of this, girls' initiation was mainly individual, and within the immediate family, while the initiation for boys tended more often to have the rank of a public event—planned and prepared. Likewise, boys' physical maturity was not a condition for attaining social maturity, and sometimes they even had to wait a few years for their initiation ceremony, while with girls these two aspects—physical and social maturity—were connected. Girls grew up mainly to take on the roles of wives, mothers and workers, while boys were more likely to grow up for public or military functions (Van Waters 1913).

Irrespective of the gender of the initiates, the duration or the complexity of the rituals, each initiation was a rite of passage, and as such the individuals or groups undergoing it were granted a separate status for the period (Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1986/2005). This meant them being temporarily excluded from the community, sometimes literally, even as a kind of temporal exile. Their return and acquisition of their new status was only possible after having fulfilled the demands of the rites of passage (Eliade 1959/1997; Bettelheim 1962; Van Waters 1913). In contemporary society, reaching adulthood occurs above all in a processual manner (Markstrom et al. 2015). During this time interval, the individual's social status changes on several occasions, depending on their stages of education, vocational experience, and whether they start their own family. Achieving each of these stages keeps the individual in a particular group within the social structure—and at no stage are they excluded from society, in contrast to the practice in initiations in traditional cultures. Nevertheless, certain taboos remain today, sanctioned in the legal constructs of age thresholds (Sironi 2015).

What does significantly differentiate the transition to adulthood in contemporary societies from that in traditional ones is the presence of adolescent rebellion. In this paper, adolescent negation and resistance are understood as a form of opposing those objects and states of affairs that the individual perceives as constraining and incompatible with their expectations and notions, and which persons who are already adults represent and practice (Oleszkowicz and Bąk 1997: 99). Adolescent rebellion combines two aspects: internal (connected to the experiencing of powerful emotions with negative overtones, such as anger, sadness and fear) and external (involving the display of feelings resulting from internal experiences, and aimed at breaking legal and moral norms or passivity towards them) (Oleszkowicz and Bąk 1997: 100).

To summarize, as opposed to the traditional and relatively short-lived model of *rites de passage*, society today is dominated by the stretched-out model of *passage sans*

rites (Lipska and Zagórska 2011: 9). There has been a transformation from the ritual assumption of identity in traditional collectivist societies to the model of individual identity construction in contemporary post-traditional societies (Joniec-Bubula 2000; Zagórska et al. 2012). Public rituals involved ritually marking a person's transition to full membership in the group. They also connected individuals to the community, and the community to the broader and more powerful spiritual world. In postmodern society, the gradation, duration, and different times at which different individuals reach adult status have evolved into a whole period of development, which in turn has made collective ceremonies obsolete. Thus, public and ceremonial rituals virtually disappeared, and growing up became largely a private and subjective matter. For society and the developed secular state apparatus, gradual maturity becomes only a binary variable that is confirmed by certificates (of age, education, etc.).

Methodology

The findings presented in this article come from research that was conducted within the framework of the research grant: "Adulthood as a social construct: research practices for students of the IASS of the University of Warsaw," funded by the program "Excellence Initiative—Research University" at the University of Warsaw. The data were collected in September 2022 in Płock, a medium-sized city (with a population of ca. 115,000; (Polska w liczbach, n.d.)) in central Poland. The community studied was ethnically homogenous. This locality was chosen for the survey because it made it possible to reach the number of respondents planned in the project who met the criteria specified, and also guaranteed access to such public places as playgrounds, parks, eating establishments and large-format stores in which observations of so-called "adulthood distinction practices" were conducted.

The data were gathered during field research by second-year bachelor degree students from the Institute of Applied Social Sciences of the University of Warsaw. They were: Robert Jazdzewski, Andrzej Karłowski, Marta Kozłowska, Maksymilian Mamla, Zyta Ostrowska, Martyna Stępień, Aleksandra Tomasiak, Kamila Wołoncej and Kamil Zaremba. We, the authors of this article, were responsible for coordinating the research and supervising the practical experience. A total of over 50 individual in-depth interviews (semi-structured / partly structured with a pre-prepared list of questions and instructions) were conducted during the field trip, using traditional and face-to-face techniques, along with 100 uncontrolled observations using a standardised tool (record sheets), and one focus group interview with representatives of the local community (Lutyński 1994: 126). This was a pilot study, its aim being exploratory, and it enabled a preliminary diagnosis of the social aspects of contemporary adulthood.

The face-to-face interviews and focus group were conducted using a partly structured script, containing a pre-prepared list of questions and instructions. The research tool embraced the following themes: general associations with adulthood; its perception during childhood and adolescence; characterization of the process of becoming an adult; the ideal image of growing up; and changes noticed during adolescence. The conversations were recorded using voice recorders, the content then transcribed, and the transcriptions

constituted the basis for applying the analytical procedures used for the qualitative content analysis. As for the observations, they focused on searching for distinctions of adulthood in interactions between adults and children in public spaces. The description of the different situations is complemented by basic social and demographic information along with an attempt towards explaining the distinctions. This is accompanied by field notes prepared by the practical-experience researchers, and informal conversations summing up the subsequent research outcomes, conducted by the research supervisors. It should be emphasized that the research project used three different techniques of collecting material: individual interview (in-depth, but semi-structured), uncontrolled observation and focus group interview. The results presented later in the article and the quoted fragments of the respondents' statements come only from individual interviews.

Respondent selection was purposive, using a technique based on assistance from key informants and the snowball method (Babbie 1975/2004: 205–208). The respondents recruited for the individual interviews were split into two groups: young people (emerging adults), and mature adults. Simultaneously we controlled the basic socio-demographic variables of gender, age, education, occupation and family status. The observations conducted in public spaces also embraced children and adolescents (under 18) as well as senior citizens. As for the focus group only persons over 65, not working, and living on a pension were invited to take part.

The main analytical approach used to attain the results presented in this article was grounded theory. According to Graham Gibbs, this method focuses “on inductively generating novel theoretical ideas or hypotheses from the data as opposed to testing theories specified beforehand. Insofar as these new theories ‘arise’ out of the data and are supported by the data, they are said to be grounded. It is only at a later stage of the analysis that these new ideas need to be related to existing theory” (2011: 97).

The assumptions of the grounded theory method became the inspiration for proposing a system of coding the respondents' answers according to three stages recommended in the literature. The first of these was tied to open coding, involving the precise internalization of interview content and the identification of general-sounding categories. The next step embraced their clarification, in-depth examination and elaboration, while simultaneously searching for interconnections. The third stage saw the defining of the central category, incorporating and representing more specific codes. As a result a coherent message was obtained within the theoretical approaches presented (cf. Strauss and Corbin 1990).

It is worth referring here to constructivist and contemplative concepts, which allow for a better understanding of the procedures of the grounded theory method. The position occupied by the researcher in relation to the respondents and the role he plays in the process of collecting material and conducting scientific investigations are also important for further considerations (Kasprzak 2020: 155).

The main assumption of constructivism refers to the simultaneous collection of data and their analysis, and the concepts and categories that constitute the theory should be derived directly from the data, not taken from existing theorems (Gorzko 2008: 109; Konecki 2009: 13–14; Kasprzak 2020: 151–152). For this purpose, multiple comparisons are made of codes and categories created on the basis of the respondents' statements. The essence of this procedure is to draw attention to the connections between categories, as

well as to assign meaning to individual activities. Constructivist theories are embedded in ontological relativism and the assumption that there is no objective and all-embracing social reality, independent of human actions (of a supra-individual nature). As Marek Gorzko (2008: 12) notes: “Constructivist realism is expressed in a meticulous and empirical study of phenomena assuming the existence of a multiplicity of realities created by people.” This process takes place in a specific social, historical and cultural context and involves the mutual construction of subjective meanings by the researcher and the researched person (Niedbalski 2017: 133; Kasprzak 2020: 153). It is crucial to try to answer two questions: How do meanings and actions are constructed? And why is this done? (Gorzko 2008: 113). On the one hand, the aim is to recreate the respondent’s perspective, and on the other hand, to understand the purpose and motives of the undertaken activities, as well as to agree on the meanings. The basic tool in a researcher’s work is the comparison of concepts and a detailed analysis of phenomena. The goal is to understand the literal meaning of statements and their interpretation in sociological terms.

In turn, the contemplative approach is closely related to the researcher’s intuition and sensitivity, who should not base the observation of social reality on existing theories, ready-made assumptions and a priori theses. The key is to suspend the current knowledge about the outside world, which was acquired in the process of primary and secondary socialization. Thanks to this activity, it is possible to notice phenomena and construct concepts that faithfully reflect the views of the respondents, without imposing a ready-made interpretative framework. This means moving away from imposing a “pre-conceptualization” matrix to proposing categories coined on the basis of information collected in the field (Strauss 1987). As Krzysztof Konecki (2015: 63) notes: “Data can be analyzed, but we should remember that they are in our mind, and therefore we can contemplate the ideas related to them to notice their nature, see them as they are and what determines their shape.” Empathy and the context of the articulated statements are of great importance for understanding the views of the respondents (social actors). The researcher departs from established patterns of scientific conduct in favor of greater involvement in understanding the respondents’ attitudes (Charmaz 2009: 18). Contemplation promotes creativity in generating concepts and analytical categories, sensitizes to problems encountered in the field, sharpens the perception of empirical data, helps to see relationships between categories and teaches careful coding of information. Meditative reflection also allows for deeper consideration of the researcher’s own contribution to the process of scientific inquiry, introspection into the respondents’ way of thinking, gaining distance between the observed reality and mental constructs, as well as presenting conscious concepts and theories (Konecki 2015: 81–82).

Also important for the undertaken considerations have issues related to: reflexivity (awareness of the researcher’s influence on the responses and behavior of the environment), positionality (the location of the project performer and his interlocutors in the social hierarchy and thus in relation to each other) and related asymmetrical relationship of submission and dependence of researcher and participants. What becomes important is a critical analysis of one’s own influence (as a researcher) on the observed social reality and the research process, as well as their feedback. When the balance in the relationship with the respondent is disturbed, a number of negative consequences may occur, for example in the form of loss of trust, the appearance of artificiality and a sense of control in

interaction or receiving politically correct opinions (Wyka 1993). In the context of the conducted research, it should be emphasized that the influence of the interviewers (young students from a prestigious university) was small or largely limited. It was not noticed that representatives of various social groups (e.g. older people) were more or less willingly provided answers to student researchers.

Growing up in the Respondents' Narratives and in the Perspective of Research to date

The leading themes raised in the interviews, structuring this subsection into paragraphs, were analysed. Excerpts from the comments made are quoted here, with the respondents' sex and age given next to the quotes.

Change in the perception of adults during childhood and after reaching the age of majority: the adolescent and their immediate social milieu

We asked our respondents how they perceived adults during their childhood, and how they perceived them later once they themselves were slowly becoming adults. The answers obtained represented different variants of the perception itself and of the later change.

A number of respondents drew attention to the distinct separateness of the child's or teenager's world and the world of adults from the perspective of themselves as a child, together with the simultaneous lack of a need to connect these worlds. This is seen in the following comment:

To be honest, when I was at junior high school I didn't see adults at all. I can't remember them (...) They were altogether separate, I was apart, and I guess I didn't perceive those adults [F 21(1)].

At the same time these respondents usually displayed an individualistic attitude towards the social reality surrounding them, and accentuated their own autonomy in taking decisions at that time. We can assume that they were people who essentially were given a great deal of leeway by their parents, who perhaps even were not particularly involved in raising their offspring.

Some of our interviewees experienced a kind of "disenchantment" with adults during the course of their adolescence. This was tied to the radical change of the image of adults shaped in their childhood to that after having come of age. Significant others had previously come across as responsible, good, helpful people, conscious of the decisions they were taking, reliable and all-knowing, but as time passed they could no longer be counted on in all situations, or there was no longer that feeling of being safe in their company. And so authority figures were brought down to the level of ordinary mortals, and what adolescents saw as their faults outweighed their strengths. An example of such change in perception appears in the following quote:

First of all, when you're a child, adults are almost like some kind of gods who can decide about everything (...). But later, the older you get, and as you grow into your teens, that contact with adults is lost somewhere, because you start doing stupid things [F 21(2)].

The respondents' remarks also include ones that testify to a negative image of adults already being constructed in one's childhood. Narratives of this kind are dominated by descriptions recalling adults' criticism of trivial matters, inordinate attention being paid to details even making one's life miserable, excessive demands, uselessness and limited opportunities, distrust and suspicion, overprotectiveness and the exercising of power. However, during adolescence the initially unfavourable image began to give way to a neutral or even positive image. In this context it is worth quoting the following comment:

You'd think along the lines of what do adults want from me, they demand so much, they are silly [M 24].

Another group of respondents emphasized the necessity of verifying the once positive or negative image of the adult during one's adolescence. This is due to the process of gradually acquiring social maturity, in which one's sense of identification with the social category of adults grows, and at the same time one's earlier extremely judgmental labelling is softened. The respondents' opinions were therefore beginning to take into account the context and external environment, which was connected to leaving the family home, going beyond one's narrow circle of those ones is closest to, caused by moving to a different city, getting to know new people, starting one's own family or starting university. The significance of situational factors was emphasized to a greater degree, e.g. the appearance of offspring imposing new obligations and responsibility not only for one's own actions. The following quote represents this way of perceiving adulthood:

Once you'd begun making your own living then you perceived those adult functions somewhat differently. Meaning that then you actually had to have a job of some kind, you had to look after yourself. Then there's having a family, and taking care of that family [M 41].

The last of the identified respondent groups comprises those who did not discern any changes in their perception of adults from childhood to the stage of maturity they had entered. In opinions of this kind there was a greater emphasis on the significance of one's personality traits, age, experience, and an individual's development. Attention was drawn to the steadiness of views concerning adulthood and the way of talking with parents was copied in their relations with their own offspring, or to the absence of a period of adolescent rebellion. Of the comments testifying to there being no change in the image of adults, one could point to the following:

It's the same, since childhood. I meet adults because both children and adults are either calm or less clam. Quite simply we have different personalities [F 50].

The respondents were also asked about their experience of change in others' attitudes towards them when transitioning from childhood to adulthood, and in particular when reaching the age of majority. In the respondents' opinion, one's immediate social milieu is varied in terms of reaction to one coming of age. In this context, the respondents singled out their peer group, parents, and teachers. The peer group does not (and did not in the past) change its attitude towards somebody who has reached the age of majority. From their perspective no significant change has occurred, since the entire social group has grown up in a processual manner, their relations evolving. Apart from this it was an individual event,

although one universally experienced. The consequence indicated the most frequently of having reached the age of majority in one's peer group, was being able to buy alcohol and cigarettes legally, including for one's friends who had not yet reached this age. Parents in turn occasionally expected a child to take up employment once coming of age [F 18]. And some teachers began demanding "adulthood" from such pupils, meaning that reaching the age of majority was becoming yet another pretext for attempts at school to keep lessons calm and serious.

As for how our respondents had imagined themselves as adults, which they recalled from their childhood, the following areas can be distinguished: relationships, material possessions, occupation, and looks. Two of the people had wanted to be fictional characters present in pop culture.

Experiencing the transition into adulthood

In our research, gender did not differentiate respondents' self-perceptions of becoming an adult (see also: Arnett 1998; Petrogiannis 2011). Certain differences were noticeable when analysing age. The younger respondents indicated instrumental criteria more often—mainly supporting themselves and living outside the parental home, while it was more common for the older respondents to go by criteria that were more reflexive and relating to general attitudes in life—mainly a lack of selfishness and accepting responsibility for one's own family. This characteristic shift from the "I" perspective to the "we" perspective was sometimes illustrated with the context of family and raising children

(e.g. Definitely the birth of your daughter, that's for sure, now you have to be adult, you have a child and all that, so don't get lost in your dreams [F 34]).

Where such a narrative is concerned, one of the young interviewees commanded our attention; she differentiated between the stages of growing up, pointing out the successive challenges that the anticipated adulthood might bring, and positioning herself somewhere in the middle of this trajectory:

I feel responsible, for example, and in that particular respect [I feel] grown-up, but for instance I can't yet see myself as a mother (...) but you could say that I've already reached that first stage of young adulthood [F 20].

The transition into adulthood is accompanied by a number of situations and events initiating a new stage in the individual's life. One could say that it is more common for people to experience a combination of various circumstances contributing to a sense of adulthood than to have single, unique episodes. In the latter case researchers have most often referred to familiar or hypothetical situations of the death of both or at least one of the parents, which simultaneously created the conditions for and the necessity of "quickly becoming an adult." It follows that adulthood is defined relationally in regard to the key elements that constitute childhood as well as is more often perceived as a long-lasting developmental process requiring concerted effort than as a state that is something stable and static.

On the basis of our respondents' remarks we succeeded in identifying three basic categories of elements introducing people to adulthood. They mark the stage of practical

learning to be an adult, which Arnett termed “emerging adulthood” (2000: 469), and which precedes the reaching of the socially recognized state of adulthood.

The first category of elements supporting the transition embraces the issues of responsibility and economic and financial independence, such as taking up one’s first paid work and related matters: preparing for and attending a job interview; having to reorganize one’s time, hitherto daily schedule and adjusting other responsibilities; eliminating tardiness; and shortening the time set aside for pursuing one’s own interests and leisure. With employment comes monthly earnings, but also the requirement to take care of other financial aspects—such as having to pay bills on time, doing one’s own shopping, managing expenses rationally, accumulating savings, and the skill of overcoming problems with monetary liquidity. As such, category appeared jointly in the respondents’ remarks most often with such terms as autonomy, self-sufficiency, independence and responsibility. An important stage in life according to the respondents is starting higher education, which frequently entails leaving the family home and moving to a different city or abroad. Other milestones are one’s first set of exams, renting or buying accommodation and furnishing it, and taking one a number of new commitments resulting from having moved out from one’s parents’ home to a “place of their own.”

The second category of elements initiating adulthood is related to its formal confirmation through the attaining or making of specific symbolic trophies of adulthood. For some this meant documents—such as their personal ID, testifying to them having reached the formal and legal age of majority, or a driving license, certifying the possession of skills and permission for driving a car. Some respondents were of the opinion that acquiring objects, devices, material goods or gadgets strictly identified with maturity—e.g. a car or a self-defense weapon—also testified to one’s transition into the next phase of life. The last aspect in this category is participation in activities identified with adulthood. Examples could include the legal consumption of alcohol and other stimulants, organising an eighteenth-birthday party, or being a conscious leader in one’s peer group. Signals from others in one’s community should also be added here—e.g. the formal Polish manner of addressing adult others per “pan” or “pani” (sir or ma’am).

The third group of elements is closely tied to other people, since it is they who support the process of the respondents’ transition and mediate in this process. These are authority figures, significant adults—parents, grandparents, siblings, school and peer circles, friends and acquaintances, as well as first romantic partners. These people are influential in triggering life episodes, they are company when experiencing these episodes, or they become the recipients of the respondents’ behavior and activity when growing up. In particular one could distinguish here the act of getting married and the wedding ceremony. A moment the respondents considered equally momentous was the birth of their first (or subsequent) child, entailing the new roles of mother and father, supporting the family, having to secure a higher salary, and finding more stable employment and taking responsibility not only for oneself and one’s partner, but also for one’s offspring. Looking after younger siblings or other family members should also be placed in the set of person-oriented responses. Some respondents had to take on responsibilities related to their siblings, previously fulfilled by the mother or father, due to random or tragic events. In this context the respondents mentioned such activities as preparing meals, getting younger

children ready for school, seeing to their safety, or buying their clothes. In other situations respondents recalled caring for an ill or dying member of the family, or circumstances brought about by a sibling getting married.

Summarizing these three elements demonstrate that in society today the period of adolescence stretches out over a surprisingly long period, one that can even last from the start of secondary school at the age of 14–15, especially when it involves leaving home to board elsewhere, up to the birth of one's first child—which in the case of women occurs most often between the age of 25 and 34 (Rozkrut 2022: 273).

The final category, an open one, consists of the remaining responses that could not be explicitly assigned to any of the three distinguished beforehand. It embraces situations in which there was an accumulation of aspects mentioned above. These were: starting military service [M 54], the interviewee's first and meaningful public appearance and participation in a debate [M 21], the death of a loved one resulting in accelerated growing-up and an enhanced sense of responsibility [F 46] and the loss of a pet one had looked after [F 57]. This category shows in particular, that contemporary becoming has stayed deinstitutionalized and fragmented, not only conditioned by individual biographies, but also to some extent accidental and contextual.

Similarly, a few respondents were unable to indicate such a moment or process in their lives that they could identify with the transition into adulthood. On the whole, the arguments they gave were that they could not remember significant facts from the past, that mental development stopped at the level of an adolescent, and disappointment resulting from a different and non-standard experiencing of adolescence, as being no different from the other stages of life.

Our attention was also drawn to opinions emphasising the episodic nature and multiplicity of situations and events testifying to one becoming an adult—

In my life I have the impression that a lot happened in various contexts, both emotional and physical. I worked in various places. For example I started work as a barman or waiter [M 46]

—and by delays caused by various external factors, if only to mention the COVID-19 pandemic:

I think time stood still for me, although I also think that it was all because of the pandemic. I didn't even notice when I finished high school, because I'd had remote lessons for almost two years, and didn't have a prom or other such things [F 20].

There was also a group among the interviewees that stood out in how they emphasised intentionality in the process of becoming an adult. This group comprised persons of different ages, and their perspectives also varied. Younger respondents drew attention to the intentionality of the process of adolescence: one should behave appropriately to one's age [F 18(1)]; “it requires a great deal of reflection” [F 18(2)]; “striving for it” [F 21]; consciously setting out on the path towards responsibility [F 22]; adapting to the model of “I have to behave like an adult and I conform” [M 23]; and the work put in—“maybe I'd work more on myself as a person” [F 24]. As for the older respondents, although they emphasised similar factors, in their case they had already been accomplished and were tied to learned self-control: keeping control over one's emotions [F 28]; acquiring responsibility for one's

own family [F 29]; adopting a “schema of adulthood” by oneself [F 44]; appropriate goals and responsibility [M 50]; and adulthood as a structured and obligatory “daily plan,” with no room for the pre-adulthood attributes of being laid-back, of freedom, or of spontaneity [M 54].

When asked about the changes that from the perspective of time they might have liked to made in their past during adolescence, the respondents spoke among other things about educational or vocational choices that they felt had been ill-advised, about the adverse consequences of specific choices related to family life, and about being too slow in making certain changes or adopting specific solutions in their lives. What is noticeable here is that decisions concerning education and occupation were presented as if there had been no realistic opportunities for taking different decisions (cf. Arnett 2000: 479). Perhaps the social perceptions of life order caused our interviewees to link these decisions to the period of adolescence and in a way to “seal” the choices they had made, even if they were still of working age. This is a pessimistic conclusion, especially in the face of the more general social and economic changes, where flexibility and readiness for lifelong learning are valued and appreciated. If one were to pursue this path, adulthood would be characterised by stability and consistency in sticking to one’s earlier choices, even if they were to prove insufficiently beneficial or satisfactory for the individual years later (cf. Arnett 2000: 479).

The issue of adolescent rebellion

Both aspects of rebellion—internal and external (Oleszkowicz and Bąk 1997: 100)—featured prominently in the respondents’ opinions. They drew attention to mood changes caused by the experiencing of emotions, displayed e.g. through crying, or failed attempts at suicide, irritation, verbal and physical aggression, boasting, affirming one’s sense of self-worth, courage, self-reliance, or struggling with the consequences of traumatic events. Comments emphasising the significance of the internal component of adolescent rebellion included the following:

I had several phases when I’d bawl into my pillow because, for example, I’d arranged to go out with my friends and we were supposed to go to a disco or something but my parents wouldn’t allow me to go. So then I was really furious, and sometimes I even thought I’d do something to spite them, that I’d do something—swallow some pills [F 46].

On the other hand, and significantly, the respondents referred to specific behavior that was the consequence of emotions—mainly negative—that they experienced, or in other words to external aspects of rebellion. Its manifestations included the inclination to verbalize rebellion by quarrelling with those in one’s close circles, partying and showing an aversion to study, and becoming addicted to substances or electronic equipment. Behaviors indicative of negation and resistance to the social reality were also manifested in changes to one’s external appearance, generally related to one belonging to a particular subculture or identifying with characters in serials, movies, or from the world of music. Respondents drew attention in particular to such issues as resistance, wanting to show that they were right, a feeling of parents exerting excessive control, the emergence of one’s first romantic relationships, a weaker need to spend time with the family and stronger need to be with friends, and to find ways around things that were forbidden, or disobedience in general.

Positive comments highlighting adolescent rebellion's significance for the stage of transition into adulthood constituted a separate group of characteristics. At this point we should draw attention to the overcoming of internal obstacles, opening up to one's social context, self-improvement, the shaping of one's personality, discovering passions and interests or learning foreign languages. The following comment testifies to this:

No particular form of dress, nothing like that, I wasn't interested—subcultures, pop-cultures—that always made me laugh. So I found myself in music, and so also began to learn languages [M 50].

What caught attention in some respondents' narratives was how rebellion was perceived as a manifestation of the transition to adulthood and the result of a lack of understanding shown by others in their social milieu. For example, a lack of interest on the part of one's parents resulted in a kind of calling for attention, displayed in eccentric clothing, partying, smoking cigarettes or becoming addicted to computer games. Behaviour that can also be placed in this category includes fighting against the dominant position of adults, wanting to highlight one's own distinctness and emphasise one's autonomy, the need to experience freedom not constrained by prohibitions and orders given by others, and stepping out of one's comfort zone. The following comment illustrates protest against one's existing social reality:

I dressed in black only. I listened to heavy metal music. Doc Martens, that kind of company. Perhaps it wasn't actually necessary, but then that was my form of manifesto, perhaps drawing attention to myself, showing something [F 37].

The last group of respondents gave non-standard answers that were not linked in any way with specific categories of perceiving adolescent rebellion, or they did not experience it at all.

In the first pool of non-standard responses the following examples appeared. One respondent wanted to demonstrate his opposition by having his ears pierced, but instead of the expected opposition this met with his parents' acceptance, and to his surprise they even suggested reimbursing his costs as a birthday present. In other situations, certain terms of speech became synonyms of adolescent insubordination misguided expression of resistance and disobedience: "immaturity," "stupid age" or "silly ideas." At the same time the interviewees emphasised the significance of adolescent rebelliousness in every person's life, because otherwise the need for becoming independent and settling down would not emerge.

As for those respondents who did not experience rebellion, they gave the following reasons for this being the case: excessive parental control, making it impossible for nonconformist behavior and actions to develop; changes in one's form of expression, from negative to positive; the openness of those in one's social milieu, and being able to rely on close family members in crisis situations; having strong personal role models, especially positive authority figures; and a significant adult skilfully explaining the consequences of rash deeds committed during adolescence. Other reasons given for not rebelling included a well-structured way of life, routinely taking measures, problem-free functioning in keeping with established schemata, and lack of interest in belonging to a subculture or listening to a particular style of music.

To summarise, the respondents' narratives indicate a high degree of heterogeneity and mosaicism in the perception of adulthood at the three different thematic areas/subjects: the change in image of the adult from before to after adolescence, the occurrence of adolescent rebellion, and the identification of situations and events taking an individual to the next level of development. The image one has of an adult during the transition can undergo significant reshaping depending on individual experiences, e.g. from extremely positive or negative to neutral. On the other hand, cases were observed in which the respondents did not notice any changes whatsoever in this type of perception. In addition the issue of adolescent rebellion comes across as diversified. Some placed a greater emphasis on its internal aspect, others on the external, positively valuing the occurrence of the rebellion as such or defining it as a manifesto and protest against the existing social order. Finally, the transition to adulthood was associated with various elements, from taking the decision to move out of the family home and start one's first job or higher education, accumulating trophies and material goods and undertaking "adult" activities, to becoming involved in totally new interpersonal interactions. One could say that the characterizations presented above fit quite well with the fluid, non-permanent, syncretic, fragmented and constantly projected perception of one's own identity and adulthood in general in the postmodern era (cf. Dubas 2009: 144; Bauman 1997).

Discussion

So *what* are emerging adults *growing up to*? What is the purpose of the process of growing up? The adulthood that our respondents are aiming for or have already attained is processual and multidimensional. If we were to construct a concept of adulthood grounded in our research, it would be a psychological and social state rather than legal status or—all the more so—the physical maturity of the body. This area is the reason for the diverse perception of adulthood, because these aspects have been decollectivized nowadays, unlike the legal and physical aspects, which—although still achieved by individuals at different times—are more universal and objectified.

The contemporary Polish "milestones" of adulthood that our research revealed are events of a private, individualized and diverse nature, occurring at different stages of life, and usually distinctly later than the attainment of adulthood in the legal sense. They may be grasped as situations making the individual aware of the necessity to cope by themselves with everyday life, although devoid of a universal social pattern. Young adults are surprised to discover, however, that subsequent individual milestones—unlike the former collective and arbitrary initiation rituals—are still not the end of becoming or completing. Today's emerging adults are therefore growing up to self-reliance understood as independence from parents—mostly economical, but also in regard to the decisions they take. The second element of the practical experiencing of adulthood is responsibility—for oneself, one's decisions and one's actions, but also for other dependent people, such as one's own children (parenthood was indicated as one of the "milestones" of adulthood) or younger siblings (in the event of the death of a parents). Finally, in our respondents' experience, adulthood is self-sufficiency; respondents spoke of this not only in economic terms (paid work, moving

out of the family home, and supporting one's own household), but also in psychological terms. It was also associated with self-restraint, understood as the skill of exerting self-control and holding one's emotions in check.

When we take a closer look at such attributes of what the interviewees described as their own "adulthood," we notice that the experience is the exact opposite of how childhood is portrayed in our culture. The stereotypical childhood is a period of carefreeness, of having no obligations (reinforced by the prohibition or at least restriction of children's gainful employment), of holding no responsibility (including legal), of innocence (including sexual), of being looked after, of being allowed to be emotional and sensitive, and—last but not least—of being protected from the "dark sides" of life (e.g. suffering, violence, death). Studies into the transformations taking place in contemporary childhood in Poland demonstrate that in many respects this period is becoming more and more radically separated from adulthood. Children are being burdened with steadily fewer household chores; the bulk of their activity revolves around education. In many Polish homes almost the only duty that children have today is to learn, to study (Krajewska 2022: 357). In more affluent families this sometimes takes the form of very extensive educational programs, which—in addition to the child attending school—anticipate a number of extracurricular activities, taking up most of the child's free time (Dąbrowska 2011: 120–132). Competition with others and the directive of continuous development also play a significant role in this socialization (Rosa 2003). Children's activity is thereby becoming specialized, focusing on preparing them mainly for a professional career—only one of the many dimensions of adulthood. When we juxtapose this set of responsibilities that children have today, a set that is shrinking and becoming increasingly homogenous, with the multifaceted experiences that make up becoming an adult in our respondents' narratives, we see that for a whole range of "experiences of adulthood" early and late childhood only provide marginal preparation if any at all. At the same time, there is no certainty as to what one should grow up to, since the deinstitutionalization of adulthood has taken place and individuals have acquired a tendency to become autonomous and seek their own ways of self-definition and life outside the accepted institutional norms (Rosa 2003). Contemporary Polish adulthood, similarly to other Western culture countries (cf. Molgat 2007), has become a largely non-structural phenomenon; the norms and expectations that define it (e.g. regarding the "milestones" of adulthood) often do not match the existing opportunities and conditions, which also turn out to be varied and fluid. Today, the normative pattern of an "adult person" can even be considered one of the "zombie-categories"—in a sense, it is "dead but still alive" (Bauman 2000: 6). Increasingly unpredictable adulthood takes place primarily in the sphere of individually differentiated praxis as defined by Piotr Sztompka (cf. 1991), which—furthermore—turns out to be inconsistent with childhood experiences. The experiencing of childhood largely involves subordination to the power of adults, restrictive and protective on the one hand, but on the other relieving children of the necessity to take decisions, to solve problems by themselves, or to bear responsibility. Paradoxically, the intensifying discourse concerning the rights of children and youth is not going hand-in-hand with an increase in the scope of their freedom. And this may constitute the most precise preparation for modern adulthood, which, analogously, drastically limits the freely understood freedom of individuals in favor of the power of deadlines and schedules,

analogously to what it is like in childhood. Our research strongly indicates that growing up is a time for transition between two extremes—from an absence of responsibility to full responsibility, from being protected to the necessity to cope by oneself with everyday life and its problems, from having no or only a few duties to being burdened with work for oneself and for one's own family formed as part of "becoming an adult."

Acknowledging the deep dichotomy between the constructs of childhood and adulthood in contemporary social reality allows one to take a fresh look at the problem of growing up. On the basis of our respondents' reflections one could reach the conclusion that the growing up is sometimes chaotic and has no clearly marked direction, because life is no longer perceived as linear, and identity and therefore some kind of completeness are a lifelong project. In our respondents' narratives adulthood understood this way is entered into gradually, with one learning by one's own mistakes, rather than due to rites of passages. What is more, retrospect does not facilitate the redressing of some of these mistakes in later life, because the respondents perceive them as assigned to adolescence, and that is now a time that has passed by.

Growing up is also not made easier by adolescent rebellion, which can fulfill the functions of testing various identities and trying out different lifestyles, sometimes innovative and challenging the existing order of adulthood. This is because the category of youthful rebellion includes aspiring for independence or practicing one's own autonomy and axiological-emotional self-sufficiency (Wysocka 2010: 100) as well as defining oneself in opposition to the expectations of the older generation (Oleszkowicz and Bąk 1997: 103). Therefore rebellion and defiance should paradoxically be conducive to one developing the traits or skills essential for achieving what our respondents recognized as indicators of "being an adult." But is contemporary rebellion able to fulfill the function of facilitating the transition process? The experiences of our study participants do not confirm this at all. They generally talked about their adolescent rebellion as something superficial, not leading to profound re-evaluations or the acquisition of skills useful in adult life. Many contemporary researchers of youth speak out in a similar vein; that youthful rebelling is even vanishing among young Poles was already mentioned at the turn of the 21st century by such as Świda-Ziemba (2005), Kurzępa (2005) and Wrzesień (2003). In their opinion, the causes behind this phenomenon are connected to social transformations. The rebellion is ceasing to fulfill the role distinguishing the actual process of transitioning from childhood into adulthood. The predominant conviction is that nothing can be changed anyway, so it's better just to simply surrender to randomness and inertia, just like adults do, because this is what the structure of contemporary social reality push. The lack of awareness today of the generational bond, the deepening atomization of interests, and the greater dispersion and loosening of social ties, which are becoming superficial, are also responsible for the disappearance of rebellion. Today people strive for cooperation rather than antagonism in relations between a child or young adult and parent, while the juvenilization of culture is responsible for parents increasingly often wanting to "match" to youth in certain aspects. In a prefigurative culture, the phenomenon of adolescent rebellion simply loses its meaning (Wileczek 2014: 225).

Some of our respondents drew attention to the paradox of "unadult adults" in regard to others but also themselves, emphasizing the subjectively perceived incompleteness of

the adulthood attained. This is an illustration of the lack of social distinctiveness of the phenomenon of adulthood and its ambiguity as a concept. These cultural transformations are responsible for such “unachieved adulthood.” It provides yet another proof of the incompatibility of “normative adulthood” with social praxis and confirms its status as a “zombie-category”: on the one hand, it is a point of reference for emerging adults, but on the other hand, to large extent it is unachievable and incompatible with the reality of adult life. The “real” adulthood may eventually “happen” (after reaching normatively designated transition points that are selectively given an intrinsic meaning), but it may as well never come (Molgat 2007: 506). Contemporary social reality is characterized by social acceleration, lack of collectively fulfilled patterns and fragmentation of life (cf. Rosa 2003). However, the condition of a modern individual is burdened by a lack of order, because his or her life is outside the linear timeline and he or she is subject to the pressure of deadlines and schedules on a daily basis. Identity has also become a lifelong project that never reaches completeness because there is no final pattern or state to achieve (cf. Bauman 2018). In this context, one can wonder about the relationship between structural conditions and the social praxis of adulthood (cf. Sztompka 1991)—can the latter play a morphogenetic role in some perspective (cf. Archer 2011) and modify the structure of contemporary adulthood? Or is adulthood becoming a social phenomenon whose inherent feature is the lack of structural order? Perhaps, however, the individualization and subjectivization of adulthood are only a temporary effect of the temporary social anomie that characterizes today’s society? (Zagórska et al. 2012: 97).

The adolescent today is suspended for many years between childhood and adulthood, and the period of the so-called *moratorium* is systematically extended (cf. Zagórska et al. 2012); adolescents tend to “try on” various elements of adulthood, striving for the fulfillment, the essence of which is unclear even to themselves (Zagórska et al. 2012: 34). In late-modern achievement society, with its transformation of the individual from *subject* to the *project* (Byung-Chul 2015: 48), achieving satisfaction in accomplishing an infinite number of possible goals—including “full” adulthood—may turn out to be a delusion. Moreover, as responsibility and independence slowly increase, it is unclear when this “ideal” adulthood would even begin. The disappearing rites of passage, so strongly associated with a kind of achieving and completing one’s identity, have been replaced by individual and arbitrarily designated breakthrough moments in the individuals’ lives. However, their breakthrough meaning lies mainly in the fact that they force individuals to change their habits and to reflect on their individual identity (Giddens 1991). At the same time, secularization and decollectivization mean that adults also do not experience their lives as a logical, temporal project and no religious or spiritual clues help give meaning (Bauman 2018). Therefore the attempt at answering the question concerning what contemporary youngsters are growing up to may be taken as a pretext for reviewing the present phenomenon of adulthood as such.

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The authors report there to be no competing interests to declare.

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