
Gendered Concepts of Maturity among Emerging Adults

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Emerging adults are people developing self-definitions. Over the last thirty years, this process has been examined by surveying emerging adults as to whether they identify themselves as *adult* rather than *child*. We wondered if the answers would be different if a survey used gender-specific words for adulthood.

Between *child* and *adult* lie many intermediate words-- teen, emerging adult, youth, young adult, adolescent --yet there is no gender-specific English term for an intermediate stage between *girl* and *woman*, *boy* and *man*. The Elizabethans used the word “maid” to connote this stage, but in current American English this distinction is lacking. As Korobov and Bamberg (2004) have observed, the construction of the self is “situated in language practices,” and the lack of necessary terminology may make adolescents hesitate to commit to any term that also describes seventy-year-old war veterans or widows with a dozen grandchildren. We speculated that emerging adults might shrink at gender-laden words even more than at the neutral “adult”; we were aware of Arnett’s observation that for Americans, “[i]n their late teens and early twenties, marriage, home, and children are seen by most of them not as achievements to be pursued but as perils to be avoided.” (Arnett, 2004, p. 6). We also pursued our curiosity about the *attractiveness* of mature status, sharing an assumption with Rembeck (2006) that “not wanting to become an adult indicates a risk of potential future problems” (pp. 711-712). We admittedly expected to encounter some resistance to our binary choice (Are you a girl or

a woman?) and the “labels” we supplied, partly due to our sense that individualistic young people of current times (Arnett, 2001, p. 135) would be reluctant to choose. But we relied on three follow-up questions to allow fuller, more nuanced answers.

Arnett’s survey in 1998 asked whether subjects thought they had “reached adulthood,” (Arnett, 1998, p. 304) but also asked them what makes a person a man/woman as opposed to a boy/girl. He did not apparently ask them as we did if they *were* a man/boy or woman/girl. He also

Even with the option of gender fluidity open to young people as never before, the English language tends to demand that mature males and females eventually assume the title of man or woman. While it is less cumbersome to survey simply by asking about adulthood without specifying gender, the present study explores whether young American adults, ages 18 to 21, characterize themselves as either *boys* or *men*, *girls* or *women*. The terms were used in order to identify possible gender differences in the development of self-perceptions.

Man, woman, adult: Terms used by researchers Three published studies share the name “What does it mean to be an adult?” with additional subtitles that vary (Lopez, Chervinko, Strom, Kinney, & Bradley, 2005; Mayselless & Scharf, 2003; Raymond & Heseltine, 2008). None bear the title “What does it mean to be a woman or man?” Many other studies have asked participants about adulthood using the word *adult* (e.g., Arnett, 2001, 2003; Badger, Nelson and Barry, 2006; Nelson, Padilla-Walker, Carroll, Madsen, Barry, & Badger, 2007) asking, “Do you think that you have reached adulthood?” One of this study’s authors conducted a small survey using the boy/man, girl/woman dichotomy (Farish, 1973), but the study has not been published. Males at the time were close to

uniform in equating adulthood with financial independence from parents; females were quite diverse in their answers but legal and biological milestones such as marriage and childbearing predominated as criteria. No females referred to “toughness” or suffering as criteria.

The use of the terms *man*, *woman*, and *adult* are used in many studies in non-specific ways. For example, Connell (2000) asked the question, “What do you think it means to be a man, for you?” in the context of life-history interviews of men only, and without contrasting being a *man* explicitly with being a *boy*. Even in a study limited to male subjects in a residential environment (Raymond & Heseltine, 2008), the term *man* is apparently is not used in the survey question intended to “tap the *young men*’s construction of their transition to adulthood. Guiding questions included: ‘what is an *adult*’ ... ‘when will you become an *adult*,’ what things will you be doing as an *adult*’ ...” (p. 201, emphasis ours). Interestingly, that study refers to the subjects as *young men* although none were over 18 years (average age of 15.9 years). Watts and Borders (2005) argue, “Gender role conflicted males have difficulty expressing emotions to other *men*...” (p. 271, emphasis ours).

Connell (2000) describes an interview subject who engaged in numerous facile sexual contacts and drug use in early years, then enrolled in college, reestablished his relationship with his mother, and as Connell puts it, “established a [long-term] relationship with a young woman” though the interview subject called the other contacts “girls” (p. 97). This word choice suggests that the scholar views the long-term relationship behavior to be that of a man, and so matches him with a woman. A

fascinating oscillation of terms follows as Hodvedt (1990), sets the same reproductive event in varying cultural contexts:

A 15 year-old woman becomes pregnant. If she is a rural Iraqi peasant *girl*, her father may kill her. If she is a Kalahari *bushwoman*, she may marry quickly and comfortably. If she is a middleclass U.S. high school *student*, she might stay unmarried and attend a special class for expectant mothers....Each outcome is part of an integrated cultural pattern...in which the reproductive capacity and sexuality of the *girl*...have different economic and social portent (p. 157).

Piran & Ross (2005), on the other hand, employ the fulsome term *adolescent women* when talking about those who have participated in “empowering activities” such as “implementing anti-harassment policies in their schools or banning the publication of advertisements demeaning to women” (p. 331). Other sources use the word *woman* in the context of the burdens both of biology and adult responsibility and expectations.

Terms Used by Participants—other studies

1. Watts & Borders (2005) note that when one of their participants says that he shows anger, he interjects the word “man”: “That’s the only emotion I really have. Temper. When something ticks me off, *man*, it is known.” p. 271. (Italics ours.) In American English, it is hard to imagine using “woman” as an expletive.
2. R.W. Connell mentions an Australian course “for *boys*...[at] a progressive private school” that implemented a “sexism program.” A student in it said, “I remember having to go and make a verbal submission....I remember having *all-male* groups and the *women* having *all-women* groups.... (Connell 2000, p. 145, italics ours.) This pairing of “male”

with “women” is unusual and may indicate that the participant felt reduced to a biological role whereas the females were accorded full-orbed, mature, identity.

3. The term the popular usage often matches with “girls” over about 12 years of age is “guys.” For example, Connell quotes one interviewee thus: “...[T]here was the usual dividing: the cool guys hang out together, and the cool girls hang out together....” The word “guy” is conveniently unclear as to the age of the person. Watts and Borders (2005) report high school males saying that expressing emotions was “unmanly”, but the article does not highlight actual quotations of the boys using that word; the subjects use the word *guys* for themselves and other males. In the same article (pp. 271-2, 276-7) the subjects use the word “guys” so much that eventually the scholars use the term, asking: “Do some guys need to feel really in charge?”

Despite the fact that most surveys ask questions without specifying gender of the term *adult*, Rembeck, Moller, & Gunnarsson (2006) assure us that “girls ...must dare to ask questions such as: ‘What does it mean to be a woman? What is expected of me?’” and that “they...need support to verbalize their feelings” (pp. 711-712). The literature does recognize that, for example, the word *woman* conveys expectations that the word *adult* may not; Harway and Nutt (2005) suggest that “an emphasis on giving to others and putting others first has long been considered a part of the traditional gender-role message for women in this culture” (p. 200). Modern psychological theories, as Rice and Else-Quest (2006) argue, “have reinforced the motherhood mandate, arguing that women are fully developed only once they have borne children” (p. 339). Concerning girls with eating disorders and social anxiety, Bucholz, Henderson, Hounsell, Wagner, Norris, and Spettigue (2007) assert that “...these girls may be less likely to express negative thoughts

or feelings while striving to maintain a socially desirable ideal of *the good woman*" (p. 162).

In interviewing middle and upper-middle-class white boys at a prep school, Oransky & Marecek (2009) seem to have used “manly” with “macho” interchangeably in speaking with the boys. This use of terms could have shaped responses.

Criteria for adulthood

One line of research has directly analyzed gender differences in self-perceptions of *adulthood*. In 143-item questionnaires for *emerging adults*, Arnett (2001, 2006) asked participants “*Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?*” and has found that the answers differed somewhat by gender. In one study (Arnett, 1998) young men’s criteria for adulthood were most frequently (1) *accepting responsibility for themselves (bearing the consequences for their actions)* (2) *achieving financial independence*, and (3) *becoming independent decision-makers*, while young women’s criteria were (1) *accepting responsibility*, (2) *becoming independent decision-makers*, and (3) *developing consideration for others*. Arnett’s survey and many of the results have been replicated by others, even in very different cultures, such as China (Badger, Nelson & Barry, 2006) and Israel (Mayseless & Scharf, 2003).

Other literature suggests that there are few sex-related differences in the construction of identity. Researchers who spoke in terms of adulthood rather than manhood and womanhood found that “most role transitions consistently rank near the bottom” in perceived importance (Arnett, 2001, 1997) both for male and female participants. Yet, Janssen (2008) says that masculinity, in the minds of study participants is “massively central” to maturity. This suggested to us that role transitions such as

marriage and childbearing might rank higher if the questions were asked in gender-specific terms.

Arnett's questionnaire listed specific areas where people might feel they had attained maturity. We suspected that open-ended question as to what constitutes the difference to the participant between a man/woman or a girl/boy, could elicit responses that might not surface otherwise. Arnett (2005) himself points to the value of qualitative studies of emerging adults, without prestructured response choices. For one thing, persons at this stage of life are articulate and insightful, he argues, noting that his original questionnaire on criteria for adulthood failed to include the one mentioned most often in the interview: accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's actions.

Research questions. Using brief open-ended interviews, we were seeking to discover:

Do young adults, ages 18 to 21 years, perceive themselves as men or women?

By what criteria do they define themselves as such?

Does it appeal to males to be considered men or females to be considered women?

What influences do these young adults report as sources for their perceptions of what a man or woman is?

Are there gender differences in the responses to these questions?

Methods

In order to explore these questions, we administered short oral interviews of 18- to 21-year-olds found on or near three different college campuses. Responses were recorded and coded for quantitative analysis, while a more qualitative analysis examined specific responses.

Participants. Participants in the study were approached by a research assistant in a public place on or near one of three college campuses in a midwestern U.S. city and asked to participate in a brief (no more than 5 minute) interview. The three campuses were a community college, an urban branch campus of a large state university, and a small, selective private university. Actual college enrollment was not determined. Participants were predominantly white. Research assistants stood in centrally-located, high-traffic locations on or near the campus, and stopped people who looked as if they were between the ages of 18 and 21, confirming that the person was in that age range, and asking them to participate in an interview. Participants were interviewed on the spot, while the research assistant took notes on a clipboard, with a total of 224 surveys collected. See Table 5 for the distribution of respondents by age and gender.

Interview protocol. Each female participant was asked:

1. *Do you consider^[SEP] yourself a girl or a woman?*
2. *What is the difference between a girl and a woman?*
3. *Does it appeal to you to be a woman rather than girl?*
4. *Where have you mainly picked up^[SEP] your ideas on what makes the difference between a girl and a woman?*

Each male participant was asked the parallel questions.

Coding and analysis. Once the completed interview protocols were collected, the authors separately read each response to questions 2 and 4, looking for patterns and commonalities. Working inductively, each author generated a list of responses that recurred. We then worked through these two lists together to develop coding categories for responses for questions 2 and 4.

For question 2, "What is the difference between a girl and woman/boy or a man?", the following categories of response were developed: financial responsibility, responsibility (without specifying what kind), independence, self-reliance (nonspecific) maturity (nonspecific), physical development or puberty, having engaged in sex/not a virgin, age, has own family/spouse/children, life experience (nonspecific), morality or wisdom, independent decision-making, emotional development, having a career, being other-oriented, and other responses that occur only once or twice.

These categories are not mutually exclusive; respondents often mentioned more than one category. Three responses, "responsibility," "independence," and "maturity," (or some form of those words) appeared frequently with no further explanation as to what kind of responsibility, independence, or maturity was pertinent.

For question 4, categories of responses included: mother (only), father (only), parents (if a response was coded as *mother* or *father*, it was also coded as *parents*), other family members, religion or church, media, teachers/school/education, society or culture (nonspecific), organizations/clubs, life experience (nonspecified), psychotherapy, own opinions, and other responses from only one or two respondents. More than one category was often stated.

Each participant's responses were coded for the presence or absence (1 or 0) of each category of responses to questions 2 and 4. Frequencies were computed and cross-tabulations made. Chi-square analysis was employed to identify relations between gender and response categories, and age and response categories.

Results

Responses to interview questions. The frequency of responses to each question is listed below in Tables 1-5.

Table 1

Responses to Interview Question 1: "Do you consider yourself a boy/girl or man/woman?"

Response	Yes	No	Total
Adult version	157 (70.1%)	67 (29.1%)	224
Child version	69 (30.8%)	155 (69.2%)	224
Total	226	222	

Table 2

Frequency of Responses and Proportion of Respondents Giving Each Response to Interview Question 2: "What is the difference between a boy/girl and a man/woman?" (n=224)

Response	Frequency of response	Proportion of respondents
Responsibility	59	26.3 %
Independence	59	26.3 %
Maturity	67	29.9 %
Financial	41	18.3 %
Physical	15	6.7 %
Had sex	3	1.3 %
Age	30	13.4 %

Own family	20	8.9 %
Life experience	19	8.5 %
Wisdom	13	5.8 %
Make decisions	23	10.3 %
Emotional	15	6.7 %
Have career	10	4.5 %
Other-oriented	12	5.4 %
Other responses	70	31.3 %

Table 3

Responses to Interview Question 3: "Does it appeal to you be man/woman rather than a boy/girl?"

Response	Yes	No	Total
Adult version	174 (77.7%)	50 (22.3%)	224

Table 4

Frequency of Responses and Proportion of Respondents Giving Each Response to Interview Question 4: "Where have you mainly picked up your ideas on what is the difference between a boy/girl and a man/woman? (n=224)

Response	Frequency of response	Proportion of respondents
Mother (only)	39	17.4 %
Father (only)	26	11.6 %
Parents	92	41.1 %

Other family	63	28.1 %
Religion	14	6.3 %
Media/Press	43	19.2 %
Teacher/School	13	5.8 %
Society/culture	46	20.5 %
Clubs/organizations	2	0.9 %
Life experience	18	8.0 %
Own opinions	19	8.5 %
Peers	31	13.8 %
Other responses	34	15.2 %
Observation	11	4.9 %

Discussion

Around 70% of participants identified themselves as a woman or man as opposed to girl or boy. 75% of males did so and 66% of females did. Of the males, 77% said it appealed to them to be men; 78% of the females said womanhood appealed to them.

Males who articulated full-orbed or nuanced concepts of manhood--concepts that included a sense of continued development and moral strength--found manhood appealing; the following are some illustrative responses of those who said it appealed to them to be a man:

“A man is able to stand up to any challenge and understands when something is out of his scope and is willing to ask for help.”

“[A boy] is still living life to have fun...A man is older, with respect to knowing the difference between what is right and what is wrong.”

“A man supports himself and others, thinks about others.”

“A boy is someone that does not have an understanding of life” but it appealed “Not really, but a little” to do so.

“A man grows and learns from his mistakes.”

“Boys don’t know how to treat a lady.” This person said he was a man and that it appealed to him to be one.

“Boys always take; men always give.” He said it appealed but he was still a boy.

“Responsibilities and morality.”

“When you’re a boy you don’t really care—you do what feels good. [When a man] you do what’s best for you and your family and your future.”

Answers by males that took into account physical development were few--7, or 6.6%.

One said, “Puberty” and another quipped, “About 4 inches;” another: “Facial hair.”

Females who included physical factors—there were 11 (9.3%)--named “losing virginity,” “a woman can have sex,” “career and child make the difference.”

To a participant, if manhood meant agentive freedom and future challenges, then manhood appealed: “A man can do what he wants”; “A man represents growth and wisdom”, but a manhood which already “has his life set out/planned, having his goals secured” did not appeal. A male who viewed boyhood as having more freedom (“As a boy it is easier because you can be immature and careless”) said it did not appeal to him to be a man, even when there were positive aspects to manhood: “A man is wiser than a

boy.” Another participant said that a boy will “always ask questions” and men “always give answers”; he did not call manhood appealing.

A few answers implied a sense that manhood was achieved when the lures of hedonism could be vanquished: “A boy likes to have fun” but this person said being a man appealed: “A man prepares for his life through means such as getting a good job, etc....a boy isn’t serious about the world.” “I think I fit in ‘boy’ by mindset because I still like to use my imagination.” One said boys were “stigmatized for immaturity” and said he considered himself neither a boy nor man, and that as for appeal, “Different situations favor each.”

Boy or man? A 21-year-old participant had this to say: “A guy; more than that, I identify as a third-gender person. [Criteria?] Don’t know: I don’t think that most ‘men’ develop the sort of maturity and sense of responsibility it takes to justify their self-identification as ‘men.’ Personally, I don’t really have any special endowed meaning for the word ‘man,’ and I usually only use it sarcastically. [Appeal?]: I don’t think there is a real difference--the ‘men’ I’ve been close to usually turn out to be douchebros, so no, I guess.” [Where picked up your idea?]: “Movies and clichés.”

With the exception of the respondent above, the more simplistic (one-word and/or limited to the very prevalent categories) answers to the definition question yielded the most negative answers about appeal. One correlation was clear: Answers that saw manhood as morally superior viewed manhood as appealing.

Six females (5%) said they were women even though they didn’t find it appealing; 11 (10.4%) self-proclaimed men said being a man did not in fact appeal to them, and 2 more said it only partly appealed. Only 4 males (3.8%) were equivocal as to whether they were

men or boys, as opposed to 9 (7.6%) females. These constituted small percentages compared to what we had expected.

Among factors that constituted the adult role, having one's "own family" was four times more important to the females as the males. Financial responsibility and independence were factors much more important to females, whereas a generalized responsibility was determinant for more men. Virtually no female responses referred to nurturing, or to considering others, the latter a predominant element of female answers in Arnett (2001, 2006). Females gave noticeably more *multi-factorial* answers than did males. Some examples:

"A woman runs her own household and may have a career and not in college. A girl is still dependent on her parents to some degree. A woman is more provocative, stands out, is noticed. A girl doesn't draw attention to herself in that way." This participant also said being a woman didn't really appeal to her—she was "content where I am" and at 21 said she was a girl.

"Being successful with responsibility" makes one a woman. "Paying bills is an important part. Having a serious relationship does make you feel more grown up." For this 21-year-old, there were "pros and cons" to womanhood—"It's easier to have someone tell you what to do."

"A girl is innocent," said a 19-year-old who was satisfied to call herself a woman. "A girl can't stand up for herself, doesn't understand the world around her—lives in a bubble. A woman is mature, has gone through difficulties and overcome them."

"A woman has matured from a girl through her life experiences and trials," said a 20-year-old woman.

11 males (10.4%) said religion, church or the Bible gave them their ideas about what constituted a man. (None of those were people who were “reluctant men.”) Five females (4.3) named religion, church, or the Bible as a source of their ideas on womanhood.

When telling of what gave them their ideas, 11 (9.3%) females used a word like “observing” or “seeing the example of” another person, while only one male did. This resonated with Padilla-Walker et al., 2008 in their claim that men have independent self-construals whereas women tend to have interdependent self-construals. (One might hesitate to call reliance on a religious institution or faith tradition an “independent” trait, but it might be that with a rise in anti-religious rhetoric and practice in 21st-century America, independence-seeking males could be just contrarian enough to identify with the religious rather than the irreligious.) All of the females who used language of “observing” said that being a woman appealed to them. For both genders, parents and family outstripped media as an identified shaper of ideas by about 4 to 1. School and peers were credited with even less influence.

A significant difference from Arnett’s findings is that his 2001 study revealed that a hefty 50% of participants were somewhere *in between* adult and child status, while only an average of about 5% of current participants felt somewhere in between. This project also contrasts with a large study by Blinn et al. (2008, p. 585), which found that *adult* “status was not significantly associated with gender.” The large disparity was surprising because we had hypothesized that the roles associated with the gendered terms would be more daunting to today’s youth.

The disparity can be chalked up in part to the binary choice offered in our question—boy or man?—as opposed to Arnett’s third option given as “in some respects yes, in some respects, no.” But perhaps we also underestimated the appeal of gendered maturity.

A similarity of our findings to Arnett’s and others’ is that “role transitions” such as marriage, loss of virginity, and children were either absent or averred to have little relation to the maturity question (see, e.g., Lopez, p. 5). Though one male herein said, “Men have kids,” our participants were mostly adamant that sexual experience, marriage, and parenthood had “nothing to do” with manhood or womanhood; more than one said something like this: “I know a fifteen-year-old who had a baby, and no way was she a woman.”

Conclusion

More analysis of the findings is warranted. A detailed comparison to the 1973 pilot study might suggest a difference between the cohorts. Of course, ethnicity was not noted or self-reported and might yield more nuanced findings, while geographical differences might be observed by sampling from other regions. Future questioning should probably challenge or follow up where the word “maturity” is used, since it is tautological for our purposes.

Some convergence appears between males and females when asked a gender-specific maturity question, but not as much as when they are asked about adulthood. More males derive guidance with “manhood” from their spiritual lives than the corresponding females, who observe others to form their paradigms of womanhood. Peers, school, and media are much less significant in that formation than are personal contacts with men and

women. For both, taking on responsibilities and achieving independence are overall welcome goals.

Statement of Potential Conflicts of Interest

None have been identified. Leah Farish paid surveyors \$1. per survey.

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