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# Establishing the core self and its significance developmentally : a qualitative exploration of the relationship between achieving self cohesion and entrance into adulthood

Joseph James Lacy

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Joseph J. Lacy  
Establishing the Core Self  
and its Significance  
Developmentally: A  
Qualitative Exploration of the  
Relationship between  
Achieving Self Cohesion and  
the Entrance into Adulthood

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between achieving self cohesion and the transition into adulthood. Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004) has introduced a developmental stage which is neither adolescence nor adulthood, emerging adulthood, during which identity exploration is occurring. This exploration involves the questioning of one's worldviews, relationships and career path. As this discovery evolves one becomes more committed within these areas resulting with a cohesive self. Drawing from Erik Erikson's (1950, 1968) psychosocial stages of development and James Marcia's (2002) identity development model this thesis will explore identity development and the entrance into adulthood.

This study sought to explore the several dimensions of identity: work, love, and worldviews and their relationship to perceived adulthood. A qualitative approach was chosen due to the wish to understand the participant's experience of how they understand adulthood, their identity and the possible relationship between the two. One-hundred thirty-three (133) participants responded to the anonymous open-ended survey with 73% reporting they were female, 88% identified as white and the mean age was 26.5 years. The findings of this study were consistent with the findings of Arnett's (2004) as the participants felt adulthood was defined by responsibility and independence rather than age or marriage. A large majority of the participants expressed feeling their worldviews and commitment to relationships and a career had evolved. This evolution was due to

personal experiences as well as becoming independent. In addition, emerging and perceived adults viewed adulthood as a process of individualism. This researcher proposes individualism is not solely becoming what Marcia (2002) would refer to as identity achieved, but also achieving the virtue of love.

ESTABLISHING THE CORE SELF AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE  
DEVELOPMENTALLY: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE  
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACHIEVING SELF COHESION AND THE  
ENTRANCE INTO ADULthood

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Social Work.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Recent literature has been challenging the traditional stages of development (Arnett, 1998, 2000, 2004). Traditionally, an individual would move forward from adolescence into adulthood, however as the literature and the results of this study will show, adolescence and adults do not feel the transition is as simple as becoming 18 years old or getting married. Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004) has introduced a stage of development he refers to as emerging adulthood, which is neither adolescence nor adulthood. Emerging adulthood is a stage in which an individual is exploring their identity as well as their commitment to love, work and worldviews (Arnett, 1998, 2000, 2004).

Erik Erikson (1950, 1968) explained the main developmental task during adolescence is to form a stable sense of identity. The transitional developmental process of adolescence to adulthood is often quite a difficult one in which an individual may experience feelings of confusion, frustration and low self esteem. Marcia's (2002) identity development model highlights the importance of taking the opportunity to explore one's identity, stating one is not able to become identity achieved without exploring.

Further research on developmental theory is necessary as it evolves with time. With the advancements in technology and changes in society from the days of Erikson, research is necessary to reexamine and refine the understanding of development in a world which is very different than it was a century ago. What does adulthood mean to adolescents and perceived adults? How and when does one become an adult? Also,



when does identity exploration occur? Is it during adolescence or is occurring later on in development? Does one's identity change from adolescence to adulthood?

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between achieving self cohesion and the transition into adulthood. Defining identity and self can be difficult as the two are often used interchangeably and seen as synonymous terms. For the purposes of this study, "identity" will be understood as an individual's morals, values and beliefs, reflective of their environment as well as their sociological and physical traits. "Self" will serve as a greater entity: a culmination of all of the layers of one's identity, it is thus reflective of their core identity which is not dependent on the environment. In the study, the researcher will refer to self cohesion as the commitment to an individual's understanding of their unique and distinctive qualities and how an individual experiences the pieces of their identity. Self cohesion will refer to the experience of becoming "identity achieved;" additionally, it will be understood as being specific to the identity formation stage of development as it is the foundation of an individual's identity and self.

Using anonymous open-ended survey questions, participants were asked to share their understanding of adulthood as well as how and when one becomes an adult. In addition, participants were asked to share their experiences on how their views of love, work and worldviews had been changed since 18 years of age. These questions were used to provide this researcher with an understanding of the participant's possible emerging adulthood experiences and their identity exploration process.

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter I presents the problem, rationale, purpose, study questions, and definitions are presented. Chapter II, the literature review, provides both theoretical writings and empirical research on the

understanding of adulthood and identity development. Chapter III presents the methodology for this study and detailed descriptions of the research project including how the participants were recruited, the questions they were asked and how the data was analyzed. Chapter IV, the research findings, will provide a general understanding of the participant demographics and description of the collected data. Finally, Chapter V presents a discussion of the literature with the findings of this study in order to provide a translation of the data, the strengths and limitations of this study as well as considerations to make in future studies.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This qualitative study will explore the relationship between the understanding of adulthood and identity development. This chapter will provide both theoretical literature and empirical research in order to illustrate the apparent transformation in the understanding of adulthood, identity development, and the relationship between the two. The review of the literature provides context for the study research question: “How does self-cohesion relate to the entrance into adulthood?”

#### *Development of Adulthood*

There has been a shift in understanding the developmental process of becoming an adult. Erik Erikson (1950, 1968) wrote about the eight stages of psychosocial development. Each stage included a psychosocial crisis, a challenge, which was necessary to master in order to move forward into the next stage of development. Failure to master a psychosocial crisis could possibly result in difficulty moving on to the next stage as well as reoccurring struggles with the failed challenge. The stages and respective challenges include: infancy (birth-18months) with trust vs. mistrust; toddler (18months-3 years old) with autonomy vs. shame and doubt; preschooler (3 years old – 6 years old) with initiative vs. guilt, school-age children (7years old – 12 years old) with industry vs. inferiority; adolescence (12 years old – 18 years old roughly) with ego-identity vs. role confusion; young adulthood (the 20’s) with intimacy vs. isolation, middle adulthood (late 20’s – to 50’s) with generativity vs. self-absorption; and old adulthood (50’s and beyond) with integrity vs. despair.

In his examination of adolescence and the conflict of identity vs. role confusion Erikson (1950, 1968) came to understand the entrance into adulthood, or young adulthood rather, as achieving ego identity and the virtue of fidelity. An individual who has achieved their ego identity is able to have a sense of who they are in relation to others. Failure to do so will result with individual experiencing role confusion. During the next challenge, intimacy vs. isolation, Erikson (1950, 1968) believed the virtue achieved was love. Intimacy meant more than simply sexual relationships, rather, it portrayed the ability to be close to others as a friend, lover or member of a community. Inability to do so would result with isolation. Erikson (1950, 1968) believed “fear of commitment” was an example of immaturity during this stage. This fear refers to both relationships as well as career, which is of importance in our industrialized society. As earlier mentioned Erikson’s (1950, 1968) focus on development was primarily around the stage of adolescence and he molded his understanding of the “eight ages of man” around this confusing time period.

Levinson (1986), on the other hand, believed there were only three stages to what he described as the life cycle: the initial segment – from conception – 22 years old (pre-adulthood); the final segment – beginning at 65 years old; and the time between being adulthood. Levinson (1986) strongly believed developmental periods were age specific, as he found in his research, with an error margin of plus/minus two years. His research was focused on adulthood development, particularly the early and middle periods of adulthood. He found within the life cycle there were periods of structure building and structure transition. Structure building reflected life stability, but that is not to say these periods were not stressful. Structure transition would occur during developmental

transition periods and reflected the reorganizing and rebuilding of an individual's life (Levinson, 1986). Levinson (1986) considered this process ongoing throughout adulthood as demonstrated in his nine stage model of adult development: early adult transition (17-22 years), early life structure for early adulthood (22-28 years), age 30 transition (28-33 years), culminating life structure for early adulthood (33 – 40 years), midlife transition (40-45 years), early life structure for middle adulthood (45-50 years), age 50 transition (50-55 years), culminating life structure for middle adulthood (55-60 years), and late adulthood transition (60 – 65 years). Levinson (1986) found this ongoing life structuring process in response to personality, work, and love as well as biological, psychological and social development.

Erikson (1950, 1968) found the adolescent mind in a state of moratorium, exploring their ego identity. Similarly, Levinson believed there to be transitional stages in which individuals recalibrate their understanding of themselves in the moment in order to move forward into the next stage of life. During the age of adolescence, individuals are exploring/recalibrating their understanding of themselves.

#### *Markers and Rites of Passage*

Entrance into adulthood does not appear to be a simple rite of passage denoted by age or a concrete accomplishment such as graduating from high school or getting married. Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004) states historically, marriage has been the marker of adulthood in most traditional, non-Westernized cultures, as well as here in the United States through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Also, an eighteen year old is no longer legally considered a minor in the United States. At 18 years old, an individual finishes high school, often moves out of their parent's residence, is eligible to vote and to join the

armed forces. Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004) argues however, becoming 18 years old no longer translates into a rite of passage in becoming an adult.

Around 1960 the median age of young people getting married began to rise and continued to do so well into the mid 1990's. The rise in age corresponded with the dedication to individualism, thus resulting with the demise of marriage being a significant marker of adulthood status (Arnett, 1998, 2000, 2004). Individualism became the marker of adulthood. Adulthood began to be understood as a transitional process rather than marked by a single event such as an 18<sup>th</sup> birthday or marriage. The process of becoming an adult is an intangible and ambiguous process, which is unique and personal. This process fosters the growth of one's qualities of character, perhaps better understood as their moral identity (Arnett, 1998, 2000, 2004).

Fussell and Furstenberg (2004) believed the concept of a shift in development was a result of more available options and a widening of choices for individuals rising from adolescence. The authors further explained the reason for this developmental delay was due to both the technological revolution and gender revolution. As the economy has shifted since the latter half of the twentieth century, there has been an increase in need for further education and skills necessary to participate in today's workforce. This, as well as the increase in women striving to develop a career of their own, rather than the course of becoming a home maker, has resulted in a delay in marriage and family planning. As the world becomes more complex, more life paths and options emerge, and the transition to adulthood becomes more difficult to define (Fussell & Furstenberg, 2004; Furstenberg & Gauthier, 2004).

Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004) describes the late teens through the early twenties of most individual's lives as "the most volitional years of life" and has identified this developmental time as emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is neither adolescence nor young adulthood. According to Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004), emerging adulthood occurs roughly between the ages of 18 – 25, however, he notes that age is only a rough indicator as the transition into adulthood is a unique and personal experience. In his research, he found individual's no longer view marriage as the marker of entrance into adulthood. Rather, they see adulthood as a point in life where they begin to take responsibility for their actions and consequences, are able to make independent decisions, no longer are self oriented and are more considerate of others, are financially independent, and are less likely to participate in risky behaviors (unprotected sex, drunk driving, etc) (Arnett, 1998, 2000, 2004). Arnett's (1998, 2000, 2004) model of emerging adulthood is parallel to the works of Levinson (1986). Levinson (1986) believed the 20's and 30's to be the "peak years of the life cycle" recognizing these years as a time period allowing individuals to explore and take risks, with experiences of great satisfaction and disappointment as well. The two authors share the understanding that there are stages of exploration and commitment between the ages of 18-24 roughly, however, Arnett's (1998, 2000, 2004) more recent research has expanded and modified Levinson's (1986) understanding of early adulthood development and has provided more recent research of what adulthood means to those individuals who are emerging or perceived adults.

### *The Self*

Theoretical research on the understanding of the self is perplexing as the experience of self is quite subjective. The literature provides a great understanding of

how multi-dimensional the concept of self and the different pieces some feel are pivotal in understanding the elusive topic. The self is a unique, personal and complex concept and to define it can be quite difficult. The following literature will provide important information to assist in understanding the many facets of the self as well as giving words to an intangible experience.

Within all theories of adulthood, identity appears to be a reoccurring theme. Understanding identity however, can be difficult as it is often tied closely with the concept of self. One's personal identity can most simply be defined as one's distinctiveness compared to others (Schaffer, 2006). Associated with a personal identity is an individual's sense of self. Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary defines the self as "the entire person of an individual" and "the union of the elements (body, emotions, thoughts, and sensations) that constitute the individuality and identity of that person" (as cited in Berzoff et al., 2002).

Schaffer (2006) explains in *Key Concepts in Developmental Psychology*, understanding the true definition of the self can be confusing due to the multiple definitions and personal perspectives scholars have in regards to these concepts. The idea of the self has been theorized by philosophers such as Socrates and St. Augustine and forward, however, William James was the first to take a scientific approach in understanding the nature of the self (Schaffer, 2006). James understood the self as having two aspects of the self: the I-self and the Me-Self. James defined the I-self as "the subjective self... which thinks and feels... organizes and interprets experiences in a purely subjective manner and which is aware of one's own distinctiveness and personal continuity;" whereas he envisioned the Me-self as "the objective self... the way we



define ourselves in terms of personal qualities and as a member of particular categories such as age, gender, and ethnicity” (as cited in Schaffer, 2006, p.75). Cooley explains in his notion of the ‘looking-glass self’ we most clearly come to view ourselves initially with how others view us. But it is important to recognize “without social experience, there would be no self” (as cited in Schaffer, 2006, p. 76).

Similar to James, Schaffer (2006) believed the concept of the self as being far too complex to be seen as a “simple, unitary concept.” He believed the self can be more easily understood if examined as a system of three different aspects: self-awareness, self-concept, and self-esteem. The self system was understood as “the multifaceted theory that all individuals construct in the course of development as to who they are and how to fit into society, based on a sense of continuing identity at the core of one’s awareness” (Schaffer, 2006, p. 74).

Self-awareness is defined as “the realization by children that they are each distinct beings – an entity separate from all others and possessing an identity of their own” (Schaffer, 2006, p. 77). This is an integral part of the sense of self and is the first to emerge, occurring gradually during the child’s first two years. Self-concept is defined as “the specific mental representation individuals build up of themselves, in order to provide an answer to the question ‘Who am I?’” (Schaffer, 2006). This can be seen developmentally by the child’s increasing concern with psychological characteristics, seen through I-statements. Self-esteem is defined as “the value that individuals attach to their personal qualities, answering the question ‘How good am I?’ and thus relating the worthiness and competence an individual experiences with respect to his or her personal attributes” (Schaffer, 2006, p. 78). Schaffer (2006) argued examining the self as a system

allowed an individual to have a reference base from which one could view their reality. However, it is apparent scholars who have written about theories of the self, have seen the world through their perspective, lens, theory, or paradigm. Thus, it is important in studies to define what is meant by this ever-evolving terminology.

### *Identity Development*

According to Erikson (1950, 1968), the main developmental task during adolescence is to form a stable sense of identity. Identity formation is a process located “*in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his common culture*” (Erikson, 1968, p. 22; italics in original). Identity development can be a perplexing period of time, involving a period of identity crisis, in which the individual experiences change, an increase in confusion and a decrease in self-esteem (Schaffer, 2006). Marcia (2002) explains the identity crisis can also be seen as a time of exploration. Erikson believed in order for an adolescent to achieve their personal identity they must endure a developmentally normal stage of identity crisis (as cited in Good & Willoughby, 2007). The identity crisis has come to be understood as “a period of confusion and low self-esteem that occurs as a normative event during adolescence” (Schaffer, 2006, p. 81). The identity crisis is seen as the major obstacle that lies in the path of an adolescent on their journey to adulthood. This ideological exploration and subsequent commitment is referred to by Erikson as *fidelity*. Erikson believed the ego strength of fidelity would provide those adolescents with the basis of love, care and wisdom in adulthood (as cited in Good & Willoughby, 2007).

Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004) believes there is a process involved in becoming an adult, similar to Erikson’s identity crisis. Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004) has refined the

understanding of identity development situated in adolescence explaining identity exploration occurs during emerging adulthood. Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004) explains emerging adulthood is a period in which a variety of life directions are explored and individuals determine which path best suits them. As one tries out these various life possibilities, experiencing both success and failure, one gradually moves toward making more personal decisions and committing more or less to an identity.

Personal identity development allows individuals to be able to have an understanding of who they are as well as to be able to apply their personal morals, values, and beliefs in their decision making process and commitments. These decisions include, but are not limited to, what constructs their social identity such as their future occupation, religious, political, sexual and social beliefs, and values (Marcia, 2002). Individuals undergoing the identity formation process can be in one of four periods at a given time.

Marcia (2002) believed the most common way for an adolescent to begin the formation of their identity is in 'foreclosure.' Foreclosure refers to the "unquestioned adoption of parental (or other authorities') plans and values" (Marcia, 2002). During childhood and adolescence, most individuals take their parents or authoritative figures words to be the ultimate truth, not questioning them or considering what they think personally. Marcia (2002) alludes to how some adolescents never leave foreclosure rather they continue to grow up and can be seen as "a more sophisticated version of their 10 year old self." Adolescents who begin to embark on their journey, and begin to question why things are the way they are, begin to think about their personal values and beliefs are seen as in a state of 'moratorium' (Marcia, 2002). They are beginning to explore alternatives and consider their personal interests as well as what they foresee as

being apart of their future. Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004) believes identity moratorium occurs more so during emerging adulthood, as it provides for more opportunities for individuals since they have relatively more independence than adolescents.

Marcia (2002) explains the best case scenario for an individual in the moratorium phase is to move forward into the stage of identity achievement. This phase is seen as the completion of the exploration of identity. The author however, does explain identity achievement is not absolute, understanding an individual might possibly find themselves later in life enduring identity crises again, and searching for identity achievement (Marcia, 2002). Erikson believed individual's who are identity achieved contain the ego strength of fidelity (as cited in Good & Willoughby, 2007).

The foreclosure-moratorium-identity achievement path is the optimal path however it is not the only path an individual may find him/her self. Some adolescents may find themselves in a state of identity diffusion, in which they are either unable or unwilling to explore alternatives or make commitments. Adolescents' exploration during identity diffusion is seen "more like aimless wandering than a dedicated struggle to find an adult direction for themselves" (Marcia, 2002, p. 202-203).

Another important concept to consider in evaluating the process of an individual's progress in the formation of their personal identity is the individual's identity style. Duriez & Soenens (2006) incorporated identity styles in their study and found three types (normative, informational, and diffuse/avoidant), which they relate to an individual's openness to experience. Normative style individuals stand by their respective identity structures and filter how they see the world through this lens. Informational style individuals are more open to explore and make decisions on their own after considering

consequences which may result at the expense of their decisions. And finally the diffuse/avoidant style includes individuals who are not interested or not able to consider their personal identity. Their study, which surveyed second year undergraduate college students, found individuals with the informative identity style were the most open to openness to exploration, whereas normative and diffuse/avoidant were negatively correlated to openness to exploration (Duriez & Soenens, 2006).

### *Empirical Research on Identity Formation*

While investigating the development of an individual's identity it is important to consider sociological factors, which may influence or alter the process depending upon their race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, as well as the characteristics of the family and other influential relationships (Duriez & Soenens, 2006; Mullis et al., 2003; Umana-Taylor, 2006). In a study by Duriez and Soenens (2006), the authors examine if differences in personality and identity formation are related to adolescent religious attitude. They surveyed second-year undergraduate students, with a mean age of 20 years as well as 323 10<sup>th</sup> grade students with the mean age of 16 years. The researchers discovered not only did an individual's identity style have an impact on the openness to exploration, but also found a relation between an individual's identity style and their religiosity dimensions. The findings of this study were adolescents with an informational-oriented identity style were able to critically evaluate whether religious content corresponded to their personal beliefs. Adolescents with diffuse/avoidant identity styles were believed to interpret religiosity in a literal manner due to an inability to question content. Late adolescents with normative identity style were found to be more religious as they have assimilated to their significant authority's beliefs and believed to be in a

state of identity foreclosure. Thus, an individual's identity style and commitment to a set of values as depicted by their respective religion also plays a role in the process and willingness of an adolescent to embark on their identity formation journey.

Umana-Taylor (2006) did a quantitative study, involving students ranging in age from 13 – 25 years and examined the influence of their heritage on identity development, as well as taking into consideration the family's commitment to their respective ethnicity and the ethnic population in the schools the participants attended. Similar to the results of the Duriez & Soenens (2006) study, Umana-Taylor (2006) found an individual's race and ethnicity will also have an influence and perhaps alter the course of identity development. Therefore, one's environment and social differences will influence the process of one's identity development.

Mullis et al. (2003) explored the relation of family characteristics and their adolescent's identity formation. They found the family and the parent's parenting style plays a role in their adolescent's identity development, but in addition found evidence of gender differences, recommending future research in this area. In a study examining identity development and attachment to parents in college students, Samuolis et al. (2001) discovered there were differences between male and female students. In addition, the results of their research indicated that females had significantly higher levels of exploration and commitment than male students (Samuolis et al., 2001).

It should also be noted that adolescents often find themselves in identity crisis as a result of a redemptive turning point. In a qualitative study by Good and Willoughby (2007), a major theme that arose was centered on identity crises occurring as a result of tragedies or hard times in the participant's lives. Their study primarily focused on

comparing the identity development of church attending rural adolescents to rural adolescents who were not involved in the church. The theme of turning points in one's life is an interesting one, because as Good and Willoughby (2007) found, these difficult times may cause individuals to reevaluate their commitment to their morals, values, and beliefs in regards to their personal approach to living their lives.

Grotevant and Cooper (1985) explored the interaction patterns found between the family and adolescents during their development of identity exploration. This study consisted of 84 participants who were Caucasian seniors in high school coming from middle-class, 2-parents families with one or two siblings. Although this study was very selective, its methodologies were interesting because they not only gathered data from the primary participant, but they also gather data from the parents, siblings as well as an unacquainted peer of the primary participant. Also, one of the methodologies involved a Family Interaction Task, in which the family had to plan a trip together. This approach provided a well rounded, non-biased opinion of the family dynamics.

#### *Importance of the Family*

All of these studies aforementioned allude to the importance of considering sociological factors, but they also reveal the importance of the family's characteristics and impact on the morals, values and beliefs which have been instilled in their children. In exploring the nature of our identity, the formulation of our identity is negotiated within a framework of interpersonal experiences. Family, in particular, is a powerful influence in the lives of adolescent's and young adult's lives (Mullis et al., 2003).

From a theoretical perspective, theories such as attachment theory, neo-analytical theory, and the theory on individuation in family relationships address the importance of

the family and their role in their adolescent/or emerging adult's identity development as he/she embarks on their quest to adulthood. These theories highlight that parents are expected to have an influence on identity formation due to the relationships with their children, which have been present since birth (Beyers & Goosens, 2008). Attachment theory highlights the need for exploration to start from a secure base, as the child does during toddlerhood. Identity formation and attachment theory share common beliefs in the importance and influence of relationships. Both paradigms consider the significance of the need for exploration, security, and the construction of the self through one's environment (Beyers & Goosens, 2008; Samuolis et. al, 2001). The neo-analytical theory emphasizes how the identity formation process is characterized by autonomy and "emotional separation" from an adolescent's parents, reflective of the concept of separation-individuation. The individuation from family relationships theory focuses its attention on the importance for parents to play a positive and supportive role to promote the development of their children's personal identities (Beyers & Goosens, 2008). Parents play a pivotal role in their child's identity formation and as Marcia (2002) explains when an adolescent finds themselves in distress they often go to seek support from their parents. All three of the theories demonstrate the importance of a supportive relationship with the parents.

### *The Evolving Notion of Adulthood*

The understanding of adulthood and what it means to be an adult is shifting. The process itself at one time was considered complete upon one's 18th birthday or at the time of marriage. Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004) and Nelson & Barry (2005) provide pertinent information in challenging the developmental process and examining how



adulthood is defined. Their claims are based off of empirical research, and their findings appear to support their hypotheses.

In 1998 Arnett conducted a study, with a sample of 140 participants ranging in age from 21-28, in which participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire consisting of 38 questions and take part in a structured interview consisting of two, two-part questions. The results of this study revealed the top three markers of adulthood by today's youth are: accepting responsibility for one's actions (94%), deciding on value's and belief's without influence from parent's or significant others (78%) and financial independence (73%). Only 17% of the participants answered 'yes' marriage was necessary for adulthood. The results of this study correspond to theoretical developments in understanding the transition to adulthood status. In the structured interviews those who answered 'yes' to the question 'Do you consider yourself to be an adult?' increased with age. This data further supports the understanding that adulthood is not an event; it is a process (Arnett, 1998, 2000, 2004).

Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004) focused on understanding emerging adulthood as a transformational stage in development. This was demonstrated by emerging adults explaining they did not find themselves to be adolescents, but also do not fully find themselves to be adults. Nelson & Barry (2005) explored what young people think about themselves developmentally and whether or not they feel they have become adults. They surveyed 232 college students between the ages of 18-25 comparing the developmental difference between individuals referred to as perceived adults, who felt they had achieved adulthood, and individuals referred to as emerging adults, who did not feel they were fully an adult. As they hypothesized, the researchers found that both perceived adults

and emerging adults shared a common understanding of adulthood , but perceived adults had achieved more of the criteria and had a better overall sense of their identity. The results were consistent with Arnett's (2000) understanding of emerging adulthood as a time of identity moratorium, trying out various life directions and new experiences.

Emerging adulthood serves the purpose of allowing individuals to explore themselves as well as experience change and various life directions, eventually finding what suits them best. During emerging adulthood, one is more independent than they were as an adolescent, therefore allowing freedom for the individual to explore new experiences and take risks. As one begins to make more enduring choices, they reach a point in which they are committed to their identity, their self is cohesive, and it is at this point, as Arnett hypothesizes, the individual moves on to adulthood (Arnett 1998, 2000, 2004; Nelson & Barry 2005).

Of the studies examined, the greatest weakness I have found is the inability to consider all of the sociological factors which may promote or inhibit the openness of exploration in an adolescent. When examining the process of identity development, it is important to consider sociological factors such as gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, religion/spirituality, culture and family dynamics to name a few. In Arnett's (1998) study, it is noted 94% of the participants were white and middle class. Although this does speak to the majority of America's population, the findings of the study do not speak to the process of becoming an adult for minorities or members of the working class. An interesting finding in the Samuolis et al. (2001) research was not only were there differences found between male and female students in regards to their identity exploration and commitment, but also differences in regards to the attachment between

the participants and either their maternal or paternal caregiver. Therefore, knowing there are differences in the formation of one's personal identity between males and females, it is important to have a balanced sample based on gender, unless focusing on one sex. Mullis et al. (2003) pointed out in their article, few studies have examined identity formation with individuals past the age of 21 years and research has shown that the formation of one's personal identity may take longer. Also, researchers must consider whether or not the human brain is able to cognitively reflect and understand their identity development as they are engaged in this process, knowing how confusing a time it can be. With that in mind, a major strength in the research by Umana-Taylor (2006) and Nelson & Berry (2005) is their samples included participants up to the age of 25 years, taking Mullis et al.'s (2003) concerns into consideration. Another weakness found in a number of the studies, is that the gathered data is self-reported. Although it is important to gather the data from the primary participant, it is also important, when examining the influence of the family, to gather data from the family members as well. This would provide a non-biased understanding of the family dynamics and relationships.

#### *Summary*

The literature points out the following: the understanding of adult development is becoming more complex, the markers for adulthood status are not clear in Western society, and identity formation may be more fluid. Erickson believed, "A sense of identity is never gained nor maintained once and for all... It is constantly lost and regained" (as cited in Arnett, 2004, p. 162). With that being said, it is this researcher's belief that establishing self cohesion is the foundation of one's identity. Therefore, future refinements of one's identity will be built off of this core self. As this cohesive self is

synonymous with establishing a sense of individualism this accomplishment reflects the entrance into adulthood.

Using the theories and empirical research on emerging adulthood, provided by Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004), this research study will examine the identity development theories of Erikson (1950, 1968) and Marcia (2002) to examine a possible relationship between the two. Previous research has not included samples of individual's past the age of twenty-five and not taken into consideration the subjective experiences of emerging adulthood, identity development and participant's beliefs of the connection between the two. Further studies are necessary to include more demographically diverse and older samples.

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between achieving self cohesion and the transition into adulthood. This study will expand the argument that identity development occurs during the transformation process of adolescence into adulthood. As Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004) has argued, there appears to be a developmental stage which is neither adolescence nor adulthood, emerging adulthood, in which the majority of identity exploration is occurring. This is in accordance with recent studies which have shown young adults are not considering themselves to be full adults at the end of adolescence (Arnett, 1998, 2000, 2004).

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The development of the pieces of an individual's identity is forever in flux and dependent upon where one is in their life, and if one is encountering new chapters or turning points, which may cause one to reexamine pieces, or even all, of their identity. The process of identity exploration begins during adolescence, in which one begins to question who they are, how others see them, what their morals, values, and beliefs are, and how they are unique. This researcher believes during an individual's later 20's to early 30's one finds their core sense of self, a solid foundation and understanding of who they are. Self cohesion can be conceptualized as achieving this core self. Biologically, at this time the brain is developed enough to allow reflection upon beliefs, experiences, identity, and the self from an intrapersonal space.

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between achieving self cohesion and the transition into adulthood. This study will expand the argument that identity development occurs during the transformation process of adolescence into adulthood. This study will seek to explore the relationship between self cohesion and perceived adulthood. Self cohesion was measured by examining the participant's experiences within the domains of love, work and worldviews as these domains have been mentioned in Arnett's (1998, 2000, 2004) studies. A qualitative approach has been chosen due to the desire to understand the participant's experience of how they understand adulthood, their identity and the relationship between the two.

This exploratory study used a cross sectional survey design qualitatively assessing the relationship between self cohesion and perceived adulthood. The study employed a

purposive, non-random sample to answer an internet-based, anonymous survey. The survey used demographic questions to assess age, gender and race/ethnicity, but primarily consisted of five open-ended questions assessing the participant's adulthood status and self cohesion experience. Understandings within the domains of love, work, and worldviews were used in assessing self cohesion. It was believed referring to Marcia's (2002) identity development model the open ended responses would reflect where a participant may be within their personal identity development. The study also explored the participant's understanding of their adulthood status and when, if at all, the participant entered adulthood as well as why they felt they had or had not entered adulthood. The design of this study was approved by the Human Subjects Review Board of the Smith College School for Social Work (Appendix A).

#### *Sample, Recruitment and Selection Process*

The study sample criteria consisted of individuals between the ages of 20 – 32 years of age who are United States citizens. Historically, 18 years of age has been the marker of adulthood in the United States, where individuals have typically finished high school, often move out of their parents' residences, are eligible to vote and enlist in the armed forces, and are considered adults in the justice system. This study, however, focused on social and psychological dimensions of adulthood. Based on Arnett's (1998, 2000, 2004) research, the transition to adulthood is hypothesized to occur in the mid-twenties. Thus, the age range of 20-32 was selected to incorporate those individuals who have had a few years to explore their identity as well as those who hypothetically may be able to share their experience in determining what marked their entrance into adulthood and when it happened as well. Eighteen and nineteen year olds were not included

because, as Arnett's (2004) research has shown, rarely do individuals of this age consider themselves to have reached adulthood. This study did not exclude anyone because of their gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion or class.

Participants were recruited by a posted recruitment letter (Appendix B) on the internet communication site facebook.com and via an email to friends and acquaintances who met the selection criteria. The letter introduced the study and invited participants between the ages of 20 – 32 who are United States citizens to complete a survey regarding their experiences and perspectives on identity exploration and perceived adulthood. Email and facebook.com are both resources that enabled the recruitment letter to instantaneously reach approximately 400 potential participants.

A non-random, snowball sampling method was used. Regardless of whether a potential participant chose to participate, they had the opportunity to pass the survey along to secondary potential participants as requested in the recruitment letter. The sampling technique allowed for the recruitment letter to reach potential participants nationwide. At the bottom of the recruitment letter there was a link to the informed consent (Appendix C) and survey (Appendix D) on surveymonkey.com. Participants demonstrated agreement to the informed consent by completing and submitting the survey.

#### *Sample Demographics and Data Cleaning*

Two-hundred twenty-nine (229) participants open and began the survey. Due to the high volume of participants, the survey was shut down and a rigorous data cleaning was performed to omit incomplete and frivolous responses. The omission process included going through each survey and identifying surveys which did not have complete

responses to every question. If a survey included one question which was not answered the entire survey was omitted. Ninety-six (96) surveys were omitted due to participants skipping or not responding to a question.

One-hundred and thirty-three (133) participants were used in the study. Of the one-hundred thirty-three (133) participants, ninety-seven (97) identified as female and thirty-six (36) male (Figure 1). Eighty-eight percent (88%) identified as white (Table 1) and the mean age was 26.5 years old (Figure 2).

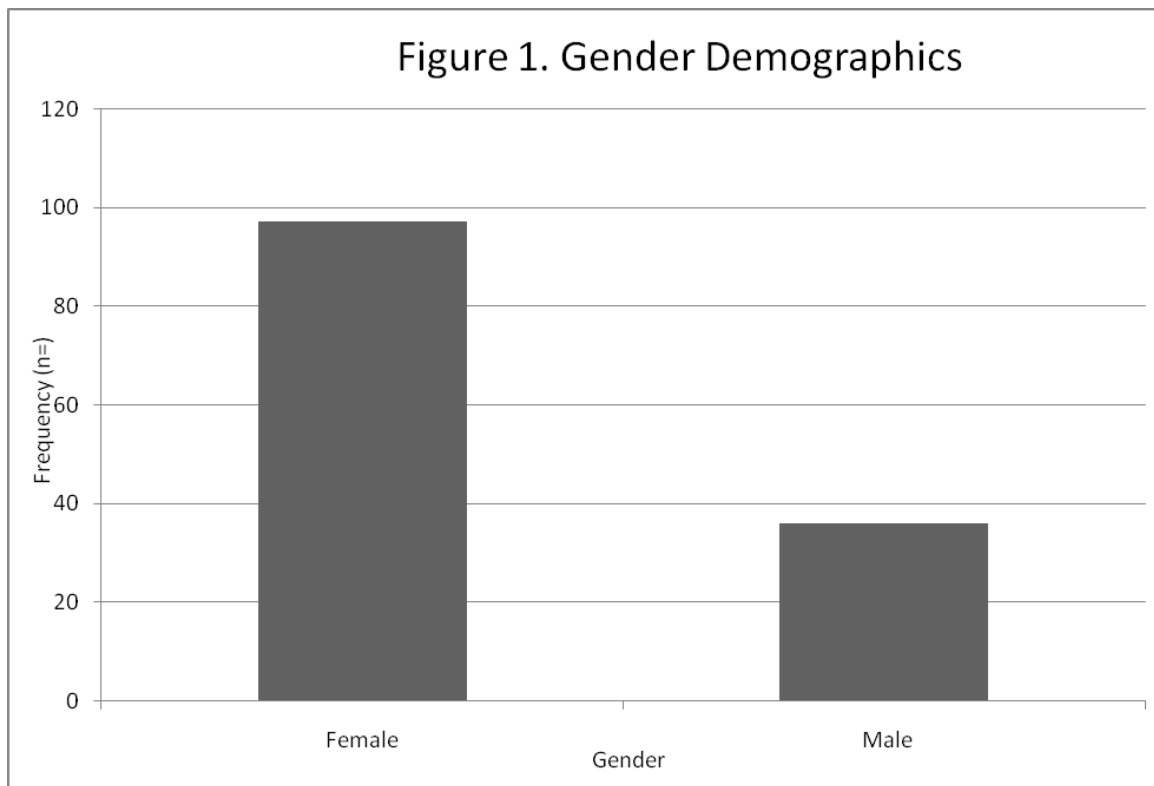
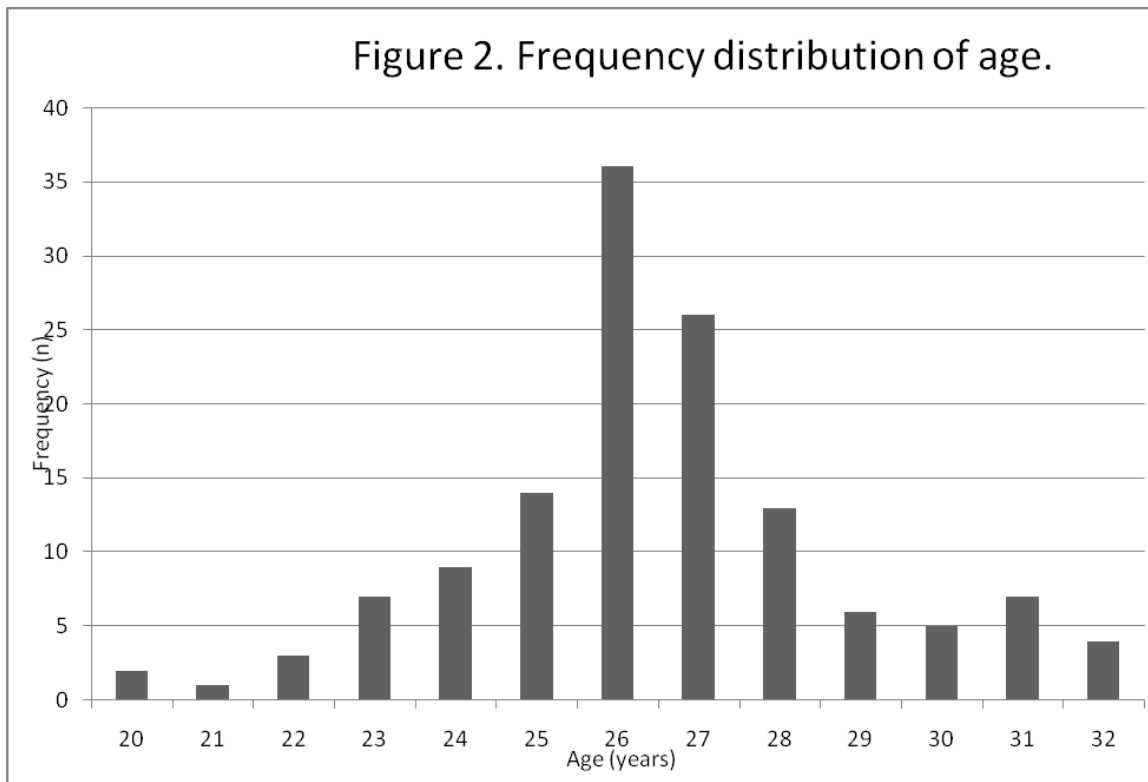




Table 1. Race/Ethnicity Demographics

<u>Race / Ethnicity</u>	<u>Frequency (n)</u>
White	117
African-American	2
Asian-American	6
Brazilian-American	1
Bi- / Multi- Racial	5
Other	2



### *Ethics and Safeguards*

All data collected was confidential and all participants remained anonymous throughout the study. Once the request to participate in the study was sent out, it was unknown to this researcher who had participated in the study because participants clicked on the provided link to the survey and no trace of the participants e-mail address or any other identifiable information was available to the researcher. The informed consent (Appendix C) described: who I, the researcher, am; in general terms, what I am researching and why; the risks and benefits of participation; the steps taken to ensure privacy; and notice that there will be resources for additional information and support should they wish to seek it. Participants were allowed to decline to answer a question or even decline to submit the survey at any point. Once the survey was submitted, however, the survey was not able to be withdrawn. Participants were informed that by completing the survey they had read the consent and agreed to its terms, thus indicating their informed consent.

At no point were participants asked to provide personal information other than their age, gender and race/ethnicity. Upon completion of the data collection process, all completed surveys were copied and pasted into a Microsoft Word© document, saved on a USB thumb drive and printed for coding. No copies were saved on a personal computer. Surveys remained in this researcher's survey monkey account until the end of data analysis. After data analysis was completed all data was burned onto a CD and in addition to hard copies of surveys, will be kept in a secure place for three years, as required by federal regulations and after that time the data will be destroyed or continued to be kept in a secure place. When the data is no longer needed it will be destroyed.

This was a low risk study. Potential risks of this study included putting participants in a possibly uncomfortable space, by asking them to reflect on their identity development in the anonymous survey. In discussing personal information and requesting participants to reflect on their experience exploring their identity, achieving self cohesion and their perception of adulthood status it was possible participants may have felt some internal discomfort. Referral information was provided on the last page of the survey, referring those who would like to further explore these topics to a national mental health provider locator website (Appendix D). It was assumed participants were able to access referral resources listed.

Participants received no material compensation. The study provided the participants an opportunity to share and reflect on their identity exploration, achieving self cohesion and entrance into adulthood experiences. The study will contribute to the understanding of the relationship between identity development and the entrance into adulthood.

#### *Data Collection*

Participants clicked onto a link that was at the bottom of the recruitment letter (Appendix B). This link connected participants to SurveyMonkey.com where they first read the informed consent (Appendix C). After indicating their consent, they were directed to the actual survey (Appendix D). There were two parts to the survey. The first asked for three pieces of demographic information, age, gender and race/ethnicity. The second part consisted of five open-ended questions. The survey requested the participants reflect on their developmental process from adolescence to adulthood, if they consider themselves to be an adult, and their understanding of their commitment to love,

work and worldviews. It was hoped participants would be able to provide an understanding of how come they consider themselves to be an adult or why they believe they are not quite an adult at this time. The survey took about 20 – 30 minutes to complete. The study was piloted by a group of ten (10) prospective participants, who ensured the survey directions and questions were clear and easy to understand. Data was collected for six weeks between January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2008 and February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2008. The survey was closed due to the high volume of responses and obligation to begin the analysis process.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis began immediately after the data collection ended. The data was analyzed using theme identification for coding (Anastas, 1999) with exception of the first section of the survey asking for demographic information. Demographic data information was summarized above in the Sample Demographics and Data Cleaning section. The demographic data was analyzed using descriptive statistics available through Survey Monkey. Data from the five open ended questions was converted into a Microsoft Word© document for analysis and coding purposes. The data was then further broken down into four Microsoft Word© documents. Each of these five documents contained all of the responses to the survey questions respectively. Questions four and five were grouped together and coded together due to the relatedness of the questions asked.

Each question was then individually analyzed for themes using an inductive “constant comparison” method (Anastas, 1999, p. 423). All one-hundred thirty-three (133) responses were read for each question. Each response was coded with a theme and

each subsequent response was reviewed to see if it fit into the theme or required a new theme. Themes were then defined and labeled as themes or sub-themes. If a response fit into more than one theme it was split up and coded with multiple themes.

A table was then created for each question, which included the defined themes and sub-themes in one column and the corresponding responses in the following column. Responses were read over again and copied and pasted from the document of responses into the data analysis table with respect to the appropriate theme/sub-theme. Once coding was complete the table was read over to ensure the responses were grouped correctly with respect to the theme and sub-theme definitions. Although reliability is not associated with qualitative analysis, by providing documentation for the analysis we can be assured that all data have been included in the analysis and the conceptualization of themes can be confirmed (Anastas, 1999).

The theme and sub-theme groupings were then reviewed in order to recognize patterns and frequencies of data. A worksheet was created in order to note the frequency of sub-themes amongst the responses. Again, although frequency is not usually associated with qualitative analysis, being able to indicate which responses seemed to resonate with a majority of respondents was deemed valuable. The worksheet was used to address the findings within the data and compare to previous studies. The final themes and sub-themes selected for analyzing the data were question specific. Each question did reveal responses which were unable to be coded within the major themes or related sub-themes due to a lack of information and/or the responses were believed to not have answered the questions being asked. These responses were coded as miscellaneous. One and a half percent (1.5%) of responses to the questions on adulthood status were coded

miscellaneous, 13.5% of the responses for the question about love and relationships, 16% of the responses for the question about work and career and 7.5% of the responses for the question about worldviews were coded as miscellaneous. The responses which were coded as miscellaneous are within acceptable ranges and understandable since the questions were open ended and prompts for further understand of the responses were not available.

Four (4) major themes and related sub-themes about adulthood status were defined for questions 4 and 5 and are defined below.

**Responsibility.** Participant's response reflected a belief adulthood was defined by a sense of general responsibility

**Responsibility - Personal.** Participant's response reflected a need to demonstrate personal responsibility such as: having a job, paying bills as well as making mature and thoughtful decisions.

**Responsibility - Other.** Participant's response reflected a need to demonstrate responsibility towards others such as providing for or being considerate of partner, family and friends.

**Responsibility - Accountability.** Participant's response reflected a need to demonstrate responsibility by taking accountability for their actions.

**Independence.** Participant's response reflected a belief adulthood was defined by a general sense of independence.

**Independence – Financial.** Participant's response reflected a belief adulthood was defined by financial independence.

Independence - Not dependant on others. Participant's response reflected a belief adulthood was defined by independence from others, such as family, friends and partner's; freedom and control.

Emotional Maturity. Participant's response reflected a belief adulthood was defined by an individual's personal growth

Emotional Maturity - Self Awareness. Participant's response reflected a belief adulthood was defined by an increase in an individual's understanding of them self , their identity, and/or a metaphysical understanding.

Emotional Maturity – Experience. Participant's response reflected a belief adulthood was defined by emotional maturity gained through an individual's life experiences.

Age. Participant's response reflected a belief adulthood was defined by an individual's age; identified by society as an adult.

Miscellaneous. Participant's responses did not fit into the defined themes or sub-themes due to lack of information and / or response did not address the question asked.

Three (3) major themes and related sub-themes about love and relationships were defined for question 6:

More serious. Participant's response reflected being in or interest in longer term relationships; relationships that are more genuine.

More Serious - Future focus. Participant's response reflected more serious relationships but are focused on commitment and future with their partner; participants spoke about spending life with partner or marriage.

More Serious - Personality/Character. Participant's response reflected thinking their relationships more seriously and focused less on the others appearance and sex, rather more on the other's personality and character.

Emotional Maturity. Participant's response reflected a personal growth which has changed their approach to relationships

Emotional Maturity - Self Awareness. Participant's response reflected an increase in self awareness, personal needs and wants, as well as an increase in ability to express oneself within the context of relationships.

Emotional Maturity – Experience. Participant's responses reflected an increase in emotional maturity which was based out of previous relationship and life experiences.

No change. Participant's response reflected a belief their understanding of romantic relationships has not changed since they were 18yo.

Miscellaneous. Participant's responses did not fit into the defined themes or sub-themes due to lack of information and / or response did not address the question asked.

Four (4) major themes and related sub-themes about work and career were defined for question 7:

Evolved . Participant's response reflected a belief their work interests have evolved or are evolving.

Evolved - Career Focus. Participant's response reflected a belief work interests had evolved by being more focused on a career path



Evolved - Personal Interests. Participant's response reflected a belief work interests had evolved by working within a field of personal interests and expressed feelings of passion, happiness and enjoyment.

Evolved – Experience. Participant's response reflected a belief work interests had evolved due to life and previous work experiences.

Evolved- More practical/realistic. Participant's response reflected a belief work interests had evolved by feeling the need to be more serious, practical, realistic and rational in following a career path.

Money. Participant's response reflected an interest in following a career path which allow financial stability.

Uncertain. Participant's response reflected uncertainty about career interests, frustrated, feeling stuck and/or is in the process of changing but unsure how.

No change. Participant's response reflected a belief there had been no change in career interests.

No change - More prepared. Participant's response reflected a belief there had been no change in career interests; however they expressed feeling more prepared to follow career interests due to education and/or experience.

Miscellaneous. Participant's responses did not fit into the defined themes or sub-themes due to lack of information and/or response did not address the question asked

Three (3) major themes and related sub-themes about worldviews were defined for question 8:

Evolved. Participant's response reflected an evolution in worldviews, specifically how worldviews have evolved, been refined and/or are being questioned.

Evolved - Open to other opinions and/or beliefs. Participant's response reflected an evolution of their worldviews to include more tolerance of others beliefs if not the same or are offensive.

Evolved- Open to reflection. Participant's response reflected an evolution of their worldviews through an increase in wanting to reflect on and question personal worldviews.

Evolved – Personal. Participant's response reflected an evolution of their worldviews by having more personal/independent worldviews, more confident/comfortable with them and embracing them more as well.

Evolved - Experience. Participant's response reflected an evolution of their worldviews based on experiences.

Uncertain. Participant's response reflected uncertainty in how worldviews may have changed and/or uncertain how to balance worldviews.

No Change. Participant's response reflected a belief their worldviews had not changed.

Miscellaneous. Participant's responses did not fit into the defined themes or sub-themes due to lack of information and/or response did not address the question asked.

The findings of this study are explored in the following chapter, Chapter IV.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

The researcher set out to explore the relationship between achieving self cohesion and the transition to adulthood. Research was conducted with participants ranging in age from 20-32 years in which they were asked to discuss their perceptions of their adult development and their views on work, love, and worldviews. In addition, the participants were asked to reflect on the interconnectivity between the dimensions of love, work and worldviews and adulthood development.

#### *Sample Demographics*

Participants were asked to complete an anonymous on-line survey. There were two parts to the survey. The first asked for three pieces of demographic information, age, gender and race/ethnicity. The second part consisted of five open-ended questions. One-hundred and thirty-three (133) participants completed the anonymous on-line survey. Seventy-three percent (73%) of the participants were female, eighty-eight percent (88%) identified as white and the mean age was 26.5 years. A complete description of sample demographics is found in Chapter III.

#### *Major Qualitative Findings*

##### *Adulthood*

Participants were asked to complete five open-ended questions. The first two questions addressed the understanding of adulthood and read: “Do you consider yourself to be an adult? Why/Why not? What does it mean to be an adult? What indicates adult status?”. One-hundred eight (108) participants believed they were adults, seven (7) did

not consider themselves to be adults and eighteen (18) participants were uncertain answering yes and no to the question. Analysis of participants' responses to how they understood adulthood status resulted in four (4) major themes: responsibility, independence, emotional maturity and age. Responses which were unable to be coded within the above themes due to lack of information, were coded under the theme miscellaneous. Of the four major themes, responsibility (n=77) was mentioned most frequently followed by independence (n=59), emotional maturity (n=25), and age (n=24) (Table 2). Multiple themes and sub-themes were present in some responses therefore they were coded accordingly and not subject to single theme/sub-theme per response.

Responsibility was defined as a response which contained the idea that adulthood was defined by a sense of general responsibility. These participants were not specific in their response, however did express the role responsibility held in becoming an adult. One participant wrote, "An understanding of responsibilities and desires and the ability to balance the two." And another response read:

When you reach a point in your life where things like saving money, accepting responsibility (work, personal, or other) and time management are more important than always having to go out and socialize. Accepting responsibility for obligations, realizing the value of relationships, time management, and wanting to proceed to the next stage in life is also important.

Under the theme of responsibility were three (3) related sub-themes: personal responsibility, responsibility to others and responsibility demonstrated by taking accountability for one's actions. Personal responsibility (n=38) was the most prevalent followed by responsibility demonstrated by accountability (n=26, Table 2). Participants who felt personal responsibility was a determining factor in adulthood spoke about the

importance of having a job, paying bills, and taking care of themselves. One participant stated:

Being an adult means that I am responsible for aspects in my life that range from paying bills to defining my role in my community. I make my decisions independently and am able to ask for help when I need it.

Another participant shared, “I have a full time job and pay for all of my expenses... to be responsible for yourself and possibly others.”

Being responsible towards other was reflected by participants expressing the importance of taking care of and being considerate of friends, family and partners. One participant expressed, “For me adulthood means supporting yourself and those who you are responsible for, including children and spouses;” and another stated “it means having responsibilities toward other people.” In addition, some participants expressed the importance of making responsible decisions and taking the responsibility for those decisions and actions. Participants who voiced the importance of taking accountability for one’s actions had responses such as: “Adulthood, for me, means accepting a certain level of responsibility for yourself ... and also for the consequences of your actions;” and “I think you are an adult when you are able to make real life decisions and accept the consequences of those decisions.”

The major theme independence was defined as a response which reflected the belief that adulthood meant a general sense of independence. These responses were not specific in their response. In defining adulthood, one participant responded, “Definitely independence, although there are certain levels of independence that one progresses to enter adulthood.” And another mentioned they were an adult because they had “achieved a moderate level of independence.”

Participants who felt adulthood was defined by independence were discussing either one or two specific areas. The sub-themes were financial independence ( $n=22$ ) and no longer being considered a dependent ( $n=25$ ) (Table 2). One participant who expressed the importance of financial independence stated, “I do consider myself to be an adult because I have and am capable of supporting myself financially.” Whereas, participant’s who focused on no longer being dependent on others, especially care givers wrote, “I believe that being an adult means being independent of your parents.” And some participants mentioned both sub-themes of independence in their responses.

I consider myself an adult because I am not dependent on my family or anyone else for financial stability... I am proud of my accomplishments and the steps I've taken to become an adult. For me that means moving out of my parents home, financially supporting myself without dependence on family members

While another responded, “I am completely independent and fully support myself. To be an adult means to not be dependent upon others. The ability to fully support oneself.”

The theme emotional maturity was defined as the belief adulthood was connected with an individual’s personal growth. The theme of emotional maturity appeared to be more of a metaphysical or abstract understanding; more of a feeling rather than a tangible definition. One participant wrote “one must have the belief they are an adult.” And another explained “I will feel like an adult when I know my place in the world and I am comfortable with that place, and when I feel confident that I have something to offer the world.” Emotional maturity had two (2) sub-themes as well: self-awareness and emotional maturity based on experiences. Self-awareness ( $n=14$ ) was mentioned more frequently (Table 2). Self-Awareness was demonstrated by a participant’s belief adulthood was established by having a sense of self. One participant wrote, “It means

knowing and being comfortable with your identity and believing and making decisions with integrity and responsibility. I also think it is an element of adulthood to be 'comfortable in your own skin.'" And another wrote, "Being developmentally mature when faced with various situations, and increased self-awareness." In addition, some participants expressed a belief that this understanding was established via life experiences. One participant expressed "Being an adult means having experienced life." While another participant wrote, "I think one is an adult when they are presented with life altering experiences that make them feel very small. Its then that you realize how far you have come from actually being that small."

Finally, some participants felt adulthood was determined by age or was an objective understanding possibly a label placed on one by society.

To me, it means being identified by society as "an adult." ...And so society at large may be the best determinant of adulthood. You either demonstrate your abilities to exist, move and work in the world, or you physically look like you have lived long enough to do so.

Another participant wrote, "I think being an adult means being of a certain age (18+), first and foremost. I don't think you can consider someone under that age to be an 'adult.'"

Table 2. Frequency of Adulthood Themes and Sub-Themes

<u>Theme/Sub-Theme</u>	<u>Frequency (n)</u>
Responsibility	7
Personal	38
To others	6
Accountability	26
Independence	12
Financial	22
Not dependant	25
Emotional Maturity	3
Self-Awareness	14
Experience	8
Age	24
Miscellaneous	2

*Love*

In assessing the identity development of the participants, the survey asked three questions addressing their thoughts and feelings on the topics of love, work and worldviews. Addressing the topic of love, participants were asked the following questions: “Are you in a relationship at this time? Are you interested in a relationship at this time? What are you looking for in a relationship at this time? Please discuss how you have seen your interests in romantic relationships change and develop since you were 18yo. Please explain.”

Eighty-nine (89) participants reported they were in a relationship at the time they completed the survey. Of those in a relationship, eight (8) shared they were engaged and



eight (8) shared they were married. Forty-three (43) participants reported they were not in a relationship, twenty-two (22) of which stated they were interested in a relationship, but seventeen (17) stating they were not interested in a relationship at this time. One (1) participant did not report relationship status.

The major findings of this questions revealed four (4) major themes in how participants believed their understanding of relationships had changed since they were 18 years of age: more serious, emotional maturity, no change and miscellaneous. The major themes and sub-themes from the question about love and relationships are outlined below in Table 3.

More serious was defined as participants who were in or interested in longer term relationships and/or relationships that were considered more genuine. An example is demonstrated in this participant's response:

I was in a different one when I was 18. At that point I idealized marriage and settling down. Now I am more practical, despite that still being my ultimate goal. The quality of the relationship is what matters now rather than just simply having a relationship

And another respondent wrote:

I think my relationships since 18 have changed, and at this point I think I am in the first real adult relationship. When I was younger I loved an element of drama in my romantic relationships. Currently, I like sharing my life and time with the guy I am with because we are so honest with each other, and not interested in playing games. In my previous relationships the games intrigued and kept me interested, which is sad.

Under the theme of more serious, two (2) sub-themes emerged: future focused and increase in focus on their partner's personality / character. Participant responses classified in the future focused sub-theme expressed desire not only for being in more serious relationships, but also wanting to be with a partner whom they saw as someone

they could spend their life with and possibly marry. Respondents wrote, “Since I was 18, my interests in relationships have gone from current fun and pleasure (from 18-22yrs) to wanting to find someone to marry and share my life with (after 22yrs).”

Another participant commented:

I'm much more interested in settling down with someone in a long-term committed relationship, that I hope will end up resulting in marriage; Relationships have changed since I was 18 in many ways, the most notably being that now I am looking for someone to spend my life with as opposed to a short relationship

Other participants, who were more serious about their relationships, also commented on how they are more focused on their partner's personality and/or character rather than physical appearance and sex appeal. These responses were classified as personality/character. An example of this is:

The change between now and then is drastic. At age 18, I certainly wanted to be with a nice, friendly, interesting partner. However, physical attraction and having sex with a partner was priority. Now, I look for someone with whom I can relate on many levels: intellectually, emotionally, physically, spiritually. I am most interested in someone who has some sort of spiritual path and discipline; who is actively working on personal growth/evolution. While physical attraction is still important, I find that I am drawn only to women with whom I'm compatible on multiple levels.

And another shared, “I am looking for a companion with similar interests, aptitudes, life goals, etc. I think that my emphasis on physical attraction has changed since I was 18. Attraction is essential, but less of a focus now.”

The emotional maturity theme was recognized by those who expressed a personal growth which has changed their approach to relationships. One participant responded:

When I as 18, I was too immature and insecure to care about someone more than I cared about myself. To me, having a mature/ grown up relationship is being a bit more selfless and not having to win arguments/ prove myself all the time

Another commented:

When I was 18 I thought that I would be the person to end all of my romantic relationships - that it was all up to me to date people until I found a man I wanted to marry... While I am still a long way away from marriage, I have a much better understanding of how relationship partners can affect me and how I can affect them. Further, I feel like I have a better idea of what is necessary to make a long-term relationship work.

Two (2) sub-themes were found under the theme of emotional maturity: self-awareness and emotional maturity due to experiences. Under the sub-theme of self-awareness, participants expressed feeling more comfortable with who they were and having an increased understanding of their personal needs and wants. One participant explained, "When I was 18, my relationships were more about companionship and convenience. Now that I have a better understanding of my self, I am more focused on finding someone who fulfills my emotional and intellectual needs." And another responded, "This has changed a lot! I think based on my own personal development- learning what I want and what I need." Some other responses referred to a change in their approach to their understanding of relationships as a result of previous experiences in relationships and life experiences.

The more I date and experience different people in a romantic way, the more I learn about what I want in a partner and what I don't want in a romantic partner.; I have learned a lot in past relationships since I was 18, such as the importance of maintaining individuality while in a relationship and no longer have a feeling of needing to be in a relationship to be complete

And another commented on how "...all of my relationships from when I was 18 up until now have helped me hone my criteria for an "ideal" partner."

Finally, there were also five (5) participants who expressed feeling their understanding of relationships had not changed since they were 18 years of age. One

participant commented, “I don't feel that my interests in romantic relationships have really changed all that much since I was eighteen;” and another shared “Not sure what I'm looking for in a romantic relationship now since I'm not really looking, but I can say that my interests have not changed/developed much since I was 18.”

Table 3. Frequency of Love Themes/Sub-themes

<u>Theme/Sub-theme</u>	<u>Frequency (n)</u>
More Serious	16
Future Focus	19
Personality/Character	31
Emotional Maturity	4
Self-Awareness	30
Experiences	13
No change	5
Miscellaneous	18

### *Work*

Addressing the topic of work, participants were asked to answer the following questions: “How do you feel about your current line of work? Are you studying or working towards a job/career? Please discuss how you have seen your interests in your work and/or career change and develop since you were 18yo? Please explain.”

Of the one-hundred thirty-three (133) participants, seventy-four (74) stated they were working at the time they completed the survey. Forty-eight (48) stated they were enrolled in school, four (4) were both working and in school, two (2) stated they were neither working or in school and five (5) did not share that information.

Five (5) major themes emerged from this question: evolved, money, uncertain, no change and miscellaneous. The frequencies of the work themes and sub-themes are

outlined below in Table 4. Evolved was defined as the belief participant's work interests have evolved or are evolving. An example of this theme is:

I think everything I was interested from 18 on has brought me to the point I am at now professionally, and the skills that I developed have evolved throughout time. I didn't know what path I was on during college and right after, but now feel secure in my choices, and confident that I know what I am good at.

And another wrote:

Before the age 26 I held jobs there weren't going anywhere like at the local coffee shops, or record stores, or data entry. I reached a point, however when I wanted something not only more meaningful and challenging, but more consistent in pay and room for growth. I began seeking out job that would provide more meaning. Eventually I found what I want to do as a career and since I have enrolled myself back in college and am working hard at obtaining a degree so that I can advance in my field. 5 years ago I would have said I was never going back to school.

The theme of evolved revealed four (4) sub-themes: more career focused, more focused on personal interests, evolved due to experiences and more practical / realistic. Considering the sub-theme more career focused, these participants expressed feeling they were more serious about pursuing a career. An example of a response considered more career focused is:

I plan on going back to school to further my career in international relations. I have seen a shift from the pursuit of broad experiences, i.e. living/working abroad, various jobs, etc. to a focused pursuit of a 'career' in recent times.

Or another participant explained, "My interests have developed in that I am more career focused and driven to find a professional lifestyle that fits my passions."

Other participants expressed feeling they were more focused on following a career path which reflected their personal interests. These participants explained they were not necessarily looking for the most glamorous job, rather a job which they felt was personally fulfilling. One response read:

I used to want to achieve a job that seemed to be the ultimate success - a doctor, for example. I learned through the years that I don't have to prove anything to anyone - only to myself. I have found something I love to do for a career, but I also learned that your job does not have to define you - I can have hobbies and passions that are totally unrelated to my line of work. I continue to have ambition and aspire to go further in my career, and I feel like I can do whatever I really set my eyes on.

Another respondent wrote, "My interests have changed since 18 because at 18 I wanted to be a banker and just make money. Now, I chose my profession for the love of my job and company." Other participants felt the evolution of their understanding to their career path was due to previous work and life experiences. One participant shared, "My interests in work have change dramatically since I was 18... As I gain more work experience, I gain more insight on what I really want in my career." Another wrote:

I think that I have had experience in my career that has settled the anxious frustrations that I initially experienced when entering the work force. ... Because of what I've experienced over the past 5 years: a number of different jobs, different salaries, multiple job offers, getting fired, I think I am working more aggressively towards my ultimate goals.

Finally, there was also a group of participants who felt that their approach to their career had evolved in the sense that they were more practical and realistic in regards to what they would be able to achieve. One participant wrote, "I have become far more rational. At 18 I wanted to save the world, and now I try to at least be a comfort to people, to listen to them." And another participant expressed:

My interest in my career has changed in that career- related decisions are based more on practical needs (i.e. getting a job, securing a salary to support my lifestyle, pursuing education to further my career options, etc.) than existential needs.

The theme of money was not mentioned too frequently, but was demonstrated by a desire to ensure financial stability.

I feel good about my current line of work and am interested in continuing my education in the field I'm in. My interests went from not wanting a demanding career to realizing that career growth and financial stability are really important to me.

Some participants were also concerned with wanting to be able to provide for their loved ones and themselves financially. "I am currently working as a social worker, but I am applying to go to law school because I'd like to have a career where I make more money so that I could support a family."

Participants also expressed feelings of ambivalence and uncertainty in what they wanted to do with their career. One participant expressed they were feeling "frustrated, stuck, inspired and over-worked. I have been working towards higher goals in my career, but consistently over-worked since exiting." Another participant shared:

My entire student career was set up to prepare me for work in publishing, but I've been doubting it the past couple years. I worry that it's more fluff than anything else, and I fear that I might not live to my full potential in this field. I believe I have a mind and a passion for more "important" work, work that directly affects people's lives. (Vague, yes, and that's because I have no clue what that alternative work would be.) I've started to feel like magazine publishing is, well, bullshit. (And it's so unstable now, I might never be financially independent if I stay in editorial, so, considering my above definition of adulthood, I might never grow up if I don't make a move!)

And another wrote:

It is hard to balance the realities of the capitalist work world with my ideals, trying to figure out how much of my energy to give to work, this is one of the hardest parts of being in my current stage of life.

Finally, there were participants who expressed feeling they have not changed in their understanding of their career path. An example of one participant's response read, "I love my line of work, and it has not changed at all since I was 18." There were also some participants within this grouping who felt they had not changed, but did feel they

were more prepared in moving forward to meet their goals or follow their chosen career path. An example of this is:

I have had several jobs, but my intentions/interest has not changed since I have turned 18. I have always been interested in pursuing a path to a satisfying "career" rather than just having arbitrary jobs. I am enjoying my current line of work, particularly because my previous jobs and completion of a Master's degree led me to have the requirements needed for my current position

Table 4. Frequency of Work Themes/Sub-themes

<u>Theme / Sub-Theme</u>	<u>Frequency (<i>n</i>)</u>
Evolved	25
Career Focused	5
Personal Interests	23
Experiences	18
Practical/Realistic	6
Money	6
Uncertain	10
No change	19
Miscellaneous	21

### *Worldviews*

The questions concerning the topic of worldviews asked participants to: “Please discuss how you have seen your worldviews (morals, values, beliefs, etc.) change and develop since you were 18yo. Do you feel you are still exploring them or have you more or less committed to them? How do you feel your worldviews are connected to becoming an adult? Please explain.”

Thirty-nine (39) participants reported they were committed to their worldviews, twenty (20) expressed they were committed to continue to explore their worldviews,



twenty-two (22) participants shared they were still exploring worldviews, and one (1) participant expressed they were neither committed nor exploring worldviews. Seventy-one (71) participants did not clarify. In addition, thirty-seven (37) participants felt worldviews were connected to adulthood, five (5) stated there was no connection, five (5) were not sure and eighty-six (86) participants did not respond.

The major findings of these questions revealed three (3) themes: evolved, no change and miscellaneous. The frequency of the worldview major themes and sub-themes are outlined below in Table 5. The theme evolved was again understood as an evolution in worldviews, specifically how worldviews have evolved, been refined and/or are being questioned. One participant shared:

I feel that being an adult means that you are open to the world, constantly learning, always discovering. My world views have been refined. There are several general tenets that will remain constant in my life, but I think the older I get the more texture is added

And another expressed feeling “my worldviews are much more deeper and I am still exploring them. I believe that your opinions change through life, you are constantly growing and exploring, that is the purpose of life.”

Four (4) sub-themes were found within the theme of evolved: more open to others opinions, more open to reflect on one’s own worldviews, personal interests, and personal interests due to experience. Participants who stated being more open to others opinions expressed an increase in tolerance or respect for those who did not share the same worldviews. An example of this is:

I have become much more accepting of people who hold values I find abhorrent and I feel I am less reactive. For example I can have a conversation with someone who is anti-abortion, anti-gay. Previously I was so angry & disgusted I would not really listen, just sort of wait for the pause for the point in the conversation to

passionately tell them why I was disgusted. I feel so much more able to hold the idea that they are doing the best they can to understand something that is complex and although I think they are wrong- I can listen now, and attempt to HEAR them

And another participant wrote, "I've become more flexible with understanding and accepting other people's world views." Other participants who felt their worldviews had evolved expressed an increase in being open to reflect on and further explore their worldviews. A respondent commented:

... I'm MORE committed to exploring my worldviews now than when I was 18. I'm open to continued self-discovery and awareness and with that comes new things/issues to include in my worldview. I think openness to examining your thoughts/beliefs about yourself and others, your community, the world is important, but I can't say that one person is more "adult" than another because of their worldviews or development in that area. Perhaps more "mature"...

Another participant's response read:

I think I am less committed to the absolute world views that I used to believe were so correct, now I am more flexible and patient and willing to learn and explore. I think my morals were always pretty much the same, but now I am less fiery and absolute. I think emotionally the biggest change in entering adulthood has been learning patience. I think this is connected to my world view because I understand who I am, but am willing to explore

Other participants expressed feeling their worldviews had become more personal. More personal meaning their worldviews were more reflective of their personal beliefs rather than those instilled upon them. Often, participants commented on how they were embracing and expressing their beliefs more.

My world views went through a series of developments at different points in my life. Religious beliefs, political beliefs, and values in particular were shaped and changed in a rigorous internal process. Becoming an adult is really about learning who you are, how to make sense of the world, and how to figure out how you can best relate to the world

Another participant wrote:

I think I have examined my beliefs and values much more deeply in the time since I was 18. I have connected with my sense of these values being true for myself

instead of being placed on me externally. I have become much more passionate about my beliefs in this time. I think part of being an adult is exploring one's worldviews and becoming more committed to them, but not wedded since we can always learn more/experience more, which may shift these worldviews

In addition to more personal worldviews, some participants expressed their worldviews had been changed or shaped by life experiences, including travel and turning points. One participant shared:

Since I was 18, I have traveled extensively around the world. I have been to about 30 countries and lived in 4 of them. I enjoy traveling, hearing experiences, and learning the views of those I speak with in my travels. I have a firm grasp on my morals, values, and beliefs, but I feel that I will always continue to learn and explore them. .... You cannot place a price on learning from other civilizations - civilizations that have survived the test of time. This helped me figure out what is important in my life, what to value, how to live my life and things to look for as I continue to mature throughout adulthood

And another participant felt:

I think that when I was younger my world views were heavily influenced by those who educated me. To a certain extent what my teachers said, counted more than what my parents said, or what I discovered on my own. Now that I am an adult, I feel that my views have been shaped more by personal experiences, rather than what others tell me to believe

Twelve (12) felt their worldviews had not changed since 18 years of age. One participant expressed, "I do not feel that my morals and values have changed one bit from the age of 18 to now;" and another wrote:

I don't believe my morals or values changed that much as I think those are something that were instilled in me at a young age. As I like my own values and morals I have not felt compelled to change.

Table 5. Frequency of Worldview Themes/Sub-themes

<u>Theme/Sub-theme</u>	<u>Frequency (n)</u>
Evolved	29
Open to others	6
Open to reflect	9
Personal Interests	31
Experiences	35
No change	12
Miscellaneous	12

*Summary of Findings*

Eighty-eight percent (88%) of the participants identified as white, seventy-three percent (73%) were female and 26.5 years was the mean age of the participants. Eighty-one percent (81%) of the participants were perceived adults. Overall, the findings reflect an understanding responsibility and independence carry more weight than age in achieving adulthood status. In addition, within the topics of love, work and worldviews, the majority of the participants spoke of how their understanding of these topics had evolved or changed since the age of 18 years. The similarities found between these questions include references to adulthood in understanding of these topics as well as a presence of emotional maturity or ability to become more considerate and awareness of personal interests, needs and wants. There are some participants, however, who have felt they have not changed in their understanding of love, work and worldviews since the age of 18 years. These research findings will be further explored and interpreted using the literature in the following discussion chapter.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This qualitative study explored the relationship between the understanding of adulthood and identity development. The literature has shown there appears to be a shift in the understanding of adulthood today, as it is no longer denoted by an age or marriage, rather by a sense of individualism. Looking at the literature on adulthood and identity development, this chapter will discuss the findings of this research study with the hopes of answering the question: “Does self-cohesion mark the entrance into adulthood?”

Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004) has introduced the understanding a developmental stage he refers to as emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is a transitional process between adolescence and adulthood. During this time, emerging adults are exploring their understanding of who they are with the ultimate goal of discovering their identity. Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004) has expanded on the works of Erik Erikson (1950, 1968) and his eight stages of psychosocial development by providing a more contemporary understanding of development. Once more, Erikson (1950, 1968) believed the main developmental task during adolescence was to form a stable sense of identity. By mastering the psychosocial crisis of ego identity vs. role confusion, one would earn the virtue of fidelity and move forward to the next psychosocial stage of young adulthood. And within the stage of young adulthood the hope is mastery and achieving the virtue of love. Again the immaturity here is fear of commitment. The virtue of love is not solely with another rather it is also a commitment to a career and to one’s community. This researcher believes is it also a commitment to oneself. The virtue of fidelity is achieved

when one becomes identity achieved and has a stable understanding of their identity however it takes the virtue of love to embrace that identity in relation to others.

### *Defining Adulthood*

Eighty-one percent (81%) of the participants were perceived adults. This is not surprising as the mean age of the participants was 26.5 years and as demonstrated in Arnett's (1998) study perceived adulthood increases with age. In very few studies does the age range go beyond 25 years therefore it is understandable why the samples in those studies typically have more emerging adults.

The findings of this study are congruent with those of Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004) and Nelson (2005). In Arnett's (1998, 2000, 2004) studies, he has found the dominant criteria for adulthood to be 1) accepting responsibility for the consequences of your actions, 2) decide on personal beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences, and 3) financial independence from parents. Similarly, Nelson & Berry (2005) found perceived and emerging adults had similar criteria in defining adulthood, most notably the major criteria for adulthood was independence. In this study, the most frequent themes within the responses of defining adulthood were responsibility and independence. Both of which have many forms as they were represented in the coding by sub-themes. Responsibility highlights personal responsibility, responsibility and consideration for others as well as responsibility by being accountable for one's actions. Independence was also understood further as including both financial independence and no longer being dependent on one's care givers or others. Emotional maturity was just as frequently mentioned as age however Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004) and Nelson & Berry (2005) include what has been labeled as emotional maturity in this study as apart of the

theme of independence. In both studies the theme is recognized as deciding on personal beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences. Again, despite the coding difference, there appears to be a strong focus on the theme of independence when considering the criteria of adulthood by today's emerging and perceived adults. As expected, age was of far less importance in defining adulthood in this study as well as in the recent literature (Arnett, 1998, 2000, 2004; Nelson & Berry, 2005). The findings of this study strongly support the notion that independence is a primary marker of adulthood.

#### *The Role of Relationships and Adulthood*

It was not surprising to see that eighty-nine (89) of the participants reported being in a relationship and twenty-two (22) of the participants who were not in a relationship reporting they were interested in being in one. It is believed the majority of the participants, due to the average age of 26.5 years, have moved forward from the psychosocial crisis of ego identity vs. role confusion and onto what Erikson (1950, 1968) termed the young adulthood stage, within the psychosocial crisis of intimacy vs. isolation. A large majority of the participants were both expressing they were more serious about their intimate relationship and felt their understanding of their relationships had evolved. Most notably, they were more focused on their personal interests and felt their interests and focus had evolved due to life experiences.

As mentioned in Chapter II, the virtue of love is achieved once one has mastered the crisis of intimacy vs. isolation. Again, the virtue of love here is more a reflection of an ability to commit. With a large portion of the participants expressing feelings they are more serious about their relationships it is believed this data supports the understanding

the sample is farther along in regards to their psychosocial development, most likely in what Erikson (1950, 1968) coined the young adult stage.

This question revealed the evolution in how participants experienced their romantic relationships. The responses demonstrate intimacy growth from being primarily physical, convenient and self satisfying relationships to ones of companionship and intimacy once having a better understanding of one's self. This finding correlates with Erikson's (1950, 1968) belief one must achieve the virtue of fidelity prior to being able to experience true intimacy.

#### *The Role of Work and Beliefs in Adulthood*

Having seventy-four (74) participants reporting they were working and forty-eight (48) reporting they were in school is reflective of the age distribution of this sample, with the understanding the likelihood of an individual working increases with age. As stated earlier in the literature review, however, the need for further education has increased, thus it is also not surprising a large portion of the sample report they are in school or both working and in school, despite the sample mean age of 26.5 years. In addition, schooling was not specific in clarifying whether the participant was in school for their undergraduate, graduate or continuing education studies.

The majority of the participants expressed how they felt their approach to work had evolved, most notably due to their personal interests and due to previous work and/or life experiences. As stated previously, Erikson (1950, 1968) has mentioned it is necessary for one to form a stable sense of identity, achieving the virtue of fidelity, in order to be able to move forward in their respected psychosocial development. Thus, one must be identity achieved in order to embrace intimacy. Again, Erikson (1950, 1968)



explained intimacy is more than a commitment within a relationship it is also a commitment to a career. Therefore, the findings of this study correlate with Erikson's (1950) theory of psychosocial development in that in order to commit to a career one must know themselves and their identity in order to be able to move forward in their respected career. In addition, it also supports Arnett's (2004) understanding of emerging adulthood, as it is a time to explore one's identity, relationships and career options. During this time, emerging adults may have several different jobs and it is through these experiences an individual gains a better sense of self in understanding their personal career path.

#### *The Role of Worldviews and Beliefs in Adulthood*

As Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004) has shown in his study, the number two determining factor of an adult is to decide on personal beliefs and values separate without influence by parents or others. This is demonstrated in the responses from participants in the final question about worldviews. A total of one-hundred ten (110) participants expressed their worldviews had evolved, most notably their worldviews were more personal and their worldviews had changed due to personal interests. Deciding on personal morals, values and beliefs is a part of the process of independence as well as defining one's identity. With such a large sample of the participants indicating their worldviews have evolved in some manner, it is again reflective of the older age range and belief that the participants are either towards the end of the moratorium, exploratory, stage of identity development or are identity achieved and have moved forward. Additionally, with a total of thirty-nine (39) participants stating they had committed to their worldviews, twenty-two (22) of which specifically stating they were committed to explore their worldviews demonstrate

again the older age and perhaps greater number of perceived adults in the study's sample. It was not surprising to see thirty-seven (37) participants expressing they did believe worldviews were connected to adulthood since previous studies and this study have highlighted the importance of deciding personal morals, beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences as a characteristic of adulthood.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

This study involves a large range of ages with the majority of the sample in their later twenties, which is a population the literature has not typically included. This sample allowed for participants to share their exploratory process and their experience in determining what marked their entrance into adulthood and when they achieved self cohesion. This study gave validity and more information about the emerging adulthood stage that Arnett describes. The qualitative approach to this study has allowed for the participants to define and give voice to their experience of becoming an adult.

The sample does contain bias, as a large majority of the participants were white and female. In addition, this entire study was done via a public website, which would indicate participants both had access to a computer and were educated in how to use the internet. This reflects a bias as the sample does not reflect the experiences of males, person's of color, or individuals with less education.

Using website based anonymous open-ended survey questions did result in inconsistencies in data quality. Some participant's responses were short, not complete or simply lacking depth and explanations of their experiences and viewpoint. If the study was done using in person interviews, it is believed prompts may have been used in order to gain greater depth and understanding of the participant's experiences as they enter

emerging adulthood, are in emerging adulthood and reflect on their experiences as emerging adults. On the other hand, a fair number of responses were thorough and provided rich data as illustrated in Chapter IV. The efficiency of using this survey method allowed for a large number of participants to complete the survey. In the future instructions to give examples and thorough responses might be useful.

### *Conclusion*

Overall, this study demonstrated that participants were engaged in a process of exploring career, love and worldview options that extended beyond adolescence. It was mentioned in all of the responses to questions how life experiences have fostered the evolution of their understanding of love, work, and worldviews as well as adulthood. Several respondents referenced this evolution specifically from the age of 18, further supporting and validating Arnett's (1998, 2000, 2004) concept of emerging adulthood and Levinson's (1986) concept of building and restructuring phase of early adulthood.

As Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004) has expressed, emerging and perceived adults today are defining adulthood by the process of individuality. Emerging adults undergo the process of exploring their identity, just as Marcia (2002) has recognized in his stages of identity development. Respondents in each question expressed they saw evolution as well as some respondents sharing they did not see any change. These findings support Marcia's (2002) identity development model as those who have experienced an evolution have explored and are in, or have gone through, the stage of moratorium whereas those who have not experienced a change may still be in the stage of foreclosure or diffusion. Similarly, the findings also are supportive of Duriez & Soenens' (2006) study examining identity styles. Participants who felt they had evolved are believed to demonstrate an

informative identity style, whereas those who did not mention change are considered to have a normative or diffuse identity style.

In becoming adults, it appeared respondents were equally engaged in discovering their identity through refining their worldviews as well as exploring their comfort with intimacy in connection to work and relationships. This suggests that emerging adulthood may be a stage when the process of achieving both Erikson's (1950, 1968) virtues of fidelity and love are occurring. According to Erikson (1950, 1968) and Marcia (2002) as one accepts to take on the psychosocial crisis of ego identity vs. role confusion they are within the midst of moratorium. And as they achieve the virtue of fidelity, they become identity achieved. But becoming identity achieved does not appear to be synonymous with becoming an adult or gaining a sense of individualism based on the findings of this research. Rather, it appears to be more than becoming identity achieved. Perhaps it involves not only becoming identity achieved but also achieving the virtue of love. Accordingly, one may establish their identity as well as becoming open and able to commit to a relationship, a career, and their self. Therefore, individualism, as well as adulthood, is ultimately mastering Erikson's (1950, 1968) psychosocial stages of adolescence and young adulthood, recognized by achieving the virtues of fidelity and love. With that understanding, it is believed through the previous research and the findings of this study that an individual's understanding of self cohesion does not necessarily concretely mark the entrance into adulthood, however it is very much associated with the transitional process of becoming an adult.

### *Future Studies*

Future studies would be encouraged to incorporate mixed method approaches in order to explore possible correlative analyses present between demographic information (age, race/ethnicity, class, gender, etc.) and the understanding of adulthood and identity development. In addition, what are the differences between ages? Race/ethnicity? Class? And gender? It would be interesting to have a gender specific study which explored the difference between men and women. Additionally, it would further the study, as Nelson & Berry (2005) did, by exploring the difference between emerging adults and perceived adults using a wider age range than in this study. Also, considering this sample's education level, it would be interesting to explore possible differences in the understanding of adulthood through different education levels. Are individual's who do not have the opportunity to further their education required to become an adult sooner? Seeing a large part of emerging adulthood does take place while those who are able are in college, do those who are less fortunate have the opportunity to experience emerging adulthood? It should be noted, while it would be interesting to yield results from a mixed methods research study, the approach is still a new area of research.

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## Appendix A

### Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letter

January 19, 2009

Joseph Lacy

Dear Jamie,

Your revised materials have been reviewed and all is now in order. We are happy to give final approval to your study. It will be interesting to see if people will respond to this invitation and take the time to participate in a qualitative study on line. We can hope that they will be sufficiently intrigued by the topic to want to explore it.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Kate Didden, Research Advisor



## Appendix B

### Recruitment Letter

Dear Prospective Participant,

**I am asking you to participate in a survey that explores what it means to become an adult. This survey is part of a** research project that I am conducting for my Master's of Social Work thesis at Smith College School for Social Work. **I became interested in studying the entrance to adulthood when I realized how many different definitions there could be of adulthood; and with changes in our society, how many different pathways there are to becoming an adult.**

**For my study, I need individuals who are 1) US citizens and 2) between 20 and 32 years old.** The survey should take about 20-30 minutes and asks **YOUR** experiences and perspectives on becoming an adult. The study is an important one that could help **CONTRIBUTE TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE ENTRANCE INTO ADULTHOOD.**

If you are **interested in** participating, please click on the link below, which will lead you to an informed consent form, and then to the survey. Please forward this letter to others who are between the ages of 20 and 32, even if you should decide not to participate in the study yourself. Thank you in advance for your time and consideration. Your interest and efforts in helping with this research **project** are greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Joseph Lacy

Smith College School for Social Work

To participate please click, or copy and paste into your browser, the link below:

[http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=ILQP\\_2frxoZn\\_2bni38o\\_2bCcALA\\_3d\\_3d](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=ILQP_2frxoZn_2bni38o_2bCcALA_3d_3d)

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Form

Date

Dear Participant:

My name is Joseph Lacy and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. While working on my Masters in Social Work, I am required to complete a master's thesis based on a research project. The purpose of my research is to look at **IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT** and its **RELATIONSHIP TO BECOMING AN ADULT. THIS RESEARCH WILL BE SUBMITTED AS A THESIS AND POSSIBLE PRESENTATION AND PUBLICATION IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF OBTAINING A MASTER'S IN SOCIAL WORK FROM THE SMITH COLLEGE SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL WORK.**

I am asking that you be a participant in my study based on the fact that you meet the following criteria: you are between the ages of 20 – 32 and are a United States citizen. To be a participant in this study you will have to complete an anonymous, **TWO PART** on-line survey. The first will ask for **THREE** pieces of demographic information: age, gender **AND RACE/ETHNICITY**. The second part is five questions asking you to reflect on your experiences **REGARDING YOUR IDENTITY AND BECOMING AN ADULT. SPECIFICALLY, THE SURVEY WILL ASK YOU TO REFLECT ON YOUR DEVELOPMENT; IF YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF AN ADULT AS WELL AS YOUR THOUGHTS ON LOVE, WORK AND YOUR WORLDVIEWS.** Your honesty and full participation will be appreciated so that an understanding of your experience **CAN BE OBTAINED**. The survey should take 20 – 30 minutes.

**I BELIEVE THERE IS MINIMAL RISK TO YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY. HOWEVER, SHARING PERSONAL INFORMATION INCLUDING YOUR PERCEPTION OF YOUR ADULTHOOD STATUS ALWAYS HAS THE POSSIBILITY OF CAUSING SOME DISCOMFORT.**

Referral information will be provided at the end of the survey, encouraging those who would like to further explore these topics to do so.

The benefits of this study include providing you an opportunity to share and reflect on **THE EXPLORATION OF YOUR IDENTITY AS AN ADULT**. This study will **CONTRIBUTE TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND BECOMING AN ADULT.**

Your privacy and the protection of all of the information you provide will be taken seriously. All information will be confidential and you will remain anonymous throughout the study. At no point will you be asked to provide personal information

other than your age, gender **AND RACE/ETHNICITY**. Upon completion of the survey, I will print the responses for coding purposes. No copies will be saved on my personal computer. **MY RESEARCH ADVISOR WILL HAVE ACCESS TO THE DATA. AFTER CODING IS COMPLETE, ALL DATA WILL BE KEPT IN A SECURE PLACE FOR THREE YEARS, AS REQUIRED BY FEDERAL REGULATIONS AND AFTER THAT TIME THE DATA WILL BE DESTROYED OR CONTINUED TO BE KEPT IN A SECURE PLACE. WHEN THE DATA IS NO LONGER NEEDED IT WILL BE DESTROYED.**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. This is an anonymous study. You may decline to answer any survey question, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty by not submitting the finished survey. However, once you have submitted the survey you will not be able to withdraw from the study because it would be impossible to identify your particular survey once it has been submitted since it is anonymous. **I WILL STOP ACCEPTING SURVEYS AFTER I HAVE RECEIVED A DIVERSE NUMBER OF SURVEYS IN REGARDS TO AGE, GENDER, RACE/ETHNICITY AND ADULTHOOD STATUS.**

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study.

**BY COMPLETEING AND SUBMITTING THE SURVEY, YOU INDICATE THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY. IF YOU HAVE ANY ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS PLEASE FEEL FREE TO CONTACT ME OR THE HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW COMMITTEE.**

Please keep a copy of this consent for your records.

## Appendix D

### Adulthood and Self – Cohesion Achievement Survey

#### Demographic Information

1. Gender:

\_\_\_\_\_Male      \_\_\_\_\_Female

2. Age:

\_\_\_20 \_\_\_21 \_\_\_22 \_\_\_23 \_\_\_24 \_\_\_25 \_\_\_26 \_\_\_27 \_\_\_28 \_\_\_29 \_\_\_30 \_\_\_31 \_\_\_32

3. RACE/ETHNICITY:

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#### Qualitative Questions

1. Do you consider yourself to be an adult? Why or Why not?
2. What does it mean to you to be an adult? What indicates adult status?
3. **ARE YOU IN A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP AT THIS TIME? ARE YOU INTERESTED IN A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP AT THIS TIME?** What are you looking for in a romantic relationship at this time? **PLEASE DISCUSS HOW YOU HAVE SEEN YOUR INTERESTS IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS CHANGE AND DEVELOP SINCE YOU WERE 18yo?** Please explain.
4. **HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT** your current line of work of work? **ARE YOU STUDYING OR WORKING TOWARDS A JOB/CAREER? PLEASE DISCUSS HOW YOU HAVE SEEN YOUR INTERESTS IN YOUR WORK AND/OR CAREER CHANGE AND DEVELOP SINCE YOU WERE 18yo?** Please explain.
5. **PLEASE DISCUSS HOW YOU HAVE SEEN** your worldviews (morals, values, beliefs, etc.) change and develop since you were 18yo? Do you feel you are still exploring them or have you **MORE OR LESS** committed to them? **HOW DO YOU FEEL YOUR WORLDVIEWS ARE CONNECTED TO BECOMING AN ADULT?** Please explain.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR RELEVANT INFORMATION AND SUPPORT**

**Further Educational Information:**

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR SOCIAL WORKERS**

<http://www.socialworkers.org/>

**RESOURCES FOR EMERGING ADULTHOOD INFORMATION**

<http://www.jeffreyarnett.com/articles.htm>

**Referral Information:**

**PSYCHOLOGY TODAY: FIND A THERAPIST**

[http://therapists.psychologytoday.com/rms/prof\\_search.php](http://therapists.psychologytoday.com/rms/prof_search.php)