

## Reinventing Adulthood

David Elkind

Adulthood is a modern invention. It was a creation, in the late nineteenth century, of the newly established social sciences. In actual fact, it was constructed as a counterpoint to the corresponding invention, and scientific investigation, of childhood. Modern childhood was defined by its differences from adulthood which gained it's unique status almost by default. Children were weak, innocent and dependent whereas adults were strong, sophisticated and independent. Children were impulsive, emotionally labile and morally deficient. Adults were reflective, emotionally stabile and morally upright. This view of civilized adulthood was reinforced by those anthropologists who described indigenous natives of Africa, or of the Pacific Islands, as primitive and "childlike."

In the postmodern era, beginning at roughly mid-century, we have reinvented childhood and are in the process of reinventing adulthood as well. Modern childhood, was as noted above, defined in terms of age group differences. Now that we have moved into the postmodern era, however, our conception of childhood has changed and today emphasizes the diversity among same age children rather than the differences between age groups, For example, the contemporary concern for children with special

needs, for children of color and for children of minority status, tends to push age group differences into the background. The stagewise conception of childhood has given way to a diversity conception.

Adulthood, has been reinvented as well. This, of course, is prompted by more than the reinvention of childhood. Today, at least in western societies, people live longer and adulthood may last for more than a half century. We are, therefore, just beginning to explore and understand the many physical and personality changes that transpire during this elongated time frame. Likewise, the prevalence of divorce, remarriage and cohabitation give evidence that a majority of adults no longer remain in the same social relationships across the full span of their maturity. Finally, the rapidly changing technology of the postmodern world means that adults often pursue several different careers during their lifetime. Put somewhat more succinctly, we have moved from a modern perception of all-or-none adulthood to a postmodern conception of graduated adulthood.

The postmodern reinvention of adulthood is an ongoing societal process which is both mirrored and reinforced by the social sciences and by the media. The social sciences codify and label the changes they observe in adult life styles while the media represent them in sometimes extreme dramatic or comedic form. Put somewhat differently, the reinvention of adulthood takes place in the real world as an adaptive response to tectonic

changes in our social institutions. This reinvention is then conceptualized by the social sciences and made part of our collective consciousness through media portrayals.

In this essay, therefore, I will attempt to support the argument that there has been a transition from a modern instantaneous maturity to a postmodern graduated entrance into the adult estate. The supporting evidence is of three types. First I will give examples of the actual sociological changes in adult behavior and life styles. Second, I will briefly review the social science conceptualization of these changes. Thirdly, we can look at some examples of the how media portrayals have mirrored the transition from an all or none adulthood to a graduated one. A closing section will suggest some possible implications of this postmodern graduated adulthood for society in general and for the family in particular.

#### THE SOCIOLOGICAL DATA

##### The Modern Era

Perhaps the most clear-cut evidence for a modern all-or-none adulthood was the introduction of a legal age for a variety of activities. A legal age was established for drinking, for driving, for female sexual activity, for marriage, for entering into military service, for working, and for leaving school. These ages were not the same for all activities--you could drop out of

school at sixteen but were not allowed to join the armed services until you were eighteen. The ages for some legal engagement in some activities also varied from state to state. Nonetheless, the message was the same, at a certain age you became immediately capable of making decisions about your own life, of holding down a job and of behaving responsibly.

Even religions, particularly the evangelical ones, contributed to this all-or-none conception of adulthood. Around the turn of the century, many adolescents went through an intense personal experience that was called a "religious conversion." It was a sudden, emotion filled moment in time, when the young person "found" Christ and became a true Christian. The concept of religious conversion reflected the modern view that one could instantaneously be transformed from a doubter to a true believer. The "born again" movement is a contemporary edition of conversion. Other religious practices, such as the Jewish Bar Mitzvah and Catholic confirmation also suggested that these one-time rituals moved the participant into the adult estate.

Clothing was another way in which this all or none conception of adulthood was conveyed. For example, up until the end of WWII boys did not wear long pants and girls did not wear silk stocking or nylons until they had reached adolescence. At a certain age you were allowed to wear adult clothing and to stay up late. You were also made privy to family secrets such as the drunk uncle or mad aunt. Organized team sports were another

activity that young people could only participate in after they had reached a certain age. In most cases children did not participate in any organized team sports until they entered high school. Participation in such sports was another index of having attained adult status.

Likewise, once you graduated high school, or turned eighteen, particularly if you were a boy, you were expected to leave home and make your own way. At that age you were supposed to be able to hold a job, pay rent and other bills, buy your own clothes, and attend to your own dental and medical care. Young people who continued to live with their parents, particularly boys, were looked upon immature and unwilling to deal with the challenges of adulthood. Young women were granted a certain dispensation in this regard, but they were also expected to marry and leave the parental home to live with the husband. Even those young women who did not wed, still often left the parental home in their middle to late twenties.

There was another marker of adult status that was acquired with the attainment of the age of maturity, this was adult culture. Up until the 1950's youth culture was highly limited and most young people looked to adult leadership in clothing, music, language and personal habits. If adults were listening to big bands, that is what adolescents listened to. If adults smoked and drank, that is what young people aspired to. In addition, Many adult fraternal orders such as the Masons established junior

divisions such as the DeMolay, to initiate young people into this adult social club. In short, coming of age, also meant becoming a member of adult society and culture.

I want to emphasize that what I am depicting here is the pattern for mainstream white culture and does not necessarily hold as true for minority families and for families of color. Racism, inequalities in education and job opportunities forced different patterns of adulthood upon minorities. Indeed, adulthood for many minorities meant learning how to survive with dignity in a flawed democracy that did not enforce equal rights for all of its citizens. On the other hand, an all-or-none adulthood was not unusual for those minority adolescents who, protected as children, had to face virulent hatred and discrimination as young adults. Such experiences precipitated them into a precocious maturity as well.

In the modern world, then, with the important exceptions, that were just noted, age became the price of admission to most adult activities. Once you had attained that age you were legally permitted to engage in activities that were prohibited even a day earlier. The modern emphasis upon age as an index of maturity was derived from the invention of childhood and the recognition of age differences in the ability to reason and to exercise sound judgment. Age limits served as a preventative system for keeping young people out of trouble.

Nonetheless, this identification of maturity with a given

age had some negative consequences. Many young people who came of age still did not feel mature or ready to make some of the decisions that were expected of them. The pressure to be an instant adult rushed many young people into premature marriages and too early parenthood. Others chose careers or followed occupations out of expediency and without experimenting as to what they were best suited for. Put somewhat differently, in the modern era children were permitted a graduated childhood and adolescence but expected to become instant adults.

#### The Postmodern Era

The post World War years were a period of rapid social and technological change. Many of these changes affected our modern conception of childhood. World War II was a maiming war and the many returning veterans with missing arms and legs, limited hearing and vision, made us more willing to accept those with special needs into the larger society. These enlightened attitudes spread to children as well. Before the war, deaf, blind and retarded children were usually sent off to special schools and then more or less forgotten. Nor were there provisions for children suffering from diseases such as cerebral palsy or spinal bifida. After the war, particularly after the passage of the national special education act in 1975, children with special needs were increasingly mainstreamed within the educational system.

One result of this new attention to children with special

needs was to shift attention from between age differences among children to the within age group differences. Other social events moved society in a similar direction. The Civil Rights Movement, to illustrate, made the mainstream culture more aware of children of color who were the same age as mainstream children but who were receiving substandard education. Likewise, the Women's Movement made us more aware of the special needs of girls and the many subtle prejudices against them such as the pervasive use of "he" in both fiction and non-fiction writing. This new emphasis upon the gender differences among same age children also tended to de-emphasize the age group differences.

This demotion of age group differences as a definition of childhood was evidenced in many other ways as well. To be sure, the modern legal age limits have been maintained into the postmodern era. They are, however, being increasingly ignored. For example, movie ratings for different age groups are something of a joke and even young children often watch R, and even X, rated films if not at the theater then at home on cable or on tape. Likewise, despite the legal age limits, young people are experimenting with drugs at earlier and earlier ages and a great many are smoking. Similarly, although there are laws against statutory rape in most states, the number of teenage girls who are sexually active has tripled since the 1960s. Put differently, contemporary youth largely ignore many of the age restrictions that once were the earmarks of adulthood.

Similar trends can be seen with respect to clothing and sports activities. Even young boys wear long pants and some young girls are allowed to wear make-up. With the growth of Little League, T Ball, Soccer and Pop Warner football, children are engaged in playing organized team sports at an early age as young as four and five. Many children teams have uniforms and equipment that resemble that used by adolescents. From a distance it is sometimes difficult to tell the age of the players on a field. Clothing and activities are thus no longer markers of the attainment of adult status.

Other markers of all or none adulthood have been minimized as well. The postmodern increase in the number of young people attending college and the cost of that attendance has extended the age of dependence of young people upon their parents. Now young people leave home at eighteen to go to college not to be on their own. Ironically, although young people are emotionally and culturally dependent upon their parents for a shorter time than they were in the modern era, they remain financially dependent for much longer period. Thus the increased number of adolescents going on to college has contributed to a graduated young adulthood as it has made the separation from parents less abrupt and has extended the period of financial dependence.

The introduction of a unique youth culture, particularly the music of rock and roll has also played an important part in creating a graduated adulthood. In the modern era, moving into

adulthood was something of a leap, it demanded a huge and a immediate change in attitudes and behavior. The young person had to take on all of the accouterments of adult culture including music, clothing and behavior patterns. With the creation of a unique youth culture, however, there has also been a rejection of the adult cultural role model. Indeed, today young people carry their youth culture into adulthood. For example, in many high tech youth oriented companies there is no dress code and there may even be a "happy hour" on Friday afternoon. In such companies, the transition to the adult estate is much more gradual, than it is going from college to a more traditional "grey flannel suit" firm.

Finally, young people are marrying and having children at older ages than was true in the past. Presently, the average age of first marriage for women is 24 and for men it is 27. In addition, many more young adults are cohabiting than was ever true in the past. Living together without marriage is a kind of experimentation relatively unknown in the days of instant adulthood. Cohabitation is but another evidence of the fact that postmodern young people want to move into the marital estate gradually and more cautiously than was true for earlier generations.

In many different facets of their behavior, therefore, young people give evidence of moving into adulthood more gradually than was true in the modern era. This reinvention of adulthood has

also been observed and conceptualized by social science. We need to turn next to that domain. It is probable that the social science conceptualization of gradual adulthood both reflects, and contributes to, this reinvention.

#### THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

Modern social science depicted childhood as a period of growth and change while adulthood was portrayed as a period of stasis and decline. In the postmodern era, however, childhood is often portrayed as precocious and adulthood as a period of change and growth. We can see these patterns best in the social science treatment of intelligence and of developmental stages.

Intelligence. The Modern Era. Up until mid-century, adulthood was seen a period of intellectual stability while childhood was seen as a period of mental growth. The early psychologists emphasized the changes in young children's thinking as they mature. Alfred Binet not only constructed the first intelligence test he also introduced the concept of Mental Age, the idea that levels of mental ability changed with age and could be identified by that age measured in years and months. Intelligence testers generally believed that intelligence peaked at about the mental age of eighteen and declined thereafter. This conception of adult intelligence was suggested as recently as 1954 by the creator of the most widely used adult intelligence tests, David Wechsler.

The Postmodern Period. The belief in the decline in adult intelligence after the peak at age eighteen was challenged in the

nineteen sixties. A number of investigators reexamined the data upon which this conclusion was based and found a serious error. It appears that the data for this conclusion were compromised. The fact is that the older subjects in the investigation had many years fewer schooling than did the younger subjects in the study. So what appeared to be an age superiority was in fact an educational superiority. When additional investigations were run comparing older and younger individuals with similar educational backgrounds, there was no longer a decline with age but actually a modest increase.

This improvement, however, is not uniform across all subtests of mental ability. John Horn and his colleagues have distinguished between fluid intelligence, which may deteriorate somewhat with age and crystallized intelligence that does not. The difference is largely between timed and untimed measures of reasoning and problem solving ability. Fluid intelligence is generally measured by timed tasks and crystallized intelligence by untimed. With untimed tasks, older subjects can do as well as younger subjects. They do less well with timed tasks.

Other postmodern writers such as Robert Sternberg and Howard Gardner, reject the concept of general intelligence and argue for a more differentiated construct. Sternberg posits three different types of intelligence whereas Gardner claims there are seven multiple intelligences. Although the evidence for the existence of a general level of brightness is well established as is its

persistence across the lifespan, the idea that intelligence declines with age or that it is a single entity is no longer tenable. To sum up, adulthood is no longer regarded as a period of intellectual stasis or of deteriorating but one of a complex pattern abilities many of which continue to improve with age.

#### Developmental Stages.

The Modern Era. Psychologists writing during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first half of the present one, depicted childhood and adolescence as a period of progressive growth and all but ignored adulthood. Freud argued that the psychosexual stages of childhood were the prime determinants of the adult personality. Arnold Gesell and his colleagues observed the year to year changes in children from birth to sixteen but made no attempts to observe older adolescents or adults. Jean Piaget described the stages of intellectual development from birth to adolescence and assumed that there was no further growth in reasoning ability after that period. Although not stated explicitly these writers reinforced the notion that childhood and adolescence were the most important stages in the life cycle and little of importance to the personality happened thereafter.

Experimental psychologists contributed to this impression. Those concerned with learning studied animals in the belief that the same learning principles applied across species and across age levels. Those concerned with humans studied psychophysics,

the basic sensory processes and paid little attention to higher mental processes that were often eschewed as "mentalistic." Cognitive processes such as problem solving were conceptualized as they were observed at the animal level, namely as a matter of insight and trial and error. It was only in the 1960's and the cognitive revolution that psychologists studying problem solving discovered that adults employed hypothesis testing in their efforts at find a solution.

Modern psychology, then, by its neglect of adulthood mirrored the modern idea that it was a period of stasis and decline. The one exception was Carl Gustav Jung, Freud's erstwhile heir apparent, and first major defector. In his work with financially successful middle aged men, Jung found that they were unhappy and depressed despite the outward appearance of having everything. Jung came to the conclusion that personality is two sided with both a masculine(animus) and a feminine(anima) component and that both sides of the personality need to be realized for the individual to attain a true sense of happiness and fulfillment. The successful business men had so emphasized their animus, their male, competitive aggressive side that now their anima was seeking expression. Jung encouraged such men to spend more time with their children, to paint, read poetry and give expression to the more nurturant, feminine side of themselves. Middle aged women were likewise encouraged to realize their more competitive, aggressive animus.

Jung was thus the first to point out that adult character itself was not a constant and went through uniquely adult changes as the individual matured. It would be decades, however, before this insight was translated into the postmodern concept of the "midlife crises."

The Postmodern Era. As we moved into the postmodern era and the cognitive revolution, there has been an increasing rejection of the stage wise progression of development described by Freud, Gesell and Piaget. Contemporary psychologists argue that stages are not uniform and that any given child is at many different stages at the same time. Further since learning is domain specific, the idea of general stages is not helpful. In addition, many psychologists are arguing that infants and young children are much more capable than the modern psychologists assumed. Some infant researchers claim that infants have theories about the world and that young children already have a fairly elaborate theory of mind. Many postmodern psychologists thus dispute the extent of age differences between children and adults.

At the same time, there has been an explosion of interest and investigation into the stagewise progression of adulthood. For example, Gail Sheehy, building on the work of psychiatrist Daniel Levinson, wrote the book Passages, which describes the stages adults navigate as they make their way through the twenties, thirties and forties. In his book Childhood and Society, Erik Erikson described the eight stages in the adult

life cycle, including the identity crises of adolescence and the crises of intimacy and generativity of early and middle adulthood. Likewise Judith Viorst described and illustrated the adult life trajectory as a series of Necessary Losses.

In addition to this clinical and conceptual elaboration of the adulthood period, it has become the focus of experimental investigation as well. Studies of families of divorce, for example, look not only at its effects upon the children but also its effects upon the parents. We now have information about the length of time it takes to recover from divorce, patterns of remarriage and so on. Men, for example, remarry more quickly than do women and are more likely to have unsuccessful second marriages. We also have studies ranging from the communication patterns of men and women to the adjustment difficulties of immigrating adults.

In the postmodern world, therefore, adulthood and adult personality, are no longer regarded as static, but rather as changing and developing. Perhaps this is best exemplified in psychiatrist Scott Peck's enormously successful book, The Road Less Traveled. For Peck, adulthood is an ongoing journey and not a fixed place. In a marriage, for example, couples have to continue to work at the relationship. One cannot assume, as too often happened with the all or none conception of adulthood, that once married you did not have to worry about your relation to your partner. The same is true for one's role as a parent, people

must continue to grow and change as parents much as they must continue to grow and change as marriage partners, friends and lovers.

Again, it has to be said that psychologists whether writing about the modern all-or-none, or the postmodern, graduated adulthood, do not speak to the issue of minorities or people of color. What does adulthood mean to a man who cannot find work and who cannot support a family? What does adulthood mean to someone who has achieved success but remains subject to being treated with disdain because of his or her color. Indeed, one might well argue that minority prejudice and racism deprives many individuals of the ability to realize full adulthood of either the all-or-none or the gradual variety. The issue of adulthood for minorities and people of color remains to be addressed. I am probably not the person to do it, but I do want to make clear that I am fully aware that I am not writing about all Americans.

#### ADULTHOOD IN THE MEDIA

The media both reflect and reinforce patterns already extant in the society they portray. They are, like social science, both cause and effect and it is almost impossible to separate out these different functions.

#### Television

Modern television The early television programs presented highly idealized stereotypes of modern childhood and adulthood. In the Leave It To Beaver series the boy was always getting into

trouble and had to be thoughtfully handled by his parents. The Show My Three Sons and The Brady Bunch were similar. Adults were wise and mature able to handle every situation while children were impulsive, self centered and insensitive. Older children were depicted as in better control than the younger ones and so the shows again emphasized the age group differences. Finally, while there was room for the children to grow and change, the parents always remained pretty much the same.

Postmodern Television First of all, over the past few decades the number of programs for children has diminished greatly. When television first began almost fifty percent of the programming was geared to children. Now if 5 percent is so directed that it probably a high estimate. Likewise the way in which young people are depicted has changed as well. Children on television are much more mature than they were in the past. Whether we look at the children on Roseanne or those of Grace under Fire or Married With Children, they are all depicted as much more knowledgeable and savvy than was true of the portrayal of children in the modern era.

At the same time, their parents seem to struggling towards maturity and are certainly not all wise and all knowing. Other programs for adults reflect the gradual progress towards adulthood characteristic of this postmodern time. The characters on Seinfeld are adults in one sense, they work and are independent, but they remain adolescent in other respects. The

same is true for the characters on Friends, Ellen, and Caroline In the City. In each of these shows the characters seem to struggling for maturity, but have not reached it yet, they all reflect the postmodern conception of graduated adulthood.

Perhaps the example of graduated adulthood on television is given by the show, Third Rock From the Sun. In this series, four aliens come to earth to learn our ways. They are grown-ups but do not know the simplest things about adult behavior. The young woman is naive about how to behave with men as the older man is with respect to women. The only character who adapts quickly and reasonably well is the alien who takes the form of an adolescent. In these characters it is clear that adulthood is not an instantaneous condition, but takes time and effort to learn. The fact that the youngest of the cast adapts the most easily reflects the postmodern idea that childhood is a simpler phase of life than is adulthood.

#### Motion Pictures

Perhaps the best depiction of modern parents and children is in the classic, Its a Wonderful Life. The husband is hard working, honest and dedicated to his family and his community. His wife devotes herself to her husband and her children. The children are well behaved and know that they are to be seen and not heard. Here adulthood is portrayed in all of its multifaceted features. The major character does grow in insight, but not because of his own struggles but rather because of the

intervention of an angel.

In contrast, more recent films depict the struggle of adults to get to a more stable place in their lives. In the Mirror Has Two Faces, the heroine struggles to break away from her overinvolvement with her mother and her envy of her more attractive sister. In

The President, the hero is actually the widowed President of the United States who wants to date a young woman. In this film the usual struggles about remarriage, acceptance of the children and so on is complicated by his position. Likewise in The Bridges of Madison County, two adults--one of whom is married and has children--fall in love and have an adulterous affair. Although such themes date back as far as the Scarlet Letter, they convey a different message today, namely, that romance can happen in later adulthood and is not limited to those just reaching maturity.

### Fiction

In modern fiction it was generally assumed that character was destiny. Whether we look at the English novels of Jane Austin or the American classics of Moby Dick, Billy Budd or The Great Gatsby, the fate of each hero and heroine is imbedded in their character and the story is the unfolding of the inevitable consequences of that character. If change does occur in the character, say to Scrooge in Dickens's A Christmas Carol, it occurs through an outside agency, the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future. As in the case of It's a Wonderful Life,

change in adult character can only be brought about by an external agent, it is not inherent in adult character conceived as a fixed entity.

More recent fiction, however, details the growth of individuals during their adulthood. Perhaps the best example is the Rabbit series of John Updyke which covers the maturity and aging of a single man, his marriages, his children, his affairs and his movement into middle age. Likewise, in Love in the Time of the Cholera, Gabriel Garcia Marquez describes the unrequited love of a man for a married woman whom he does eventually marry late in life after her husband dies. This story also makes the point that romance is ageless and also that individuals can change as a function of relationships. Both the man and his bride become different people once they are together.

The media, like the social sciences have mirrored the transition from and all or none to a graduated adulthood.

#### IMPLICATIONS

The postmodern reinvention of adulthood as a gradual coming to maturity has had many different consequences. While it would be wrong to attribute these consequences entirely to the changed conception of adulthood, I do believe it has played a part. The readiness of contemporary adults to divorce, for example, often builds, in part at least, upon the belief that it was a mistake of immaturity and that one will do better next time. When adulthood was conceived as a done deal at a certain age, there

was little hope for future growth, and little point to divorce as a means of improving one's life.

The conception of graduated adulthood has also been extended to a sense of graduated parenthood. Parents today are more willing to acknowledge not knowing a lot about childrearing and helps explain their willingness to have children in out-of-home care and to follow the advice of experts. The programs, books and journals for parents are growing at a very fast pace. While there are some positive benefits to this willingness to learn about childrearing, it can lead to overdependence upon experts and not enough reliance on the parent's own good sense.

Finally, I believe that the graduated sense of adulthood has allowed many young people to prolong their adolescence so that they are more willing to put up with the gross, the obscene, the gruesomely violent than were earlier generations at the same point in their lives. Put differently, graduated adulthood probably contributes to a loss of civility in our society. It may also contribute to the phenomenon of "dead beat dads" who don't believe they should be held responsible for their youthful and therefore, forgivable, mistakes.

Certainly the reinvention of adulthood as a gradual process has many benefits for adults. It says that adulthood is a time of change and growth, something to look forward to and to enjoy. It allows young people to be more deliberate in making decisions that have life long consequences. So there are many positives, as

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well as negatives, to a graduated sense of adulthood. The real challenge is retain the best of modern adulthood, its sense of responsibility and morality and combine this with the forward looking thrust of a postmodern graduated maturity.