

CONCEPTIONS OF ADULTHOOD BY EMERGING ADULTS IN CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to describe and articulate the definitions of adulthood by young people in Cameroon. Participants were 992 high school students (females = 54% and males = 46%, with mean age = 20) selected from four urban centres in the country. They completed a self-developed Likert-type questionnaire. Descriptive results indicate that young people in Cameroon tended to conceptualise adulthood in terms of independence (57.6%), emotional maturity (83.6%), financial independence (72.0%), being more responsible (90.1%) and attainment of role transitions (72.9 %). The results suggest that Cameroonian youth in urban centres like others around the world are currently witnessing a new way of defining adulthood where definitions of adulthood, though psychological in most respects, are also demographic. Results showed that adult role transitions-getting married, starting a career, having children-still matter greatly. The implication is that while Cameroonian young people equally share of the widely acclaimed subjective markers of adulthood, they continue to value objective indicators of adulthood. Society-based indicators of adulthood are still widely considered very important in most African societies today.

Keywords: Independence, Emotional maturity, Financial independence, Responsible adulthood, Role transitions.

INTRODUCTION

Arguments here and there point to the obvious fact that social and psychological definitions of what it means to be an adult have evolved in response to social changes. The implication in the life-course is evidenced in how young people conceive and define adult status today. In the Africa sub region in general and Cameroon in particular, the transition to adulthood is an arduous task characterised by several challenges (Lo-oh, 2009). Social and economic inequalities in the African continent continue to mark the challenges of Africa's youth life courses. While wealthier urban children and youth are beginning to experience problems with over nutrition, some rural youth still face nutritional deprivation (Nsamenang, 2007). Unemployment and crime rates are dramatically higher among rural youth and young adults. Wealthier youth and those in urban areas are more likely to be in school than their poor rural counterparts, and thus enjoy significant advantages in a labour market that increasingly rewards credentials and not basic skills (Lo-oh, 2009).

In the midst of all these, Africa's youth also suffer the effect of disease, especially HIV/AIDS and malaria, increasing rates of unemployment, alcoholism and drug trafficking, corruption and embezzlement, which continuously predict a bleak future for the future of African youth. This somehow is at the centre of explanations for why Africa's youth perceive adulthood the way they do, and why they eventually become what they become in their adulthood. The outcome is that most young people's vision for adulthood in the sub region is ill-fated by such difficulties with corresponding adverse effects on young people's definitions of adult status as well as their experience of emerging adulthood. Notably, in Cameroon, health care services, economic resources, and social services are unevenly distributed. As a result majority of Cameroonian youth are left languishing in abject poverty, unemployment, under-

scholarisation, and a difficult labour market economy. School-to-work transitions are also a farce. With these, it is increasingly difficult to manage the economics of adulthood which entails becoming autonomous, financially independent, personally and socially responsible, emotionally stable and self-reliant. With these difficult experiences, it is continuously difficult for young people to say exactly what they think their tomorrow will look like, how to define adulthood for themselves and how to negotiate it. In the event of this, they tend to proceed with life as though tomorrow will never come. And when asked what adulthood is to them, their explanations are usually contested against each other and with mixed feelings. Their lives are undefined and are not mapped out so that everything is almost possible, with no clear definition or direction of where they are going. It is therefore the interest of this article to describe and articulate the definitions Cameroonian young people in urban spaces have of adulthood. We mainly sought to find out if the globally acclaimed subjective markers of adulthood are also common among Cameroonian young people.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on emerging adulthood has indicated comparative and contrastive definitions of adulthood across cultures. Such studies have sought to understand the criteria that are most important in signifying adult status; and whether there are universally held conceptions of adulthood or if these conceptions are cultural or context bound. Whichever way, however, how young people perceive and define adult status will correspondingly determine how they negotiate the transition to adulthood. For some, the process is characterised by completing school, finding work, developing a social network of friends and intimates, contributing to the maintenance and support of a household, and participating as a citizen in a community (Shanahan, 2000; Settersten, 2006). But many others find it challenging negotiating this period of life, especially as they know very little about where they are going (Jablonski and Martino, 2013). With demanding social and economic challenges, the situation is even more difficult and complex for young people in African societies.

The transition to adulthood was compressed and standardized during the first half of the twentieth century, then stretched out and got individualized during the later part of the century (Hartmann and Swartz, 2006). The implication of these changes in the transition to adulthood for other life course stages is unclear. Some scholars argue that the delay in the adoption of adult roles means that adolescence is being extended (Nsamenang, 2002;) with corresponding postponement of important life-course events. To other researchers, the increasing length of the transition period and the later entry into full adult status suggest the development of a new life stage, labelled emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Whichever way, social definitions of what it means to be an adult, for oneself or for others, have evolved in response to social and economic changes (Furstenberg, Kennedy, McCloyd, Rumbaut, and Settersten, 2003) and sociological research has used the concept of “transition to adulthood” while psychological research has used emerging adulthood to denote a new period in the life course. In developing societies, such social changes are accompanied by cultural exchanges and evolutions, leading to adoption of Western practices of livelihood.

Meanwhile there has been significant disagreement on when exactly the transition process lasts and whether adult status could be defined by age norms. Based on this, some literature has suggested that the process lasts between 18 to 29 years (Arnett, 2009, 2007; Arnett and Eisenberg, 2007; Seigner, 2009). Meanwhile other studies have argued that many transitioning youth do not complete the transition to adulthood these days until even their early 30s. Yet to others (e.g. Benson and Furstenberg, 2003) the timing of demographic

transitions varies by socioeconomic position. The most prevalent issue is that it does indeed take much longer to make the transition to adulthood today than decades ago; and the process has become more ambiguous and occurs in a less uniform and more gradual complex fashion (Settersten, 2006) than it used to be. The process of becoming adult has become quite unstable and non-linear, longer, more complex and uncertain, no longer prescribed but more individualised and open to risks as well as to opportunities. Behind this is the fact that it takes much longer to get a full-time job that pays enough to support a family than it did in the past.

The implication of these challenges and changes in the transition to adulthood is evidenced in how young people today conceive and define adult status. And with such challenges and changes, markers of adulthood have also been de-standardised so that earlier pathways seem not to hold true in today's generation of young people. This has also led to shifts in youth definitions of adulthood. Findings on the transition to adulthood suggest shifts from sociological to more psychological definitions of adulthood (Shanahan, 2000; Shanahan, Motimer and Porfeli, 2005). Emerging adults, unlike full adults, are undergoing a period of exploration where they can test out a series of possible life courses because they have not yet entered the enduring responsibilities that are normative in adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Barry and Nelson, 2005). As such they are exposed to conflicting, uncertain, and unstable definitions of adulthood; and well into their thirties, many of them continue to doubt the content of the future of their adulthood; and even what adulthood is all about.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The cross-sectional survey design was adopted for the study, making use of space, sampling, theory and methods triangulation to give a comprehensive picture of participants' conceptions of adulthood. The sample of the study was 992 young adult males and females, selected from the 21 high schools in four urban towns in Cameroon. Out of the 992 participants, there were 536 (54.3%) females and 452 (45.7%) males. Their age range was 16 to 27 years with the age group 19-21 (570, 57.7%) having the highest representation. The youngest age group, 16-18 years had 222 (22.5%) participants meanwhile the age group 22-24 years was represented by 177 (17.9) participants. The oldest age group, 25-27 years constituted 19 (1.9%) of the sample.

In terms of marital status, majority of the sample was single, (941: 95.3%); 39 (3.9%) were married; 6 (0.6%) were separated; and 01 (0.1%) were divorced. Across most ethnic groups in Cameroon, most young adults are postponing marriage into their early or middle thirties. However, in others like the Islamic societies of northern Cameroon, it is still possible to have young people turned into marriage in their early teens so that by the late teens a lot of them have already experienced parenthood, marital separation or divorce as the case may be. This partly explains why as much as 78 (7.9%) of participants had already had at least a child at the time of the study.

Procedure

This research was part of a larger study that was aimed at investigating youth conceptions of adulthood in Cameroon. A number of ethical issues were addressed to ensure the effectiveness and quality of the study. In this respect, ethical standards were maintained in collecting information from participants, by explaining to the participants the relevance and usefulness of the study and justifying why the respondent had to participate in the study. This

was to avoid wasting the respondent's time. Again prior to the study, participants were made adequately aware (through in-class exposition and discussion) of the type of information needed from them, why the information was being sought, what purpose it was put to, how they were expected to participate in the study, and how it directly or indirectly affected them. Based on all of these, participants freely enlisted themselves in the study. Above all, issues of confidentiality and anonymity were seriously considered, so that whatever information given by the respondents was only strictly used for the benefit of the study; and in no circumstance the identity of the respondents have been revealed.

While in the high schools and taking cognizance of gender, age and division of origin (which provided data on ethnicity), students were conveniently and systematically selected for the study. The use of conveniently and systematically selected participants required the researcher to have access to particular types of participants who were especially likely to help in gaining an understanding of the phenomenon (Patten, 2005) of thinking about adulthood. Therefore, to ensure credibility and reliability of the quality of the sample, participants were first sorted demographically (in terms of class, age and gender), then further given the opportunity to understand the research idea, and finally, they wilfully enlisted themselves as participants in the research. A brief discussion was conducted with volunteered participants to establish if they were actually conversant with the phenomenon of thinking and reflecting about the future of their adulthood; and then their attitudes to schooling. At the end of the discussion with volunteered participants, and based on the researcher's discretion, students were recruited into the study.

Measures

A Likert scale known as the Inventory of Youth Conceptions of Adulthood (IYCA) was constructed, based on voices from young people themselves, existing literature and validation from expert researchers in youth transitions. The instrument was then piloted on a group of high school students just to ensure that it was clear in collecting reliable data. At the initial stage, brief discussions were held with some high school students to collect in their own voices general views, thoughts and perceptions of adulthood held by young people in African contexts. The definitions constituted their perceptions of adulthood. The essence was to determine in their own voices, experiences and life paths what they perceived adulthood to mean. Emerging definitions from these discussions with youth were used to facilitate the construction of (and also validate) the Inventory of Youth Conceptions of Adulthood (IYCA). The inventory was then administered to a broader sample of 992 participants from across 21 schools in four ethnic communities in Cameroon. This was to enable respondents provide self-reports about their conceptions and definitions of adulthood.

The measures or constructs of adulthood examined in this study are similar to those of earlier research (Shanahan, Motimer and Porfeli, 2005) and also gain from the theorizations of Arnett (2004, 2000) on emerging adulthood; Nsamenang (2002) on identity formation; and Kruse and Walper (2008) and Seigner (2009) adolescent individuation. These measures included conceiving adulthood as having a sense of autonomy/independence, financial independence, responsibility, and emotional maturity. Among other indicators, autonomy/independence was marked by thoughts of establishing an independent household; being in control of one's own thoughts and ways of behaving; allowed to take independent decisions; permitted to take adult responsibilities at one's pace; able to resolve one's own problems; allowed to drink alcohol; and no longer need parental assistance to take care of oneself.

Emotional maturity had indicators such as nurturing a sense of being able to take good control of one's feelings; capable of understanding the feelings of others; capable of keeping one's family safe; committed to a long term love relationship; capable of making lifelong commitments to others; becoming less self-oriented, developing greater consideration for others; capable of keeping oneself safe and out of danger; able to keep away from aggressive behaviour; able to avoid criminal acts; able to decide on one's personal beliefs and values; and capable of respecting one's values in life.

Responsibility was marked by indicators like being able to take care of one's parents; settled into a long term career; able to accept responsibility for consequences of one's actions; understanding the difference between right and wrong; able to justify why one behaves the way he/she does; caring for personal welfare and wellbeing; and showing love to oneself and caring for one's future.

Indicators of financial independence included becoming financially independent; paying for one's basic needs; capable of financially supporting one's family; providing the needs of one's brothers and sisters and having them depend on one; providing the needs of one's parents and having them depend on one; having enough to spend without worrying; able to meet one's health needs with ease; and able to meet the health needs of significant others in one's life.

Meanwhile role transitions were marked by demographic or sociological events such as finishing school; getting a full time job; building a house; contributing to the development of one's community; getting married; initiated into adult sacred societies; becoming biologically capable of bearing children (if female); and becoming biologically capable of fathering children (if male).

Table 1: Reliability analysis

Model component	Cronbach's Alpha*	Valid N	No. of items
Becoming independent	0.590*	931	7
Achieving Emotional Maturity	0.754*	888	11
Becoming responsible	0.729*	948	7
Gaining financial independence	0.837*	922	8
Attaining role transition	0.772*	641	8

* *Components with Cronbach's Alpha equal or greater than 0.6 testify of a good internal consistency*

The Chronbach's Alpha for conceptions of adulthood ranged from 0.590-0.837 with an average of 0.73. In all cases it was realized that Cronbach's Alpha was above 0.5, which indicated satisfactory internal consistency, thus making them suitable for modelling.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to present the distribution of participants between and within subsets using frequencies, proportions and Multiple Response Sets. With these, frequencies and the total aggregate score of all responses were determined. Descriptively, the nature of conceptions, indicator by indicator was first determined by analysing all the 4-point scale to determine the proportion of respondents who either strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed and strongly disagreed. After this, the data were further collapsed into two categories (agreed and disagreed) to determine the effective proportion of respondents who agreed and those who disagreed against an option.

RESULTS

Summarily, results showed what emerging adult their conceptions of adulthood were. Questionnaire data were entered in Epi-Info 6.04d (CDC, 2001). e not too different from those earlier earmarked among young people in industrialised nations. This is certainly because majority of youth included in the study were currently living in urban centres; and as it is in most African countries today, most young people in urban places are becoming more and more westernised with well adapted Euro-American values. The only difference was that unlike typical Euro-American youth, they defined adulthood with both psychological and sociological markers. Psychologically, they conceived adulthood to mean having a sense of independence or autonomy (57.6%), emotional maturity (83.6%), responsibility (90.1%), and financial autonomy (72.0%). They also added attaining specific role transitions (72.9 %) as key indicators of adulthood. The specific results are presented below:

Conception of adulthood as becoming independent/autonomous

Table 2: Young people's conception of adulthood as becoming independent

<i>Becoming independent/autonomous</i>		
	Agree	Disagree
Establishing an independent household	669 (70.2%)	284 (29.8%)
Being in control of your own thoughts and ways of behaving	759 (79.3%)	198 (20.7%)
Allowed to take independent decisions	640 (67.2%)	313 (32.8%)
Permitted to take adult responsibilities at your pace	599 (63.5%)	245 (36.5%)
Able to solve your own problems	727 (75.9%)	231 (24.1%)
Allowed to drink alcohol	169 (17.7%)	787 (82.3%)

No longer need parental assistance to take care of yourself	285 (29.8%)	671 (70.2%)
Aggregate scores(MRS)	3848 (57.6%)	2829 (42.4%)

Looking at the measure of adulthood as becoming independent and autonomous, findings showed that 79.3% of young people in Cameroon conceived independence and autonomy to largely mean being in control of one's own thoughts and ways of behaving. Another important indicator of autonomy in adulthood was having the ability to solve one's own problems (75.9%). Others further defined autonomy in adulthood as establishing an independent household (70.2%); having the liberty to take independent decisions (67.2%) and embrace adult responsibilities at one's pace (63.1%). Contrary to Euro-American findings, an overwhelming proportion of emerging adults in Cameroon (82.4%) did not find alcohol consumption as an indicator of autonomous behaviour in adulthood. Also, we found that parental assistance continue to be important well into adulthood as 70.5% of emerging adults disregarded the notion that independence in adulthood is marked by decline in the need for parental assistance to be able to care for one's self.

Conception of adulthood as achieving emotional maturity

Table 3: Young people's conception of adulthood as achieving emotional maturity

<i>Achieving emotional maturity</i>		
	Agree	Disagree
Able to take good control of your feelings	830 (87.1%)	123 (12.9%)
Capable of understanding the feelings of others	834 (87.1%)	124 (12.9%)
Capable of keeping your family safe	858 (89.7%)	98 (10.3%)
Committed to a long term love relationship	713 (75.0%)	238 (25.0%)
Capable of making life long commitments to others	669 (70.3%)	283 (29.7%)
Becoming less self-oriented, develop greater consideration for others	598 (63.1%)	350 (36.9%)
Capable of keeping yourself safe and out of danger	861 (89.9%)	97 (10.1%)
Able to keep away from aggressive behaviour	840 (87.7%)	118 (12.3%)
Able to avoid criminal acts	825 (87.9%)	114 (12.1%)
Able to decide on your personal beliefs and values	836 (87.4%)	120 (12.6%)
Capable of respecting your values in life	896 (94.5%)	52 (5.5%)
Aggregate scores(MRS)	8760 (83.6%)	1717 (16.4%)

Results on achieving emotional maturity showed that 83.6% of young people in Cameroon agreed to the importance of emotional maturity. They largely defined the achievement of emotional maturity as being able to respect one's values in life (94.5%); being capable of keeping one's self safe and out of danger (89.9%); capable of safeguarding one's family (89.7%); take control of one's feelings (87.1%); capable of understanding the feelings of others (87.1%); committed to a long term love relationship (75.4%); and capable of making lifelong commitments with others (70.3%). Meanwhile only 63.1% of emerging adults viewed achieving emotional maturity as becoming less self-oriented and developing greater consideration for others during adulthood. Other markers of emotional maturity were the ability to keep away from aggressive behaviour (87.7%), criminal acts (87.9%) and the ability to decide on one's personal beliefs and values (87.4%).

Conception of adulthood as becoming responsible

Table 4: Young people's conception of adulthood as becoming responsible

Becoming responsible

	Agree	Disagree
Able to take care of your parents	862 (90.4%)	92 (9.6%)
Settled in a long term career	825 (87.0%)	123 (13.0%)
Able to accept responsibility for consequences of your actions	865 (90.5%)	91 (9.5%)
Understanding the difference between right and wrong	894 (93.5%)	62 (6.5%)
Able to justify why you behave the way you do	863 (90.7%)	89 (9.3%)
Caring for personal welfare and wellbeing	823 (86.4%)	130 (17.6%)
Showing love to yourself and caring for your future	880 (92.1%)	76 (7.9%)
Aggregate scores(MRS)	6012 (90.1%)	663 (9.9%)

Another important marker of adulthood in Cameroon is becoming responsible (90.1%). Responsible behaviour was largely defined by the ability to understand the difference between right and wrong (93.5%); show love to one's self and care about one's future (92.1%); able to justify one's behaviour (90.7%); ability to accept responsibility for consequences of one's actions (90.5%); ability to take care of one's parents (90.4%); settled in a long term career (87.0%); ability to care for one's personal welfare and wellbeing (86.4%); and.

Conception of adulthood as gaining financial independence**Table 5: Young people's conception of adulthood as gaining financial independence****Gaining financial independence**

	Agree	Disagree
Becoming financially independent	719 (75.6%)	232 (24.4%)
Paying for your basic needs	756 (79.9%)	190 (20.1%)
Capable of financially supporting your family	762 (80.2%)	188 (19.8%)
Providing the needs of your brothers and sisters and having them depend on you	644 (67.6%)	308 (32.4%)
Providing the needs of your parents and having them depend on you	614 (64.8%)	333 (35.2%)
Having enough to spend without worrying	430 (45.2%)	521 (54.4%)
Able to meet your health needs with ease	747 (79.4%)	194 (20.6%)
Able to meet the health needs of significant others in your life	746 (78.0%)	211 (22.0%)
Aggregate scores(MRS)	5418 (72.0%)	2577 (68.6%)

Another proportion of emerging adults in Cameroon conceived adulthood as gaining financial autonomy (72.0%). They further defined financial autonomy as having the capacity to financially support one's family (80.2%); paying for one's basic needs (79.9%); having the ability to meet one's health needs with ease (79.4%) and the health needs of significant others (78.0%). Meanwhile others conceived financial autonomy to simply mean becoming financially independent (75.6%); providing needs for parents and siblings and having them depend on one (67.6%). In line with most value systems in African customs, 54.4% of respondents rejected the notion of adulthood as having enough to spend without worrying.

Conception of adulthood as attaining role transitions**Table 6: Young people's conception of adulthood as attaining role transitions**

Attaining role transitions	Agree	Disagree
Finishing school	719 (75.2%)	237 (24.8%)
Getting a full time job	752 (79.3%)	196 (20.7%)
Building a house	761 (79.7%)	194 (20.3%)
Contributing to development of a community	836 (87.6%)	818 (12.4%)
Getting married	712 (76.3%)	221 (23.7%)
Initiated in to adult and secret societies	268	677

	(28.4%)	(71.6%)
Becoming biologically capable of bearing children (if female)	679 (80.5%)	165 (19.5%)
Becoming biologically capable of fathering children (if male)	597 (78.0%)	168 (22.0%)
Aggregate scores(MRS)	5324 (72.9%)	1976 (27.1%)

Contrary to results in many industrialised and emerging economies, those in Cameroon showed that demographic society event markers of adulthood continue to be important in young people's conceptions of adulthood. As much as 72.9% considered the attainment of society-based role transitions as an important marker of adult status in Cameroon. In Cameroon, young people maintained that contributing to the development of one's community (87.6%); becoming biologically capable of bearing children (if female) (80.5%); getting full-time employment (79.3%); building a house (79.7%); becoming biologically capable of fathering children (78.0%); getting married (76.3%); and finishing school (75.2%). As much as 71.6% of young people today rejected the variable of being initiated into adult sacred societies as a marker of adulthood.

DISCUSSION

Markers of adulthood in Cameroon

The demographic and subjective conceptions that emerging adults hold of adulthood in Cameroon goes contrary to Arnett's argument that today's youth typically visualise adulthood subjectively or individualistically (Arnett, 2000). According to Arnett, emerging adulthood is marked by subjective markers such as becoming independent, achieving emotional maturity, gaining financial independence and becoming socially and personally responsible. In this study, the conceptions seem to be mixed among Cameroonian youth where apart from subjectively conceiving adulthood, they also nurture demographic conceptions and feel that they would be adult only after attaining certain role transitions. Though contrary to Arnett's findings, the finding is consistent with those which found that both demographic and subjective markers continue to co-exist and influence each other (Benson & Furstenberg, 2003; Shanahan, Porfeli & Motimer, 2005).

Becoming independent and autonomous

The pursuit for independence and autonomous well being, which is a typical phenomenon among emerging adults was significantly emphasised among Cameroonian youth. Independence is typically marked by responsibility, autonomy and decision making. Results from youth transition researches have demonstrated incremental gains in independence each year from late teens to the twenties. From this study, when you look at the emerging adults individually, paths toward independence are unique and most of them are non-linear. That is, as adolescents are making their way to adulthood, they move forward and backward to get there, and they each do it in their own way. And, progress in one domain for example, one's career, is associated with gains in independence in others, such as establishing romantic relationships and becoming homeowners.

Results also show that emerging adults in Cameroon place a lot of value on personal beliefs, values and attitudes than on objective indicators of adulthood such as taking alcohol, parental dissociation and performance of adult roles. This is very exemplary of Cameroonian youth

whose definitions of independence in adulthood largely depend on their personal experiences and psychological mind sets. Richter & Panday (2006) also found that South African youth placed significant value on psychological and personal autonomy through independent decision making, acceptance of the consequences of their decisions, control over emotions and relating to adults on an equal footing. In their own study, Arnett, Ramos, & Jenson (2001) also found that emerging adults are likely to make a lot of reference to autonomous beliefs and values when they define adulthood. Meanwhile Spear & Kulbok (2004) found that independence or autonomy was attributed by self-determination, locus of control, self reliance and self concept. With these definitions, we see a theme of self-sufficiency and self-reliance to the near exclusion of any other oriented criteria.

Achieving emotional maturity and stability

The finding which identified achieving emotional maturity as a psychological marker of adulthood was consistent with those of earlier studies (Arnett, 2000; Benson & Furstenberg, 2003 and Mayseless & Scharf, 2003; which also identified emotional control, stability, maturity, and self control as key attributes of becoming a full adult around the world today. These studies have argued that more and more around the world; especially in industrialised and urbanised centres, the transition to adulthood is marked by gaining a sense of autonomy, financial independence, self-control, emotional maturity, and personal responsibility.

While consistent with these earlier studies, the finding is also different from others which rather laid emphasis on social and traditional event markers such as school completion, job security, marriage and parenthood (Shanahan, 2000). Notice that this finding is well adapted especially if we consider the context within which participants were located and contacted. Majority of them were attending a high school class in an urban centre. This made the sample quite elitist in nature so that their beliefs and values were much similar to those of young people in industrialised northern economies. It is also important to notice that it is becoming common place to find young people undergoing similar experiences in developing economies like those in well advanced industrialised nations. With these prevailing social, economic and cultural changes marking the 21st century, the developmental path has ceased to be a linear progression with mapped out transitions. With globalisation, young people around the world today are seemingly being hit by similar experiences, especially youth from industrialised and emerging societies. Societal demands and changes in these regions are making youth development non-linear in nature today than it used to be. With these changes, defining and conceptualising adulthood has become more an issue of mind state than a societal issue. That is why Cameroonian emerging adults might have identified among other subjective definitions of adulthood, the achievement of emotional maturity as one of the markers of 21st century adulthood.

Becoming responsible

The finding on conceiving adulthood as becoming responsible, corroborated existing literature which identified one of the psychological markers to be having a sense of becoming personally and socially responsible (Arnett, 2000; Benson & Furstenberg, 2003; Mayseless & Scharf, 2003). For example, Jeffrey Arnett had found that young Americans who had achieved responsible adulthood were accountable for their actions, could take stable decisions regarding their beliefs and values, and were generally more likely than ever to look up to their parents as equals. In their study of what becoming adult means among adolescents, emerging adults and parents of adolescents in Israel, Mayseless & Scharf (2003) found that

the items endorsed to the highest degree to define adulthood were accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's actions and deciding on personal beliefs and values independently of parents and other influences. Richter & Panday (2006) also validated among South African emerging adults the values of self-sufficiency, independent decision making, responsibility for the consequences of decisions and actions, control over emotions, and relating to adult on an equal footing. These complemented findings show that Cameroonian young people like others around the world are experiencing the new age of subjective and psychological adulthood, and one of the major considerations is beginning to nurture a sense of being responsible. However, they also note like others around the world that responsibility goes beyond social indicators to psychological stability.

Gaining financial autonomy

Like other psychological markers earlier identified, gaining financial independence" was consistent with earlier studies which found that young people today were more likely to subjectively define adulthood than demographically define it (Arnett, 2000; Benson & Furstenberg, 2003; Mayseless & Scharf, 2003; Settersten, 2006). Considering this, Ansell (2004) made reference to an alternative adulthood today, marked by financial independence, economic activity, paid employment and full functioning in the formal work sector. From a South African study, Richter & Panday (2006) found that being able to set up and maintain an independent family and household that is financially sustainable, safe and provides a nurturing environment for children is central to attaining adulthood. With this, they noted strongly that this phenomenon was underpinned by the need to establish financial and residential independence from parents and the associated requirements of economic self-sufficiency through education. This component is seemingly the most prominent for becoming adult in developing economies as its achievement comes along with other adult transitions. Being financially autonomous would certainly enable the on-set of other adult transitions like independence, emotional stability, personal and social responsibility, and possibly the attainment of various role transitions. In relation to this argument Richter & Panday (2006) also found that with financial independence, young South Africans placed significant value on psychological and personal autonomy which was manifested in independent decision making, acceptance of the consequences of decisions, control over emotions and relating to adults on an equal footing. In this study, young Cameroonians also celebrated financial autonomy as the key to many demographic transitions. A lot of them reported the need for financial autonomy to be able to get married, parent children and also run an independent household. Like Richter & Panday (2006), Cameroonian youth identified among others, longer time spent in school; delays in finding employment; and prolonged economic and residential dependence to be the major hindrances to marriage in young adulthood.

In addition, Morrow & Richards (1996) argued that high levels of poverty and unemployment make it difficult for emerging adults to attain full adulthood, producing a mismatch between young adult expectations and the reality of their experiences. In Africa, high rates of youth unemployment are a result of very low levels of job creation, and the increase in the economically active population. More women are entering the workforce, and because of the low levels of job creation, demand by young people seeking work is higher than the supply. This backdrop of economic despair has led young people to experience high levels of frustration, despair, envy and resentment because they are prevented from attaining the material and social success held up as important in emerging adulthood. This may partly explain why many more young people continue to drag on with the demands of adulthood,

sometimes even postponing most of the demands on the grounds of not yet becoming financially independent. That is why I argue in this work that financial independence ranks among the highest subjective markers of adulthood in Cameroonian transitioning youth. It is the pathway to virtually all other transition markers, psychological or sociological, among Cameroonian young people. Its influence goes beyond and extends to transition agencies. For example, a financially secured university student is likely to more positively regard school than his/her counterpart from a financially weak background.

Attaining society-based role transitions

Whereas the finding on the presence of mixed conceptions of adulthood among Cameroonian youth was evidently contrary to current psychological research, it was also consistent with other literature on the debate of emerging adulthood. Despite the shift from demographic to individualistic markers of adulthood sociological research has maintained the importance of traditional markers of adulthood and strongly argued that the five traditional markers remain outstanding in thinking about adulthood. In their study (Lopez, Chervinko, Strom, Hsu, Kinney, & Bradley, no date), young people considered “workforce entry and career perseverance”, and a majority considered “having and taking care of a family” as noteworthy role markers of adult status. In a similar Israeli study (Mayseless & Scharf, 2003), respondents viewed role transitions of full employment, settling into a long term career, school completion, marriage, child birth, purchasing a house and commitment to a long term relationship as moderately important as indicators of adulthood.

Yet, another noticeable trend in this web of research is championed by contemporary social science research, generally interested in emerging adulthood. According to them, young people’s definitions of adulthood are mixed (Benson & Furstenberg, 2003; Shanahan, Porfeli & Motimer, 2005). Sometimes, their definitions are subjective and at other times they are based on societal events. This is the situation among Cameroonian youth. A significant majority of them indicated that role transitions such as completing school, finding employment, getting married and parenting were necessary and important indicators of adulthood. At the same time, they also strongly used psychological indicators such as having a sense of becoming independent, responsible, financially autonomous and emotionally secured. As such, Cameroon emerging adults use both criteria to face the challenges of adult transition. With these arguments, we find that more and more, the transition to adulthood has changed from a relatively clear-cut, linear pathway to a complex, fragmented and individualized process dependent on the ability of each young person to navigate his or her way through a set of landmark events (Dwyer, Smith, Tyler & Wyn, 2003). This suggests core role transitions including finishing school, entering the work force, leaving the parental home, marrying and becoming a parent. But taken alone, none of these transitions is either necessary or sufficient for the achievement of adult status, but taken together, they mark the adult stage of the life course development and also serve as a mature base for navigating psychological understanding of what it takes to be adult.

CONCLUSIONS

This article partly provides some support for Jeffrey Arnett’s suggestion that traditional markers of adulthood are no longer the measure with which adulthood is defined. However, it suggests a need for redefining how traditional adult transitions are employed in the examination of emerging adulthood. Rather than portraying the simplistic view that traditional markers are no longer useful in defining adulthood, it appears to be more

appropriate to re-evaluate how adult development could be measured using the variations in the traditional and individualistic transitions to capture the nuances of an emerging adult's development. These nuances are logged in the individual's experiences in transition processes like schooling, work, peer group and family. This article has also agreed with some earlier ones that individualistic conceptions of adulthood are embedded in traditional ones and that the achievement of traditional markers during emerging adulthood facilitates appropriate psychological definitions of adulthood.

The findings of this study indicate that Cameroonian youth like others around the world are currently witnessing a new way of conceiving adulthood where definitions of adulthood, though subjective in most respects, are dominantly mixed. Perhaps most important to the discussion of what constitutes "adulthood," society event markers-getting married, starting a career, having children-still matter greatly. Youth who had already experienced all three events were twice as likely to report feeling like an adult as those who had not experienced all three events. As expected, most married respondents or those already with kids felt like fully adult and not partly adult. As a result, this study supports the notions that there has been a shift from defining adulthood with sociological event markers to using psychological markers to define it; and that in some contexts, the definitions of adulthood are mixed because emerging adults are not yet fully adult and so do not completely understand what it means to be adult.

The findings also indicate a strong emphasis on psychological well-being than generations gone by where emphasis was on success on societal event markers that provided sociological well-being. There is no longer a clear-cut, linear pathway to adulthood but a complex, fragmented and individualized process which is dependent on the ability of each young person to navigate his or her way through a set of landmark events. For example today, children are born before marriage; education and employment alternate; and jobs paying enough to support a family increasingly require more formal education. As a result young people today remain in school longer to acquire the credentials they will need to support a family. Again, it has become more common to have a child before marrying and to re-enter school after spending sometime in the labour force. All these changes have seriously affected youth conceptions of adulthood in Cameroon.

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