

ACCELERATED AND EMERGING TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD:  
IDENTITY, UPWARD MOBILITY, AND LIFE OUTCOMES ON A COLLEGE  
CAMPUS

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters  
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Master of Arts

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Ann Branaman, Department of Sociology, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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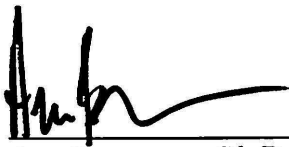
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## ABSTRACT

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In this study I analyze how college students transition to adulthood. Based on 38 semi-structured interviews with young adults, I found that two groups appeared: emerging adults and accelerated adults. Emerging adults were more likely to come from economically privileged families and had the social and economic resources to focus on education, pursue a fulfilling career, and have fun while in college. In contrast, accelerated adults had adopted adult responsibilities during their childhood or teenage years and struggled to succeed in college due to inadequate guidance, lingering emotional anguish over childhood events, and lack of financial support. Although enrolled in the same university, these groups transitioned to adulthood very differently. I discuss the implications for each type of transition, as well as the implications of my findings for public policy and for future sociological research.

ACCELERATED TRANSITIONS DURING THE ERA OF EMERGING  
ADULTHOOD: IDENTITY, UPWARD MOBILITY, AND LIFE OUTCOMES ON A  
COLLEGE CAMPUS

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1970s, the college educated and non-college educated have become increasingly disparate in their occupations, incomes, and family patterns. In fact, between 1989 and 2013, the net worth of college-educated American households with children rose by 47 percent, whereas the net worth of high school educated households declined by 17 percent (Cherlin 2014; Putnam 2015). These trends indicate that the stakes of education for economic stability are higher than ever. While higher education has become more accessible in recent decades, it is also profoundly stratified. Children from wealthier families receive significantly more financial, emotional, and intellectual assistance from parents than those from lower-income families (Lareau 2002; Padilla-Walker, Nelson, and Carroll, 2012). At the university level, affluent parents who pay for college tuition and dorms provide a safety net for their young adult children to finish college, survive a precarious labor market, and ultimately reproduce their social class (Astin and Oseguera, 2004; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Swartz 2008). When parents can only provide meager financial, emotional, or intellectual support, however, navigating the path through college and into an upwardly mobile adulthood can be a formidable task.

Much of the empirical literature on the transition to adulthood focuses on the divergence of experiences among contemporary youth—either the middle to upper-middle class youth at universities who experience an emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000, 2004, 2016) *or* the working class, high-school educated youth employed in service work

who experience an accelerated adulthood (Furstenberg 2008; Lee 2014; Osgood, Foster, and Courtney 2010; Silva 2013; The William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship 1988). Arnett (2000, 2004, 2016) defines emerging adulthood as a new stage of life in which young people experience (1) instability, (2) identity exploration, (3) self-focus, (4) feeling in between adolescence and adulthood, and (5) optimism/belief in possibilities. Accelerated adulthood, in contrast, is defined by Lee (2014:710) as “a brief or immediate transition that requires the immediate adoption of one or more adult responsibilities or commitments due to the lack of alternatives and/or insufficient resources.” However, these concepts often represent youth who are on paths to reproduce their social class status within *separate* institutions.

Less attention has been paid to those who attempt to experience both an accelerated and emerging adulthood; in other words, they have experienced accelerated adulthoods but are currently trying to revert or decelerate into an emerging adulthood. If they were to reproduce their social class, these youth would not be attending college and would instead be engaged in service sector work—i.e., following the standard accelerated adulthood path. The accelerated adults who are attempting to decelerate, however, are attending a university in the hopes of becoming upwardly mobile. In 2012, 12.3 percent of low-income<sup>1</sup> high school graduates in the United States had plans to attend a four-year university in the fall (Digest of Education Statistics 2015). The literature on these students, while sparse, has not showed promising results, as many of these students enter college at financial, emotional, and cultural disadvantages in comparison to their peers (Armstrong & Hamilton 2013). For example, students from low SES backgrounds who attend four-

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<sup>1</sup> “Low-income” students have family incomes below the 25th percentile (Digest of Education Statistics, 2015).

year colleges and universities work more, study less, are less involved, and report lower grade point average than their high socioeconomic status peers (Walpole 2003). Thus, although they are engaged with a common institution—the system of higher education— young people from different life backgrounds seem to have very different experiences in college.

In this study I look at two groups of young people—accelerated adults and emerging adults—and analyze the ways in which these two groups experience the transition to adulthood differently. What factors characterize an emerging adulthood versus an accelerated adulthood? How is college experienced for emerging adults versus accelerated adults? What are the emotional consequences of accelerated and emerging adulthoods? Finally, I conclude by discussing the implications of my research for educators, administrators, and policymakers hoping to enhance the college experience for students from low income or disadvantaged backgrounds.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Subjective and Contestable Age Identities*

Erving Goffman (1963:105) defined identity as the subjective sense of one's situation and "continuity and character that an individual comes to obtain as a result of his various social experiences." A number of scholars have drawn upon identity theory (Stryker and Burke 2000) to argue that a subjective view of age may be appropriate in studying age identity and subjective age. Age identity has been defined as "the subjective evaluation of one's age ... grounded in a person's social experience" (Johnson, Berg, and Sirotzki 2007:244; Kaufman and Elder 2002). Berg (2007) argues, for example, that feelings of adulthood differ by one's social domain (e.g. with friends, with parents, with work, at school), family transitions (e.g. leaving home of origin, marrying, having children), and individual qualities (e.g. feeling financially responsible). Roles have a significant influence on subjective age identities, and the combinations of roles that are enacted by individuals as well as the *age-grading* of those roles influence self-perceptions of age and changes in subjective age identity. Thus, among people of the same *chronological* age, there is likely to be significant variety in how these individuals view their *subjective* age (Logan, Ward, and Spitze 1992).

Subjectivity in age identity can be seen in the ambiguous or contested nature of contemporary adulthood. For current young adults, adulthood is seen as a problem. As

social, economic, political, and technological changes have drastically changed both the transition to adulthood and the type of adulthood that is now required, youth can no longer be expected to become the type of adult typical of the past (Blatterer 2007; Côté 2000). Today young people are expected to be more self-directed, flexible, and innovative, while also maintaining a dynamic and viable identity (Bauman 2000; Côté 1996; Threadgold 2009). Furthermore, social validation can be achieved in many different spheres, and the diversity of daily contexts that people inhabit increases the likelihood that such validation will not necessarily carry over. In other words, an individual may be recognized as an adult in one sphere, but not in another. This facilitates the ambiguity of adulthood, as individuals may receive conflicting messages regarding their status as adults (Blatterer, 2005).

If identities are situated accomplishments, then individuals must demonstrate an understanding of who they are in that situation in order to gain recognition (King 2012). In his study of young adults taking a gap year between college and university in the United Kingdom, King (2012) found that young adults recounted certain changes that had occurred during their gap year to gain recognition of their development as independent, confident, and mature young adults. Thus, these young people used discursive resources—i.e. their ability to convincingly and successfully articulate changes they had experienced over the last year—that enabled them “to gain recognition for their adult identities in the here and now” (King 2012:110). Thus, adulthood may be more dependent upon individuals’ own subjective understandings of their status and identities as adults and the corresponding validation that they can elicit from significant people in their lives.

### *The Changing Transition to Adulthood*

Similar to the way in which the concept of childhood has developed and changed over time, so too has the concept of adulthood. The concepts of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood are culturally constructed, differing by one's class, geographical region, and the time period in which one lives (Aries 1962; Mintz 2015). During any cultural shift there are attempts to explain current circumstances in comparison to how they were in the past. What it means to be an adult today is largely a continuation of the association between stability and adulthood that existed during the late 1940s to the 1970s as a consequence of the post-war boom following World War II (Blatterer 2005, 2007; Cherlin 2014; Coontz 1988, 1992). "Classic markers" of adulthood—completion of education, full-time employment, marriage, parenthood—emerged during this time, as many young people in their late teens and early twenties were able to achieve these markers in a reasonably smooth manner and thus it became a sort of "standard" model of adulthood (Blatterer 2005, 2007). However, this traditional model of adulthood no longer fits the experience of current youth transitioning to adulthood (Blatterer 2007, 2010; Côté and Allahaar 1996; Maguire, Ball, and Macrae 2001). A number of new concepts have emerged as a way to make sense of why the current generation of youth are taking longer to reach traditional markers of adulthood, such as arrested adulthood (Côté 2000), refusal of adulthood (Maguire et al. 2001), erosion of adulthood (Calcutt 1998), adulescents (Burnett 2010; Crawford 2009), and failure of adulthood (Burnett 2010). Essentially, these explanations all suggest that the life course is changing in that adolescence is being prolonged, and adulthood is being avoided or deferred.

Life course sociologists have argued that adulthood has traditionally been considered the default category, both in sociological research and in everyday life. For current young adults, however, the line between youth and adulthood has become blurred (Blatterer 2005, 2007). Adulthood as a social category is less standardized than it was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as personal choice is emphasized more than strict adherence to social norms. As social, economic, political, and technological changes (Côté 2000) have drastically changed both the transition to adulthood and the type of adulthood that is now required (Blatterer 2007), youth can no longer be expected to become the type of adult typical of the past. Individuals are increasingly expected to construct their own life course trajectories among a range of options in love, work, and beliefs, and to be more self-directed, flexible, and innovative while also maintaining a dynamic and viable identity (Bauman 2000; Côté 1996; Threadgold and Nilan 2009). As a result of these changes to the “traditional” notion of the life course and age transitions it may be increasingly important for young people to engage in identity work as a pathway to recognition as adults.

The concept of an extended or emerging transition to adulthood has developed in scholarly literature over the last 10 to 15 years in response to the growing recognition that youth are reaching traditional markers of adulthood (e.g. finishing education, attaining full-time employment, achieving financial and residential stability, marrying, and having children) much later than previous generations. In 1970 the median age of first marriage in the United States was 21 for women and 23 for men. By 2015, it was 27 for women and 29 for men (The United States Census Bureau 2015). The number of young people enrolled in higher education has also dramatically increased from 14% in 1940 to over 60% in the mid-1990s (Arnett 2000). Before taking on these lasting role commitments and adult

responsibilities. According to Arnett (2000, 2004, 2007), young adults opt to explore various life possibilities in love, work, and worldviews (i.e. dating, working part time, figuring out what career best suits them, changing majors, and questioning their worldviews) in order to obtain greater life experiences. There are five main characteristics of emerging adulthood in the United States: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood, and optimism regarding the future and budding possibilities (Arnett 2004). While they are legally adults, then, emerging adults are often reliant on their parents for financial support, enrolled in higher education, and still in jobs that they do not consider careers. The majority of Americans in their late teens and early 20s, Arnett argues, find themselves within the category of emerging adulthood but do not have a name for the period and therefore refer to themselves as somewhere “in between” (Arnett 2000).

#### *Accelerated Transitions to Adulthood and Adultification*

In response to the argument that a phase of emerging adulthood is coming into being, several sociologists have noted that this concept does not adequately recognize the importance of social class in determining an individual’s experience during this age frame (Berzin and De Marco 2010; Bynner 2007; Cohen et al. 2003; Galambos and Martínez 2007; Silva 2013). Psychological factors of maturity and independence are largely the focus of Arnett’s (2000, 2004, 2007) theory of emerging adulthood. However, others have taken a different approach by highlighting the structural factors that influence the transition to adulthood. While youth from more advantaged backgrounds also marry and have children later than in previous decades—opting instead to pursue postsecondary education and explore a variety of potential life paths—those from less advantaged backgrounds are



marrying at younger ages or not at all, having children younger and outside of marriage, and are more likely to experience relationship instability (Arnett 2000; Furstenberg 2008; Silva 2013). This process of early transition to adulthood may begin as early as childhood (Backett-Milburn, Wilson, Bancroft, and Cunningham-Burley 2008; Burton 2007; Lee 2014) and typically involves premature workforce participation, early childbearing, taking care of siblings or parents, and charting their own life courses with little guidance or mentorship (Calarco 2011; Hamilton 2016; Lee 2014; Silva, Snellman, and Frederick 2014). It also often involves a feeling that their childhood or adolescence was not “normal” (Backett-Milburn et al. 2008).

For working-class young adults, scholars argue that the traditional markers of adulthood are often out of reach. Economic insecurity, lack of meaningful work, and a life history filled with intense emotional suffering create a group of people who see adulthood as a rejection of any form of dependence and completely relying on one’s self (Silva 2013). Youth from poor families tend to become parents earlier, leave home later, and marry less—although those who do marry often marry at a younger age—than more advantaged groups, but they rarely have the financial resources to support themselves and maintain these marriages (Berzin and De Marco 2010; Bynner 2005). Young adults from wealthier families receive significantly more financial assistance than those from lower-income families (Padilla-Walker et al. 2011), which has a serious impact on young people’s ability to pursue an exploratory period of emerging adulthood. Thus, while a new period of emerging adulthood may appear to be developing, it exists only for those who have the resources to experience an extended period of role exploration and experimentation (Silva 2013).

Without an extended period between adolescence and adulthood, youth from marginalized social groups often enter into adulthood without the skills and resources needed to be successful. As a consequence, these young adults navigate the path to adulthood at a severe disadvantage. Lacking agency and control over the course of their own lives—factors that are crucial to what current youth believe it means to be an adult (Arnett 1997; Schwartz et al. 2005; White 2002)—working-class youth feel stuck in a permanent position of powerlessness. Unable to step into fully independent roles, Silva (2013) argues that the working-class young adults make use of the tools they have available to them by articulating a therapeutic narrative. They constructed a therapeutic narrative by utilizing personal struggles and painful experiences to frame their identity in a context of emotional suffering that leads to self-liberation. By overcoming their painful experiences and suffering through hardships, they are able to claim adult status by managing their own emotional problems and pathologies on their own, with no help from anyone else. Resultantly, by using the therapeutic narrative to shape their identities, working-class youth are able to gain some sense of agency and respect that is attained through achievement of independence (Silva 2013).

The participants in Silva's study had either not attended college or had dropped out before obtaining a degree. Those who did not engage with higher education at all often did so because they did not see themselves as smart enough or because it was too expensive. The individuals who dropped out believed that they had been inadequately prepared for the rigor of college courses. One young woman, for example, was caught plagiarizing a paper and then decided to drop out after feeling overwhelmed by the bureaucratic process of appealing to the university. Others had taken out loans but ultimately "failed out" (Silva

2013:46) of college with significant amounts of debt but no degree. Silva's (2013) analysis provides a useful and meaningful narrative of the experiences and consequences of working class young adults in contemporary American society. My study, however, looks at a slightly different population of young adults: those who did not fail out or drop out of college, but who have (so far) managed to stay afloat. These young people experience an accelerated adulthood similar to Silva's participants, but the key distinction is that my participants have had a higher degree of success in attempting to change pathways and become upwardly mobile than the individuals in Silva's study.

While some scholars have studied the early transitions to adulthood that youth from marginalized social class backgrounds make, others have studied the more severe process of adultification that some youth experience when they have to make the transition to adulthood at very young ages—typically as children or pre-teens. According to Burton (2007:329), childhood adultification involves a process of “contextual, social, and developmental processes in which youth are prematurely, and often inappropriately, exposed to adult knowledge and assume extensive adult roles and responsibilities within their family network.” These premature and inappropriate exposures are, of course, historically specific. Since it first became conceptualized as a life stage, the meaning of childhood has changed drastically over time and still varies today by culture and geographic region. Whereas children in Western societies during the 17<sup>th</sup> century were valued for their utility to the larger family, contemporary Western societies consider children to be objects of sentimental value that are to be nurtured and properly developed (Burton 2007). Thus, when children today are tasked with assuming “adult roles” such as performing the role of caretaker, provider, etc., this is considered non-normative.

Nonetheless, what it means to be a “child” varies greatly by social class, race, and gender, and what is considered a normative childhood or normative child behavior differs according to the social context (Burton 2007). Indeed, some scholars have found that adultification is more common among youth from economically disadvantaged homes than those from higher socioeconomic statuses (Dodson and Dickert 2004).

There has been limited research on processes of adultification. However, among those who study it, adultification typically involves a process of premature caregiving, early independence, parenthood, and/or “confronting challenges that required higher levels of maturity, including violence, substance use, or extensive self-care” (Roy, Messina, Smith, and Waters 2014:61; Schmitz and Tyler 2016). Adultification has also been described as a double edged sword, in which the young person accumulates both assets and liabilities as a result (Burton 2007). Some adultified adolescents, for example, may feel a strong sense of importance, need, and appreciation in their families as a result of bearing such heavy responsibilities, and it is often cited as a source of self-esteem and maturity (Backett-Milburn et al. 2008; Burton 2007). However, these young people are also likely to experience greater levels of anxiety, depression, and “hyper” levels of worry (Burton 2007). Adultification has largely been associated with negative outcomes in young adulthood and beyond. Typically when children take on adult roles in their household it is due to a lack of ability or choice by the parents to do so. Thus, adultified children often experience parental substance abuse, high levels of family unpredictability, and a broad range of childhood maltreatment such as abuse and neglect (Burnett, Jones, Bliwise, and Thomson Ross 2006; Burton 2007). Later in life, adultification has been associated with difficulty transitioning to independent living, lower academic status, illicit drug use and

drug related problems, anxiety, and depression (Backett-Milburn et al. 2007; Burton 2007; Chase, Deming, and Wells 1998; Wolkin 1984).

*Parenting, Social Class, and Early Life Adversity*

Research in developmental psychology and early childhood development has produced consequential findings from studies of poverty, parenting, and child development. In their study of family processes and children's development, Linver, Brooks-Gunn, and Kohen (2002) found that family income was associated with children's development in three significant ways. Higher family income was associated with (1) more cognitive stimulation in the home (e.g. the number of books that the child has, the mother's use of language stimulation with the child, how often the child eats with the parents), (2) less maternal emotional distress (depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and social role dysfunction), and (3) more positive parenting practices (e.g. level of warmth, control, and punitiveness); these factors were then, in turn, associated with higher scores on cognitive tests for the children and lower child behavioral problems. Additionally, Yuan (2009) reported that lower levels of parental well-being and higher levels of stress due to economic hardship explained much of the rise in children's internalizing problems (e.g. depression, anxiety, and distress) and externalizing problems (e.g. antisocial behavior, oppositional behavior, and conduct problems).

Few sociologists have tackled the issue of child rearing, poverty, and consequences for children's social mobility and life chances. However, in her acclaimed study of twelve poor, working class, and middle class families, Lareau (2011) concluded that different parenting styles among middle class versus poor and working class parents contributed to the transmission of differential advantages to children. The middle class parents practiced

a child-rearing technique that Lareau refers to as “concerted cultivation,” in which parents see themselves as developing their children and cultivating their individual talents in a coordinated manner. The “accomplishment of natural growth,” in contrast, was practiced by the poor and working class parents who did not see the concerted development of children as an essential aspect of good parenting and instead wanted their children to spend their childhoods unconstrained by adult-organized activities and demands. These two types of child-rearing, Lareau argues, conferred advantages to the middle class children and disadvantages to the working class and poor children. For example, a middle class upbringing allowed children to develop greater verbal agility, larger vocabularies, more comfort with authority figures, and acquisition of cultural capital. A working class or poor upbringing, however, did not teach children how to make the rules of institutions such as the education system work in their favor.

Studies by psychologists of infants and toddlers suggest that Lareau’s conclusions about the influence of parenting practices extend to younger children. For example, McLoyd (1990) found that economic hardship negatively affects children’s socioemotional development through its impact on parents’ behavior toward the child, specifically because poverty and economic loss hinder parents from providing supportive, consistent, and involved parenting. Parents who are financially pressured are more likely to be depressed, irritable, and explosive, and are more likely to experience marital conflict than parents who are in a more favorable economic position (McLoyd 1990). Lower and working class parents have also been found to be less engaged with their infants and toddlers than are middle class parents, primarily because they do not have the support to make the time investments to engage in such conscious parenting (Augustine 2014). However, this is

largely due to education level. In Augustine's (2014:711) study, for example, there were "statistically significant differences by family structure group (intact versus non-intact) in every parenting indicator and measure of child achievement among less educated mothers" but *not among well-educated mothers*. Family structure did not produce any significant differences in children's achievement at any point in time for well-educated mothers, nor did it produce any differences in parenting, apart from kindergarten school involvement and first-grade maternal sensitivity. For children of less-educated mothers, however, non-intact families were negatively associated with starting math and reading skills. It appears, then, that education not only confers human and financial capital (such as wages and assortative mating) but also "conveys a host of social, cognitive, and psychological resources that provide a valuable compensatory force" (Augustine 2014:712).

These studies provide a solid foundation for studying the different experiences of accelerated adults and emerging adults in college. However, as previously stated, most of this literature focuses on youth in separate institutions. Thus, my study looks at these issues among a range of students from various life backgrounds in the context of the same college campus. These individuals are enrolled in the same university and are taking the same classes, but come to college with vastly different experiences. Thus, I ask what factors characterize an emerging adulthood versus an accelerated adulthood, how college is experienced for emerging adults versus accelerated adults, and what the emotional consequences are of accelerated and emerging adulthoods, I hope to gain insight into how these groups both relate to each other and differ from one another. In the next chapter, I discuss my methodology and the demographic characteristics of my participants.

### III. METHODS

This research was conducted from July 2015 to August 2016 at a large public research university in south Florida. Approximately 37,000 students attend this university each year, and the average undergraduate student age is 23. The university is primarily a commuter school, although efforts have been made in recent years to encourage on-campus living. Among undergraduates who were enrolled in the fall semester of 2017, 83% of undergraduates and 42% of freshman students commuted or lived off campus. The four year graduation rate at this university is 19%, and the six year graduation rate is 50%. In-state tuition is \$24,567 per year, and approximately 40% of undergraduate students receive income-based federal aid intended for low-income students (CollegeData 2018). As shown in Table I, participants (n = 38) ranged from age 18 to 29 years of age. Of these 38, 22 (58%) came from families where their mother had less than a Bachelor's degree, and 11 (29%) of the participants' mothers had a high school diploma or less. Additionally, 19 (50%) of participants' fathers had less than a Bachelor's degree, and 11 (29%) had fathers who received a high school diploma or less. The income distribution was largely concentrated in the lower to middle income categories; 23 (61%) were from homes with incomes below \$75,000, and 12 (32%) came from households with annual incomes below \$50,000 per year<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> To contextualize these incomes, the estimated living wage is \$81,240 for a family of two adults and three children and \$69,042 for a family of two adults and two children for the county in which this university is located (Glasmeier & Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2016).



**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of Participants.

|                                     |              |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|
| Age                                 |              |
| 18-21                               | 42% (n= 16)  |
| 22-25                               | 45% (n = 16) |
| 26-29                               | 13% (n = 5)  |
| Race/Ethnicity                      |              |
| White/Caucasian                     | 45% (n = 17) |
| Black or African American           | 23% (n = 8)  |
| Hispanic American                   | 16% (n = 6)  |
| Asian/Pacific Islander              | 8% (n = 3)   |
| Multiple Ethnicity/Other            | 8% (n = 3)   |
| Household Income While Growing Up   |              |
| \$0–\$49,999                        | 32% (n = 11) |
| \$50,000–\$74,999                   | 29% (n = 11) |
| \$75,000–\$99,999                   | 5% (n = 2)   |
| \$100,000–\$149,999                 | 8% (n = 3)   |
| \$150,000–\$200,000+                | 26% (n = 10) |
| Mother’s Highest Level of Education |              |
| High School Diploma or Less         | 29% (n = 11) |
| Some College or 2-Year Degree       | 29% (n = 11) |
| Bachelor’s Degree                   | 23% (n = 9)  |
| Post-Graduate/Professional Degree   | 11% (n = 4)  |
| Not Sure                            | 8% (n = 2)   |
| Father’s Highest Level of Education |              |
| High School Diploma or Less         | 29% (n = 10) |
| Some College or 2-Year Degree       | 23% (n = 9)  |
| Bachelor’s Degree                   | 21% (n = 8)  |
| Post-Graduate/Professional Degree   | 16% (n = 6)  |
| Not Sure                            | 11% (n = 4)  |

Recruitment took place in introductory and major-level sociology courses with the permission of the instructor. Students were offered extra credit to participate in an interview, and an alternative assignment was offered to students who did not wish to participate in the research. At the start of the interview, participants were asked to read over and sign a consent form indicating their willingness to be audio taped and/or contacted in the future for a follow-up. Participants were given the option to opt out of having their

interview recorded, but none chose to do so. Participants were assured that they were free to speak about whatever they were comfortable with, and that they were not required to answer any questions posed to them if they were uncomfortable doing so. A short survey was administered to each participant, where they filled out a range of demographic (i.e. age, gender identity, racial identification, annual income of childhood home, education, etc.) data. The interview subsequently opened with a set of general questions, such as “can you tell me about your life growing up?” and participants were further probed with more specific questions when necessary. Interview questions pertained to three general topics: life growing up, life now, and thoughts on adulthood. The survey questionnaire and interview protocol are both provided in full in Appendix A.

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded using Atlas.ti. The first round of coding was inductive and focused on the experiences of growing up and reaching adulthood, adult identities, and definitions of adulthood. Specifically, I looked for patterns in how participants described their experiences of growing up, whether they identified as adults, and how they defined adulthood. After this first round of coding, I realized that there were considerable differences in how my participants were characterizing their experiences of growing up. Thus, in the second round, I utilized focused coding and categorized participants as either accelerated adults or emerging adults with the goal of identifying concrete variations in how accelerated adults and emerging adults transitioned to (and thought about) adulthood. Furthermore, I looked to see if there was any significant difference in the percentage of accelerated versus emerging adults who identified as an adult, and whether there was any difference in definitions of adulthood between the groups.

I focused on four categories of analysis in my characterization of the two types of adulthood: (1) care/support, (2) guidance, (3) characterization of childhood and adolescence, and (4) college experience. Table II presents the characteristics of accelerated adulthood and emerging adulthood as I used them to code my interviews, which are based on definitions of these concepts within the literature—specifically by Arnett (2000, 2004, 2007) and Lee (2014)—but that are modified to more specifically fit my sample

**Table 2.** Characteristics of Emerging Adulthood and Accelerated Adulthood.

|  | <b>Emerging Adulthood</b>  | <b>Accelerated Adulthood</b>  |
|--|--|---|
| <b>Care &amp; Support</b>                            | (1) Was well taken care of as a child and adolescent<br>Received significant support from family: (2) financial, (3) emotional, (4) academic | Took care of (1) self, (2) sibling(s), and/or (3) parents   |
| <b>Guidance</b>                                      | (5) Received adequate life guidance from parents   | (4) Lacked life guidance from parents   |
| <b>Characterization of childhood and adolescence</b> | (6) Had a fun or easy childhood and adolescence without significant conflict or strain   | (5) Experienced emotional trauma such as: abuse, death of a family member or close friend, immigration, or a severe illness |
| <b>College experience</b>                            | (7) Able to focus on themselves and their own schoolwork during college  | (6) Struggled to fully engage with school because of family and/or work responsibilities                                    |

Categorization of adulthood type was based on participant’s self-reported experiences; for example, in the area of care/support, if they stated that they believe they were well taken care of as a child, they were classified as having been well taken care of.

Arnett (2000, 2004) outlines five characteristics of emerging adulthood, which include (1) instability, (2) identity exploration, (3) self-focus, (4) feeling in between adolescence and adulthood, and (5) optimism/belief in possibilities. While Arnett argues that emerging adulthood is a new life stage that entails certain psychological processes, I choose to focus on the structural realities that allow young adults to engage in the processes of emerging adulthood that Arnett outlines—particularly the advantages that were provided by emerging adults’ parents. Similarly, accelerated adulthood is defined by Lee (2014:710) as “a brief or immediate transition that requires the immediate adoption of one or more adult responsibilities or commitments due to the lack of alternatives and/or insufficient resources.” Thus, my criteria for accelerated adulthood were influenced by the specific adult responsibilities and commitments that the participants in my sample experienced during their childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood years. I also take into consideration the time at which individuals adopted certain adult role statuses, such as taking care of self and/or others and witnessing distressing events such as trauma, severe illness, or immigration. In determining whether or not an individual is an accelerated adult, I took into consideration whether or not the individual had choice or agency in taking on those adult roles or making those transitions to greater levels of responsibility (Lee 2014).

In the next three chapters, I delve into the analysis of my interviews with participants. Chapter four explores the experiences of emerging adults, whereas chapter five discusses the accelerated adults. These two chapters begin with an analysis of participants’ lives growing up, followed by their college experiences and adult identities. In chapter six I examine the consequences of both emerging and accelerated adulthood, with an emphasis on emotional consequences.

#### IV. RESULTS: EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Studies of extended transitions to adulthood show that youth are reaching traditional markers of adulthood (e.g. finishing education, attaining full-time employment, achieving financial and residential stability, marrying, and having children) much later than previous generations. Before taking on these lasting role commitments and adult responsibilities, they opt to explore various life possibilities and obtain greater life experiences. Their early adult years are frequently characterized by a focus on education, the pursuit of fulfilling and gratifying careers, and personal growth. While everyone in my sample appeared to be attempting to engage in an emerging adulthood, not all were fully able to. In this section, I discuss the individuals who were able to fully and successfully experience an emerging adulthood.

Using the criteria that I outlined in chapter three, I classified twenty three of the young adults in my sample as “emerging adults.” A crucial factor to the categorization of each individual in this group was that they had all gone through a relatively normative—i.e., those that are predictable for a substantial number of families, or for the dominant family type—transition from child to adolescent to young adult, which some scholars have argued confers certain advantages in comparison to those who experience non-normative transitions (Cowan & Cowan 2003; Furstenberg 2005). This will be further expanded upon in chapter five. Table III displays the individual characteristics of each participant who was

categorized as an emerging adult, as well as the specific elements of emerging adulthood that they experienced as individuals.

**Table 3.** Emerging Adult Participant Information

| <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Characteristics of E.A.</b> | <b>Adult Identity</b> |
|------------------|------------|---------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Rayana           | 22         | Woman         | 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7               | Yes and no            |
| Caitlin          | 22         | Woman         | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7            | Yes                   |
| Bella            | 20         | Woman         | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7            | Yes                   |
| Stella           | 26         | Woman         | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7            | Yes and no            |
| Maia             | 22         | Woman         | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7            | Yes                   |
| Dylan            | 18         | Woman         | 1, 3, 4, 5, 7                  | No                    |
| Kelsey           | 20         | Woman         | 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7               | No                    |
| Alexandra        | 20         | Woman         | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7            | Yes and no            |
| Alisha           | 20         | Woman         | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7            | Yes                   |
| Viviana          | 21         | Woman         | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7            | Yes and no            |
| Zachary          | 23         | Man           | 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7               | Yes and no            |
| David            | 18         | Man           | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7            | Yes                   |
| Nina             | 21         | Woman         | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7            | Yes and no            |
| Deborah          | 21         | Woman         | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7            | Yes and no            |
| Camille          | 24         | Woman         | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7            | No                    |
| Devi             | 23         | Woman         | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7            | No                    |
| Gabriella        | 22         | Woman         | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7            | Yes and no            |
| Eric             | 22         | Man           | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7            | Yes and no            |
| Kasey            | 23         | Woman         | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7            | Yes and no            |
| Jessie           | 22         | Woman         | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7               | Yes and no            |
| Robert           | 18         | Man           | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7            | Yes and no            |
| Azaria           | 22         | Woman         | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7            | No                    |
| Jordan           | 20         | Man           | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7            | Yes and no            |

**Characteristics of Emerging Adulthood Key:** (1) = Was well taken care of as a child and adolescent; (2) = received significant financial support from family; (3) = received significant emotional support from family; (4) = received significant academic support from family; (5) = Received adequate life guidance from parents; (6) = Had a fun or easy childhood and adolescence without significant conflict or strain; (7) = Able to focus on themselves and their own schoolwork during college.

### *Life Growing Up*

All of the emerging adults in my sample felt as though they had been well taken care of as children and adolescents, and all were receiving some kind of support from their parents—whether financial or emotional—as they transitioned to adulthood. As noted in Table III, all emerging adults believed that they were well taken care of, and all received significant financial, emotional, and/or academic support from parents. Caitlin, for example, expressed that she was taken care of as a child, as she said “I was always provided [for], like, my parents always took care of us. I grew up in a pretty stable house.”

The emerging adults also typically characterized their experience of growing up as an “easy ride,” “fun,” or “typical.” Maia, for example, described her childhood as “very good, very encouraging, very uplifting.” Some emerging adults even compared their childhoods to what they considered to be an ideal childhood. Dylan, for example, believed she had “the typical American household you used to see in TV shows and movies.” Although they weren’t able to help her with tuition and books while she was in college due to financial constraints, Dylan’s parents provided the financial, emotional, and academic support during childhood and adolescence that allowed her to successfully find her own footing as a young adult. Similarly, Bella stated that she “had a really good childhood.” This was mainly because she had parents who were always loving, and “got to do special things, go places—have that whole ideal family kind of thing.”

Others who were categorized as emerging adults believed that they had “normal” or “ordinary” childhoods, although they sometimes recognized that they were normal to *them* but may not have been considered normal to others. When asked what his life was like growing up, Robert reported that “it was the normal life. Went to private school—well,

for me it was normal. Private school, played sports, always having fun. Just normal little kid life.” Much of what Robert and his family did were also family oriented, such as family vacations every summer to places like the Bahamas, Hawaii, Tennessee, and South Carolina. Robert also recognized that how he grew up significantly shaped who he was today. Since he grew up in a “white suburban area,” he was not exposed to things like gangs or drugs. He stated, “If I were to grow up in—I guess, like, the ghetto—I might have been more inclined to do drugs, be gang related. But I grew up in a white suburban kind of place so it was more of just, like, go outside, make friends, have fun.” The most disruptive thing that had happened during Robert’s childhood was that he and his family had to move into his grandparents’ house while theirs was being renovated. Apart from this, his life has “always been the same—same old, same old since I was a kid.”

At the time of their interview, a few participants were fully financially supported by their parents. Alexandra, a twenty-year-old young woman, was living in the university dorms at the time of her interview. Her family took care of all of her expenses, including tuition, dorms, food, gas, and spending money. She stated, “My parents are still providing everything. I have a commuter’s meal plan, and ... if I need to go to the grocery store because I need snacks or something then my mom pays for it. But what my dad puts in my account—it pays for gas, and if I’m going out, or I wanna go shopping or something.” Alexandra’s grandmother paid for her meal plan, and her divorced parents contributed an equal amount of money to her every month—her mother’s debit card was used to buy snacks and supplemental food items, and her father deposited extra spending money directly into her bank account each week.



Some participants believed that they were spoiled, and provided with things that they didn't need when they were younger. Devi, for example, reported that she "had a pretty fun childhood" and was well taken care of. She stated, "I pretty much did what I wanted. I was always getting in trouble. But I mean, overall—like, I had a really good childhood. I grew up in the suburbs, so, always feeling safe and secure growing up in a gated community." Devi also explained how her parents spoiled her while she was growing up: "I was very close to my parents and very spoiled, always got what I wanted and um, my parents always made sure they gave me everything I needed plus things I didn't need." Devi's parents also currently provided her with a \$100 per week allowance. Similarly, Viviana explained how she was confident that her parents would bail her out if she got into any financial trouble: "I know that any type of financial problem I'd get into, my parents would bail me out of it, just cause I'm an only child. Which people say I'm spoiled for, but it's not like I chose to be an only child, you know?"

The cases discussed in this section illustrate two things. First, since they were actively parented, these emerging adults were able to act like children during their childhood years. This provides certain benefits to children and adolescents in comparison to those who are forced to act more "adult" during these times, as they entered young adulthood with no (or very little) emotional baggage, felt confident, and saw themselves worthy of experiencing good things. As we will see in Chapter five when the accelerated adults recount the stress that they experienced while growing up and navigating young adulthood, this is a privilege that not all experience. Second, many of the emerging adults experienced a prolonged dependence on their parents, which allowed them to focus on their own individual growth—either through school, personal development, or fun things like

going shopping—and enjoy freedom from parental constraints that was, ironically, possible only because of their continued parental support. This will be the focus of the next section.

### *College Experience*

The emerging adults overall characterized their college experience as positive.

Looking back at her involvement in college, Viviana explained:

My grades were perfect, and I mean perfect as in all A's perfect, and friendships were great, I was single at the time but I was... totally okay with that. I was working on myself, I was building my leadership here on campus, I was literally about to be on [executive] boards<sup>3</sup> and stuff and I wanted to join a sorority.

Viviana explained to me that she was enjoying her time in college as a single young woman, focusing on herself and her own responsibilities as a student and in student government. Others, like Robert, were just enjoying the freedom of college and the excitement of living in a dorm with friends who were around all the time. Robert was in his first semester as a freshman when he stated that college had been a lot of fun so far and that he hoped it would continue that way: “That’s all I wanna do, I just wanna have fun. That’s all I really wanna do.” Although he was Pre-Med, he was taking advantage of the time spent in easy (to him) pre-requisites like English 101 and having fun with his friends, either playing video games or intramural sports like basketball and dodgeball. Neither of these individuals in particular, and most of the emerging adults in general, were employed. Thus, apart from their school responsibilities, they had time to focus on themselves and their own interests—whether that was through spending time with friends like Robert or,

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<sup>3</sup> An executive board of a sorority is comprised of a number of members of the sorority who also serve as leaders, or chapter officers, of the organization. These positions are typically President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer.

later in college, becoming actively involved in student government and sororities or fraternities like Viviana.

One of the primary structural advantages of the emerging adults in college was the way that their degree was being funded. The parents of the majority of emerging adults (52%), exclusively paid for their education. This allowed them the luxury of not having to worry about taking out student loans or paying for school out of pocket. Some, like Robert, did not even know the specifics of how their education was being funded except that their parents were taking care of it:

As far as I know my parents had the Florida prepaid<sup>4</sup> and then I got quite a few scholarships. And then uh, so that's like the tuition part. And then my grandma, she's paying for my meal plan. I just know that I was set for college, that's all they ever told me. College is basically—they're handling it. I don't ask any questions.

This was an extreme example, as most of the emerging adults whose parents were paying their tuition knew the more specific details. The fact that Robert had no idea how his tuition was being paid most likely reflects the fact that he was in his first semester of college. Some emerging adults paid for a portion of their tuition—either out of pocket, through financial aid, with grants, or with loans—while their parents paid the rest. Caitlin for example, received a financial aid package that paid for 50% of her tuition, and her parents then paid the remaining balance with a payment plan. Additionally, Nina's parents had a payment plan set up to pay for her tuition and she also received a scholarship from the university that, combined, paid for her tuition in full. The remaining emerging adults fully paid their own tuition without any help from parents. Most commonly, these students

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<sup>4</sup> The Florida Prepaid College Plan is a program that allows families to prepay for their child's college education at a guaranteed fixed rate. This program began in 1988 and is the largest prepaid tuition plan in the country.

received financial aid and/or grants that paid for their tuition, plus a refund check that they received each semester that they were able to use on housing or books. Others, however, were paying either completely or mostly with loans, but this was rare for emerging adults. The only emerging adult who did so was Azaria, who was paying for tuition and other college expenses entirely with loans.

These experiences are similar to what Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) observe in *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*. In their five-year ethnography of a cohort of women who lived on the same floor of a residence hall at a university, Armstrong and Hamilton found that affluent students attend college with the primary goal of having fun and socializing, whereas more disadvantaged students are looking to work hard and become upwardly mobile. All of the emerging adults in my sample fell somewhere in between these two college trajectories, as they came from varying social class backgrounds and had different intentions coming into college. Nonetheless, they all displayed either a strong level of commitment to succeeding in college or a strong family safety net to fall back on (and some displayed both) that I was fairly confident in the future success of each of the emerging adults.

### *Identity*

The emerging adults in my sample often considered themselves to be adults in the sense that they did some things on their own—such as getting their school work done, making their own decisions, and taking care of their own food or laundry—or because they felt that they were psychologically mature. The primary reason why participants felt that they weren't full adults yet, however, was because they were not financially independent from their parents. Thirteen of the emerging adults felt that they were adults in some ways

but not in others, while 5 fully identified as adults and 5 did not identify as adults in any way.

Alexandra believed that she was an adult in some ways because of her maturity. When asked whether or not she identified as an adult, she responded: “Um, yes and no. I feel like I’m an adult because I know right from wrong, and I know whatever I do now is gonna have consequences. But no because my parents are paying for everything. So I’m financially dependent on them, but in aspects of life I feel like I’m an adult. I feel like I would know what to do.” Although her parents pay all of her bills, Alexandra felt that she was *somewhat* an adult because she knew right from wrong, recognized that her actions had consequences, and believed that *if* she had to make adult decisions and take care of herself then she would know what to do.

Among the four emerging adults who fully identified as adults, there was a shared belief that they were adults because they were responsible, mature, and independent. Bella, for example, stated that “being an adult is having the ability to choose what you want to do for yourself. Being responsible for your actions and choices that you make. Being able to support yourself, make your own decisions.” Although she recognized that she was still financially dependent upon her mother, she fully identified as an adult because she believed that society saw her as one. Alisha, however, felt as though it was not possible to become an adult until at least age twenty five—attributing this to the development of the frontal lobes. Nonetheless, as a twenty year old she believed that she was fully an adult. She stated, “I’m somewhat of an abnormal twenty year old, as you can tell. I think I make mostly good decisions ... I’m more mature than a twenty year old. I don’t know, I think I am an adult, just because I make... decent decisions.”

Lastly, there were six emerging adults who did not see themselves as adults in any way. Devi, for example, believed that she was not an adult because she could not take care of herself without receiving help from her parents. She stated, “I feel like I’m not an adult because I can’t stand on my own two feet financially. Like, if my dad can’t give it to me, well then I gotta go get it from my mom, and if my mom can’t give it to me, you know, I have to go get it from my grandmother.” Nonetheless, she saw this period of extended dependence as necessary for attaining the future life that she wanted—one where she holds a job that requires an extended degree and has a comfortable lifestyle similar to the one that she grew up in:

It’s like, I can work, but cause I’m still in school and I got accustomed to living this kind of lifestyle, \$9 an hour isn’t gonna cut it. So I think I’m not an adult because I can’t depend on myself. I can’t stand on my own two feet financially. But I think I’m an adult in the ways that I carry myself—like, just being respectful towards other people, doing the right things, being responsible.

Since she has become accustomed to a certain standard of living, she chooses to temporarily remain dependent upon her parents for financial support, and thus forego her identity as an adult, in order to maintain this standard in the future. Although she believed that she was mature, responsible, and able to comport herself in an adult manner, she was still a “big kid” since she was not yet financially self-sufficient.

In the next chapter, I discuss the accelerated adults’ experiences growing up, transitioning to college, and attempting to become upwardly mobile. In many ways these young people are striving to have the life that the emerging adults in this chapter recounted. They are usually aware of the difference between them and those who are more privileged, which is reflected in statements about how their lives growing up were not “normal” or “typical”—the exact opposite of how the emerging adults often characterized their

childhoods. This perceived difference not only seems to distance the accelerated adults from their emerging adult peers, but it intensifies the feeling of dissimilarity that the former feel on college campuses and in classrooms. Whereas the emerging adults feel a sense of belonging in college, accelerated adults feel incompatibility and conflict. In the next chapter I explore accelerated adults' experiences growing up and in college.

## V. RESULTS: ACCELERATED ADULTHOOD

The life histories of the accelerated adults in this study were unique, and yet still connected. Accelerated adulthood is defined by Lee (2014:710) as “a brief or immediate transition that requires the immediate adoption of one or more adult responsibilities or commitments due to the lack of alternatives and/or insufficient resources.” All of the accelerated adults in my sample took on adult responsibilities at young ages, and were therefore exposed to realities of life that were far removed from what they now saw as appropriate circumstances for a child. However, as I noted in Chapter two, the accelerated adults in this study were attempting to decelerate their early onset into adulthood and delay their acquisition of any additional adult roles. Thus, they were enrolled in higher education, putting off marriage and parenthood, and sometimes still living with their parents or guardians in order to save money.

Thirteen of the young adults in my sample exhibited characteristics that classified them as “accelerated adults.” While they often adopted an amalgam of adult roles, there was considerable overlap among the accelerated adults’ experiences. Table IV displays the individual characteristics of each participant who was categorized as an accelerated adult, as well as the specific elements of accelerated adulthood that they experienced as individuals. Each participant encountered at least one, but often more, of these incidents. Specifically, five took care of themselves, sibling(s), parents, and/or other family members; ten experienced emotional trauma; and eight lacked guidance from parents.



**Table 4.** Accelerated Adult Participant Information.

| <b>Pseudonym</b>   | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Characteristics of A.A.</b> | <b>Adult Identity</b> |
|--|------------|---------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Ada  | 19         | Woman         | 1, 4, 5, 6                     | Yes And No            |
| Katherine  | 24         | Woman         | 1, 4, 5, 6                     | Yes                   |
| Emily  | 29         | Woman         | 1, 4, 5, 6                     | Yes                   |
| Johanne  | 19         | Woman         | 1, 4, 5, 6                     | Yes                   |
| Sarah  | 22         | Woman         | 1, 4, 5, 6                     | No                    |
| Hallie   | 26         | Woman         | 1, 3, 4, 5, 6                  | No                    |
| Natalie  | 29         | Woman         | 1, 4, 5, 6                     | Yes And No            |
| Mark   | 25         | Man           | 1, 4, 5, 6                     | Yes And No            |
| Marika   | 20         | Woman         | 1, 3, 4, 5, 6                  | Yes And No            |
| Olivia   | 18         | Woman         | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6               | Yes And No            |
| Violine  | 21         | Woman         | 1, 3, 4, 6                     | Yes And No            |
| Aliza  | 24         | Woman         | 4, 5                           | Yes And No            |
| Giovanna   | 23         | Woman         | 4, 6                           | No                    |
| <p><b>Characteristics of Accelerated Adulthood Key:</b> (1) = Took care of self; (2) = Took care of sibling(s); (3) = Took care of parents; (4) = Lacked life guidance from parents; (5) = Experienced emotional trauma such as abuse, death of a family member or close friend, immigration, or a severe illness; (6) = Struggled to fully engage with school because of family and/or work responsibilities.</p> |            |               |                                |                       |

The accelerated adults frequently described the transition to adulthood as difficult, abrupt, exhausting, or as a “reality check.” Adulthood was often thrust upon them with little to no warning, and without proper guidance from authority figures they scrambled to figure out what to do and how to *be* an adult. When asked how she learned what an adult is, for example, Emily stated: “Getting thrown into it. Like fending for yourself and—responsibility for yourself, too. Taking responsibility, even if you don't want to. Understanding that, I guess.” The very act of being “thrown into” adulthood implies that it was not something that she was prepared for or had a choice in. When I asked her when she felt like an adult, she stated: “I was probably sixteen when it, like, really hit me. Fifteen,

sixteen. I think that was when I finally did, like, take responsibility; I felt like an adult. I was treated like one, that's for damn sure." So, while Emily had not been taught how to be an adult, she was forced into it at an early age. These transitions, as compared to the emerging or extended transition, are non-normative in the context in which these young adults live (Cowan & Cowan 2003; Furstenberg 2005). Lee (2014) argues that marginalized youth typically do not experience an extended transition period, and instead they are forced to take on adult roles which in turn places them at a disadvantage when they enter adulthood. Furthermore, Furstenberg (2005:157) found that non-normative, ill-timed, or unexpected transitions are detrimental to individuals' success later in life, and that "non-normative or unscheduled transitions confer social disadvantage."

### *Life Growing Up*

A common theme among the accelerated adults in my sample was the act of taking care of themselves, siblings, parents, and/or other family members while growing up. Out of thirteen participants who had experienced an accelerated adulthood, eleven described that they had to take on caregiving roles during their childhood or adolescent years. Hallie described how she had to take on much of the family responsibility at the age of 12 when her father died, and that she essentially skipped adolescence and went straight from child to adult. Although she had a childhood, she was tasked with arranging the legal affairs after her father's death since her mother didn't speak English. After that, she quickly took on other adult roles and behaviors; she explained that she started working at age twelve shortly after her father died, lost her virginity at age fourteen, and started lying about her age so that she could work full-time at fifteen:

I didn't have, like, a teen-hood. Or whatever you call that. Like, I lost my virginity when I was fourteen, and then from then on, you know—it was

just like, you're an adult—start working. [Mhm. How old were you when you first started working?] Well I used to work during the summers, very early, right when my dad passed away, probably when I was twelve. And then I think when I was 15 I started lying about my age and like got side jobs and stuff.

Additionally, she was at the time of her interview still taking care of her mother. She stated that, as a child, she didn't realize that she was taking on more responsibility than was normal. Today, however, she both recognizes it and is resentful towards her mother for it:

As a child you don't think about anything. You're just like, whatever, it is what it is. Thinking about it now... I might resent my mom a little because I had to grow up so fast. Because she couldn't take care of anything on her own, and she still doesn't. I still do all of her stuff for her. So sometimes I'm like, what the fuck it's so unfair.

It was very common for accelerated adults to have taken care of their parents when they were children and to still be taking care of them at present. Thus, not only were they unable to *be* children, they were unable to do the things that are today expected of young people—focus on themselves, explore their identities, and chart their potential futures (Arnett 2004).

Another common characteristic of life growing up for accelerated adults was emotional trauma. A number of experiences had deleterious effects on the emotional wellbeing of accelerated adults in my sample, such as abuse (physical, emotional, mental, or sexual), death of someone close, immigration to the United States, or illness (self or parent/family member). However, the experience itself was not necessarily the determining factor in whether or not the individual suffered emotional trauma. Instead, it was often the circumstances surrounding the event and how it was handled by family, friends, and/or other authority figures involved, and whether or not these people provided adequate support. Sarah, for example, illustrated how growing up in a highly oppressive religious household was one of the main reasons why she matured quickly, as she recounted dealing

with realities that her peers did not. Of her struggle with the religion, she revealed that there were many abhorrent elements which left lasting effects on her mental and emotional health: “I had a lot of issues growing up, like mental issues, because of [the religion]... because it’s a very controlling religion and there’s a lot of mind control that kind of goes on with it.” One of the most traumatic experiences was when she was sexually assaulted by a member of the religious organization. When she confided in her parents about the incident, they did not believe her; instead, they chose to defend the man since he was a trusted leader of the organization.

Finally, lack of guidance was a common factor among my accelerated adult participants. Reflecting on their experiences in college, many expressed concern that they didn’t have guidance to make the right decisions. Katherine, for example, believed that the hardest thing about growing up was a lack of guidance from both her parents and schools. Although her parents had moved from Colombia so that she and her sister could obtain a better education than what was provided in their home country, they were not familiar with the American school system and could not give her the instruction and guidance she needed. When asked whether her parents helped her figure out how to apply to college, she responded:

Honestly, even in high school, they had no idea. They don’t know how the system here works. [So how did you figure it out when you were in high school? Did you have any mentorship or guidance from anyone at school?] (Sigh) No, nothing. And I think that’s why it’s taking me so long because I’m 24 and I graduated high school in 2009 so it’s been a while just for a bachelor’s. And I think it’s because I had to learn like along the way, I didn’t really have any guidance. Like, when people are already applying their junior year—I had no idea.

Half of the accelerated adults in my sample felt as though they had inadequate guidance while growing up, and this was typically caused by lack of involvement by parents or

school counselors. Low socioeconomic status (SES) students are more likely than their high SES peers to attend high schools that do not focus on preparing them for college, and that have fewer counseling resources (Walpole 2007). This lack of guidance then became especially difficult during the transition to adulthood. Children and adolescents who have experienced early onset of adult responsibilities, for example, are more likely than their peers to have lower academic achievements; this may suggest that the burdens these youth are forced to take on may negatively influence their successful pursuit of a college education (Chase et al. 1998).

### *College Experience*

In contrast to the emerging adults, the accelerated adults in my sample did not characterize their college experience as fun or even positive. Instead, it was often challenging. There were a number of experiences that the accelerated adults encountered while in college. Olivia, for example, often found it difficult to fully concentrate on school activities, especially extra-curriculars, and she explained how she was unhappy that all she seemed to be doing was going to class rather than being fully engaged with campus life:

I want to be more involved but I feel like, there's just something kind of holding me back from being like, going out and actually being really involved in what I'm doing. ... Now being in college, I haven't had to—like, I feel like it's my responsibility to make sure that my mom and my brothers are okay. Because I was always there and I was always, like, even when I got older I was always the one that wasn't afraid to say anything. And same thing with my older brother. When my older brother left, it became me. And so I feel like I need to constantly make sure that they're ok. So it's always in the back of my mind. And I feel like it shouldn't be that way.

Although Olivia lived in on-campus dorms, she struggled to devote her undivided attention to school as she often worried about whether her little brother was doing okay without her back at home. Since she lived less than an hour away from her parents, she frequently felt

obligated to return home to babysit or check up on her family. Since her father was an alcoholic and her mother did not stand up to him, she was worried that her younger brother would get into verbal altercations with her father—as had happened with her when she was living with him.

Many of the accelerated adults also had a difficult path to enrolling in a four-year university. Several had bounced between a few different universities and community colleges before landing at their current destination, and others had simply taken time off after high school or their GED certification only to realize that they needed to go back to school. Emily, for example, received her GED after years of unstable school enrollment combined with juvenile detention. After jumping between a number of jobs, she had a sudden epiphany that she needed to go to college while she was working as a server in a restaurant:

I think I was twenty three when I realized that everyone else that was my age already graduating college, you know, starting their careers. And I'm like, I haven't done anything in my life. Like I'm just looking back and I'm like, holy shit we're the same age and you have all this and I don't even have a job. And, like, I live with my mom. Like, nothing, I have nothing. That was when I was just, like, it all hit me. I'm just like, what the fuck are you doing? With yourself, with your life?

Thus, at twenty-three she enrolled in a local community college while waiting tables and paying her tuition primarily with loans. Then, she transferred to the four-year university where she was currently still enrolled. She acknowledged her sister as her main role-model, as she had gotten her Bachelor's degree in political science and was currently working in Tallahassee for the House of Representatives.

The majority of accelerated adults (79%) paid for their education completely on their own. Additionally, none were being completely funded by their parents, and only 21%

were receiving help from their parents. These numbers are striking when compared to the emerging adults, where 52% were being completely supported by their parents in their pursuit of higher education. This was for a number of reasons, but primarily because their parents simply could not afford to pay such a large amount of money. Many of the emerging adults who were completely supporting themselves did so with financial aid and scholarships. For example, Ada's tuition was almost completely paid for by financial aid, and what was not covered would be paid for with loans. In contrast, Katherine was paying her tuition for a full-time course load completely out of pocket by also working full-time at a local bar, which had managed to keep her away from taking out any loans. Many of the accelerated adults paid for school out of pocket by working either full-time or part-time while being enrolled in school. They were often hesitant to take out loans, as they had usually seen their parents take on severe amounts of debt. A large number of accelerated adults, however, did pay for college at least partially with loans. Giovanna, for instance, was primarily paying for her education with loans after her parents stopped paying for her tuition after her freshman year. So far, she had taken out about \$30,000.

Despite their difficulties in college, almost all of the accelerated adults remained positive (at least outwardly) about the success that their college degree would bring them in the future. Since most of the accelerated adults came from non-college educated families, the act of attending college and obtaining a higher education was a marker of success in and of itself. When asked whether or not he was hopeful about his future, Mark responded: "Mhm. It's just how I live my life—very happy, just, I know everything's coming." While he did recognize that growing up in a working class family disadvantaged him in some ways, such as not being able to get a private (and, in his view, better) education, he reported

that he would not change his past just to have a better future, because he believes that “it’s coming.” Similarly, Giovanna explained how she was principally motivated to go to college by a desire to not be like her parents. None of Giovanna’s family members had gotten a Bachelor’s degree, except one of her cousins who had attended a community college. She was also the only one out of all of her friends back home to attend college.

### *Identity*

Since many of the accelerated adults felt like they had grown up too fast, they often saw their childhoods as incomplete or “lost.” When asked about her life growing up, Marika stated: “I kinda grew up a little... faster? So my childhood was a little lost. It wasn’t complete, I guess.” These descriptions were very common among accelerated adults. Feelings of having missed out on childhood experiences, or of not having a childhood altogether, were expressed by all of the accelerated adults in my sample to varying degrees. Although they had all enacted adult roles and, in a sense, transitioned to adulthood early in their lives, only four of the accelerated adults in my sample identified as adults at the time of the interview. Two believed that they were not adults in any way, except legally. Feelings of being somewhat an adult, but not fully there yet, were much more common (N=7).

Of the four participants who considered themselves full adults, there were varying reasons why they identified as such. Johanne believed that she was an adult because, to her, you are an adult when you turn eighteen. Similarly, Katherine believed that she became an adult at eighteen—not because it is the legal age of adulthood, but because she had to become financially independent from her parents. At the time of her interview, Emily was



twenty-nine and felt as though she transitioned from being a “kid adult” at fifteen to being a real adult at twenty-five.

In contrast, there were two young adults who believed that they were not adults in any way. When asked if there were any ways that she did feel like an adult, Hallie replied:

Um... no. I would say paying my bills but, not really. [You had said earlier that when your father passed away that you kind of grew up really fast, so did you feel more adult at that point?] I probably felt—yeah, more adult back then than I do now. [Really. Because you were taking care of your mom?] I guess. Yeah. Or maybe because I was younger and I definitely shouldn't have been doing those things? I don't know. But that's interesting, I've never thought about that. But it's true—I definitely felt, like, more of an adult back then than I do now. Now I feel like I'm... digressing a little, cause I'm just so—I'm just so reluctant to completely plunge into it and not come back. So I feel like right now I'm resisting a little.

An interesting realization that Hallie has in this moment is that she felt *more adult* when she was thirteen. She assumes that this is because of the responsibilities she had as a thirteen year-old, which were not expected of children; thus, she was surpassing expectations of maturity at that time. Today, however, she feels behind other people her age because of the expectations surrounding adulthood, maturity, and responsibility that she has not met. While she believes that society holds marriage and parenthood as hallmarks of adulthood, she disagrees and instead sees maturity and wisdom as more important markers of adulthood; nonetheless, she is aware that she does not meet up to society's standards and, perhaps, is influenced by society's judgment in her own self-conception of her adult identity.

Lastly, seven young people considered themselves adults in some ways but not in others. They often felt like they were adults in the sense that they had to step up and take responsibility for their own lives, and sometimes the lives of family members, when their own parents failed or were unable to do so. While they often felt more mature than their

peers, however, they expressed a lingering feeling that they still lacked something—typically financial, emotional, and/or residential independence—that was crucial for being considered a full adult. Natalie explained how she did not feel like an adult because she finds adulthood and the competitiveness that it entails exhausting. The need to constantly get ahead and “move up” in the world was something that she did not have the motivation for, and instead just wanted to have fun—which, in her eyes, meant that she was still a child. Although she stated that being an adult means that you have to take care of yourself and survive—something that she has done for many years—the fact that she wants to have fun contradicts her idea of what an adult is. As a result, she does not feel like she is there yet and instead sees herself as a “big child.” Marika believed that she was not an adult because she still lived with her mother and, therefore, her mother still had control over her behavior.

In the next chapter, I discuss the consequences of both pathways to adulthood. I begin with emerging adulthood, focusing on three main similarities among these students: (1) trust and support, (2) maturity and self-improvement, and (3) delaying marriage and romantic commitment. I then consider the consequences of accelerated adulthood, including (1) distrust & abandonment, (2) maturity & strength, and (3) avoidance of intimate relationships.

## VI. CONSEQUENCES OF EMERGING ADULTHOOD AND ACCELERATED ADULTHOOD

### *Emerging Adulthood*

The majority of emerging adults in my sample described their childhoods as stable and their parents as supportive. They were also having fun in college, and were enjoying the relative freedom from parental constraint that was allowed by their parents' financial support. In studies of upward mobility, the characteristics of disadvantaged individuals that hinder them from being successful are often focused upon. These studies, along with mine, ask, "Why do these individuals fail to become upwardly mobile? What about their lives inhibits them from doing so?" However, an equally important question is what assists advantaged individuals in succeeding. In this section I discuss the consequences of an emerging adulthood, and outline three broad dispositions that the emerging adults in this study exhibited: (1) trust and support, (2) maturity and self-improvement, and (3) delaying marriage and romantic commitment.

### *Trust & support*

Three key components of the definition of emerging adulthood that I used for this study were that individuals believed they were well taken care of as a child and adolescent, received significant support from their family (whether that was emotional, academic, or financial), and/or received adequate life guidance from their parents. As a result, these individuals trusted their parents and felt as though they had significant support from them.

As they transitioned into adulthood, then, they approached their college experience with the confidence and assurance that they would succeed in whatever they did. This reality was highly reflected in participants' descriptions of what careers they would pursue, their relationships with their parents, and where they saw themselves in the future.

One emerging adult, Robert, had decided that he wanted to be a doctor—specifically, a surgeon. Once he made this decision, he explained, his parents were very supportive:

I always wanted to be a doctor. Always. [Did your family have any opinions—?] Oh they supported me 100% with that. [Did they always intend for you to go to college?] Yes. Yeah.

While it may seem obvious to some that Robert's parents would support his decision to become a doctor—a highly prestigious and lucrative career—there were also emerging adults whose parents supported their decisions to pursue careers that were more risky. Dylan, for instance, also described her parents' support for her decision to go into music management:

I've always loved music and I go to a lot of concerts and I'm always really happy when I'm there and so it's just a big part of my life. I mean with the student government I plan a lot too, so. [Right.] I was talking to my parents about it and I was like, that actually sounds kind of cool, so. [Are they supportive of that?] Yeah, yeah. My brother and my dad are both bit music lovers. Like my brother, he was in a band growing up and like I always was on tour with them cause he toured up and down the east coast over the summer and took me.

Essentially, Dylan wished to manage and plan events for bands, such as concerts. She especially wanted to travel the world with bands while they were on tour, as she saw this as an exciting way to work while also traveling. Her parents were very supportive of this idea, likely in part due to her father and brother being music enthusiasts. Furthermore, Alisha—who was from a very religious family—commented on her parents' input in regard

to her choices in school by explaining how they always supported her in whatever she wanted to do, or whatever she was called to do, as long as she went to college. Thus, it seemed that many of the emerging adults' parents felt that, as long as their child went to college, they were free to choose whatever major they wanted.

Emerging adults also felt supported by their parents in financial terms. Azaria recounted how her mother assured her that, if she needed to quit her job, they would make sure to take care of all of Azaria's expenses:

I know at any given point, like I talked to my mom about quitting my job and she was like, well just know your car payment will get paid, you'll still have insurance, you're gonna have this, you're gonna have that. And she was basically like, reaffirming me that whatever decision I chose to make would be okay because they were gonna make sure everything else was taken care of. And not that it's all about, you know, monetary value, but even like the support system my mom has given—she's very controlling in certain ways, in her own like weird little way, how she kind of finagles her opinion in there, but she is still very, very supportive.

Although she admits that her mother can be very “controlling” at times when she is trying to persuade Azaria to pursue a certain path, she also assures me that her mother is nonetheless very supportive of whatever her daughter chooses to do. Viviana was also certain that her parents would help her endure any financial difficulties:

I know that any type of financial problem that I'd get into, my parents would bail me out of it. Just cause... [So you have a strong support system?] Yeah. And I think it's just that I'm an only child. Which people say I'm spoiled for, but—I mean, it's not like I chose to be an only child, you know? It is what it is.

Consequently, the emerging adults often felt a sense of financial security that eased some of the burden of being in college and deciding what they wanted to do for the rest of their life. By receiving the financial support that they did, they were able to focus on their own studies and career choices rather than worrying about credit card debt or student loans.

Viviana also recognizes that being an only child, which was out of her control, allowed her parents to fully focus their attention and resources on her.

Apart from career choices and financial decisions, some emerging adults also expressed the belief that their family members showed them unwavering emotional support and love. When I asked her what had been the most significant influence on her life, Stella described her relationship with her grandparents and mother in this way:

Definitely my grandparents because they... just love me unconditionally. I get a texts from them every day, they're like my support system. They're so adorable. And they just have helped me with everything. Like especially now that I'm older they, like, make my life possible. And then both my parents, for sure, but definitely my mom. Like, she is just—I love her so much, like to death and I just want to do right by her and make her proud. Like that's why I do everything I do. And then... really like my whole family has played a role—all my siblings. Like, they just like pushed me to be who I am.

Although Stella grew up in what she described a working class nuclear family, her wealthy grandparents had essentially pulled her up to the middle class by providing substantial financial, as well as emotional, support while she was growing up and in college. She stated,

(My grandparents are) very wealthy and I think that without them, I don't know if I could even like classify myself with my parents because they pay for so much of me. That's—that's why it's like kind of even hard for me to be with people in that kind of—in my class because, like my social class, cause like my grandparents do provide me so much that I'm kind of like even more privileged because of them. So they'll pay for anything with college, they pay for my sorority now, I feel like they've just kind of like taken me under their wing and I'm very fortunate about that.

As a consequence of her grandparents' wealth and generosity, Stella was able to live more of a middle class life than she would have otherwise lived. The reason why her grandparents supported her, she believed, was because “they love me so much and love my mom so they help out.” When Stella got sick and found out that she had a rare liver

condition, her grandparents were very supportive and helped her pay the costs of the treatment.

The love, support, and encouragement that these emerging adults expressed in the stories of their family shows how much influence these family members had in pushing them to succeed. It also demonstrated the trust that emerging adults had when taking advice from their parents—advice that would often work to their benefit. When Azaria described how her mother was very supportive, even if she could be controlling, what was implicit in this statement was the likelihood that Azaria would take her mother’s advice seriously because she was typically so supportive and appeared to have her daughter’s best interests in mind. Similarly, Rayana—whose parents were from Bangladesh—trusted her parents enough to choose her husband in an arranged marriage. Rayana maintained that, while some girls absolutely dreaded the idea of an arranged marriage, this was because they did not trust their parents. However, she fully trusted her mother and father, and was confident that her parents would make the right decision because they knew what was best for her. Whereas the accelerated adults often spoke of being abandoned by parents and family members, the emerging adults expressed unequivocal gratitude towards their parents. The effects of this support, in turn, seemed to have a clear impact not only on the tangible resources such as financial support, but also on the emerging adults’ *confidence* in their ability to succeed. This is the focus of the next section.

### *Maturity & confidence*

Several of the emerging adults in my sample believed that they were mentally mature, specifically more mature than “typical” people their age. While this was a common claim among accelerated adults as well, the emerging adults felt mature in different ways.

As explained in the section on adult identities, emerging adults typically believed that they were mature because they made good decisions and could hypothetically handle themselves in adult situations. Alisha, a twenty year-old emerging adult, believed that she was more mature than her chronological age. She explained:

I'm somewhat of an abnormal twenty year-old though, as you can tell. Like I think I make mostly good decisions—I mean, yeah I feel like... my boyfriend's twenty four and I'm twenty, it's kind of—he's more mature, I'm more mature than a twenty year old.

In this exchange it was interesting how she assumed my position on her maturity, where she adds, “as you can tell” after stating that she was an abnormal twenty year old. She was clearly confident in the impression that she was making, which was of a mature young adult who makes responsible decisions.

Some of the emerging adults also explained how their maturity allowed them to develop more opinions and strong personalities. Essentially, they were not afraid to express their personal beliefs, even when they were challenged. Bella illustrated this when she described her ability to stand up to her family members when they expressed sexist or anti-feminist views. She explained,

I have my own opinions, I'm very bold about what I'm saying, I don't lie about how I feel if someone says like, “oh, what do you think about this?” I'll give them my honest opinion. So I'm very brutally honest, I guess. Like, I don't feel the need to lie about a situation or fake something. Umm, so I guess I just have a stronger personality, being like, being able to express myself in front of adults was accepted, I guess.

As I mentioned in the last section on support and trust, the emerging adults often had a sense of confidence in themselves that the accelerated adults did not. Growing up in households where they were encouraged to express their own opinion led them to, as young adults, feel comfortable speaking their mind. In her study of poor, working class, and



middle class families, Lareau (2011) came to the conclusion that growing up under the parenting style of concerted cultivation led middle class children to have a sense of entitlement when engaging with others. They were not afraid to state their opinions, and would even challenge authority figures such as doctors and teachers, because they had been encouraged by parents to do so. This differed significantly, Lareau found, from the poor and working class children, who were raised to be more deferential towards authority and were not encouraged to verbally express their opinions.

#### *Delaying marriage & romantic commitment*

For those who were in romantic relationships, emerging adults typically saw themselves as either far too young to get married or as too young to think about potentially marrying the person with whom they were in a relationship. Many of the emerging adults, regardless of whether they were currently in a relationship or single, believed that they were too young and had too little education and job experience to get married at that point in time. However, all but one of the emerging adults in my sample hoped to get married someday, and believed that it was a likely or assumed future reality.

A frequent response to the question that I posed to participants asking whether or not they could see themselves marrying their current boyfriend or girlfriend, or whether they could see themselves getting married at all, was a resounding “not yet.” This was often due to their desire to finish their education and have a stable job before committing to marriage and, especially, parenthood. Bella simply laughed when I asked whether or not she could see herself marrying her current boyfriend, and then explained to me that it was way too early to be thinking about that:

[Is he someone that you could see yourself potentially marrying—] (laughs)  
[Or is it, like, way too early—] Waaaaay too early! That’s like, I run the

other way at that idea. No. I don't know, no no no no. But um, I don't know. I'm just going with—it's like, right now I just want, like my goal to be like focused on myself and be able to support myself, like, be my own person, support myself financially, be independent. That's like what my goal was—and then like, if I fall in love with him or if that works out in the long run, like my primary goal is just like myself first. So, yeah." [Do you think that you—eventually, do you want to get married?] I would want to get married, yeah. Have kids, do the whole thing. But after I'm able to support myself, and then... kids are really expensive, so (laughs) that's a long way away.

In a similar vein, Maia—who had a boyfriend at the time of her interview—also explained that she could not even think about marriage until she had a Master's degree.

The emerging adults who were not in a romantic relationship at the time were spending their college time enjoying their lack of attachment to any single person. Jessie, for instance, reported that she was “very single” but that she actually had a date that night, and Alexandra was also happily single at the time of her interview. Sometimes these individuals dated casually, and sometimes they simply enjoyed the time to focus on themselves. Azaria remarked that she loved dating:

I love dating. Like, it's just awesome. Especially because I am a virgin, so it's never looked at in, like, a bad light, so people can never be like “oh she's, like, doing whatever” so I can just go out and I can get free dinners and, you know, whatever. So it's just awesome.

Thus, although these participants were not engaged in committed romantic relationships, they either enjoyed the time to be by themselves or dated casually. This was often a way to enjoy some of the benefits of dating, such as companionship or sociability (or, as in the above case, a free meal) without the constraints being linked to another person long term. For the emerging adults who were in romantic relationships, marriage, as well as childbearing, was seen as very far down the road as they saw themselves in need of an education and a steady income before committing to something that serious. Thus, the primary reasons why emerging adults held off on long-term committed relationships were

at least in part a result of their commitment to self-focus and the desire to first achieve a more settled life.

### *Accelerated Adulthood*

For the majority of the accelerated adults in my sample, the reality of growing up fast meant that many typical childhood and adolescent experiences—being carefree, hanging out with friends, going on dates, and figuring out who you are—were missed out on. Many accelerated adults felt like they had to make up for that lost time, and as a consequence they felt more *and* less mature than people their age. They also reported feelings of isolation and incompatibility with others, since most of their peers could not relate to the same experiences and emotional realities. In this section I discuss the consequences of accelerated adulthood, and outline three broad dispositions that the accelerated adults in this study exhibited: (1) distrust & abandonment, (2) maturity & strength, and (3) avoidance of intimate relationships.

### *Distrust & abandonment*

The accelerated adults frequently referenced feelings of isolation from others, distrust, and abandonment by family members or friends while growing up. Thus, they operated on a basic assumption that you could not trust or rely on others, and that the only person they could really count on was themselves. Ada described how, as a teenager, she had a realization that other people were not going to be there to support her: “That’s when I realized, like, okay people suck. Like, they’re not always going to, um, be, you know, empathetic towards you.” After a bad divorce between her mother and step-father, Ada, her mother, and her brother went from firmly middle class to poor. After this, she found that she could no longer relate to many of her friends, because they didn’t understand what

she was going through. Ada interpreted this to mean that “people suck,” as she had realized that most people do not recognize what living in poverty means. Ada also had negative interactions with guidance counselors at her high school, who tried to dissuade her from applying to college. Nonetheless, her stubbornness pushed her forward and she managed to graduate with a 2.9 GPA and was accepted to the university that she was currently enrolled at. After this incident, however, she became even more distrustful of others.

Similarly, Olivia reported that she had difficulty trusting others or giving people second chances because of the way she had grown up. Her father, who was an alcoholic and verbally abusive, often demanded that she apologize to him after verbal confrontations. Furthermore, his constant outbursts and confrontations convinced Olivia that people would not change their behavior, no matter how convincingly they made their case for forgiveness. As a young adult, then, she was reluctant to give people second chances:

Growing up I always—I had my guard up growing up through middle school and high school, until now, and now I think that it’s shaped me into a person that is very – I mean I’m, I’m still—I’m more stubborn, on the stubborn end when it comes to trusting people. Or um, being open to new people or giving people multiple chances. I’m not – because of how I was raised and what I was raised with, the multiple “okay, you get another try. Okay, you get another try”—I always said that’s never gonna happen, that’s never gonna be me.

Olivia was, however, reflexively aware that her family environment had influenced her tendency to distrust others, and was actively engaged in trying to re-teach herself the appropriate or normative way to respond in social situations that required her to make a decision about trust.

### *Maturity & strength*

Looking back on the challenging experiences they had faced while growing up, accelerated adults often saw their upbringing as beneficial in that it helped them become a

stronger or more mature person. Natalie, for example, explained how she felt stronger as a result of the challenges that she had faced:

I feel like right now I'm at a place where my experience makes me stronger. I feel very strong considering what I've been through, cause I haven't broke down or I haven't given up or I haven't just said—you know, that's it, I'm not gonna go to school. I think I've gone a long way.

While she stated that she had not broken down or given up, however, Natalie was one of several accelerated adults who cried during their interview. It has been well documented that children who experience maltreatment and chronic adversity are more likely to suffer from drug related problems, lower academic status, higher rates of depression and anxiety, and negative health outcomes in adulthood (Burton 2007; Chase, et al. 1998; Huang, Trapido, Fleming, Arheart, Crandall, French, Malcolm, and Prado 2011; Mersky, Topitzes, and Reynolds 2013; Landerman, George, and Blazer 1991; Wolkin 1984). Thus, while Natalie may see herself as stronger in comparison to others who have been through comparable struggles and “given up,” she is at a greater risk of developing emotional, physical, and drug-related issues than her peers who did not experience any of those struggles.

Many accelerated adults recounted narratives of personal struggles and painful experiences, and framed their identity in a context of emotional suffering. For those who had experienced traumatic events during their childhood or adolescent years, these circumstances were often viewed as enlightening their views of the world. Consistent with research on the effects of child adultification (Backett-Milburn et al. 2008), some felt more mature than their peers in the sense that they never participated in dangerous or illicit activities such as teenage drinking, doing drugs, or driving while under the influence. One young woman named Marika stated,

I think I have more, like, sense that a lot of people my age. Like, drinking and driving? Why would you do that? Like, I've been intoxicated, but—I think I still have the mindset of, like, okay, I know that I'm not driving or I'm not gonna do certain things. But they're like, "yeah, we're gonna go drive!" I'm like, but that doesn't make sense!

Before he died, Marika had to take care of her sick father when she was a child and young teenager. Because of this experience, she felt a greater sense of maturity than her peers when in situations like the above. After being exposed to adult problems such as illness and death, decisions such as drinking and driving didn't make sense to her.

Similarly, Johanne described how she had become stronger as a result of the difficulties she faced with her father:

I think I grew a tough skin when I started staying with my dad because he doesn't know how to talk to people I would say. So it's like, I learned how to be ok with things that are said, instead of being extra sensitive and taking things to the heart. Like I had a teacher—she was really rude. I had her 11th and 12th grade year for psychology so she would try to say stuff and it wouldn't bother me. People would say things, it never bothered me at all so. I guess that shaped me as a person.

While these cautionary behaviors could be beneficial for the accelerated adult, they also have the power to manifest pessimism and detachment in the name of "being realistic." Research on youth who have experienced early onset of adult roles has found that in some circumstances bearing adult-like responsibilities is beneficial to youth's self-esteem and maturity, as it makes them feel needed in their families and gives their life a positive meaning (Backett-Milburn et al. 2008; Burton 2007). However, youth from these types of homes also have higher levels of anxiety, depression, and "hyper" worry than their peers (Burton 2007; Mersky et al. 2013). Correspondingly, many accelerated adults held conflicting feelings about their experiences growing up; while they were frequently described as difficult, painful, or terrible, negative events were often—in the long run—

perceived as positive (or at least not inherently negative) because they allowed the young person to develop a “thick skin” and a more “realistic” mindset. More often than not, however, these participants did not exhibit promising signs that their emotional hardships would pay off in the long run, as the difficulty of figuring out what life path to follow, financial barriers to actually pursuing that path, and the burden of coping with depression and anxiety make success much harder to attain. For example, Johanna reported that the reason why she was not currently in a romantic relationship was because she had “a lot of emotional issues” and that she needed to work on herself first “before imposing that on somebody else.” In the next section, I discuss the implications that an accelerated adulthood had for romantic relationships during young adulthood.

#### *Avoidance of intimacy and romantic relationships*

Another common theme among accelerated adults was an avoidance of romantic relationships, primarily due to a perceived inability or unwillingness to take care of anyone else. These young adults often felt obligated to help out their families of origin when needed, and as a result felt overwhelmed with responsibilities to make sure that the people around them were alright. In romantic relationships, however, they did not feel as though they could maintain this same sense of attentiveness and worry. Instead, they either felt like they could not handle a romantic relationship at the moment or—if they were in a relationship—they expected that their partners would largely take care of themselves.

Many of those who did not want to be in a romantic relationship at the time, the most common reason given was the need to focus on themselves. Sarah, a twenty-two year old young woman, felt that she needed to focus on school and her own mental health before committing to a romantic partnership:

Honestly like at this point I'm much more concerned about, you know, my mental health and well-being and all that, over even thinking about a relationship, so. I mean if it happens in the next 10 years, that's ok, but if not I'm also ok with that. I'm not in a rush or anything. I'm just, like, right now—just school and my mental health. And then I guess once things start getting in check I can think about a relationship.

Similarly, Johanne explained that she did not want to be in a romantic relationship until she was more emotionally fit to do so: "I'm okay with [not being in a relationship], I guess. It doesn't bother me. I'm not—I have a lot of emotional issues I would say, so I would rather work on myself first before imposing that on somebody else."

For those who *were* in romantic relationships, many felt ambivalent about the relationship's future prospects. While they felt the need for freedom and space to focus on themselves, romantic relationships often entailed being attentive to another person's needs. This often manifested as an unwillingness to maintain a relationship that was seen as *work*. Helen, for example, believed that a romantic partnership should be comprised of two people who took care of themselves, rather than one person having to take care of another:

Like now that I'm in a relationship and I am supposed to be in a partnership and, you know... help someone else out, I'm just over it at this point, like I just want to take care of myself. And I want to be with someone who takes care of themself. And I've noticed that a lot more recently, um, so like talking to her about stuff like that is really aggravating 'cause it's like, she's still a child and I'm like, still taking care of her.

After taking care of other people for so long, a romantic relationship could not continue if it became an emotional burden. Olivia, an eighteen year old white woman, was beginning to feel unsure about her relationship because her boyfriend was highly sensitive and was hurt easily. She explained:

I don't want to feel like everything I do is going to make him upset cause he's very sensitive. Like, for instance the other day he kissed me and I was like "ugh"—I had a hair in my eye and he got upset cause he though I just didn't want to kiss him. So I was saying, like, I don't think I could handle



that aspect of it for much longer if it continues. I think I did see it possibly ending up in us being together but I don't know how it's gonna go anymore. I think that I just need to see how it goes because if it continues to be more of a burden than something I enjoy then I just can't do it.

Olivia was currently a freshman in college when I interviewed her. Although she was living on campus, the university was only about 40 minutes away from her parents' house and she often took trips home to check on her younger brother and help her parents with babysitting if they needed it. Since her older brother had gone away to a university that was several hours north, Olivia felt that she was expected to be available if and when her parents needed her. Despite being away from home for the first time, she explained that she was having a difficult time truly focusing on her life at school and instead often worried about what was going on at home and whether her little brother was alright. Her father was an alcoholic who at times lashed out at her mother and siblings, and she was often the person to stand up for herself and her siblings while living at home. Being in another relationship that was emotionally taxing, then, was not an option for her.

These stories are similar to what Silva (2013) found in her study of working class adulthood in contemporary America. In this study, Silva argues that economic insecurity and lack of financial and cultural resources makes attempting committed relationships too risky. She states, "fear—of being deemed unworthy, of losing their selves, of betrayal, of failing and losing what little they have—dominated their experiences in the romantic sphere" (Silva 2013:59). While economic insecurities seemed to play a role—as when, for example, Natalie vehemently denied that she would ever have a family before establishing "a huge bank account"—emotional insecurity also played a significant role in my participants' apprehension about marriage. As when Sarah explained that she needed to take care of her own mental health before thinking about marriage or even dating, or when

Johanne stated that she needed time to work on herself before imposing her emotional problems on someone else, the belief that they are unable to commit to a serious relationship because of emotional issues was strikingly apparent. Since many of these young adults had also taken care of siblings and/or parents for much of their life, they did not want to enter another relationship where they would have responsibility for yet another person. This makes sense, as they saw the period of young adulthood that they were currently in as (in principle, if not in practice) a period of self-focus rather than obligation towards others. Thus, if they had taken on the primary caretaker role in most of their familial relationships, it is understandable that they would expect this from their intimate relationships as well.

In chapter seven, I revisit my research questions and bring together my findings from each of the analysis chapters. I also discuss my findings in relation to how they fit in with the literature, avenues for future research, and policy implications.

## VII. CONCLUSION

This study sought to determine (1) why and how individuals experience an accelerated versus an emerging adulthood, (2) how adult identity is affected by accelerated and emerging adulthood, and (3) the emotional impact of an emerging adulthood versus an accelerated adulthood. The transition to adulthood can take many different forms and occur at different rates depending on a number of structural and institutional factors, such as race, social class, ethnicity, and family structure (Bynner 2007). Whereas middle-class young adults often pursue a developmental path characterized by exploration of possible identities, self-focus, and deferment of concrete obligations and commitments (Arnett 2000; Berzin and De Marco 2010; Lee 2014; Maysless and Keren 2014), youth from more marginalized social classes often do not have the opportunity to explore these options and frequently experience an accelerated transition to adulthood (Berzin and De Marco 2010; Bynner 2005; Silva 2013).

In this study I found that the young people in my sample who had more social and economic resources tended to extend their transition to experience an emerging adulthood, while more disadvantaged youth often experienced an accelerated transition to adulthood during their teenage years. The emerging adults were more likely to have experienced childhoods and adolescences that would be considered more “appropriate” or “normative” by Western cultural standards, as they had relatively stable lives, were able to focus on their education, and did not have to worry very often about major life

stressors such as lack of finances or family addictions (Burton 2007; Cowan & Cowan 2003; Furstenberg 2005). Similarly, the emerging adults' early adult lives were frequently characterized by a focus on education, the pursuit of fulfilling and gratifying careers, and personal growth. The accelerated adults, in contrast, had adopted adult responsibilities (e.g. starting full time work, caring for alcoholic or drug addicted parents, parenting younger siblings, etc.) during their childhood or teenage years, and often had parents who were unable to support them apart from offering them a place to live without paying rent.

The level of parental education among the participants in my sample also varied significantly. Thirty percent of accelerated adults' mothers and 39% of their fathers completed "some college" or more, compared with 84% of emerging adults' mothers and 80% of their fathers. Without guidance or mentorship from parents or other successful adults, these youth frequently described feelings of insecurity, vulnerability, and resentment towards family members as they thought over their childhood, adolescent, and early adult years. Research has found that parents from higher socioeconomic statuses provide more resources to their children during childhood and adolescence, and that these advantages continue into young adulthood, as those who are better off financially are able to provide better material support to their children. Furthermore, parents who are highly educated are more likely to provide advice to their adolescent and young adult children, as they have better access to information than parents who are less educated (Eggebeen and Hogan, 1990; Fingerman, Kim, Davis, Furstenberg, Birditt, and Zarit 2015). This was illustrated in my findings. However, research has also found that lower socioeconomic status parents spend more time on intangible support, such as advice, companionship,

technology, and child care for grandchildren, perhaps to make up for the lack of financial support (Fingerman et al. 2015).

Although emerging and accelerated adults similarly viewed themselves as somewhere between adolescence and full adulthood, the reasons and justifications they gave for their adult identities were very different. Whereas emerging adults typically brought up aspects of psychological maturity or self-sufficiency, such as getting their school work done, making their own decisions, and taking care of their own food or laundry, accelerated adults offered their experiences of stepping in as a primary caregiver for themselves, and sometimes the lives of family members, when their own parents failed or were unable to do so. Furthermore, many of the accelerated adults expressed feelings of having missed out on childhood experiences or of not having a childhood altogether. Since many of the accelerated adults felt like they had grown up too fast, they also typically saw their childhoods as incomplete or as one participant described “lost.” As a consequence, they felt like they had to make up for that lost time, and as a consequence they felt both more mature than *and* behind their peers.

All of my participants were enrolled in the same university setting and were consciously attempting to experience an extended transition to adulthood despite the fact that some had already become adults in many ways. When youth attend college, then, they often do so with the intention of holding off on serious romantic relationships and childbearing; spending time focusing on themselves; and gaining more credentials, experience, and maturity before committing to lasting responsibilities (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Arnett 2004). However, for those who have experienced early onset of adulthood in their childhood or adolescent years, it was not quite as easy to decelerate back

to an extended transition, and there were emotional costs to enduring accelerated transitions. In addition to lacking the economic, social, and emotional resources to buffer their transition, many of the accelerated adults in my sample still maintained a significant amount of familial and/or economic responsibilities and felt as though they lacked the guidance to be successful. Although they were enrolled in the same university, then, accelerated adults experienced the transition to adulthood very differently than their more advantaged peers.

This research has two main implications for sociologists interested in studying the effects of previous life experiences on life outcomes. The first implication is the difficulty that low-income and disadvantaged students face in not only getting into college but in coping with external demands, family pressures, and lack of confidence that they have in their abilities. The young adults in my sample who were from accelerated paths were attending university in the hopes that one day they would be more successful than their parents, and I believe it is within my capacity to say that they will be. Nonetheless, these individuals appeared to struggle in their attainment of a college degree to a much greater extent than those from more advantaged backgrounds. Prior studies have consistently found a link between college attendance and favorable health (Dupre 2007; Mirowsky and Ross 2003). However, new research has shown that college students who have experienced early misfortune may have the most to gain by obtaining a college degree. A quantitative study by Schafer, Wilkinson, and Ferraro (2013) found that individuals who completed a college degree despite coming from households marked by divorce, low socioeconomic status, and maltreatment gained the most in health benefits (i.e. rates of mortality, hypertension, and heart problems) comparison to those from more fortunate households.

This is bittersweet discovery, as individuals who experience childhood misfortune are less likely to attend college; however, it seems that this may be why the benefit is so great. Future research should pay specific attention to the ways in which universities may either facilitate or hinder the upward mobility of these more disadvantaged accelerated adults, as this research may have urgent implications for policies aimed at supporting first generation and/or disadvantaged college students.

The second implication involves the effects that childhood adversity appear to have on adult life. In this research study, I did not probe respondents for information about traumas or adversities that they may have experienced as children or adolescents. Rather, these issues emerged by coincidence during the interviews, particularly among the accelerated adults. For this reason, I decided to look more into the literature on adversity, stress, and trauma, and was shocked to find that there was little sociological analysis of these issues. Several recent studies in biology, neuroscience, psychiatry, and public health have looked at parental substance abuse, family unpredictability, and childhood maltreatment—experiences that are more common among economically disadvantaged families—and analyzed the ways in which these experiences are associated with negative health outcomes for the children exposed to them later in their lives (Blair and Raver 2012, 2016; Block 2017; McEwen and McEwen 2017; Watson, Maitre, Whelan, and Russell 2017). Early Life Adversity, or Adverse Childhood Experience (A.C.E.) refers to frequent, prolonged, and intensely negative experiences during childhood and adolescence (Bucci, Marques, Oh, and Harris 2016). These experiences include stressful or traumatic events (such as abuse), neglect, and household dysfunction.

Stress is typically defined in these studies as a discrepancy between social conditions and individual characteristics (i.e. his or her needs, values, perceptions, resources, and skills). Aneshensel (1992:16), for example, states that “conceptualizations of stress usually emphasize the following elements: a state of arousal resulting either from the presence of socioenvironmental demands that tax the ordinary adaptive capacity of the individual or from the absence of the means to attain sought-after ends.” Stressors, then, are external circumstances that challenge or obstruct individuals, whereas stress is the effect of internal arousal. Others distinguish between singular *stressful life events* and *chronic stress*. According to Umberson et al. (2005:1333), “a stressful life event refers to an undesirable event that occurs at a specific point in time (e.g., death of a loved one), whereas chronic stress refers to ongoing sources of stress (e.g., ongoing financial stress).” Pediatrics and epidemiology define stress as an incident which activates the body’s stress response. However, there are multiple types of stress. Positive stress is considered to be a physiological response to a mild or moderate stressor, or a physiologic state that is brief and mild to moderate in magnitude. Examples include a tough test at school, a playoff game, or dealing with frustration. Central to the experience of positive stress is the availability of a caring and responsive adult who helps the child cope with the stressor, thereby providing a protective effect that facilitates the return of the stress response systems back to baseline status (Shonkoff and Garner 2012; Bucci et al. 2016). Tolerable stress occurs when there is an adaptive response to a time-limited stressor, and is associated with exposure to non-normative experience that present a greater magnitude of adversity or threat than positive stress. Examples are the death of a family member, a contentious divorce, immigration, or a natural disaster (Shonkoff and Garner 2012; Bucci et al. 2016).



Toxic stress is characterized by the prolonged or frequent activation of the stress response, which leads to a dysregulation of the neuroendocrine immune circuitry, alteration of hormones and neurotransmitters, and ultimately a change to brain architecture and multiple other organ systems. Toxic stress occurs when the body's stress response is continuously activated. Examples include child abuse or neglect, maternal depression, parental substance abuse, and other household dysfunctions, which typically occur in the absence of the buffering protection of a supportive, adult relationship (Shonkoff and Garner 2012; Bucci et al. 2016).

There are several negative outcomes that have been found to be correlated with the experience of adversity and toxic stress during childhood. For example, negative outcomes such as cancer, diabetes, asthma, premature death, depression, substance abuse, autoimmune disease, cardiovascular disease, and suicide are positively correlated with adverse childhood experiences and toxic stress (Dube et al. 2001; Felitti et al. 1998; Bucci et al. 2016). There is also a strong relationship between A.C.E. score and the probability of lifetime and recent depressive disorders (Chapman et al. 2004; Dube et al. 2002), and compared to persons with no A.C.E.s the risk of heavy drinking, self-reported alcoholism, and marrying an alcoholic were increased twofold to fourfold by the presence of multiple A.C.E.s regardless of parental alcoholism (Dube et al. 2002). Experiencing high levels of adversity during childhood is also associated with poorer self-rated health and life satisfaction during adulthood, as well as more frequent depressive symptoms, anxiety, tobacco use, alcohol use, and marijuana use (Mersky et al. 2013). Lastly, the risk of suicide attempt is increased 2- to 5-fold by any adverse childhood experience, regardless of the category (Dube et al. 2001).

The effect of toxic stress and childhood adversity is relevant to current sociological research on the transition to adulthood because of its association with accelerated adulthood and adultification, and because toxic stress and childhood adversity has been found to be more prevalent in disadvantaged, impoverished, or lower socioeconomic status homes (Backett-Milburn, Wilson, Bancroft, and Cinningham-Burley 2008; Kirkpatrick-Johnson and Mollborn 2009; McEwen and McEwen 2017). McEwen and McEwen (2017) argue, for example, that early childhood adversity and toxic stress are mechanisms through which social structures impact children's bodies and brains. Essentially, social structures, processes, and relationships have embodied effects on developing brains and bodies, which in turn contributes to the process of social reproduction and intergenerational poverty. Nonetheless, there has been little integration of these issues into sociological research and inquiry, and sociologists rarely acknowledge the research that has been conducted in these areas despite the gains that could be made by doing so. In their review of the literature on early life adversity and the intergenerational transmission of poverty, McEwen and McEwen (2017) argue that sociologists have failed to go beyond identifying correlations between structural realities and personal characteristics. However, to fully understand the causes processes that translate structural positions into life trajectories, these realities cannot be ignored. *Why* are children who grow up in poverty more likely to be poor as adults? What are the mechanisms that produce these outcomes? Although sociologists have identified some of the factors that are instrumental in these processes, these analyses would be strengthened by the introduction of an analysis of how biological mechanisms—such as epigenetics—through which social inequalities become embodied (McEwen and McEwen 2017:447). The results of this study clearly indicate that the participants in my sample who

had come from backgrounds of accelerated adulthood experienced significant life difficulties that continued to trouble and hinder them. It would be beneficial for sociologists to contribute to the understanding of childhood adversities and their uneven dispersion across social locations.

This research also has implications for social policy makers, counselors, teachers, and school administrators. In addition to scholarships that help low income students afford the high price of college, programs designed for first generation and low income students should be implemented into universities in order to facilitate their progress and completion. A number of organizations have been recognized for their dedication to promoting the attainment of high quality education for low-income, first generation, and historically underrepresented students. The Education Trust is a nonprofit organization that works to promote greater equity in education for students of color and those who come from low income families. The organization's main goals are to work alongside educators, parents, students, policymakers, and civic and business leaders in order to transform schools and colleges into institutions that better serve all types of students; to develop a better understanding of achievement and opportunity gaps and the corresponding actions that will close them by analyzing local, state, and national data; and working to shape and influence national and state policy that will help students reach higher levels of achievement (The Education Trust 2018). The National College Access Network (NCAN) is an organization that aims to improve the quality and quantity of support that underrepresented students receive to apply to, enter, and succeed in postsecondary education. Members of NCAN are provided with professional development, networking opportunities, benchmarking, tools, and news from the field so that they can successfully facilitate college access and success

services more effectively and to a greater number of students. At the national level, NCAN also advocates for policies that improve access to and success within postsecondary institutions for all students (National College Access Network 2018). Lastly, iMentor is a notable organization that pairs high school students from low-income communities with volunteer college graduates in order to empower first generation students to graduate high school and succeed in college. iMentor partners with high schools in low-income communities and recruits thousands of volunteers who commit to mentoring a high school student for a minimum of three years in order to promote long-term, personal relationships that help students succeed (iMentor 2018).

There are also a number of universities that have been recognized for their superior assistance to low income and first generation students. A recent article in the New York Times titled “America’s Great Working-Class Colleges” recognized a number of universities that have persevered in the face of steep state wide budget cuts to education funding (Leonhardt 2017). The following universities were noted as producing the greatest percentages of students<sup>5</sup> from the bottom fifth of the income distribution who end up in the top three-fifths of the income distribution: New Jersey Institute of Technology (85%); Pace University (82%); California State, Bakersfield (82%); University of California, Irvine (81%); California State Polytechnic University, Pomona (81%); Xavier University of Louisiana (80%); Stony Brook University (79%); San Jose State (79%); Baruch College (79%); and California State, Long Beach (78%). Recent studies on the effectiveness of universities, powered by huge data sets, have allowed researchers to single out those universities that are best serving students from low income families. This has also

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<sup>5</sup> Percentages are listed in parentheses.

prompted a number of researchers to figure out how these universities are doing it. One example is the City University of New York's model for providing comprehensive support to capable students who are limited by educational and financial circumstances. The SEEK Program, which stands for Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge, offers a host of instructional, financial, and counseling support services to its students. These services are designed to assist students in tackling the challenges of college and to provide a supportive environment in which they will flourish (City University of New York 2018). Similarly, Brown University's First Generation College and Low-Income Student Center provides a number of resources to first generation and low income students, and serves as a hub for initiatives and programs within the university and as a home-base for affiliated student organizations (Brown University 2018).

The organizations discussed above are examples of programs that may be put in place to help facilitate disadvantaged students' success in higher education. As higher education becomes increasingly necessary for maintaining economic stability (Cherlin 2014; Putnam 2015), it is imperative that students from a wide variety of backgrounds are given the direction and mentorship that they are so sorely lacking at many universities. The accelerated adults in my sample not only lacked economic, social, and emotional resources to buffer their transition, they also maintained a significant amount of familial and/or economic responsibilities and felt as though they lacked the guidance to be successful. Thus, it is important that students from households marked by misfortune and disadvantage are given greater attention by the universities they attend.

## APPENDICES

### *Appendix A. Survey Questionnaire and Interview Protocol*

*Survey*

*Interview protocol*

*Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire and Interview Protocol*

*Survey*

- A. What is your age?
- B. Which gender do you identify with?
  - Man
  - Woman
  - Other (please specify)
- C. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
  - No education
  - Some school, but no High School education
  - High School
  - Some college, no degree
  - Technical degree
  - Associate's degree
  - Bachelor's degree
  - Post-graduate/professional degree
  - Other (please specify)
- D. Which race/ethnicity best describes you? (Please choose only one)
  - American Indian or Alaskan Native
  - Asian/Pacific Islander
  - Black or African American
  - Hispanic American
  - White/Caucasian
  - Multiple ethnicity/other (please specify)
- E. Do you live...? (Select all that apply)

- Alone in your own apartment or house
- In an apartment or house shared with one intimate partner (i.e. husband/wife, boyfriend/girlfriend)
- In an apartment or house shared with one or multiple unrelated people (e.g. roommates)
- In your parents' home
- With children of your own
- In the home of relatives
- In a college dorm

F. What is the total annual income of the household in which you live?

- \$0-\$24,999
- \$25,000-\$49,999
- \$50,000-\$74,999
- \$75,000-\$99,999
- \$100,000-\$124,999
- \$125,000-\$149,999
- \$150,000-\$174,999
- \$175,000-\$199,999
- \$200,000 and up

G. What was the total annual income of the household in which you grew up?

- \$0 - \$24,000
- \$25,000 - \$49,999
- \$50,000 - \$74,999
- \$75,000 - \$99,999
- \$100,000 - \$124,999
- \$125,000 - \$149,999



- \$150,000 – 174,999
- \$175,000 - \$199,999
- \$200,000 and up

H. What is the highest level of education your mother completed?

- No education
- Some school, but no High School education
- High School
- Some college, no degree
- Technical degree
- Associate's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Post-graduate/professional degree
- Other (please specify)
- Not sure

I. What is the highest level of education your father completed?

- No education
- Some school, but no High School education
- High School
- Some college, no degree
- Technical degree
- Associate's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Post-graduate/professional degree
- Other (please specify)
- Not sure

J. Do you identify with any of the following religions? (Please select all that apply)

- Protestantism
- Catholicism
- Christianity
- Judaism
- Islam
- Buddhism
- Hinduism
- Inter/Non-Denominational
- No religion
- Other (please specify)

K. How often do you attend religious services?

- 3 or more times a week
- 1-2 times a week
- Once a month
- Once a year
- Never

L. What is your political inclination?

- Strongly liberal
- Moderately liberal
- Moderately Conservative
- Strongly Conservative
- None

M. Which social class do you identify with?

- Lower class
- Working class
- Lower-Middle class

- Middle class
- Upper-Middle class
- Upper class
- Not sure

## *Interview protocol*

### Growing up

Can you tell me about your life growing up? About your experiences during your childhood and adolescent years, particularly the experiences that you consider most important?

#### A. Family background probe questions

- Where did you grow up?
- Who did you live with growing up?
  - When you were growing up were your parents married, divorced, separated, never married? Did they ever remarry, if divorced?
  - Did you have siblings? Step-siblings?
    - What do they do now? How much education do they have?
- What do your parents do?
  - How long have they worked there? Were they doing the same thing or something different when you were growing up?
- How did your parents feel about their jobs?
  - Do you know if your parents got or get benefits from their jobs, like pensions or health care? What would happen do growing up when you got sick?
- Where did your parents grow up?
- How would you characterize your experience of growing up? What was your life like? What did you like and/or dislike about it?
- Did you have any household duties while growing up?
- Did you get a sense of what your parents' expectations of you were?
  - Why do you think they raised you the way they did? What did they want you to learn?
- Did you have any specific goals while growing up?

- Was there ever a time when your parents seemed to struggle financially? Tell me about it.
- Were there any major changes, events, transitions, or disruptions that occurred in your family when you were growing up? What were these?

B. Primary and secondary school background probe questions

- Did you like school? What about it did you like/dislike?
  - What kind of student were you?
- What was your school like? Was it a good school?
- How did you spend your time during your school years? What would you do during afternoons and weekends?
- What did you consider doing after high school? What did you want to do?
- What kinds of choices were available to you after you finished high school?
- What did your family think you should do after graduation? What were your friends doing?
- As you were growing up, did your family or others who knew you have ideas about what you should do with your life and/or what kind of person you should be? How did this affect you? Did you share these ideas?
- Did your parents give you an allowance while you were growing up? Did you work for extra money?
- At what age did you start working? What was your motivation for getting your first job?
  - Did you work during the school year?
- Did you feel like you had guidance or mentorship that helped you figure out what you wanted to do with your life or how you should pursue your goals?
- Is there anything else you want to tell me about school? Was there anything about school that was particularly important in shaping how you grew up?

Life now

Tell me about your life now. What is your life like? How would you describe it?

A. Living situation/relationships/daily life probe questions

- Do you currently live with someone, or do you live alone?
  - If living with someone, who do you live with? What sorts of things do you do together?
  - If living with parents or relatives, what are the primary reasons why you currently live with your parents/relatives?
- Are you married or in any kind of romantic relationship?
  - If you are in a relationship but not married, is there a chance you might eventually marry this person? Do you want to get married? If so, when?
- Do you have any children?
  - If yes, do they live with you?
  - If no, do you think you eventually want to have children?
- What are your feelings about your current living situation, relationships, and/or family? What do you like and dislike about it? What, if anything, would you change if you could?
- Other than your immediate family members, do you have close friendships?
- Do you have any free time? If so, what do you do?
- What is the pace of your everyday life? Do you feel pressured, relaxed?
- Would you say that you're satisfied with your life as it is now? Is there anything about it that you would change?
- Do you feel hopeful about your future?

B. Work/school/finances probe questions

- Are you currently in school?
  - If yes, are you enrolled full-time or part-time?

- What is your major/minor? How did you choose it? Are you happy with it?
  - Do you like college (or graduate school)?
  - What kind of grades do you get?
  - When do you expect to graduate? What do you see yourself doing after you finish school?
  - How do you pay for school?
- Are you currently employed?
  - If yes, are you employed full-time or part-time?
  - Where do you work? How long have you had this job?
  - What are your feelings about your current job? What do you like and/or dislike about it?
  - Are there opportunities for promotion? Do you get benefits, or could you?
  - Do you make enough from your job to pay your essential bills?
- What is your debt situation? Do you have any student loans, credit cards, mortgages? What about savings?
- How much financial stability do you have? Do you have any financial worries?

#### Adulthood

- How would you define adulthood? Or in other words, what characteristics of people (and/or characteristics of their lives) do you consider to be the most important in determining whether or not a person is an adult?
- How do you think you learned what an adult is, or what it means to be an adult?
- Do you consider yourself an adult?
  - If yes, at what point in your life did you come to see yourself as an adult? What made you feel this way?

- Are there any ways in which you do not feel like an adult? If so, what causes you to feel this way?
  - If no, why don't you see yourself as an adult?
- When do you feel most adult? Most un-adult?
- Do you know what your parents' lives were like at your age? How were they different or similar to yours?
- Has there ever been a time when you felt like people (perhaps older generations) misunderstood what it's like to be a young person today?
- What was your own transition from child to adult like?

#### Closing

- What would you say have been the most significant influences on your life and who you are as a person?
- Is there anything else you would like to say about your life that we have not already discussed?



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