

How to define the adult in 2020?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history: Article

Received : 25 October 2020

Revised : 4 November 2020

Accepted: 10 November, 2020

DOI: [10.47742/ijbssr.v1n3p1](https://doi.org/10.47742/ijbssr.v1n3p1)

ABSTRACT

Today adulthood seems to be characterized also by a certain number of obligations and the assumption of responsibilities. It is an age in which the life course in the form of an institutional processing program seems to be undermined. This can be seen in the extended periods of schooling, teaching, training, and the associated shortening of the working phase of a lifetime. Adulthood is to be understood as a social construct resulting from current demands and ideas. A diverse multidisciplinary presentation of the demands placed on adults will be discussed and a holistic representation of the concept of the adult will be developed. Which educational, biological, philosophical, legal, economic, and psychological approaches and theories are relevant here? Because of this, adulthood can currently be defined based on various interdisciplinary characteristics. Adulthood is defined as a phase that is open to development and begins with (sexual) maturity. The adult moves between dependence and autonomy, striving for autonomy. The adult is also characterized by responsibility and "wisdom". Adulthood is therefore to be understood from the perspective of contemporary educational science as a phase of development in which the relationship of the individual to himself and his environment changes through the mastering of age-related demands and the examination of the social and material environment. The adult thereby experiences himself/herself as a legally mature being who assumes economic and social responsibility for him/herself.

Keywords: Pedagogy, Philosophy, Definition Adults, Young Adults, Age

Introduction

The adult moves between dependence and autonomy, striving for autonomy. The adult is also characterized by responsibility and "wisdom". Adulthood is therefore to be understood from the perspective of contemporary educational science as a phase of development in which the relationship of the individual to himself and his environment changes through the mastering of age-related demands and the examination of the social and material environment.

An interdisciplinary approach to the concept of the adult in 2020.

1 Problem definition

"To be an adult is hard", "The serious side of life begins" or "We are simply no longer at school", some of us have heard these or similar statements from our mostly still very young environment. Today adulthood seems to be characterized also by a certain number of obligations and the assumption of responsibilities. The young people, but also people of middle adulthood, seem to be present, due to the plurality of possibilities to shape their own lives, facing constant pressure to justify themselves. The overriding feeling is "to miss something". Over

and above that the modern communication media make a constant comparison with peers possible and conditions the feeling to be not sufficient.

In particular, the definition and delimitation of "the adult" via parameters such as marriage, parenthood, or education, underpinned by Arnett's thesis that the possibilities of personal exploration are only possible in cultures that "people allowed to postpone entering adult roles such as marriage and parenthood until at least their mid-20s"¹ fell on deaf ears of some students. Also because of that, they saw the "Emerging Adulthood" phase, as portrayed by Arnett, as too self-centered, selfish, and restless. Many found this approach too traditional, rather conservative, and felt (even between 21 and 28 years old) unrepresented. The reference to changing love relationships in this age group as well as to a later possible divorce was not well received. I think some of my students felt it was reduced to their shortcomings rather than focused on their physical-mental possibilities. What remains is the possibility to deal with modern and interdisciplinary constants for the adult of today.

Today, we live in an age in which the life courses in the form of an institutional processing program, which has to be done

¹ J. J. Arnett (2014). Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood, Harlow & Essex, S. 14.

biographically, so to speak, seems to be undermined. This can be seen in the extended periods of schooling, teaching, training, but above all study (also in the form of semesters abroad or voluntary social or other years used for personal development) and the associated shortening of the working phase of a lifetime. Adulthood is also to be understood as a social construct resulting from current demands and ideas. Lifelong learning is thus beginning to gain in importance. After all, people remain mentally and physically capable of longer. Also, life expectancy is increasing year by year. This also extends the post-acquisition phase of the former working person. Another problem for people who want to have children is of course the compression of years of highest professional performance and career advancement opportunities with a de-standardization of the family cycle. In this context, one also speaks of "the rush hour of life" in the period between about 25 and 40 years of age. What does not happen in this phase of life so the general thinking (and own feeling) does not happen in your life anymore. The incessant flood of demands, tasks, and decisions even leads to depression, burn-out, and physical complaints about many people of this biologically rather young to middle age nowadays. For others, as they grow older, the care of their parents or parents-in-law is added - a task that is so far traditionally performed by women.

In general, it can be said that this process has caused traditional definitions of adulthood to lose their meaning and that traditional notions of "adulthood" have been shaken.

2 Objectives

The following essay deals with basic ideas that arise when dealing with the concept of the adult, with a special focus on the question of whether an analysis of the concept of an adult is a meaningful and fruitful undertaking. One possibility is to define the term by age, another is to define it in terms of how age-related goals or developmental tasks are mastered or psychological qualities such as "maturity". "Because people differ so greatly in their life experiences, the criteria for determining whether a particular person is an adult are anything but clear."²

A diverse multidisciplinary presentation of the demands placed on adults will be discussed and, first of all, a holistic representation of the concept of the adult will be developed in the form of a literature review. Which educational, biological, philosophical, legal, economic, and psychological approaches and theories are relevant here? This is where the question arises whether a sharp definition of the adult is feasible at all, especially since various disciplines have this as their subject, including biology, jurisprudence, philosophy, pedagogy, and sociology. Since the meanings are different in each case, it is difficult to find a subset of common meanings.

This is followed by reflections on the explanation of adulthood as a social construct under the question of whether a new definition or reclassification is relevant.

In particular, about adults, it remains to be considered that everyone is also personally mirrored in the results of research and studies as well as sees itself represented in each case by a certain age spectrum. Therefore, the topic must be approached with special sensitivity, especially in order not to offend young, middle-aged, and old adults by statements.

Also, it should be considered whether certain classifications or parameters of the classification of adulthood can still satisfy the plurality of today's forms of society or whether they need to be expanded, updated, or reclassified.

Or, as Wolf describes it: "It all started with a banal question that a student asked me on the fringes of the seminar:

'How do you define the adult?'

My answer began with a long 'so' and I was annoyed that I did not immediately have a short concrete answer to such an important question. While searching for a precise definition, I had to realize that there was neither a precise definition nor clear satisfactory answers to this question. I don't like to answer this question with academic verbosity, but I will mention some concrete aspects that I consider to be particularly characteristic of the adult."³

And so - at this point - I will do it too.

3 One adult. Different approaches

Definitions of the adult by J. Dinkelaker. Adult Learning 2018, p. 22:

1. "In biological terms, sexual maturity is an essential characteristic of the adult organism."
2. "From an economic point of view, the ability to reliably participate in contractual transactions and to be able to pay for one's own living expenses and those of relatives play a central role."
3. "Politically significant is the status of adults as self- and co-determining citizens in a democratic community."

"These examples already show that adults do not exist as a uniform construct, but that we are dealing with a multitude of partly overlapping, partly diverging understandings of adulthood."⁴

In a biological sense, adolescence⁵ is the phase in human development that extends from late childhood (11th to 14th years of age) through puberty (for girls mostly between 10 and 18 years of age, for boys mostly between 12 and 24 years of age) to full adulthood. The beginning and end of puberty are individuals, whereby puberty is defined as the transition of the child's body to the adult body in the sense of sexual maturity through the action of hormones. A person is defined as an "adult"⁶ after the completion of adolescence. Sexuality also occupies an important

² Whitbourne & Weinstock (1982). The middle life span. *Developmental Psychology of Adulthood*. Munich - Vienna - Baltimore, p. 25.

³ G. Wolf (2013). On the construction of the adult. *Fundamentals of an adult educational learning theory*, p. 11.

⁴ J. Dinkelaker (2018). *Adult Learning*, p. 22.

⁵ From Latin from the verb *adolescere*, which in English can be translated as "grow up" or "mature", but also "gain strength" as well as "flare up" and "kindle".

⁶ In German-speaking countries, the slightly outdated or traditional synonym "Reife" (maturity) is often used for adulthood, see for example the well-known film "Die Reifeprüfung" ("The Graduate" 1967 drama & love film), which was reissued in 2017. Furthermore terms such as "die mittlere Reife", defining a secondary school leaving certificate, use the word "Reife" to describe the acquisition of certain skills and knowledge.



place in biology as well as a kind of separating line between childhood and adulthood.

In the legal sense, if you are of age it corresponds to the responsible age (the age of consent). It refers to the age from which a natural person corresponds to the definition of "adult". In Germany, this will be the 18th year of age according to § 2 BGB.⁷ From this age, the citizen of the Federal Republic of Germany not only receives the right to stand for election but also becomes fully contractually capable, can conclude contracts without custody, rent an apartment, may marry, gamble, legally purchase and consume alcohol.

"The term 'adult' is defined by the legal understanding of the adult since firstly legal norms are the dominant norms and secondly a greater conceptual clarity is given for the legal definition in comparison to anthropological definitions (see Stroß 1994, 407ff.). In the legal system of the Federal Republic of Germany, persons who have reached the age of majority are adults. This is associated with the acquisition of the right to vote and to stand for election, full legal capacity and capacity to make a will, marriageable age, full criminal liability, juvenile criminal law, and compulsory military service. Since this study focuses on adults in general, but not on adults in a specific legal system, persons who are considered adults in the respective legal systems are referred to as adults. Since the age-based definition of adulthood depends on the respective legal system, the calendar age is not brought into play here to define the term 'adulthood'.⁸

This is true because even in German criminal law, the classification of an adult or even a juvenile who is not an adult - must be treated by the judges with a certain amount of discretion and individually.

In other countries, the age can also vary: In Taiwan, for example, a citizen is considered to be age 20. In the USA, Egypt, and Argentina as well as in the Ivory Coast, Cameroon, and Honduras at 21 years of age, in Guinea also at 21 years of age, but before that at marriage. In Yemen and Kyrgyzstan, the age of majority is reached already at the age of 16.

"The consideration of adulthood as a phase of life has its historical roots in the demarcation from childhood, which was discovered in the 16th and 17th centuries as a stage of development with its own rules and regularities."⁹

Historically, before 1975, citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany came of age at 21. In the German Democratic Republic, on the other hand, a law of May 17, 1950, designated as of legal age all persons who had reached the age of 18. In many regions of Germany, in the first half of the 18th century, the majority did not come of age until the age of 25. In the course of the 19th century, this age was usually reduced to 23

years and later to 21 years. "Nevertheless, the Basic Law contains some provisions that are indirectly essential for legitimizing the existing institutional support structure: The principle of the welfare state (Art. 20), freedom of belief, conscience and creed (Art. 4), freedom of opinion (Art. 5), freedom of assembly (Art. 8), freedom of association (Art. 9), the welfare state clause (Art. 10.1), and the federal guarantee for state constitutions and the guarantee of local self-government."¹⁰

"While the individual sciences want to produce positive knowledge about the nature of the world, we believe that philosophy has the task, among other things, of critically reflecting the knowledge produced by the individual sciences."¹¹ Many philosophers and theologians approach the subject via a certain "not-knowing" of adults, coupled with their pure ability to acquire knowledge (so Socrates, Plato, Plotinus, Porphyry, Augustine, Meister Eckhart, Nicolaus Cusanus, Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Nietzsche). This distinguishes the adult from the adolescent or child, whose abilities are not yet fully developed. The adult is defined in many concepts by his intelligent (intellectual) ability to reach "true knowledge" and is criticized when this ability, in this sense his own "maturity", is not used, even though its use is often accompanied by pain.¹²

It should also be mentioned that the biological interpretation of the adult in terms of sexual or physical maturity is not valid here: Sexuality and corporeality are devalued in many philosophical conceptions and do not take a large value, so with Plato, Plotinus, and Descartes. Many philosophers have improved and revised their programs even in old age. Especially in politics and philosophy, a high age, taking its origin in ancient Greece and Rome, seems to be equated with competence; apparently, the "wisdom stereotype" is especially based here:

"Because of the ambiguity of the term 'wisdom', I will try to systematically investigate the meaning of wisdom in the following. I start with a consideration of the origin of the word. From an etymological point of view, the term wisdom refers to the knowledge, experience, and insight gained in the course of a lifetime. The original meaning of the adjective 'wise' is knowing, but then also smart, intelligent, and intellectually gifted."¹³

"For the specification of wisdom knowledge, reference is made to Staudinger and Baltes: They understand wisdom knowledge as expert knowledge in dealing with difficult questions of life."¹⁴

The concept of wisdom is joined by the concept of experience: this is derived from the relationship between adults and children:

Definition by J. Dinkelaker. Adult Learning 2018, p. 22:

"Adults are said to be responsible for passing on their culture to the next generation. From the interest in the further

⁷ German Civil Code (BGB) of the Federal Republic of Germany in the version promulgated on 2 January 2002 (BGBl. I p. 42, 2909; 2003 I p. 738), last amended by Article 2 of the Act of 16 October 2020 (BGBl. I p. 2187).

⁸ K. Schneider (2004). The participation and non-participation of adults in further education, p. 12.

⁹ B. Schmidt-Hertha (2015). Adulthood, in: J. Dinkelaker, Aiga von Hippel: Adult Education in Basic Terms, p. 28.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 88.

¹¹ Reydon & Hoyningen-Huene (2011). Philosophy and its relation to the individual sciences, in: Van Ackeren & Kobusch & Müller (eds.), Why Philosophy? Historical, systematic and social positions, Berlin, p. 127.

¹² See for example the Platonic analogy of the sun and the cave, in which the illuminating light dazzles and hurts the eyes. Augustine follows this formulation in his analogy of the sun in his early work "Soliloquia" 1, 12-15. But Socrates also describes the process of gaining knowledge as "painful birth" and the philosopher as midwife or obstetrician of the same (Socrates' mother was a midwife).

¹³ K. Schneider (2005). Wisdom - a category of adult education, in: J. Antz, Bernhard Bergmann. Pedagogical review, p. 4.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

development of the culture in which the adults live, an interest in the education of the next generation arises, which should contribute to the renewal and improvement of the existing."

The definition of the adult according to maturity also applies in many philosophical concepts: the well-known saying of Kant: "Have the courage to use your intellect", but also: "Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why so many people, after they have long since freed nature from foreign control, nevertheless like to remain underage for their whole lives".¹⁵ "The learning of adults was for the Enlightenment a substantial component of the maturity of humans, which can be pursued by national education. Only through the Enlightenment did a man enter the broader consciousness as a possibility being - as a personality that is determined by its social environment, but not insurmountably fixed in its possibilities."¹⁶

Education has been a pedagogical task since it was spoken and written about. Already in Plato's "Πολιτεία" the concern for the human soul is placed at the center of all educational endeavors, whereby educational processes should accompany the entire life of the human being. The term "Παιδεία" defines both the process of education and the education that results from it.

Only about 30 years ago, the lively discourse about the importance and function of adult education for the further education of society began, among other things. Since the field of pedagogy has always been in a state of flux, and since it is immensely broad and heterogeneous, adult education, which is constantly in motion, also requires a constant, up-to-date discourse. "The image of the adult as a 'person of maturity and age of consent' (Pöggeler 1964), which has prevailed until well beyond the middle of the 20th century, fits less and less with the realities of life of the constantly changing 'adult' in a dynamically changing world".¹⁷

Furthermore, the educational policy program of lifelong learning hardly knows any more recipients defined by age than certain age groups, but rather knows, for example, professional requirement situations and their competencies.

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¹⁵ Immanuel Kant (1999). *Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?* In: *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, December 1784, 481-494, quoted below: Immanuel Kant, *What is Enlightenment?* Selected small writings, edited by Horst D. Brandt. Hamburg, 20-22.

In summary, currently, significant characteristics of the modern adult can be defined above all according to Wolf. These characteristics are:

- Maturity
- Responsible age (of the consent)
- Responsibility
- Striving for autonomy
- The ability for independent regulation effects
- Movement between autonomy and dependence

"Adulthood also functions as a normative model of development (cf. Kade 1983), as a goal to be achieved in previous phases of life. In contrast to childhood and adolescence, the phase of adulthood according to Kade is characterized today by success as the dominant measure of evaluation, individualized self-confidence, a particularization of relationships, the recognition of the duty of self-discipline, and universalistic moral concepts. [...] Adulthood is to be understood from the perspective of contemporary educational science as a phase of (further) development in which the relationship of the individual to himself and his environment changes through the mastering of age-related demands (developmental psychological perspective) and the examination of the social and material environment (socialization theoretical perspective)."¹⁸

Because of this, adulthood can currently be defined based on various interdisciplinary characteristics, although due to the current social change no claim can be made to the completeness of all characteristics. Adulthood in 2020 is defined as a phase that is open to development and begins with (sexual) maturity. The adult thereby experiences himself/herself as a legally mature being who assumes economic and social responsibility for him/herself and possibly also for others and is characterized by a certain empirical "wisdom". In the state of adulthood, the adult moves between dependence and autonomy, striving for autonomy. In conclusion, it should be noted here that in 2020 the adult defines him/herself in already established systems as well as through given structures of any kind, and that he/she can in some way constitute himself, then ever before.

¹⁶ Rolf Arnold & Ekkehard Nuißl & Matthias Rohs (2017). *Adult Education. An introduction to basics, problems and perspectives*, Baltmannsweiler, p. 19.

¹⁷ J. Dinkelaker (2018). *Adult Learning*, p. 22.

¹⁸ B. Schmidt-Hertha (2015). *Adulthood*, in: J. Dinkelaker, Aiga von Hippel (eds.): *Adult education in terms*, p. 28.



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