Article

Independence and relationality in notions of adulthood across generations, gender and social class

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Abstract
The adult person is in sociological literature often referred to as a genderless and classless being. As a life course phase it is implicitly viewed as a static destination after a dynamic transition period of youth. The aim of this article is to empirically examine perceptions of adulthood in biographical interviews in three-generation Norwegian families. A case-based biographical approach related to gender and social class across historical periods is at the core of the analysis. Thoughts on independence and the Mead-inspired concept of relationality are used as sensitising concepts to examine general ideals and personal considerations in notions of adulthood. The analyses indicate variations over historical periods, generations and life course phases wherein relationality or independence become significant. Relationality may take on different meanings with reference to period-specific gender expectations such as the male provider role and women as the primary carer in families in the oldest generations. Ideals of individual independence as choice or necessity vary according to life course phase, social class and period-specific conditions.

Introduction

The term adulthood[1] is as common in everyday language as it is in sociological writings. In general sociology there is little systematic attention to the concept (Pilcher, 2012). It is largely considered to be a phase in life related to age but also to aspects that are 'socially and culturally determined' (Hareven, 1976, p. 14) and it marks 'the mature individual' who is autonomous and independent from the family of origin (Erikson, 1978). Chronological age defines when a person is considered an adult in terms of the law but there is great variation in age norms between countries and across historical time (Buchman & Kriesi, 2011; Jones, 2009, Settersten & Hagestad, 1976; Settersten &

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Mayer, 1997). Although markers of adulthood change over time, life course studies have focused on a series of events that include moving out of the parental household, getting an education, finding gainful employment, being able to support oneself financially, finding a partner and starting a family (Elder, 1985). However, the transition is no longer regarded as a series of discrete events in a linear sequence, especially as structural changes demand longer time in education in preparation for gainful employment (Benson & Furstenberg, 2007; Jones, 2009).

There is a sociology of childhood, of youth and of ageing. The fact that there is no 'sociology of adulthood' indicate a certain self-evident quality of the concept (Pilcher, 2012). Problematising concepts of adulthood is of sociological relevance because general ideas about 'the individual' in relation to 'society' implicitly refer to an adult person. Ideas about adulthood say something about overall ideals in a given society; what values and practices are held in regard; ideas about personhood and citizenship, and what aims are deemed worthy of striving for, for individuals and for society. Notions of adulthood are however multifaceted as they are shaped by gender and social class in historical contexts across generations. The complexity of the concept is a starting point for this article, where the overarching theoretical framework is based on Mead's notions of the social and processual self (Mead, 1956) and a case-based approach that emphasises the history–biography dynamic (Mills, 1959/1980). The main aim is to examine what circumstances invite certain notions of adulthood by analysing on the one hand general ideals in perceptions, and on the other realities of personal experiences in considerations about adulthood expressed in biographical interviews with three generations in Norwegian families. In analyses the concepts relationality and independence are helpful for capturing processes across gender, generations and social class.

Notions of adulthood in sociological writings

In much research attention to adulthood itself is often implicit. Studies of relationships between generations implicitly draw on differences, often portrayed as conflicts, between the young and their parent generations (Bristow, 2020), while others focus on activities associated with this phase such as parenthood, wage work, sexuality and leisure activities (Pilcher et al., 2003; Smart, 2007). Studies framed by wider ideas about modernity and less with specific contexts tend not to engage with concepts of gender and social class (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005) but do nevertheless give valuable insight into the thoughts of groups of young people, e.g. Blatterer's (2007) study of young Australian men's ideas of adulthood. Cross (2010) focused on the immaturity of young American men and their reluctance to take on responsibilities. In other studies where lifestyle was a prominent theme, the emphasis has been on the idolisation of youth in aesthetics and the 'juvenilization' of general culture (Danesi, 2003). This has led some researchers to conclude that adulthood in the traditional meaning must be redefined. Concepts such as 'kidult', 'adultescence' and 'post-adolescence' have been introduced to define the age group 20–35 (Kocerovà, 2017). The most influential of the terms is however Arnett's (2000) 'emerging adulthood', which describes a phase between adolescence and adulthood. This and other notions that refer to lifestyle without taking the social context into consideration have been widely criticised in sociology (Bynner, 2005; Côté & Bynner, 2008). Shanahan et al. (2008) concluded that

self-perceived adulthood depended on the number of transitions gone through, thus found no support for Arnett's claim that individualistic criteria had replaced demographic transitions as points of reference.

In sociological writings a number of studies have engaged with adulthood explicitly. Jones and Wallace (1992) observed that adult status 'may have different meanings in the private, public and official spheres, but may require recognition in each sphere' (p. 102).[2] In a life course perspective concepts such as age, cohort and generations are prominent and a focus on *transitions* to adulthood is common (Hareven, 1976; Irwin, 1995; Macmillan, 2006; Shanahan et al., 2008). Holdsworth and Morgan's (2005) study of young people in Norway, Spain and the UK found 'strong links between ideas of adulthood and independence' (p. 115) and highlighted complexities in the way interviewees interpreted the concept. Another cross-national study (Newman, 2012) examined how structural conditions on the labour market and welfare state provisions affected young people's transitions and their thoughts about adulthood. Class differences in all countries showed that only middle class parents could afford to support their offspring into their thirties. Thomson et al.'s (2002) longitudinal UK study identified how social class impacted on 'critical moments' on the pathways to adulthood that could lead to social inclusion or exclusion. Jones (2009) made a similar observation: while young people's entry into the labour market was deferred because of longer time in education and erosion of the youth labour market, state support for young people was reduced and working class parents were expected to adhere to the standards of the middle classes that they could not live up to. A cross-national comparison between Norwegian and Portuguese young people (Nilsen et al., 2002) found that social class in the transition to adulthood was less prominent in the Norwegian welfare state context compared to Portugal with little or no state support. In sum, these studies illustrate that structural conditions that vary across time and national contexts affect young people's transition processes and thus also perceptions of adulthood.

The very notion of a transition to adulthood can suggest that upon arrival all movement and motion stop and life becomes a series of routines and obligations. However, as Roberts (2018) stated in a discussion about youth as a life course phase, beginnings and endings of particular phases are fuzzy. 'There are not three stable states: childhood, youth and adulthood. There is movement throughout all three' (p. 21). Hareven (1976), in a discussion of age boundaries for adulthood, observed that adulthood could be thought of in terms of several phases: 'middle' and 'old' age; or 'young old' and 'old old'. Moen (2016) discussed a particular phase of adulthood as both an age range (55–75 years) and a state of mind. She found that adulthood has many phases and is far from static. Discussing adulthood from a framework of variation and change is helpful when analysing interviews with three-generation families.

Independence and relationality in notions of adulthood

Traditionally, one of the most important markers of adulthood is financial independence from the family of origin (Hareven, 1976). The independence concept[3] is associated with individuals and individuality, and can have many meanings: freedom from coercion, detachment from relationships, or individualistic self-sufficiency

(Friedman, 2003). In an historical period when dependence is thought of as undesirable, independence, in the sense of not 'being a burden' to anyone, has become an ideal in both personal and societal arenas. As Sennett (2003) observed, dependence is associated with embarrassment, it is the antithesis of desired characteristics of the model citizen in modern Western society; being in need of support in the sense of being poor is a source of shame (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013). Independence thus has the moral high ground over dependence.

The concept 'relationality'[4] does in many ways stand in contrast to independence. It resonates with Mackenzie and Stoljar's (2000) notion of 'relational autonomy' which refers to 'an umbrella of terms, designating a range of related perspectives . . . premised on a shared conviction that persons are socially embedded' (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000, p. 4). In this instance it will be defined with reference to insights from American pragmatist thought, especially the writings of G. H. Mead[5] and his notion of the processual and relational self: 'the origin and foundation of the self, like those of thinking, are social' (Mead, 1956, p. 228). The two phases of the self, the 'I' and the 'me', make it a processual entity: 'The self is essentially a social process going on with these two distinguishable phases. If it did not have these two phases, there could not be conscious responsibility and there would be nothing novel in experience' (p. 233). Inspired by Mead's notion of the self, relationality thus refers to a way of thinking that explicitly takes other people into consideration, as someone to love and to care for, have responsibility towards or being accountable to.

In this article relationality and independence are used as sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1954). They are thus not seen in terms of a dichotomy but in keeping with Blumer's definition, they indicate directions in which to look rather than objects to look for, which is characteristic of its opposite: definitive concepts (Blumer, 1954). Sensitising concepts invite contextualisation of social phenomena. Comparing across generations, gender and social class a distinction is made between 'general ideals' and 'personal considerations' in thoughts about what adulthood means.

Study design, methods and context

In the research project Intergenerational Transmission in the Transition to Adulthood 23 Norwegian and nine UK[6] three-generation families were interviewed about their transitions to adulthood. The study has a comparative case-based life course design (Bertaux & Thompson, 1997; Brannen & Nilsen, 2011; Gomm et al., 2000a) thus the number of cases is of less relevance than thick descriptions and contextualisations that can capture processes in context (Hantrais, 1999; Nilsen & Brannen, 2014). As Gomm et al. (2000b) observed, the difference between variable and case approaches is that the former has a large number of cases and few variables, whereas the latter involves few cases and many 'variables' to enrich contextualisation. The systematic sampling followed a sociological rather than a statistical logic (Gobo, 2008; Gomm et al., 2000b), which showed the sociological relevance of the analysis of respondents as cases of men or women embedded in particular birth cohorts and generations in families and social classes. All generations in the selected families were born and grew up in Norway, which was important for getting insight into how historical change in a particular society impacted across generations. The generalisability of the sample is thus

strengthened by in-depth conceptualisations that may be transferable to cases of comparable properties in similar but different contexts. Interviewees were selected on the basis of birth year of the mid-generation (1960–1965), with one child (18+) and one parent prepared to take part and were recruited by distributing folders about the project in workplaces and leisure arenas, and by email, telephone, face-to-face encounters and snowballing. We aimed for diversity of social background in the mid-generation and gender balance in the sample. Biographical interviews lasting one and a half to three hours were carried out with family members individually. The interview focused on the scheduling of the life course, the transmission of aspirations, material resources and care and support during the transition from youth to adulthood, reflections on notions of adulthood, as well as thoughts about the future. The interviews include background information about the extended family: siblings, uncles, aunts and grandparents.

The analyses in this article involve comparisons across categories that in an article format make it difficult to demonstrate the richness of each case. They have however been given names in order to keep a sense of uniqueness as persons while keeping their anonymity. Other publications have focused on topics that are not included in this article: e.g. problematic aspects of housing and employment (Nilsen, 2019). Selection for the current purpose has been done on the basis of gender and grandparents' social class in relation to education and occupational position, as these are established dividing lines during most life course phases and events.[7] Two of the four families selected are female chains and two are male. The cases thus highlight how historical period affects both experiences and reflections about adulthood as related to social class and gender. As Crompton (1989, p. 152) pointed out, occupational categories are not comparable over time, it is hence difficult to decide a single class position of three generation since both the system of education and the labour market changed considerably over the approximately 80-year period the three generations cover. Intergenerational social mobility in the sense of children having higher education and better paid jobs than their parents, is expected between the grandparent and parent generations and is evident in the data.[8] Because of general social change in Norwegian society there is considerable structural mobility over the generations interviewed. Like most European countries, Norway saw a rapid expansion in education after the Second World War.[9] The length of compulsory schooling was extended from seven years for the grandparents to 10 years for the grandchildren.[10] While Norway is one of the most egalitarian countries in the world with a strong welfare state, contemporary increase in social inequality is evident (Statistics Norway [SSB], 2017b).

The concepts relationality and independence are helpful for capturing gendered aspects of the whole life course. Across the three generations women's situation changed considerably. Men's employment opportunities were taken for granted in the older generations. The current situation with fluctuating labour markets and changes in credential and skills demands affects both general and personal perceptions of what are important markers of adulthood.

Transitions to adulthood in three-generation families[11]

In the interviews some provided lengthy reflections over notions of adulthood while others had less to say on the matter directly but had implicit viewpoints that surfaced in

other sections of the interviews. A common distinction was between thoughts about when they became an adult person themselves, expressed mainly by the oldest generations, and more general reflections about the meaning of the term adulthood. Thus general ideals and personal considerations are articulated in most accounts. The sub-heading for each family case refers to the main theme in interviews as they relate to the independence–relationality dimension and are revisited in the comparison section.

Middle class men: Independent family providers

Grandfather *Martin **Johnson*** (b. 1934) was a wealthy retiree who had started his own business and expanded it over the years. He grew up on a small farm and had four siblings. He left home after seven years of compulsory schooling at 14 to support himself. There was no student funding and his family could not afford to pay for education so he went into apprenticeship and lived in a bedsit subsidised by his employer. When he obtained his trade certificate in the mid-1950s it was easy to find employment. After a few years he started his own company. He married in his mid-twenties and had three children. They bought a house and his wife was a housewife. Considering himself a self-made-man he emphasised the value of work and earning your own money as a marker of adulthood.

> It [adulthood] is about getting employed, do your work and get a decent pay for it.

While his ideals were related to independence, he pointed out that he had supported his children and grandchildren financially in ways his parents had never been able to do for him. In his account there was thus a strong sense of independence and self-sufficiency but also typical of his generation of men, the prominence of the provider role that conveys a sense of relationality.

The son *Marcus* (b. 1963) was an engineer. He lived with his parents until he married in his early twenties. The couple bought a house with help from his parents, had two children and had taken over his father's business. His wife had worked part-time as a secretary. About being an adult he said:

> To be able to take care of yourself. . . in the everyday. To be able to make independent choices both in work and in your private life, and that you through these independent choices are being able to support yourself. [. . .] I think I really became an adult when I had children. To be an adult has to do with making your independent choices and that's not in itself related to being a parent but I think it became more important when there was this other person who turned your whole world upside down. . . you had to adjust to other people more.

Marcus's emphasis on free choices is associated with individualistic thinking but he also talked in relational terms. Independence was an important ideal but he acknowledged his privileged background and the support he had received and emphasised relationality when talking about fatherhood.

Michael, the grandson (b. 1988) was also in a technical profession. He was single and lived in a flat he had bought with support from his father and grandfather, who also had

helped him buy a second flat that he let. He was a highly paid employee in a large company. On adulthood he said:

> It's about being able to take care of yourself. . . yeah, not to need the support of your parents, it's about that feeling that you don't need anybody's help and that you can settle your own affairs. That's how I feel about becoming an adult, and not least, that you have other values than when you were younger. . . you're supposed to work and yeah. . . be less dependent on parents. [. . .] I became a real adult when I started work.

Michael expressed his ideals in terms of individualistic choices and independence. The support his family had provided was taken-for-granted and he emphasised the freedom from need of support as important for being an adult in his current life course phase.

Working class men: Relational everyday providers

Grandfather *Paul* **Pedersen** (b. 1942) was a retired skilled worker at the time of the interview. He grew up in a suburb with six siblings, a father skilled in a trade and a housewife mother. After compulsory education he had a various jobs before being permanently employed as a mechanic. Married at 20 he became a young father and had three children. The family owned a flat and his wife was a housewife. He did not elaborate on the question of what he thought about adulthood, he merely said:

> Becoming an adult has to do with taking responsibility. . . for your life and those around you. . . [I became an adult] at 15 when I left home. I feel I grew up then.

For Paul the ideal is clearly related to relationality. He recurrently expressed the importance of being a good provider and had transmitted this attitude to his son. In his early adulthood when he had no opportunity to get support from his family, he experienced this as a sense of independence that was common for young men in his situation during this period.

Father *Peter* (b. 1962) said the most important thing that was expected of him was to find a job and support himself. He had vocational training and had at the time of the interview a small business in the building trade. He moved out of his parents' house at 20 when he moved in with his first partner. The family owned a house, he had three children, and a wife in part-time employment. Since he became a father early he considered his transition to adulthood in relation to that, but,

> I think being an adult is to take responsibility for what you are doing, so to speak; to put food on the table when you have kids and a family. . . that's a great part of becoming an adult. I think that's the most important thing of all. [. . .] I haven't thought about it until you ask now. To be honest I think it is a process. . . you get older, things happen, things change, right?. . . it's life experience. . . that's what it's all about, yeah?

Relationality was centre stage in Peter's ideals. Like his father he was concerned with being a good provider for the family. He had not received much support during his early transition and financial independence in the sense of being able to support himself had been a necessity.

Patrick, the grandson (b. 1990), had upper secondary vocational education and was a skilled service worker. He lived with his partner who was in full-time employment, in a flat they had bought together. His father had helped with the mortgage and the refurbishment. He had lengthy reflections on being adult:

> It's first and foremost about being able to take care of oneself, I think. With what that entails of economic issues and such. And then you get more and more responsibilities right?. . . It starts with you getting a job and. . . and then perhaps a flat and a car and perhaps some kids and then grandchildren and such. . . so I feel being adult is about developing on all fronts really. . . [. . .] You have to pay your bills, clean your house, clean your car, pay insurance and all the boring things. But it's. . . I think it is great fun being an adult.

Although Patrick, like his father and grandfather, mentioned responsibility and thus relationality as important in adulthood, the ideal of individualistic independence was prominent in his thoughts. He mentioned managing the everyday chores of adult life as important but his father's help towards the mortgage went unacknowledged.

Middle class women: Relational independence and personal choices

Grandmother *Bea **Bergersen*** (b. 1937), a retired teacher, came from a middle class family in an urban area. All the men in the family had higher education in the professions. She had one sister and had had what she described as a 'traditional' transition to adulthood: lived with her parents until marriage at 22, apart from a year in another city. With her husband she bought a house with support from her parents and in-laws and had three children, who were now in professional occupations. Apart from a short period as a housewife while the children were small she had been in employment for most of her adult life and had been engaged in charity and causes. About adulthood:

> It has to do with realising that you have the responsibility for doing something. . . When did I become an adult? That was when I went to [City] to be on my own. I had an exciting job. [. . .] Then I grew up. Because it was all my own responsibility. Only my own choices.

She associated her personal transition to adulthood with being independent and able to make her own choices and not have her parents decide. At a general level Bea expressed the importance of relationality in the sense of taking responsibility for others in the family and beyond.

Beatrice (b. 1963) the daughter was employed in a healthcare profession; she had three children and a husband also in the professions. Her transition to adulthood followed what she considered standard steps: moved out of her parents' house when she moved in with her husband, and the parents helped towards the mortgage. She had these thoughts about what adulthood means:

> It is to be able to support yourself, to take responsibility for yourself and those who depend on you, your children. . . and to be able to establish a life where you manage to make things work and to generate joy and happiness around you, and to make use of resources and abilities in a

way that makes for a good life for everyone. I think it is important to take responsibility beyond the family, to be able to think globally and engage in causes.

For Beatrice ideals were those of relationality and adulthood had to do with responsibility for the family and engagement in the society beyond. On a personal level the family resources were taken-for-granted and ideals of independence came across in the notion of supporting oneself.

Beate (b. 1989) the granddaughter was a student. She was co-habiting with a partner in a health profession, and had no children. She owned a flat bought with a mortgage underwritten by her parents and had a study loan and a grant. Her transition to adulthood had, as she said, followed a 'traditional' route. She said about being an adult:

> Eh, responsibility, my first thought. It's bit unclear about age and adulthood [. . .] it's about responsibility. When you have to sort things yourself, pay bills and. . . [. . .] I don't feel like an adult. I have a lot of responsibilities I think but er. . . maybe it's about having responsibility towards others, I don't know really. Now I have only myself to think of. Mmm and when you have children, perhaps you grow up very quickly, yeah.

Relationality in the form of responsibility was an important ideal for Beate. She distinguished between different types of responsibility where the one involving caring commitments rated highest. Family resources were taken-for-granted and independence at a personal level was related to practical everyday tasks such as paying bills.

Working class women: Relationality and independence by necessity

Grandmother *Astrid* **Magnussen** (b. 1939) grew up in a rural area with a fisherman father who supported the family of seven children. She was the widow of her fisherman husband whom she had married early. They had the first of five children when she was 20. After compulsory school, at 14 she was a live-in-maid with a family. She had contributed to her family's household with the money she earned. She did not elaborate on the topic of adulthood but said she had been excited about moving out of the parental home since she would get to move away from the village and see more people:

> You were more yourself then [having moved from parents] I think, even if you were working for someone [. . .] you didn't have your parents to control you, there was somebody else there. . . but that was a bit different.

Astrid's emphasis on getting away from parental control was what she considered most important in her personal perceptions of adulthood; it was then she had achieved a sense of independence. Relationality and the importance of relationships and responsibility did however permeate her account.

Amanda (b. 1961), the daughter, was a service worker who had two children and was divorced from a skilled worker husband. She had vocational training in a service trade and had a full-time job after the children started school. She had not received any support from her parents after the age of 16 because they could not afford it. This had made her

independent and she liked the feeling of freedom. On questions about adulthood she replied:

> Take responsibility for oneself. Er, if you have children, take responsibility for them. . . support them when they need you to. Oh, yeah, and do your best to make them able to take care of themselves, so no one has anything to say against them. And you should not cause trouble for other people.

Amanda's ideal was relationality. Independence was based in personal considerations founded on necessity. Hers was not a life where parental support had been an option. Relationality came across in her taking responsibility to instil the value of independence in her children in order to make them able to get by in life and to be considerate to other people.

The granddaughter *Alice* (b. 1988) was a skilled care worker and lived with her boyfriend in the city. She had been very ill as a child and had spent much time in hospital. Her thoughts about adulthood:

> To take responsibility for your actions. Really. To be able to plan and reflect on what you are doing. . . and to support yourself. . . and to learn from your mistakes. That's what's growing up is about. [. . .] I have taken responsibility for myself since I was 14–15, of course my parents have supported me. . . but I wanted to do things my way.

Alice had recovered from her health problems and her experiences had made a sense of independence important for her. She did not have the opportunity to receive much financial support from her parents. Relationality was expressed on the personal level in her care work and responsibility for those around her.

Comparing notions of adulthood across generations, gender and social class

Notions of adulthood are processual and may change over the life course depending on personal and period-specific circumstances. Although there are similarities across cases, there are also differences and nuances. Both grandfathers had had to earn a living to support themselves from an early age; it thus became a decisive event in the life course. Ideals of financial independence were important because as men of this generation their destiny was to become family breadwinners and support a wife and children. The class differences between them came across in their personal considerations about the type of support they could offer their families. Paul articulated the provider theme explicitly as an everyday, bread-and-butter issue, whilst Martin talked about the financial assistance he had provided for his children and grandchildren. Their ideals of adulthood reflect gender ideals of the historical period they grew up in.

Both grandmothers mentioned getting away from their family as important for becoming an adult person. In the mid-1950s conditions for women were stricter than for men. The marriage market was considered more important for women than the labour market; they were to become full-time mothers and housewives (Bernard, 1982). For women

these expectations were confining, albeit in different ways depending on localisation both socially and geographically. Their reflections on getting away from the family for a while before marriage express ideals of independence through a wish for autonomy and freedom from coercion and control (Friedman, 2003) that both had appreciated. They both expressed relational ideals of adulthood in the present: Astrid for her family, and Bea with reference to charity and causes beyond the family.

In the mid-1980s when the parent generation were in their early twenties there was easy access to education and work, there were study loans and grants available and the welfare state was gradually expanding to include parental leave and other benefits. Gender equality was a specific aim in the Norwegian welfare state (Nilsen et al., 2012). Both Peter and Marcus had become fathers early in life. While Peter had had to support himself from a young age and thus had become independent by necessity, Marcus had the security of a privileged family background and ideals of independence were perceived in terms of freedom to choose. Although they both emphasised relationality, this aspect of life was an overarching concern in Peter's ideals of providing for a family, while such notions for Marcus were associated with fatherhood in general. These differences were not only related to social class but also to changes in gender equality in society and the increase in women's education and employment. The ideology of the male provider waned as women became more financially independent. Beatrice had a professional career and was engaged in charity work. Relationality was an articulated general ideal in her notions of adulthood. Independence was a more implicit aspect. The generous resources she had had available all her life were taken-for-granted. Relationality was also a general ideal for Amanda. Emphasis on independence was based in personal experiences over the life course and founded in necessity as much as in ideals. She had had to support herself from an early age and took pride in transmitting this value to her children.

None of the grandchildren had children themselves. They were in many ways in the middle of orientating themselves in adult life. The grandsons both thought of themselves as adults and related this to freedom of choice and independence as a general ideal. Michael and granddaughter Beate, whose ideals of adulthood were permeated by relationality, came from privileged backgrounds. Both they and Patrick had received financial help from their families for buying a home but it did not affect their sense of independence. All three mentioned aspects of everyday life as important for being an independent adult, Michael with reference to his work and Patrick and Beate in thoughts about chores and paying bills. Alice had not been in a situation where financial support was easily available. Relationality was implicit in her interview, she was a care worker, and the care she had received while ill for a long time in her childhood served to make responsibility for others a concern whilst also insisting on the importance of making her own independent decisions.

The life course perspective of Shanahan et al. (2008) maintains that perceived adulthood is dependent on how many transitions had been experienced and thus invites a processual lens. This bears out to some extent in the interviewees' reflections. Whereas the parents and grandparents, albeit with gender differences, had more references to relationality in the form of responsibilities, the youngest generation, of whom none had children, emphasised independence and choices as ideals of adulthood. Patrick explicitly referred to a process, while Beate did not feel like an adult yet.

Paradoxes of silent discourses and the invisibility of privilege in notions of adulthood

Relationality and independence used as sensitising concepts invite multilayered contexts to inform the analyses. They thus demonstrate how notions of adulthood expressed in interviews change across generations and over the life course as both general ideals and personal experiences change with historical circumstances in Norwegian society. As pointed out in an earlier study (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005) that which is taken-for-granted in interviews takes on the quality of 'silent discourses' and can only be uncovered in comparisons: across gender, social class or in cross-national studies. When looking across generations and gender from this approach with historical period in mind, some of the seemingly paradoxical aspects in accounts provide deeper insight and add nuances to deceptive similarities.

Relationality in the sense of having various types of responsibilities was associated with adulthood in all interviews, thus referring to general ideals in society. Nuances appeared in the personal considerations between men and women that can be associated with the difference between 'caring' and 'providing'. The traditional father role is related to providing whilst younger fathers are more involved in the everyday care of their children (Brannen & Nilsen, 2006), hence different aspects of relationality emerge across generations of men. Motherhood and caring were important for the two older generations of women and Beate in the youngest generation thought 'you grow up quickly' when you have children.

Personal independence and autonomy were important points of reference for the grandmothers' personal considerations of adulthood; this in spite of their unquestionable emphasis on relationality. Only when comparing to the younger generations of women does a wider picture emerge: younger women do not mention this because their lives have been transformed by the historical changes in Norwegian society. Gendered norms that felt confining for the grandmothers have all but disappeared in contemporary society. Autonomy and freedom in important aspects of life have become taken-for-granted for the younger generations of women and have hence become part of a silent discourse in their interviews.

Another apparent paradox is in the accounts of the younger generation of the middle class families. In spite of having received generous transfers of financial and other forms of support from parents and grandparents, they still insisted on ideals and personal considerations of adulthood as being self-sufficient and independent of parental resources. Two sides of the context may help to explain this. Bertaux and Thompson (1997) pointed out that when personal resources and structural forces support one another, the tendency is for the structural forces to take on an 'invisible' quality. The 'structural forces' in this instance in part refer to the privileged background that has become taken-for-granted and thus is part of the silent discourse in the interviews. Another part of the structural forces that underpins this are overall values and ideals in society; in Norway as in most Northern European countries ideas of independence are regarded as positive while dependence is considered negative and even shameful. Thus, the ideological backcloth of this historical period encourages ideals of independence and self-sufficiency (Sennett, 2003). The analyses indicate that from this viewpoint, intergenerational transfers become part of the

'personal resources' that are supported by a structural-ideological climate of independent self-sufficiency, thus intergenerational support can serve to maintain ideals of independence in notions of adulthood. Being in need of support in the sense of being poor, however, is a source of shame (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013). Ideas of independence 'by necessity' in notions of adulthood in the working class become a matter of pride in circumstances where intergenerational support is not an option and independence from welfare state benefits for many is related to personal dignity.

Ideas and ideals of adulthood are important in sociological debate and beyond. A main theme in sociology is the individual-structure dynamic (Mills, 1959/1980). The 'individual' in question is an adult person. This article has argued that discussions about notions of adulthood are important for many reasons but not least because characteristics associated with adulthood say something about collective values and standards held in regard in society. Independence and relationality as sensitising concepts have been helpful for demonstrating nuances in perceptions of this notion in personal considerations and general ideals when examining the cases. These analyses have indicated that variations across class, gender and generations are related to wider social change over historical time and have demonstrated the validity of examining the implicitness of the concept of adulthood that can render its underlying qualities explicit and open for examination. Much of what is taken-for-granted in sociological debate can thereby become part of the wider discussion in the discipline as well as in public debate.

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Notes

1. The first entry of the term 'adulthood' in the Oxford English Dictionary was in 1850 (OED Third Edition online). The same source says that the term 'adultness', which was first cited in use in 1754, referred to 'complete or adult development'.
2. They thus suggested the term citizenship was better able to capture the processes involved in discussions about adulthood in society. This important strand of thought cannot be integrated into the current discussion without shifting the focus of the article.
3. Related concepts are agency and autonomy. Both are at the outset gender neutral (Barnes, 2000) but they are associated more with men's lives than with women's, and with white, upper class, Western men in particular over other men and women (Evans, 2013). Madhok (2013) maintained that the notions of agency and autonomy have taken on ideals of the neoliberal autonomous, self-sufficient (male) citizen, thus feminist writers have launched the term 'relational autonomy' (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). In early feminist writings the concept of 'rationality of caring' (Waerness, 1984) drew on the same body of thought.
4. Smart (2007) used relationality to focus on personal life and her definition of the concept is with reference to kin and close relationships. May (2011) discussed it both in connection to

personal relationships and with reference to society in general while Roseneil and Ketoviki (2016) traced the roots of the concept in the writings of Mead, Elias, and psychoanalysis.

5. As Lewis and Smith (1980) observed, in pragmatist thought it was essentially Mead and Peirce for whom 'the social' had primacy over 'the individual' as a basis for social interaction and for society (p. 142). The processual thinking evident in the writings of Mills (1959/1980) and more recently in the works of Abbott (2016) is by both acknowledged as a legacy from Mead's work.

6. These interviews are not drawn upon here because cross-national comparisons would exceed the word limitation.

7. Class is 'a multifaceted concept with a variety of different meanings' (Crompton, 2006, p. 658), and in this instance it refers to education and occupation (Devine, 2004).

8. Social mobility is not a specific topic in this article but it is worth noting, as Thompson (2007) observed, that 'individual mobility is often generated by family dynamics over two or three generations' (p. 18).

9. An important structural change in post-war Norway was the increasing urbanisation. In 1946 half the population lived in urban areas compared to 81% in 2017 (SSB, 2017a). For the three generations the opportunity structures for young people were more diverse in urban areas than they were in the countryside, especially so for women and girls.

10. A state study loan scheme established in 1949 has gradually been expanded and is not means-tested toward parental income for the over-18s. It includes both loans and grants. Education at all levels is free.

11. For reasons of anonymity the interviewees' occupations are not specified beyond the level and field of employment.

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