Ewa Gurba*

The Attributes of Adulthood Recognised by Adolescents and Adults

The article has made an attempt to identify the ways in which adolescents and adults see the process of "transitioning into adulthood" and what attributes they think are necessary for an adult person to possess. The problem of "becoming an adult" has been portrayed in the broader context of parent-adolescent relation development. Research by Smetana (1988) has cast some light on a possible source of the conflict: differences in understanding social situations and the role of authority figures by adolescents and their parents. In contemporary society there are no unquestionable determinants of adulthood, a fact very conducive to intergenerational conflict. In the current study two groups of adolescents (15- and 18-year-olds) and a group of adults (38 to 56-year-olds) were examined using a questionnaire by J. J. Arnett (1997) The Attributes of Adulthood. The results show marked uniformity among subjects as to the choice of "adulthood" characteristics. They point to events such as reaching a certain age, completing one's education or starting a family as the least important in transitioning to adolescence. The most popular categories, regardless of age, included subjective and psychological characteristics, such as financial independence, the ability to accept and fulfil new social roles or accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's actions. Reference to such ambiguous attributes can lead to parents and adolescents interpreting them differently and thus contribute to misunderstanding and conflict in parent-child relations.

Keywords: adolescence, attributes of adulthood, transition to adulthood, parent-adolescent relations

The Concept of Adulthood

A life-span perspective on adulthood describes it as a series of stages or phases (such as early, middle and late adulthood) following the periods of childhood and adolescence. Each of these stages, according to Robert Havinghurst (1972), revolves to a greater or lesser extent around family life (e.g. the choice of a suitable spouse and adapting to cohabitation following marriage, having a baby, developing marital partnership based on equality, coming to terms with the death of the spouse), a professional career, making friends and maintaining them or assuming social responsibilities.

The most frequent factors referred to in the literature concerned with the boundaries of adolescence marking its transition into adulthood are events commonly perceived as such due to common beliefs and public expectations. Such events indicating the passage into adulthood are usually associated with certain developmental tasks, such as getting married, completing one's education, finding a job or attaining financial independence. It is hard to tell, though, if entering adulthood necessarily means assuming all these responsibilities as well as what the significance of reaching a certain legal status, e.g., getting an ID or assuming full legal responsibilities, is for one's self-concept as an adult.

In contrast to more traditional cultures, western countries find it increasingly difficult to pinpoint the precise moment of transition into adulthood. Postfigurative cultures, described by Margaret Mead (1986), employ culture-specific rituals to mark the transition. The responsibilities associated with adulthood are in these cultures specified in a similar fashion, leaving no ambiguity. For girls living on Samoa, for example, such an unquestionable indication of reaching the adult status would be body mass. Depending on her weight a girl would assume, or not, clearly formulated and commonly accepted rights and responsibilities.

Lack of such clarity in contemporary societies creates confusion and uncertainty as to the optimal outcome of adolescent development regarding social roles, tasks, rights as well as expectations and requirements. Legal criteria, like getting an ID or the right to vote, are frequently ignored and bring about no change in the way transitioning youth is treated by parents and educators. Moreover, adults are often accused of blatant inconsistency in their attitudes towards adolescents. This gives grounds for a common complaint that the way young people are treated – as children or adults

*   **Department of Developmental and Educational Psychology, Institute of Psychology, Jagiellonian University**

– depends on a specific situation and involves limiting their independence with the simultaneous formulation of expectations and responsibilities.

The condition of youth in postfigurative cultures is not a model we can conform to due to the major socio-economic changes going on around us. It is no longer valid, and has not been since the 1970s – due to these profound changes – to describe "entering adulthood" through events such as completing one's education, getting a job, forming an intimate relationship or assuming the role of a parent (Nilsen, Brannen, 2002). Research shows that a large percentage of young people do not conform to the social clock and fail to enter the abovementioned "gates to adulthood" at the time socially prescribed. The average age of people getting married or deciding on their first child has risen by a few years nowadays. A key factor in accounting for this trend is prolonged education of young people for whom technical and scientific progress is both a chance and a challenge. Their proper social adjustment is contingent on attaining a high level of expertise through a long process of thorough education. This prolonged education leads in turn to prolonged financial dependence. Having analysed these trends and changes, Arnett, Ramas and Jansen (2001) concluded that the stage of life encompassing late adolescence and early adulthood can no longer be regarded as a normative stage preparing adolescents to assume their roles as adults. This is rather a time of experimenting with and exploring of different life models, which means that the stage of psychosocial moratorium (E. Erikson, 1972) is extended. In view of these facts, the authors suggest introducing a new stage in life-span development, which they describe as "emerging adulthood".

Perception of Adulthood in Adolescents and Adults.

Despite the considerable difficulty implicit in the attempts to pinpoint the precise moment of transitioning from adolescence into adulthood and the problems of defining the relevant life events, a lot of research concerns with finding objective determinants or normative measures of entering adulthood. In studying the process of adjustment to adulthood it is very important to take into consideration the way adolescents see and understand adulthood and its attributes (Scheer, Unger, 1996). J. Jensen Arnett (1997) uses this perspective to emphasise the significance of research on the expectations that young people have concerning the status of an adult, how to achieve it and adjust to this newly acquired role.

The above factors are so important because the picture of adulthood that adolescents build up determines the behavior they choose to exhibit in order to cross the boundary that separates them from it and enter the "gates to adulthood"; it also influences the way the role of an adult is fulfilled in the future. A comparison of the differing conceptions of adulthood that are formed in adulthood and at various

stages of adolescence could also account for the role that these differences play in the conflicts that arise between parents and their pubescent children.

The intensity of these conflicts increases significantly in adolescence. Here are the causal factors most frequently referred to in the literature on the subject:

1.   Biological factors
There are two perspectives that can be adopted when analysing the influence biological factors exert on adult-adolescent conflict. These factors can affect parent-child relations either directly or indirectly. Direct biological action is described – based on extensive literature and research – as the direct activity of adolescent hormones and the influence that their fluctuating levels exercise on arousal and emotional stability, frequently leading to negative, unexpected and violent behaviour (Paikoff, Brooks-Gunn, 1990).

Indirect biological action is linked to maturational changes affecting adolescents throughout development. These changes, concerning sexual organs and other physical characteristics, are indicative – to both parents and adolescents – of their reproductive and social maturity and lead to a change in mutual expectations (Brooks-Gunn, Zahaykevich, 1989; Collins, 1990) thus modifying in-family dynamics.

2.   Social and cultural factors
According to Margaret Mead (1986) an important source of parent-child conflict can be traced back to the disparate realities of their upbringing. Their respective culture models, value systems and general norms are a generation apart. Rapid cultural changes are reflected in the process of bringing up children and so in the quality of parent-child relations. These changes can eventually lead to conflict – a clear example of the generation gap. In contemporary, rapidly evolving societies parents can no longer serve as the main repositories of knowledge about the world available to their children. Nowadays, especially in the West, an emphasis is placed on achieving independence and striving towards individualism with simultaneous prolonged education of young people and their financial dependence on the parents. This 'double bind' of conflicting expectations and actual living conditions imposing restraints on the extent of independence attainable for the young is not conducive to good parent-child relations.

3.   Psychological factors
Psychodynamic theories (A. Freud, 1958; E. Erikson, 1997) offer detailed descriptions of conflicts between parents and their children and their putative causal determinants. The disturbed parent-child relation is thought to be an outward sign of an instinctual propensity of young people to reject the authority of the parents when new, age-related standards

of behavior and limitations are imposed. These emerging conflicts are seen as a necessary step in identity formation and autonomy development.

Adolescent rebellion against authority is also present in other theoretical perspectives and often tied to the nature of cognitive development at this stage. Social relations, including those with individuals formerly regarded as authority figures, are undoubtedly affected when a new powerful tool to explore the world around is mastered. The emerging ability of abstract, formal thinking leads to critical assessment of authority figures and the related logical absolutism leaves no doubt as to the judgements passed by adolescents. Given these cognitive changes, it is only reasonable to expect parent-child relations to be modified accordingly, in the direction of more distance, more conflict and more assertiveness on the part of adolescents.

J. G. Smetana (1988) has identified other cognitive determinants affecting the quality of parent-child relations. She was interested in the way children and their parents understand the social world and found out that conflict can arise as a consequence of a clash in interpreting social events. Young people are inclined to treat many situations as a personal matter and not a matter of custom or convention – unlike their parents. Consequently the authority of the parents is undermined because the expectations formed by them are seen as nothing less than an invasion of personal space. *Tidying the room* can serve as a clear example of such a very delicate matter. According to parents "keeping things in order" is a reasonable chore and an expression of social convention but for adolescents it is a private matter that parents should stay away from. These differences in the way certain events are interpreted can have serious repercussions for parent-child relations especially when they deal with such fuzzy ideas and vague concepts, as for example **reaching adulthood** is in our culture.

As was mentioned before, in European and American cultures there are no well-defined and clear-cut boundaries separating the worlds of adults and adolescents.

For this reason, but also following the suggestions of Smetana (1988) indicating a clash in the cognitive interpretations of events in adults and adolescents, it seems important to identify the attributes of adulthood that adolescents and adults subscribe to.

Such an attempt has been made with the use of The Questionnaire of the Transition to Adulthood by J. Jensen Arnett (1997).

Research on the Perception of Adulthood in Adolescents and Adults.

To learn what attributes of "transitioning into adulthood" are recognised by adolescents and adults as well as if these different age groups differ on the criteria they apply to adults, three groups: 15 year-olds, 18-year-olds and adults (aged from 37- to 56) were examined.

Among the different traits included in the questionnaire given to them, they were expected to mark those they considered indispensable for the acquisition of adult status.

Subjects

40 second-graders from a junior high school in Krakow (mean age: 14.8)

30 second-graders from a high school in Krakow (mean age: 18)

31 persons aged 37 to 56 and with different education levels (mean age: 42.4)

The two different age groups of adolescents represent early and late adolescence, respectively.

Since one of the questions posed in the paper concerns the role that the picture of adulthood plays in causing parent-child conflict and tension, the subjects selected to the "adult" group represent an age group that could have adolescent children.

Method and Procedure

A questionnaire was used to study the cognitive representation of characteristics attributed to adults. An adapted version of the American questionnaire "Transition to Adulthood" by J. Jensen Arnett (1997) was employed. The questionnaire has 35 items and each item is a characteristic that can be attributed to a transitioning adolescent.

The adolescent groups filled in their questionnaires collectively in class, which took about 20 minutes. The adult subjects filled in their questionnaires individually at home. The study was conducted by psychology students from the Jagiellonian University.

The subjects had to organise their pre-selected attributes of adulthood in order of importance. At the end of the study they had to answer the question: do you consider yourself an adult? If they said yes, they had to specify when they became adults and what influenced this transition. If they said no, they had to speculate on when they thought they would become adults.

The attributes included in the questionnaire were subsequently clustered by competent judges into the following categories:

1. Biological, 2. Emotional, 3. Social roles, 4. Responsibilities, 5. Behavioural, 6. Legal/Chronological, 7. Financial.

The items included in the specific categories were:

Biological: a. capable of bearing/fathering children (5), b. grown to full height (8), c. possessing physical prowess and fitness (17), d. have sex (20), e. achieved sexual maturity (28), f. have at least one child (31).

Emotional: a. establish a relationship with parents as equal adults (2), b. learn always to have good control of

Table 1
Frequency of selecting each category of attributes associated with adulthood in three age groups (15-year-olds, 18-year-olds and adults).

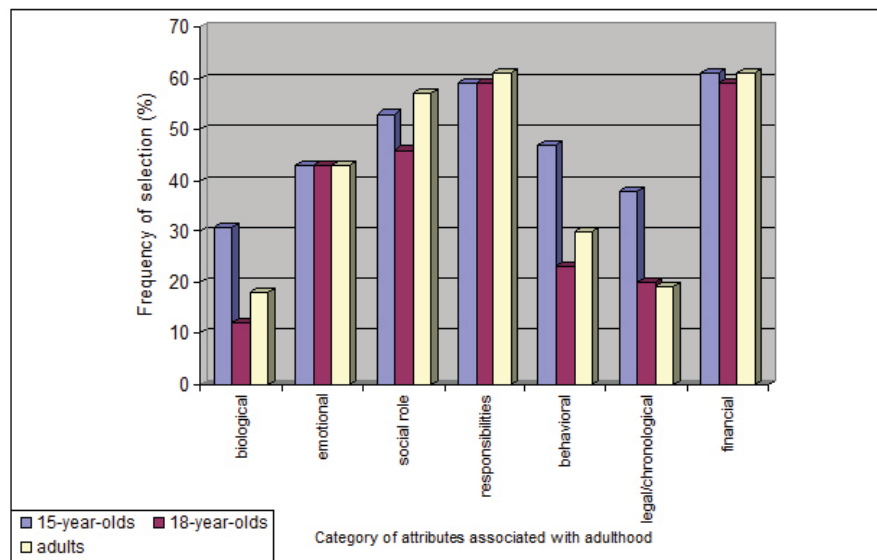| Attributes selected by					
15-year-olds		**18-year-olds**		**Adults**	
Category	frequency %	Category	frequency %	Category	frequency %
Financial	61	Financial	59	Financial	61
Responsibilities	59	Responsibilities	59	Responsibilities	61
Social roles	53	Social roles	46	Social roles	57
Behavioural	47	Emotional	43	Emotional	43
Emotional	43	Behavioural	23	Behavioural	30
Legal/Chronol.	38	Legal/Chronol.	20	Legal/Chronol.	19
Biological	31	Biological	12	Biological	18

Figure 1. Categories of attributes associated with adulthood selected by adolescents and adults.

your emotions (3), c. not deeply tied to parents emotionally (14), d. committed to a long-term love relationship (24).

Social roles: a. able to get a job (9), b. capable of caring for children (11), c. capable of running a household (30), d. involved in his/her career and social activity (32).

Responsibilities: a. accept responsibility for consequences of your actions (10), b. no longer living in parents' household (12), c. decide on personal beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences (27), d. make life-long commitments to others (29), e. use contraception if sexually active and not trying to conceive a child (33).

Behavioral: a. avoid becoming drunk (4), b. avoid taking drugs (15), c. have no more than one sexual partner (18), d. drive an automobile safely and close to speed limit (26), e. avoid committing petty crimes like shoplifting and vandalism (34), f. avoid using profanity/vulgar language (35).

Legal/Chronological: a. obtained driver's licence (6), b. reached age (7), c. finished with education (13), d. obtained ID (19), e. married (22).

Financial: a. achieved financial independence (1), b. capable of supporting a family financially (16), c. purchased a flat (25).

Analysis of results

Within specific categories the mean frequency of choosing specific items listed in the questionnaire was calculated. Because different categories had different numbers of items a percentage was used as a convenient measure.

In order to identify the significance that adolescents and adults attach to the concept of adulthood and assess similarities and differences in its perception, separate analyses were made for each age group and related statistics were calculated.

It was assumed that a relationship existed between the frequency of choosing certain "adult" characteristics and the validity of these characteristics for the picture of adulthood that our subjects had.

Table 2
Differences between specific age groups related to the frequency of selection of categories of adulthood attributes.

Category	Groups	
Biological	15-year-olds – 18-year-olds t=3.887 p=.000	15-year-olds – adults t=2.528 p=.01
Behavioural	15-year-olds – 18-year-olds t=3.281 p=.001	15-year-olds – adults t=2.243 p=.001
Legal/Chrono-logical	15-year-olds – 18-year-olds t=2.926 p=.005	15-year-olds – adults t=3.20 p=.001

What categories of attributes of adulthood were most frequently chosen by 15-year-olds, 18-year-olds and adults?

An analysis of the frequency that given attributes of adulthood were selected shows that for all three age groups there were three main categories of attributes that were chosen most frequently and comparably frequently. These three categories of attributes indicating reached adulthood were: a. financial status, b. responsibilities, and c. social roles. In choosing the criteria indicating that adulthood has been attained most of the subject ranked financial independence and the ability to support a family financially as equally important as the ability to accept responsibility for oneself and one's family. However, the category of being able to accept and fulfil given social roles was ranked as vital for becoming an adult only by the majority of 15-year-olds and adults but less than half 18-year-olds.

Do the categories of selected attributes differentiate studied age groups?

To answer this question an analysis of significance of differences in the frequency of choosing each group of attributes by each age group of subjects was conducted.

Statistically significant differences in the frequency of choosing different attributes by 15-year-olds, 18-year-olds and adults were found for the following categories: a. behavioral, b. legal/chronological, and c. biological. It has to be specified, though, that the frequency of choosing items from all three categories of attributes was significantly higher for 15-year-olds than for adults and that they were more likely to choose items in the behavioral and legal/chronological categories compared to 18-year-olds.

What attributes of adulthood were most frequently selected by 15-year-olds, 18-year-olds and adults?

An analysis of the frequency of selecting individual attributes of adulthood shows that the most frequent choice, regardless of the subjects' age, was *accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's actions*. All adults and almost 90% of adolescents (in both the early and late adolescence groups) ranked it as the most important determinant of adulthood. *Supporting a family financially* and *providing security for the family* went next, along with *reaching financial independence* as the most popular choices in "adulthood" attributes. Both adolescents and adults were also likely (more than 50% of choices within each group) to point to the *ability to have good control of one's emotions* as a significant indicator of adulthood, although this choice was most pronounced in the groups of early adolescents and adults, and not so much in the late adolescence group.

The attributes *deciding on personal beliefs and values independently of parents and other influences* and *capability of bearing/fathering children* had a higher frequency of selection only in the two groups of adolescents. For adults, reaching adulthood was more about *the capability of caring for children* than simple procreation. It was, admittedly, equally often selected by 15-year-olds. These two groups were in similar agreement about *avoiding becoming drunk*, with the majority of 15-year-olds additionally pointing out *avoiding taking drugs* as ideally typical of an adult. It is worth mentioning here that among the attributes of adulthood most popular with 18-year-olds there were none from the category of risk behaviors mentioned above. Sexual maturity was considered an adult characteristic only by a majority of 15-year-olds, unlike the other two groups. Two other characteristics of adulthood: *making life-long commitments to others* and *capability of running a household* were selected by no other group than adults.

Were there any differences in the frequency of attribute selection in the studied age groups?

In an attempt to answer the fundamental question of this study: is it possible that the factors responsible for the observed parent-child conflict are the differences in their cognitive representations of adulthood, t-student statistics were calculated to see whether and concerning what attributes of adulthood individual age groups differ as to the frequency of selecting particular items.

A comparison of the early and late adolescence groups with the group of adults was especially interesting and informative.

The attributes of adulthood that successfully differentiated at least two groups of subjects as to the frequency of selection can be found in the table below.

As to the frequency of selecting particular attributes of adulthood the greatest differences were found between the groups of 15-year-olds and 18-year-olds (8 significant differences in attribute selection) and then between 15-year-olds and adults (7 significant differences in attribute selection). The smallest differences were found between the groups of 18-year-olds and adults (3 significant differences in attribute selection).

A comparison of the choices made by the early and late adolescence groups shows that apart from one "adulthood" attribute described in the questionnaire as *establishing a*

Table 3
The attributes of adulthood selected by the majority of subjects in each age group.

Attributes of adulthood selected by					
15-year-olds		**18-year-olds**		**Adults**	
Attribute	**Freq.%**	**Attribute**	**Freq.%**	**Attribute**	**Freq.%**
Responsibility for one's actions.	88	Responsibility for one's actions.	90	Responsibility for one's actions.	100
Providing security for one's family.	80	Supporting a family financially. Independent decision-making.	80	Providing security for one's family.	90
Supporting a family financially.	78	Financial independence.	73	Financial independence.	83
Good control of one's emotions.	75	Providing security for one's family.	70	Good control of one's emotions. Independent decision-making.	73
Independent decision-making.	73	Relationship with parents based on equality.	67	Getting a job.	65
Getting a job. Capability of bearing/fathering children.Avoiding taking drugs.	70	Relationship with parents based on equality. Capability of bearing/fathering children.	53	Avoiding getting drunk. Capability of looking after a child.	59
Capable of looking after a child.	65			Making life-long commitments to others.	53
Avoiding getting drunk.	64			Capability of running a household.	51
Sexual maturity.	63				
Getting an ID.	55				

Table 4
The attributes of adulthood differentiating groups of 15-year-olds, 18-year-olds and adults as to the frequency of their selection.

Attribute	15-year-olds – 18-year-olds %	t p	15-year-olds – adults %	t p	18-year-olds – adults %	t p
Relationship with parents based on equality	23 67	2.667 .001				
Reaching a certain age			35 11	2.580 .012		
Getting a job	70 40	2.593 .012			40 65	-2.064 .043
Responsibility for one's actions			87 100	-2.269 .027		
Avoiding taking drugs	70 30	3.560 .001	70 27	4.118 .000		
Getting married					20 49	-2.509 .015
Getting an ID	55 27	2.436 .017	55 16	3.811 .000		
Working full-time	30 10	2.050 .044				
Sexual maturity	63 23	3.307 .002	63 30	3.308 .004		
Having at least one child	18 0	2.050 .015			018	-2.606 .011
Avoiding committing petty crimes	38 17	3.733 .003	38 19	3.401 .001		

relationship with parents as equal adults which was more popular among the 18-year-olds, the other 7 attributes differentiating the two groups were more frequently selected by the younger adolescents. The indicators of adulthood in question were: a. *getting a job*, b. *avoiding taking drugs*, c. *getting an ID*, d. *working full-time*, e. *sexual maturity*, f. *having at least one child* and g. *avoiding committing petty crimes*.

Similar differences in the frequency of selecting particular attributes of adulthood were found between the

groups of 15-year-olds and adults, and in 4 cases they were identical. The 15-year-olds were more likely than the adults to identify adulthood with qualities such as: a. *avoiding taking drugs*, b. *getting an ID*, c. *sexual maturity* and d. *avoiding committing petty crimes*. Besides, for the younger adolescents *reaching a certain age* was a popular criterion of adulthood whereas the adults were more likely to refer to *accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's actions* as an important indicator of being an adult.

Discussion of Results

It is important to remember that the main purpose of this study was to answer the following questions:
1. What is the picture of adulthood that adolescents and adults possess? What is their understanding of the concept?
2. Is it possible that one of the sources of misunderstanding and parent-child conflict is the discrepancy in perceptions of adulthood between adults and adolescents?

To answer the first question it can be helpful to analyze the frequency of selecting particular questionnaire items describing "adulthood" characteristics in the three age groups under investigation. It is enough to perform an initial analysis to see that the youngest subjects, the 15-year-olds, select a larger number of attributes in almost each and every category compared to the two other groups. What it means is that in early adolescence it seems necessary to fulfil a significant number of conditions to become an adult, an assumption not shared by the two older groups. This phenomenon can be understood in the context of moral rigor and criticism typical of adolescent idealism. Young people at this age (14 and 15-year-olds) place high demands on adults.

Apart from that, all subjects, regardless of their age, refer to a picture of adulthood with similar, dominant categories of attributes. According to all subjects, adulthood can be characterised in terms of financial standing, the ability to accept responsibility in different areas of activity and the ability to accept the roles that culture or society assigns. The last characteristic, however, is more popular among the youngest and oldest groups than in the 18-year-olds.

The emphasis that adolescents place on achieving certain financial standing in order to become adults may be seen as an expression of their striving for autonomy and independence. Their journey to reach these goals is often hindered by what they perceive as financial dependence on their parents. That is why achieving a certain financial status can be treated as a kind of a "ticket" to adulthood identified with the ability to make independent decisions. A deeper analysis of the selection of particular financial attributes makes it impossible to ignore the fact that, according to the

subjects, including the younger groups, financial backing is primarily meant as a means of supporting a family, and is only then considered in terms of financial independence. This means that an important feature of adulthood is thought to be the ability to assume responsibility for oneself and others. All adults and almost 90% of adolescents ranked this characteristic as an indispensable attribute of adulthood. This attribute of adulthood is also dominant among the items selected by American adolescents and adults examined with the original questionnaire by J. Jensen Arnett (1997, 2000). Similar results were obtained by Scheer (1996) on a group of American 16-year-olds, who saw transitioning into adulthood as a process of *accepting responsibility for their actions*. Another popular "adulthood" characteristic among American subjects was *deciding on personal beliefs and values independently of parents and other influences*. According to researchers such an outcome is a feature of the individualism present in the American culture which values independence and self-sufficiency most of all and places strong emphasis on this value in the process of socialisation.

According to a majority of Polish subjects, especially 15-year-olds and adults, a quality typical of an adult is the ability to maintain good control of one's emotions. Selecting this trait by the 15-year-olds is probably connected to the problems they themselves experience controlling their own, frequently conflicting and fluctuating, emotions. Among the 18-year-olds, having achieved hormonal and emotional stability, this quality is of lesser importance. It is only in middle adulthood that this trait is again sufficiently appreciated, which comes in the wake of diverse life experiences pointing to the considerable usefulness of one's ability to control emotions and its significance as an attribute of adulthood. The groups of 15-year-olds and adults also made similar choices concerning the attributes describing risk behaviors (avoiding becoming drunk or taking drugs). Failing to include this category among the six most popular characteristics of adulthood selected by 18-year-olds corroborates the finding by J. J. Arnett (2001) who thinks that propensity for risk behaviors is most pronounced in young people past the age of 18, the fact that he uses to suggest introducing an additional stage in human development, preceding early adulthood, which he describes as "emerging adulthood". It is understandable then that older adolescents who display such behaviours but also meet a number of other criteria of adulthood will not expect adults to *avoid becoming drunk* or *taking drugs*.

In the picture of adulthood that is built from the perspective of 18-year-olds the traits that can be seen most clearly, especially in comparison to the two remaining groups, are *deciding on personal beliefs and values independently of parents and other influences* and *establishing a relationship with parents as equal adults*. The latter characteristic was completely ignored by the other participants.

Older adolescents display with increasing frequency the intellectual aptitude to form their own, independent judgements and build relationships with their parents based on mutual respect and equality, relationships which allow them to experience their own adulthood.

In a summary of our considerations concerning the most popular attributes of adulthood selected by adolescents and adults it is important to emphasise the substantial overlap between groups as to the dominant characteristics that apply to the transitioning individual. The majority of participants from each age group had a picture of adulthood including qualities such as *accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's actions*, *the ability to support the family financially* and *provide it with security* and *the ability to maintain good control of one's emotions*.

Similar overlap was also found in biological and legal/chronological attributes, which, according to all subjects, had only negligible relevance for becoming an adult.

Is it possible then that the similarity observed in the adolescent and adult groups of subjects as to the significant attributes of adulthood suggests that this is not exactly the place where we should be looking for the sources of parent-adolescent conflict?

An answer to this question requires an analysis of the differences between adolescents and adults in their cognitive representations of adulthood.

The largest number of statistically significant differences in the frequency of choosing particular attributes of adulthood was found between the groups of 15-year-olds and 18-year-olds and between the groups of 15-year-olds and adults, whereas the smallest number of such differences was found between the groups of 18-year-olds and adults. Older adolescents are not as likely as adults to include *getting a job*, *getting married* or *having at least one child* as important indicators of adulthood. Younger adolescents, however, are more likely than older adolescents and adults to associate adulthood with qualities such as *avoiding taking drugs*, *avoiding committing petty crimes*, *sexual maturity*, *getting an ID* or *reaching a certain age* and less likely than adults to refer to traits such as *accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's actions*. It is easy to notice that younger adolescents particularly value principles of conduct espoused in educational influence as well as these indications of adulthood still beyond their reach. That is why the pictures of adulthood are so different in the groups of 15-year-olds and adults, much more so than between the groups of 18-year-olds and adults. It proves that the period of modifying the picture of adulthood, especially concerning minor characteristics, takes place between early and late adolescence. In the current study, older adolescents had a picture of adulthood very similar to that presented by adults.

Assuming that the quality of interpersonal relations is positively correlated with the similarity of the mindsets of the agents involved in the exchange of opinions, it is only fair to expect that the relationship of parents with their 15-year-old children will be more disturbed than if their children are 18-year-olds. American research proves exactly that: parent-child conflict is more pronounced in early stages of adolescence (Steinberg, 1987), with its intensity reaching its peak in middle adolescence (Laursen, 1998). Different world views are of course not the only source of intensifying parent-adolescent conflict. It would be a serious oversight to discount the significance of biological factors which, in the early stages of adolescence, can upset the hormonal equilibrium of the organism and lead to increased reactivity, fluctuating moods and emotional instability (Buchanan, Eccles, Becker, 1992).

When, at the end of this paper, we look again at the picture of adulthood we were able to identify in our study, based – in both adolescents and adults – on such characteristics as *accepting responsibility for oneself as well as one's family*, *the ability to support a family and provide it with security*, *financial independence* or *the ability to have good control of one's emotions*, we cannot fail to notice that our subjects perceive adulthood as a process rather than a series of critical events marking the transition into adulthood. Almost completely ignoring the legal/chronological attributes can be seen as a sign of the times, when the period of education is prolonged and the decision to marry or have children is often delayed. That is why it is no longer possible to use unquestionable, unambiguous and objective criteria of adulthood. On the other hand the negligible importance attached to biological attributes signifies an awareness, in the old and young alike, of insufficiency of biological maturity for becoming an adult. In the picture of adulthood shared by participants from all three age groups the prevailing categories include individual qualities concerning, e.g. *the ability to provide for one's family* or *financial independence* as well as psychological qualities, such as *accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's actions*. As a consequence, the picture of adulthood in the eyes of both adolescents and adults becomes amorphous and indistinct and the qualities constituting it become open to liberal interpretation and arbitrary evaluation. *Being responsible* is often quite a different thing for an adolescent and for an adult, which means different behaviors. The interpretations of the dominant attributes of adulthood are thus largely subjective so despite the significant overlap in the cognitive representations of adulthood in adolescents and adults this subjectivity or idiosyncrasy of interpretation can constitute an important source of parent-child conflict.

The analyses carried out and the interpretations offered based on the results of the questionnaire "Transitioning to Adulthood" indicate a necessity to supplement the test with a justification of the choices made as to the selected attributes given by the subjects. This would allow to look into the meanings that adolescents and adults attach to the

individual attributes of adulthood, especially those most conducive to multiple interpretations. To further identify the importance of the meanings that adolescents and adults attach to their conceptions of adulthood in the dynamics of family conflict it would also seem indispensable to determine empirically the intensity of the parent-adolescent conflict.

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