

Different adulthoods

Normative development and transgressive trajectories

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Contents

Deconstructing developmental ‘tasks’	4
Locating development	5
The limits of adulthood	5
Conclusion	6
References	6
Biographies	7

In dominant representations of the life course, the move through time is assumed to be a relatively unproblematic developmental trajectory from childhood to adulthood, with some acknowledgement of potential turbulence in the transition. Feminist work, such as that of Erica Burman (Burman, 2018 and also see special issue of *Feminism & Psychology* 2015 for responses to her work), has highlighted the constructed nature of child development and the conceptual and political issues at stake in the proposition of a singular developmental trajectory. In this Special Section we extend this theorizing into a consideration of adulthood. Our interest is in how normative adulthood becomes naturalized through dominant developmental discourse.

Normative adulthood can be understood as the longest but least explored life phase, an unarticulated background, taken-for-granted construct, or default category that is implicit in much psychological and sociological research (Blatterer, 2007). The constructed normative developmental trajectory through adulthood can be seen as a bundle of rights, benefits, obligations, and powers as well as the attainment of certain structural markers. Blatterer points to the ‘classic markers’ of adulthood, which include becoming a parent and engaging in paid work (‘markers’ that have been subject to critique by feminist scholars over many years). It is evident that these are culturally located but are reproduced in developmental theorizing as universal. Developmental descriptions of child and adult development are not neutral descriptions of the move through time but produce particular people/development as normal and natural (Burman, 1994, 2018). Feminist scholars have over many years highlighted the taken-for-granted assumptions of adulthood in which normativity (including autonomy and independence) is naturalized, gendered, and embodied. Furthermore, critical developmental psychology also highlights the cultural production of knowledge about development, where supposed universal truths of development reflect cultural priorities of the Global North (Burman, 2018).

Sociologists such as King (2013) have argued that adulthood features in research as an ever-present point of reference in studies of childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and ageing. However, similar to other normative categories, adulthood can be understood as something that is made through exclusion and through being constantly performed (King, 2013). Normative adulthood is produced and reified through contrast between adults and others not seen to be adult, including children, adults with disabilities, gender diverse adults, women who are voluntarily childless and, increasingly, young adults, with the focus on the notion of a prolonged ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett, 2000; Blatterer, 2007).

Blatterer (2007) has argued for a deconstruction of the concept of adulthood, to question, decentre, and critically interrogate adulthood as a normative life stage (see also King, 2013). Following Blatterer and others, this Special Section contains critical feminist work that interrogates adulthood as a developmental period, and that examines how certain developmental trajectories are normalized and naturalized and others pathologized or claims to adult identity are denied. It is clear that the move through time is uneven and problematic for many who transgress normative adult-

hood, including those such as women with learning disabilities whose claim to adult status is questioned and often denied (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist & Lövgren, 2013; Rogers, 2010; Tilley, Walmsley, Earle, & Atkinson, 2012). In our work, we have used the term ‘transgression’ to make visible the moral and political issues at stake in being seen to be or seeing oneself as ‘different’ (O’Dell, Brownlow, & Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, 2017).

The collection critiques normative adulthood through three linked and interrelated themes that are informed by the conceptual tools in Burman’s *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology* (2018 [1994]) but extended to an interrogation of adulthood. These are: deconstructing developmental ‘tasks’; locating development; and the limits of adulthood. These themes enable the following questions:

- *Deconstructing developmental ‘tasks’*: How is normative adulthood assumed and naturalized? What are the ‘tasks’ of adulthood (such as becoming a parent or managing an ageing body)? How can these be opened up to critical scrutiny?
- *Locating development*: How is adulthood configured within particular geopolitical spaces? How is normative adulthood located within intersections of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and geopolitical location?
- *The limits of adulthood*: How do taken-for-granted assumptions about adulthood position some as unable to claim adult status? Who is seen to be ‘adult’ and what about ‘others’ who transgress normative adulthood?

Deconstructing developmental ‘tasks’

All of the papers in the Special Section examine gendered developmental tasks of adulthood, particularly becoming a couple and having children. For example, Sjöberg and Bertilsdotter Rosqvist (2018, this issue), and Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2018, this issue) both examine the role of becoming a parent in configuring adult identity. Sjöberg and Bertilsdotter Rosqvist’s research critiques the assumption of ‘on time’ development and the notion that young mothers may be unable to take on the identity of an adult because their decision to have a child ‘too early’ demonstrates their immaturity rather than their agency. It is clear that understandings of ‘too early’ and ‘on time’ are embedded within cultural context. Riggs and Bartholomaeus further develop explorations of parenting, the intersections with sexuality, and the presumed ‘naturalness’ that heterosexual couples would have children. In their article, they examine the accounting of middle-class heterosexual couples to explain their decision to have a child. They argue that the desire to have a child is assumed and normalized in heterosexual middle-class people’s talk about the choice to become a parent.

Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2018, this issue) discuss how the concept of the ‘childless other’ is drawn on negatively by their participants as a contrast to the socially approved decision to have a child. Lesch and Van der Watt (2018, this issue) also address being

childless in their work on childless single women in South Africa. They argue that for the white South African women in their study, the ideology of couplehood was a very strong negative pressure that served to position women who have never married or lived with a partner as problematic and in some way lacking. The papers in the collection illustrate that developmental milestones and tasks are not neutral but productive; that is, they produce particular kinds of people and gendered bodies as normative, positioning others as different, transgressive, and often pathologized.

Locating development

Contributors to the Special Section also examine how adulthood is configured and known. The notion of gendered, intelligible or ‘liveable lives’ is developed by Slater, Ágústs dóttir and Haraldsdóttir (2018, this issue) in their autoethnography, which consists of their conversations together to account for the lives of young disabled women who are often seen as unable to claim adult normative lives. Tseris and Jordan (2018, this issue) specifically address the construction of normative adulthood, focusing on a critique of Erikson’s developmental theory. They argue that the theory embeds normativity into developmental description in which difference is either pathologized or excluded. Their reworking of Erikson’s theory offers a critique of concepts of autonomy, generativity, and intimacy in ways that acknowledge and include diversity. Similarly, Lesch and Van der Watt (2018, this issue) call for an expansion of ideas about social connection to include relationships outside of couplehood as meaningful and valuable.

The limits of adulthood

Throughout the Special Section authors describe how traditional markers of adulthood are unavailable to many. Taken-for-granted assumptions about adulthood reify particular expressions of adulthood as the norm and render others as pathological, problematic or absent. For example, Slater et al. (2018, this issue) critique the conceptualization of adulthood from the perspective of disability studies, drawing on Butler (1999) and McRuer (2006a, 2006b) to examine how disabled young women become intelligible within disablist notions of adulthood and femininity, and the risks involved in claiming, or being intelligible, within normative, ableist, assumptions of adulthood. They give the example of family gatherings as key moments in which normative expectations of adulthood play out and serve to exclude disabled women from adulthood. Similarly Sjöberg and Bertilsdotter Rosqvist’s research (2018, this issue) demonstrates how women who become mothers at what is seen as the ‘wrong’ time are constantly called on to reaffirm their identity as a good mother, and the women in Lesch and Van der Watt’s research (2018, this issue) are seen to need to account for their lives in contrast to the expected norm of coupledness or parenthood.

Conclusion

The aim of this Special Section was to consider ways of deconstructing adulthood as a normative life stage, to denaturalize the supposed (gendered) normative markers of adulthood and examine ways in which adulthood, as a conferring of rights and expectations, is denied to many who struggle to claim an identity of adult. Along with contributors to this Special Section, we argue that there is a need to interrogate and rework developmental theory to better accommodate difference, as well as research and activism to legitimate marginal identities whose claim to adulthood is called into question. We recognize that the production of knowledge about development is still largely based within the Global North and that there is more work needed to expand developmental theorizing to adequately account for ‘different’ adulthoods.

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