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# **“When You Act Like an Adult, I’ll Treat You Like One . . .”: Investigating Representations of Adulthood in Popular Culture**

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**Abstract:** *Our paper critiques the traditional “What is an adult?” debate. Using television as text, we examine untraditional representations of adulthood in order to keep the term “adult” in constant play. We suggest the need to move away from fixed notions of maturity in lieu of a fluid understanding that is mediated by social and historical specificities.*

## **Something is Rotten in the State of Adult Development**

The most ubiquitous discussion in any adult education classroom usually takes place during a first-session exercise that involves delving into the question, “What is an adult?” The question is so familiar to practitioners and students that we simply take it for granted that there is (or should be) an answer. In such discussions, we make lists of typical adult behaviors, such as marriage, child rearing, employment, moving out, financial independence, paying bills, emotional commitments, and taking responsibility. Each of these characteristics denotes a societal hoop to be jumped through on the way to reaching the pinnacle of Western development: *full* maturity. However, failure to complete these tasks is often looked down upon in our society, resulting in derogatory labels, such as slacker, social failure, or generational labels, such as “The Lost Generation” or Generation X (Elliot, 1994; Coupland, 1995).

But for all our attempts to define adulthood in the classroom, the student of adult education may walk away from the “What is an adult?” discussion scratching her head. This bewilderment stems from the incongruity between what our society *deems* to be adult-like behavior and what John Storey (1998) has called the “cultures of everyday life”. In other words, there is a gap between the official “adult” discourse and what is actually occurring.<sup>1</sup> This confusion is further compounded when traditional developmental theories are employed in the classroom to frame the “What is an adult?” discussion. Though each theory represents a different way of viewing adulthood, most revolve around ascending some sort of developmental ladder. But such theories merely freeze our conceptions of adulthood in an ahistorical space devoid of context. In light of

postmodern assaults on a core or centered identity (Gergen, 1991), it is time to renegotiate the “What is an adult?” debate by considering fluidity instead of fixity. In this way, contemporary issues in critical and cultural theory breathe new life into a tired old discussion.

The purpose of our paper is thus three-fold. First, it is our intention to examine traditional adult developmental theory in juxtaposition to another, less traditional “text” – that of television.<sup>2</sup> We see television as a rich and integral component to the developmental discussion. Not only is television a vehicle for mass communication, becoming the single most pervasive reflector and/or initiator of normative behavior in our society (Fiske, 1987), but it is also a visual historical record of grown-up “performances” that effectively display the shifting construction of adulthood over a period of time. Our second goal is to scuttle the static boundaries of traditional developmental theories by introducing examples from television that do not fit into the traditional models of adult developmental theory. And third, we hope to contribute to adult education practice by suggesting that adulthood is an essentialist notion, as it is not historically or culturally located. Transforming the “What is an adult?” discussion thus necessitates problematizing the word “adult.”

## **Staking Out Un/traditional Adult Developmental Theory**

“Development” is the central component of the dominant discourse on adulthood, denoting a shift from one stage to another. It presumes growth, progress, improvement, and change. Various theorists of adult development have tried to measure these features in numerous ways. Though some have focused on transitional, individual, or dialectical pat-

terns (Schlossberg, 1987; Neugarten, 1976; Riegel, 1973), many theories studied in the adult education classroom revolve around age and stage models that firmly segregate adulthood from childhood. Below, we briefly introduce some of the key players in developmental theory by asking the question, "What behaviours equal adulthood?"<sup>3</sup>

Erik Erikson (1978) locates eight levels of development based on chronological age. At each level a conflict specific to that age period must be met and resolved. Triumph over this conflict is a turning point, leading the individual to a stronger sense of autonomy and self-awareness. The adult stages of Erikson's model entail intimacy (love, sex, emotional commitment), generativity (establishing a home, carving out a career, caring for children), and integrity (responsibility, wisdom, and a moral conscience). Conversely, if the conflicts are not resolved, feelings of isolation (loneliness), stagnation (uselessness), and despair (incompleteness) will set in. As such, for Erikson adulthood implies meeting certain criteria defined by behavioural and cognitive acts.

Robert Havighurst (1972) clearly separated adults from children by carving out various duties ("developmental tasks") for each age group. According to Havighurst, shifting from adolescence to early adulthood, which he locates between ages 18 and 30, involves marriage, parenthood, home making, starting a career, and social responsibility. Similarly, Daniel Levinson's (1978) model suggests that development follows a linear blueprint. According to Levinson, early adulthood (age 20 to 39) is characterized by transition (moving out of the family home), stability (striking out on one's own) and settling down (developing permanent life structure goals). Roger Gould (1978) also viewed development as a product of "natural" life phases. He proposed a developmental theory based on the ability to separate oneself from the false assumptions of childhood. Once we make the split from youthful longings and desires to more mature pursuits, he argues, we can strive for a fuller, more independent consciousness, which is the mark of adulthood.

The above classifications are central to adult education as they help to create theories on how adults learn. As Brookfield (1995) explains, theorists of adult learning believe that there are specific forms of "reasoning, thinking and judging in adult life that are qualitatively different from those char-

acteristics of adolescence and children" (p.230). For some theorists, learning is predicated on an ability to think critically and reason in ways that are different from children. In other words, adult learning theory is based on adult developmental theory, which, in turn, is based on explicating the difference between adults and everyone else. The literature of adult education is predicated on drawing a clearly demarcated line between adulthood/adolescence and adulthood/childhood. The "What is an adult?" discussion thus becomes increasingly more significant to adult education as a whole. But by relegating adults to the ghetto of developmental theory, are we in fact becoming too insular in our thinking about adults and adult learning? What possibilities are left unexplored by such a narrow definition?

Though each represents a distinct model of development, these theorists agree that, barring any "unusual" circumstances, adulthood will eventually bring about some kind of epiphany that signifies a substantial change from that which came before ... but does it really? Moving from traditional developmental theory to the untraditional text of television, a different story emerges. By scrutinizing adult characters on current American situation comedies,<sup>4</sup> it becomes apparent that adulthood is anything but a predetermined destination at which one ultimately arrives. The age and stage border crossings on such sitcoms deserve attention in relation to developmental theory as it signifies the possibility that, within the current cultural zeitgeist, the line between adult and children's behaviors is muddied, if not completely obscured.

In the mid 1950s Jim Anderson would come home after a long day, put on his comfortable sweater, and set to work righting the wrongs of his children. *Father Knows Best* very clearly exhibited two segregated worlds: adult responsibility versus youthful leisure and mischief. Similarly, from 1957 to 1963, the childish antics of Beaver Cleaver stood in stark contrast to his ultra-mature parents, Ward and June. By the show's end, Ward usually offered his earnest, yet fallible child some golden advice. "As you go through life," he told Beaver once, "try to improve yourself, not prove yourself." Such words of wisdom came readily to these adults, who were revered as the gatekeepers of special knowledge that the children could not access. The line between adult and child was solid and rarely, if ever, transgressed. Such representations of adult-

hood uphold traditional developmental theory. Children ascended into adolescence and then adulthood through rites of passage, such as dating, graduation, employment, marriage, and parenthood. There were no free rides and no way to circumnavigate the hierarchy. Ages and stages were respected as the “natural” order of things.

But by the 1990s, sitcoms had eroded the notion that adulthood was earned through battle scars. In fact, just the opposite occurred: sitcoms began depicting adults who shunned rites of passage, or who were *more* childish than children. The *Happy Days* (1974-1984) of asking the Cunninghams for useful advice on dating and friendship were finished. The *Family Ties* (1982-1989) that kept Alex coming back to his earnest parents for guidance despite mutually exclusive philosophies were severed. And on *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), Cliff Huxtable’s despotic reign fuelled by an innate sense of morality was toppled. By the early 1990s, adults of that ilk all but disappeared from the cultural landscape to be replaced by a new breed of grown-ups. In fact, these (almost) grown-ups blurred the boundaries between developmental categories so drastically that the distinction between adult and child became virtually unrecognizable.

We are now in uncharted waters. There are no developmental theories to justify current adult behavior on television. Why? The problem is that such theories merely provide one snapshot of development, with no possibility for metamorphosis. Like all over-arching narratives that prescribe how one *should* act, these theories are ahistorical without contextual connection to everyday life. But what would other possible permutations of adulthood look like? Surely developmental theorists have not covered the gamut on adult-like behavior. For example, many adult representations on television are now focused on a different approach to adulthood. The rites of passage that once framed maturity -- marriage, parenthood, moving out, and financial independence -- have disappeared. We will briefly present three examples in order to show the multiplicities of adulthood, as well as demonstrating its social construction. Unlike developmental theorists, who present a seamless picture of adulthood, our examination of untraditional text, or what Carmen Luke (1996) calls the pedagogies of popular culture, shows adulthood to be inconsistent, non-linear, and erratic. In short, adulthood is not a natural or essential condition.

On *Home Improvement* (1991-1999), Tim Taylor continuously slips between adult and juvenile personas. He occasionally performs the role of adult, guiding his children through dilemmas, but more typically he is child-like himself, endlessly embroiled in Dennis-the-Menace mischief. Tim’s job, host of “Tool Time”, a show about fix-it projects (a child’s dream job) provides the perfect playroom for his bumbling mishaps. He routinely explodes, breaks, glues, and tinkers with things, wreaking havoc on anyone and anything in his vicinity. At home, Tim’s wife, Jill, functions as the disciplinarian, not just for the children, but for her husband as well. Here, an interesting gender issue surfaces. Tim embodies a “boys will be boys” persona. He is carefree, infantile, curious, and spontaneous. Conversely, Jill’s job is surveillance. She watches Tim, catches him in the act of misbehaving, and punishes him repeatedly. She often extracts a promise from Tim not to “touch anything” and enforces unpopular decisions. All the while, Tim is able to retain a Puckish charm. *Home Improvement* highlights the conventional notion that men and women do not function as adult-counterparts. Grown men *can* be boys, but grown women, in order to be taken seriously, must be wet blankets, spoilsports, and killjoys.

In both the home and work settings, Tim is a threat. His penchant for taking appliances apart (yet his inability to fix anything) is perhaps the surest mark of his infantilization. Though Tim has many of the traditional developmental trappings of maturity -- home, children, wife, career, and money -- it is a forced confinement brought on by a nagging wife who sidetracks him from the position he desires most, that of the knavish little boy, the Peter Pan who glorifies an alternative style of (adolescent male) (almost) adulthood.

*The Drew Carey Show* (1995-present) depicts the everyday life of four working-class friends in Cleveland, Ohio. Like a high school gang, the friends oscillate between sentimental camaraderie and a Little Rascals-brand of clowning around. Indeed, one of the characters, Mimi, is permanently dressed as a clown through carnivalesque clothing and makeup, enacting a childhood fantasy of the Halloween that never ends. The relationship between Drew and Mimi (co-workers in a large department store) is largely antagonistic. Each resolves to “one-up” the other in a game of mean spirited practical jokes. With lines such as “am

not!” and “are too!” zinging back and forth, their war-of-the-pranks could just as easily take place on the playground as in the office.

Eating nothing but junk food and beer, Drew and his pals represent the ultimate extension of frat boy life. Kate, Oswald and Lewis function as the show’s three stooges. Kate is frequently unemployed and trying to “find herself.” Oswald and Lewis live above a bar surrounded by a bricolage of nightlife paraphernalia. Oswald, an express delivery “boy,” is frequently shown in sneakers, slouch socks, short pants, a cap, and scrapes on his knees. Lewis is a professional guinea pig for a pharmaceutical company and is routinely injected with various kinds of drugs (another adolescent fantasy). Unable to sustain a romantic relationship, make any substantive changes in their lives, or move forward in their careers, the characters are trapped in a cycle of non-advancement, repetition, and high school reminiscences. Yet childish though they may be, the gang longs to have the very things they lack – family, relationships, stability, and career success. Unfortunately, they are incapable of making such things happen. For Drew, Oswald, Kate, and Lewis, adult development is not as easy as it looks. The proper stages do not correspond to the promised ages.

If adulthood is demarcated by certain behavioral and cognitive characteristics, then the antithesis to adulthood is stagnation, perhaps best embodied by the lives of Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer from *Seinfeld* (1990-1999). Each episode represents another struggle against the constraints and obligations of maturity. In fact, the characters equate traditional adulthood with death itself. For example, George, assistant to the traveling secretary at Yankee Stadium, has a carpenter build a bed under his desk so he can have frequent naps throughout the day. Jerry, a comedian who has never had a “real job”, drugs one girlfriend with turkey and red wine in order to play with her G.I. Joe action figures. Kramer, who is gloriously unemployed, is represented by a convulsive bodily comportment. His body language, like his personality, lacks self-control. And Elaine, an editor for a fashion catalogue, is repeatedly obsessed with childish acts of revenge, such as hoarding all the toilet paper in a public washroom in order to get back at a woman who had previously explained that she did not have a “square to spare” for Elaine.

The “adults” on *Seinfeld* take satisfaction in their immature behavior, delighting in daily minutiae like

a child playing with a new toy. When George becomes engaged to Susan, he spends every day trying to devise a way out of the impending wedding. Her sudden death is caused by poisonous glue on the cheap invitations George picked out. When they learn of her death, the gang does not know if they should send condolences or congratulations. In the end, everyone resolves, as they do in every situation, to grab a cup of coffee. This trivialization of major life events is characteristic of the show’s treatment of adulthood. Maturity is something to be eschewed; those who engage in mature acts are to be pitied and avoided. The only consistency the group maintains is the coffee shop and Jerry’s apartment. This “nothingness” structures every day in the seemingly non-adult world of resisting accountability and obligation.

These examples obviously contravene the more traditional representations of adulthood, thus illustrating its instability.<sup>5</sup> Tim represents a childish adult balancing the two worlds of family duty and self-indulgent play. Drew represents a childish adult who longs to be grown up but simply cannot take the leap. And the cast of *Seinfeld* represents childish adults who are dragged kicking and screaming (if you can catch them) into adult-like endeavors. Each example demonstrates how adult representations on television have been transformed from the 1950s to present day. As such, any adult developmental theory that advocates one linear path to maturity is misleading; we cannot assume similarities or homogeneity. For some, adulthood might be a personal quest to live a life *sans* the societal pressures that naturalize age/stage categories. Thus, adulthood may entail shunning those characteristics that have previously been considered “adult”.

### Conclusion

In light of this discussion, we wonder why adult educational theory has clung to an essentialized notion of adulthood? Our textual analysis of grown ups on television suggests that adulthood and childhood are not binary oppositions. Adulthood is not always the ultimate condition for which to strive. Childhood is not always something that must be overcome. Indeed, both of these worlds are represented in our examples as polysemic play, granting us the possibility of escaping static classifications of adulthood. In this fluid redefinition there is freedom to move between merging categories – not simply up and out.

We suggest that the “What is an adult?” discussion is incomplete without questioning why/how the term “adult” exists. The epistemological foundations of adulthood must be brought into the fore and challenged as social construction. This challenge can be achieved by expanding the conversation to include the history of adulthood (similar to education programs that offer the history of childhood) and representations of adults in popular culture. Expansion also necessitates going beyond the experiential, developmental, and cognitive factors mediating traditional adult development, thereby enriching adult education practice with a wider expanse of text and theory with which to work. In short, perhaps what is needed is a self-directed notion of adulthood, not one that is socially prescribed. Practitioners of adult education theory should not shy away from the possibility that adulthood, as a hard and fast concept, is now moot.

### Endnotes

1. For example, we are both twenty-nine years old, yet we have not experienced many of the typical rites of passage associated with adulthood. So are we adults? Or are we stuck in some other stage of development?
2. The term “text”, as we are using it, is employed by poststructural theorists to indicate anything that can be read semiotically, as a system of signs (Derrida, 1974).
3. It should be noted that the following theorists, though writing in a “universal” voice, are detailing theories that are from a middle-class, white, heterocentric, and masculine point of view – another good reason to expand the debate to include alternative and untraditional texts.
4. Ironically, children are now being represented on television as adult-like figures. For example, on *Dawson’s Creek*, the angst-ridden teens perpetually wax philosophic and parent babyish grown-ups; on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, one feisty teenager is charged with saving an entire town from ruin; and on *Party of Five*, orphaned children discipline and punish themselves without any need of adult supervision.
5. There are numerous other examples that we have not discussed here. *Just Shoot Me*, *The Norm Show*, *Ally*

*McBeal*, *Third Rock From the Sun*, *Friends*, and *Two Guys and a Girl* are just a smattering of alternative adult representations.

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