Emerging Adulthood in North America: Identity Status and Perception of Adulthood Among College Students from Canada and the United States

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Emerging Adulthood in North America: Identity Status and Perceptions of Adulthood Among College Students in Canada and the United States

Barbara M. Gfellner¹ and Karin Bartoszuk²

Abstract
This study examined perceptions of adulthood and associations with identity status development among college students in Canada and the United States. Participants were 678 college students (278 Canadian and 400 from the United States) between 18 and 25 years of age who completed the Alternate Model for Transition to Adulthood and the Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status. Students in Canada and the United States differed in their views on the characteristics of adulthood (for three of the five markers of adulthood). As expected, identity status scores in the personal domain were associated with students’ perceptions of adulthood. Differences were seen in the moderation of country on the linkages of foreclosure and achievement with role transitions and norm compliance, respectively. Identity theory and macro-environmental factors are considered in the interpretation of results.

Keywords
identity, cultural context, college, dimensions of adulthood, well-being

In North America and many industrialized countries, the late teens through the 20s is a prolonged transition from adolescence to adulthood known as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Many young people around the world postpone life events, such as marriage, starting a family, financial independence, launching a professional career, leaving the parental home, and protracted identity exploration (Arias & Hernández, 2007; Badger, Nelson, & McNamara Barry, 2006; Buhl & Lanz, 2007; Côté & Byner, 2008; Fussell, Gauthier, & Evans, 2007; Robette, 2010; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luycks, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013). However, research has been less focused on linkages between perceptions of adulthood and identity development. This is surprising, as identity exploration is a central characteristic of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). In this study, we investigated Canadian and U.S. college students’ perceptions of adulthood and associations with identity development.

Although Canada and the United States appear relatively similar in their experience of emerging adulthood, Fussell, Gauthier, and Evans (2007) noted three striking differences: higher economic inequality, higher child poverty rates in the United States, and Canadians aged 25–34 years are more likely to have attained a university degree. In addition, macro-environmental factors indicated in national profiles (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) may reflect differences in perceptions of adulthood among college students in these countries. In particular, the United States has been characterized as more achievement focused, dogmatic, and personally oriented in comparison with Canada.

Identity formation, the psychosocial task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968) has been extended into the mid-to-late 20s for some individuals who prolong education and defer marriage (Arnett, 2000). During this time, young people begin to explore who they are and what they would like to do with their lives in terms of occupation, relationships, and values. Marcia (1966) operationalized Erikson’s description of identity formation using two dimensions, that is, exploration (questioning and searching) and commitment (adopting a value ideology) to define four identity statuses: (1) diffused (neither exploration nor commitment), (2) foreclosed (commitment without exploration), (3) moratorium (exploration without commitment), and (4) achieved (exploration preceding commitment). Many youth today explore and make commitments during their 20s due to macro-level changes (economic, political, and social) that have

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occurred in recent decades and continue to affect societies. Commitments entail personal investment in a value ideology. These are conferred from significant outside agents among foreclosures whereas values are constructed through exploratory processes among the achieved.

In the present study, we investigated differences between Canadian and U.S. college students’ perceptions of criteria of adulthood (e.g., role transition, norm compliance, biological/age transitions, family capacity, and relational maturity) and the theoretical association with ideological identity statuses as predictors for these markers.

1. Canadian students were expected to show greater endorsement of collectively oriented criteria of adulthood (e.g., norm compliance and family capacity), given the country’s moderate position on individualism, pragmatism, and achievement in comparison with the U.S. profile.

2. Higher scores on the criteria were expected for the committed identity statuses (foreclosure and achievement), and conversely, lower scores were expected for the statuses lacking commitment (diffusion and moratorium).

3. Country was examined as a moderator in the linkages between identity status and the criteria of adulthood.

Method

Participants

The 678 (M = 20.1, standard deviation [SD] = 1.83 years) university students aged 18–25 years included 278 Canadian (M = 19.3, SD = 1.7 years; 75% female; 92% White; 80% were 18–20 years of age) and 400 students from the United States (M = 20.7, SD = 1.7 years; 63% female; 89% White; 49% between 18 and 20 years of age). U.S. students were older with fewer freshmen (13% vs. 68%).

Measures

The Alternate Model for Transition to Adulthood (Badger et al., 2006) measured the markers for adulthood. Forty items (rated on a 4-point scale) index five scales: role transitions (e.g., financially independent from parents), norm compliance (e.g., avoid becoming drunk), biological/age transitions (e.g., allowed to drink alcohol), family capacity (e.g., if a woman, become capable of caring for children), and relational maturity (e.g., accept responsibility for the consequences of my actions) to indicate respondents’ endorsement of the criteria of adulthood.

The Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (Adams, 1998) assessed identity status development. Thirty-two personal identity items (rated on a 6-point scale) provided measures of the four identity statuses: diffused (e.g., I haven’t chosen the occupation I really want to get into), foreclosed (e.g., I might have thought about a lot of different jobs, but there’s never really been any question since my parents said what they wanted), moratorium (e.g., I’m still trying to decide how capable I am as a person and what work will be right for me), and achieved (e.g., A person’s faith is unique to each individual) with 8 items reflecting each status in the personal domain, respectively.

Procedure and Data Analysis

At both universities, students volunteered to complete separate surveys and were awarded a bonus credit in their relevant course. Correlations between identity status scores and the criteria of adulthood were computed by country. A series of regression analyses were run with country, followed by identity status and subsequently the interactions for each criteria of adulthood. Slopes were plotted for significant interactions using dummy variables for the dichotomous (moderator) variable and the continuous (independent) variable centered at the mean and ± 1 SD.

Results

Correlations between the markers and identity statuses were low to negligible, ranging from −.01 to −.19 (M = 0.08) for Canadian and −.01 to .30 (M = 0.13) for U.S. students (Table 1). Using regression analyses, country was entered in the first step (Table 2). As expected, Canadian students scored higher on role transition, biological/age transition, and relational maturity. Also diffusion associated positively with role transition and norm compliance and inversely with biological/age transition. Foreclosure predicted role transition, norm compliance, biological/age transition, and family capacity. Moratorium related negatively with norm compliance and family capacity and positively with biological/age transition. Achievement predicted norm compliance positively and biological/age transition inversely.

Four interactions were significant in the full models: country by foreclosure for role transition, F(3, 657) = 8.51, p < .0001, t(657) = 2.48, p < .01, and for norm compliance, F(3, 655) = 12.99, p < .0001, t(655) = 2.16, p < .03; and country by achievement for role transition, F(3, 657) = 69.93, p < .0001, t(657) = −2.35, p < .02, and for norm compliance, F(3, 655) = 4.10, p < .007, t(655) = −2.39, p < .02. Slope analysis revealed that country moderated the effect of foreclosure on role transition ratings (Figure 1). Simple slopes predicting role transition from foreclosure was significant for U.S. students, b = 1.70, standard error [SE] = 0.28, t(389) = 6.01, p < .00, R² = .09, but not for Canadian students, b = 0.52, SE = 0.36, t(267) = 1.45, p < .15, R² = .008. This indicated greater endorsement of role transition as a function of foreclosure among U.S. students. The standardized comparison of the difference between the slopes, z = 1.80, p < .07, indicated that the proportional increase in role transition relative to foreclosure did not differ significantly between the groups. Similarly, Figure 2 illustrates the moderation of country in the foreclosure-norm compliance association. Simple slope analysis indicated this was significant for U.S. students, b = 1.26, SE = 0.22, t(388) = 5.65, p < .0001, R² = .076, but not for Canadian students, b = 0.44, SE = 0.30, t(266) = 1.47, p < .14, R² = .008. The slope comparison was not significant, z = .91, p < .36, suggesting similar relative increase in
Table 1. Correlations Between the Markers of Adulthood and Identity Statuses. Means, Standard Deviations, Ranges, and α Coefficients for these Variables by Country.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Role Transitions</th>
<th>Norm Compliance</th>
<th>Biological/Age Transitions</th>
<th>Family Capacity</th>
<th>Relational Maturity</th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Diffusion .16</td>
<td>.14***</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>-.09*</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>22.5 (6.0)</td>
<td>8-41</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foreclosure .27</td>
<td>.22***</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.10**</td>
<td>.10**</td>
<td>19.4 (7.2)</td>
<td>8-42</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moratorium .13***</td>
<td>-.08*</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>24.3 (6.2)</td>
<td>8-40</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Achievement .10c</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>33.1 (5.6)</td>
<td>10-48</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD) 26.0 (6.1)</td>
<td>24.5 (4.8)</td>
<td>14.6 (5.2)</td>
<td>27.1 (4.5)</td>
<td>18.5 (2.9)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Range 12-40</td>
<td>8-32</td>
<td>7-28</td>
<td>8-32</td>
<td>9-24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>α .84</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.57</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Diffusion -.04</td>
<td>-.19***</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>26.4 (6.3)</td>
<td>8-42</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foreclosure .09</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>23.1 (6.0)</td>
<td>8-36</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moratorium -.002</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>26.2 (5.8)</td>
<td>11-39</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Achievement .08</td>
<td>.20***</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>31.7 (5.6)</td>
<td>12-48</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD) 32.5 (5.2)</td>
<td>25.1 (4.3)</td>
<td>18.5 (4.2)</td>
<td>26.4 (4.5)</td>
<td>19.8 (2.9)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Range 16-40</td>
<td>8-32</td>
<td>7-28</td>
<td>12-32</td>
<td>7-24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>α .82</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p < .0001. ***p < .001. **p < .01. *p < .05.

Table 2. β Coefficients, Error Terms, and Size Effects From the Multiple Regression Analyses for the Predictors of the Markers of Adulthood.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Role Transitions</th>
<th>Norm Compliance</th>
<th>Biological/Age Transitions</th>
<th>Family Capacity</th>
<th>Relational Maturity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>β</td>
<td>SE (B)</td>
<td>R²</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>SE (B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>-.65</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>-.60</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diffused</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>-.80</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country × DIF</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreclosed</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country × FOR</td>
<td>1.18***</td>
<td>.473</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.82**</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moratorium</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>-.41**</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country × MOR</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>-.32</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieved</td>
<td>-.28</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country × ACH</td>
<td>-.111</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>-.91***</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Country codes: 0 = Canada; 1 = United States; identity status: DIF = diffused; FOR = foreclosed; MOR = moratorium; ACH = achieved.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001. 1p < .0001.

Discussion

Canadian students' elevated scores for their perceptions of role transition, biological/age transition, and relational maturity are consistent with the contextual perspective in Hofstede et al.'s (2010) description of the national characteristics of Canada and the United States. Although both countries received the highest scores for individualism (the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members vs. collectivism), this is greater in the United States. Similarly, masculinity (the extent to which people are driven by competitiveness, achievement, and success) was moderate in Canada and high in the United States. Finally, pragmatism (a normative respect for traditions) was high in Canada and low in the United States. These phenomena might be related to more practical, strong views on such controversial issues as abortion, euthanasia, and the death penalty. Similarly, Bean (2014) reported consistency in religious ideology among evangelists in both countries. However,
in the United States, there is a synergism between religious practice and political partisanship that is not found in Canada as well as dogmatic and polarized attitudes. As predicted, higher ratings for most adulthood criteria among Canadian students are consistent with this general Hofstede profile.

As expected, the identity development results collimate the processes involved in these statuses. The less integrated identities predicted legally and socially defined behavioral norms. Foreclosed identities are conferred from significant individuals such as parents or authority figures. The diffused rely on external cues from others to guide behavior. A lack of awareness of family issues among diffused students was supported. Such issues are an integral component of foreclosure. Since moratorium involves questioning, norm compliance and family capacity were exacerbated and biological/age transition was enhanced. However, for U.S. students, foreclosure was associated with increased variance in association with role transition, norm compliance, and the achievement–role transition link; conversely, achievement accounted for greater variability in norm compliance among Canadian students. Such differences in the moderation of country on linkages between identity commitment and students’ perceptions of relevant criteria for adulthood underscore the importance of macro-environmental influences and identity development for these markers. In terms of limitations, the study was cross sectional including samples that differed in mean age and year of schooling although both resided in nonmetropolitan areas. Apart from reliance on self-report measures, a direct index of national characteristics would have aided our understanding of differences between the countries.

Our findings locate emerging adulthood within the framework of identity development. Further research is required to elucidate nuances of how these processes unfold.
Author Contributions
The authors contributed equally to this work.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
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References


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