ABSTRACT

Title of Document: **PERCEPTIONS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD FOR SOCIOECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED YOUNG BLACK MEN**

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The transition to adulthood has drastically changed in the last half century, with more young people delaying and remaking traditional markers of adulthood. Young Black men from socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts, due to experiences of early trauma and adultification and sociostructural barriers to these markers, such as limited job opportunities and racial discrimination, are uniquely situated and may have very different pathways to adulthood than their middle class peers.

The present study utilized semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences of young Black men (n=21) in the transition to adulthood. Drawing on a life course perspective and utilizing a modified grounded theory methodology, the study examines how early experiences of trauma and adultification, as well as individual's perceptions of adulthood, shaped the transition to adulthood. Implications for policy and future directions are explored.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD FOR
SOCIOECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED YOUNG BLACK MEN

By

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science
2015

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In many impoverished neighborhoods in Baltimore City, the poverty and unemployment rates are double its city average. Domestic violence and homicide rates soar, and roughly a quarter of juveniles have been arrested (Baltimore Sun, 2015). Long-standing issues in the community are now being pushed to the forefront. Anger and unrest, along with discrimination and displacement are now publicly visible in Baltimore. These issues are inextricably linked to complex shifts in inequality and pathways to adulthood for young people. Young Black men have been marginalized by society and shaped by their contexts. In a time of economic downturn and while facing bias from the outside, these young men are often disconnected from traditional pathways through adulthood, and can get lost in transition.

Research on the transition to adulthood focuses on significant life events as markers of adulthood such as graduation, leaving the household, and marriage (Shanahan, 2000). Because of several changes in the past century, including delaying marriage and parenthood, a new stage between adolescence and young adulthood termed *emerging adulthood* has been proposed, and is characterized as being a time of uncertainty and endless possibility (Arnett, 2004). Several studies have concluded (Roy & Jones, 2014; Hendry & Kloep, 2011), however, that this ostensibly universal life stage is one that only is relevant to those who have family support, education, resources, and opportunity.

Black males from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities are a historically marginalized group that lack many of the resources and opportunities that their white peers benefit from (CDC, 2010). A decline in industrial jobs in the 1960s and

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1970s created a job market that placed a high premium on education, effectively widening the gap between middle class and socioeconomically disadvantaged populations (Furstenberg, 2008). This marginalization of lower income populations may contribute to adverse outcomes throughout the life cycle, resulting in fewer economic and emotional resources as well as limited access to school, work opportunities, and institutional support (Furstenberg, 2008; Kloep & Hendry, 2011; Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005). In addition to lack of resources and access to opportunities, stereotyping and bias from the outside world can be another barrier to a successful transition to adulthood. Because of these outcomes, pathways to adulthood for socioeconomically disadvantaged young Black men may be more circuitous and may be dramatically different than their peers who are connected to more resources.

There is a great need to discuss and theorize about diverse populations in the transition to adulthood, and to understand the complexity of the lives of the individuals who do not follow a seemingly normative pathway to adulthood. While some research has been conducted on populations who experience illness or incarceration during childhood (Osgood, et al., 2005), there is little attention given to young Black men in socioeconomically disadvantaged urban settings and how this context may impact the transition to adulthood. Scholars suggest that structural and contextual factors such as families, schools, and neighborhoods during the transition to adulthood may shape the course of development and determine success later in life (Sandefur, Eggerling-Boeck, & Park, 2005; Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2014).

One's family of origin often lays the groundwork for expectations about the world and can influence socioeconomic standing, education levels, and employment (Alexander

et al., 2014; Macmillan, 2001). Many children from disadvantaged communities face a dearth of resources and many added responsibilities and stressors. Such stressors, like early exposure to trauma or violence, can have residual effects throughout the life course (Latzman & Swisher, 2005; Macmillan, 2011). In addition to economic disadvantage and exposure to violence, socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals often serve in adult roles during childhood to assist parents financially, emotionally, and in caregiving or household management (Burton, 2007).

The present study will examine the transition to adulthood for twenty-one socioeconomically disadvantaged young Black men in Baltimore city. While some research has examined normative pathways to adulthood and transitions for vulnerable youth in public systems such as the juvenile justice system and medical systems, fewer studies examine transitions to adulthood for vulnerable youth who do not participate in such systems, or who participate through several of these systems throughout the life course (Osgood et al., 2005).

The present study aims to explicate perceptions of the transition to adulthood for socioeconomically disadvantaged young Black men. I will focus on experiences of adultification during childhood, especially precocious knowledge and parentification, and how these impact the participants' transition to adulthood. How do such experiences as serving as man of the house and hustling to provide for one's family during formative years shape one's transition to adulthood? I then will explore how adulthood is perceived by the participants, examining what it is to be an adult, and whether or not they consider themselves to be adults. I will examine unique contexts in which young men are situated such as poor neighborhoods the East Side of Baltimore. In contrast to the majority of

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studies of transition to adulthood, which use demographic approaches to population data, this study will utilize qualitative methodology to better understand the lived experiences of socioeconomically disadvantaged young Black men during the transition to adulthood.

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this literature review is to first discuss the proposed normative pathway through adulthood, termed *emerging adulthood*. I will examine some of the pathways to adulthood, including through access to education and jobs, and how these pathways have changed in the recent past. I will also review some of the alternative pathways to adulthood that exist, including those of adolescents who have been through the criminal justice system or have serious illnesses. Some implications for socioeconomically disadvantaged youth, including trauma and violence, will be discussed. Lastly I will focus on the role of family in the transition to adulthood, including family structures and resources and adultification in families.

Emerging Adulthood

In a 2004 book, Arnett called for a new stage of life to be recognized to encompass the shifting demographics of those in the mid teen to mid-twenties age group. Arnett cited the invention of birth control, increase in years devoted to education, and delays in marriage and parenthood as important components of this shift (Arnett, 2004). He viewed these variations as largely due to changes in attitudes; more young people now want to accomplish certain achievements in education or their careers before getting married or becoming parents. Arnett characterized emerging adulthood as being defined by five qualities: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in between, and possibility.

Arnett (2004) used four case examples to illustrate his claim that emerging adulthood is a time of great possibility for all of those who fall into this age range. He claimed that for most emerging adults, "Everything seems possible… and their hopes are high" (Arnett, 2004, p. 46). However, for many individuals, such as those in communities plagued by violence, poverty, and a lack of opportunity, this is not the case. The leading cause of death for African American men between the ages of 15 and 34 is homicide (CDC, 2010). In addition, 36% of the U.S. prison population in 2008 was comprised of black males ages 18 and older (Wilson, 2011). Because of homicide and incarceration, 83 Black men are present in society compared to every 100 Black women (New York Times, 2015). As such, young Black men may not have high hopes for the future or believe that many possibilities are open to them.

Relationships with parents during the emerging adulthood phase often evolve from high conflict into relationships between "friends and near-equals" in which each begins to see the other as a person, rather than simply a parent or child (Arnett, 2004, p. 47). The normative path to adulthood involves one of three paths, moving out of the household around age 18, moving back in after leaving "the nest," or simply staying home. For some individuals, the path is more circuitous, involving several changes in residency throughout this time period. Emerging adulthood is a stage in which children begin to see their parents as individuals, sometimes embracing their humanity and becoming friends, other times becoming disillusioned by certain aspects of their past or personality. During this period, the tendency for parents is to relinquish some control and to begin to take the opinions of their children seriously, establishing more intimacy and respect in the relationship.

Arnett touched on complex emotions such as resentment and disillusionment that emerging adults may feel toward their parents, but did not take into account varying situations between parent and child. Multiple family structures and parent-child relationships exist, including single parent households and family structures in which children are adultified from a young age (Osgood et al., 2005; Burton, 2007). These diverse parent-child relationships may emerge in the context of different family configurations (such as large extended kin networks), or living in poverty in resource-stretched neighborhoods. These types of relationships set the tone for very different expressions of emerging adulthood. Some parents do not possess the material and emotional resources that are essential supports through the transition to adulthood (Tanner & Arnett, 2011). Other factors, such as being pulled into a parent role or being privy to inappropriate or precocious knowledge like family drug use or violence at a young age can also make parent-child relationships more complex (Burton, 2007).

In addition to relationships with parents, relationships with significant others begin to take on more meaning during this stage of life. Dating has changed throughout the last century, and trends suggest that emerging adults are delaying marriage and parenthood, often pushing back the timeline into the late 20s and early 30s (Arnett, 2004). Though the timing of these significant life events may be delayed, Arnett assumes that most emerging adults will get married and then have children, perhaps cohabiting first. One of the primary reasons for this shift is the tendency for emerging adults with means to pursue higher education and attain degrees and credentials to set themselves up for later success.

While 9 out of 10 young Americans expect to attend college (Arnett, 2004), it is important to consider what the transition to adulthood looks like for those who will not attend college, as well as for those who have not completed high school. There still exists a large education gap for Black males, even among those who do attend college (NAACP, 2009). In a 2009 fact sheet, the NAACP stated that for high school graduates, the immediate college enrollment rate for White students is 70% while for their Black peers it is around 56%. While some may consider college a universal aspiration for young Americans (Arnett, 2004), many low-income families do not have the same access to education as their middle class peers, and have much lower rates of college graduation (Alexander et al., 2014). Similarly, education and career goals can look different for socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals. Access to resources and opportunities, including career networks, may be much more limited for young socioeconomically disadvantaged Black men (Alexander et al., 2014; Furstenberg, 2008). The unemployment rate for Black men has been about 11% for the past two years, remaining about twice as high as the unemployment rate for White peers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

Other authors have contributed to the growing body of literature on emerging adulthood and have begun to expand to research on more diverse populations. Several authors (Roy & Jones, 2014; Arnett, 2011) have called for researchers to study the transition to adulthood for socioeconomically disadvantaged young men, conceptualizing alternative pathways based on varying contexts. While comparisons to the "normative" expectations for emerging adults can be made, it is more apt to begin to see this marginalized group as a separate category with different needs. A lack of resources and

family support, early experiences of trauma and violence, and a less linear and clear-cut pathway through education and career paths may all be factors that impact the nature of the transition to adulthood.

Perceptions of Adulthood

Given the changing demographics of society, what does it mean to be an adult? Recent research has explored what the subjective experience of adulthood is for young people (Arnett, 2004; Johnson, Berg, & Sirotzki, 2007). The timing of transitions to adulthood and taking on adult roles has changed drastically in the recent past, with pathways being delayed and being characterized by more individual agency (Johnson, et al., 2007). There is much research that still needs to be done on how young adults today perceive adulthood, and how the path to adulthood has changed. Special attention should be given to groups that have been previously ignored in the literature and who have different experiences than the majority population.

It is difficult to pinpoint what it means to be an adult, and definitions can vary depending on culture and context. Arnett (2004) defined adulthood as being characterized by taking responsibility for yourself, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent. Criteria that Arnett used when assessing for adulthood included financial independence from parents, reaching age 18 and 21, becoming employed full time, having a child, and accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's actions. Young people in the transition to adulthood were asked whether they thought these markers must be achieved before one can consider himself to be an adult. Most commonly cited as a salient marker of adulthood was accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's action, and least cited was having at least

one child. While these markers are salient, they do not take into account self-perception of adulthood and still can be fluid and have different meanings for each participant (Arnett, 2004).

In a 2007 study, Johnson et al. investigated subjective age identity and its influence on adulthood. Subjective age identity can be informed by perceptions of others, by roles taken on, and by social structures. The researchers stated that "the order and timing with which youth move into adult social roles varies significantly across groups defined by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status" (Johnson, et al., 2007, p. 246). It is assumed that those who take on earlier adult roles may be more likely to view themselves as adults earlier than their peers, who typically come from higher socioeconomic strata. The study, which used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent health, measured self-perceived adulthood, taking into account financial independence and family background characteristics (Johnson, et al., 2007). Johnson and colleagues posited that White individuals from high socioeconomic strata may be "shielded from interactions that foster feelings of adulthood at earlier ages" (Johnson, et al., 2007, p. 257).

Because the transition to adulthood is seen as an exploratory phase, it is assumed that major life markers- such as marriage and parenthood- are not as salient as they once were (Arnett, 2004). While this may be true for the middle class majority, youth from socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts may not have such flexibility because of financial strain and because they have already taken on many adult roles. In addition, "minorities at all socioeconomic levels face challenges that Whites at higher levels do not, involving neighborhood conditions and access to education and job opportunities"

(Johnson, et al., 2007, p. 257). Such challenges in the workplace have been studied and researchers have found that Black men face notable barriers to employment compared to their White counterparts. Pager, Bonikowski, and Western (2009) found that among Black, White, and Latino participants who submitted equivalent resumes, Black applicants were half as likely as White application to receive a call back for a job. Additionally, Black and Latino participants performed equivalently to White participants who indicated that they had just emerged from prison (Pager, Bonikowski, & Western, 2009).

Economic disadvantage and discrimination have implications on the transition to adulthood. However, deviations from the normative proposed pathways to adulthood are rarely studied in depth. In the following section, I will outline some of the proposed alternative pathways to adulthood.

Alternative Pathways to Adulthood

Transitions for Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Youths. Vulnerable youth in the transition to adulthood are beginning to receive more attention in the literature, though research is still lacking (Furstenberg, 2008; Osgood, et al., 2005; Collins, 2001). These populations have different challenges and needs than their more well off peers, and often lack the support to adequately meet them. Some researchers suggest that many of the differences arise from discrepancies in educational attainment (Arnett, 2003; Furstenberg, 2008). Today there is a higher premium placed on education, and many are taking longer to finish schooling. In addition to this, manufacturing jobs have sharply declined, leaving few good options for those who do not attend college (Furstenberg, 2008; Kloep & Hendry, 2011).

Many researchers focus on the idea that disadvantage begins before one is born and has consequences throughout the life cycle (Furstenberg, 2008; Alexander, et al., 2014). Low-income families tend to have fewer resources for cognitive and social development. Lacking these resources leaves many families disconnected from opportunities in the school system, neighborhood, and workplace (Furstenberg, 2008).

Osgood et al.'s 2005 volume focused on transitions to adulthood for vulnerable youth in public systems such as the juvenile justice system, foster care, and special education. These groups were chosen because they often face many challenges in attaining milestones of adulthood such as finding employment and marrying. They may have limited or impaired skills and less family support (Osgood et al., 2005). Because parents today provide their children with more support through their transitions, socioeconomically disadvantaged youth are further disadvantaged. Those who participate in public systems may lack support from parents but gain it from governmental programs, yet many of these programs cut off funding by the time the recipient turns 18 (Osgood, et al., 2005). In order to ease the transition to adulthood, the authors suggested extending these programmatic supports as well as eliminating policies that may further marginalize disadvantaged groups.

Though transitions to adulthood for certain vulnerable youths have been studied, the existing literature on the transition to adulthood for socioeconomically disadvantaged young Black men who are not involved in public systems is scarce. There is a lack of research on the unique challenges that this population faces, and few policies are put in place to facilitate the process of transition to adulthood. Because of systematized poverty

and racism, there may be many more barriers to markers of a successful transition to adulthood for socioeconomically disadvantaged young Black men.

Economic circumstances and race can have predictive effects on individuals through the transition to adulthood and throughout the rest of their lives (Corcoran & Matsudaira, 2005; Alexander et al., 2014). Black children are more likely to grow up in poverty than White children, with about 34% of Black children in 2007 falling below the poverty line (Wilson, 2011). Additionally, Black men are often hit harder by economic downturn, especially in areas of employment compared to their White peers (Corcoran & Matsudaira, 2005). Because of these factors, it is necessary to conceptualize the transition to adulthood for this population in different ways and to develop programs and policies that make this transition less arduous (Wilson, 2011; Settersten, 2005).

Settersten (2005) discussed potential modifications to systems and policies to better accommodate socioeconomically disadvantaged young men in the transition to adulthood. Additional pathways through education, such as community colleges, and increased connection to job opportunities are some of the ideas that can strengthen transitions to adulthood for vulnerable populations. Community support for families and programmatic support for young people in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods are potential solutions to improve the transition to adulthood (Settersten, 2005). Despite the fact that some of these suggestions have already been offered, it is necessary to collect data on marginalized groups in order to best inform policies and interventions to fit the needs of these populations.

Trauma and Traumatic Loss. While large-scale epidemiological studies have been conducted on the impact of trauma in urban neighborhoods, there is only limited

data on the lived experience of trauma survivors in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts and its impact throughout the life course. Exposure to trauma can have adverse implications for mental, emotional, and physical health. While exposure to trauma in socioeconomically disadvantage urban neighborhoods can begin early and recur throughout the life course, it is not often recognized or treated. The effects of early experiences of trauma may cause functional impairments and even create lasting impacts on one's worldview.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) defined trauma as involving actual or threatened death or serious injury by experiencing, witnessing, or learning that it happened to a loved one. Witnessing trauma may manifest in symptomology that indicates post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, or anxiety (Briere & Scott, 2006). Some risk factors for developing later adverse reactions include less functional coping styles, greater distress at the time of the trauma, lower socioeconomic status, and race, with Black and Latino individuals at greater risk than White trauma survivors. Reactions to trauma are similar to natural fear responses, and create feelings of depression and anxiety and sometimes lead to posttraumatic stress symptoms (Briere & Scott, 2006). In a 2015 study, Smith examined the life course frequency of traumatic losses for young Black men in Baltimore. The participants were found to have an average of three traumatic losses to homicide, and the most losses were experienced in adolescence. Adverse health consequences for these experiences are discussed and the study highlights a need for trauma and grief-informed services for young Black men.

Post-traumatic symptoms are clustered into four categories: intrusion, arousal, and reactivity; avoidance; and negative alterations to cognitions and moods. Intrusion symptoms include memories and flashbacks of the event; avoidance of these memories is also seen as symptomatic (APA, 2013). The arousal and reactivity category includes hypervigilance, irritable behavior and angry outbursts, and sleep disturbance. These symptoms are common in posttraumatic stress reactions. Also newly added to the DSM-5 definition of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is reckless or self-destructive behavior, which places an emphasis on coping mechanisms and recognizes these behaviors as reactions to trauma (APA, 2013). Negative alterations and cognition and mood symptoms include distorted cognitions and increases in negative emotions and beliefs (APA, 2013). When these symptoms are not treated, these negative beliefs and schema often persist.

Trauma experienced in childhood can be particularly impactful. When children survive trauma, there is often a loss of their assumptive world of protection and safety (Goldman, 2012). Children no longer live in a world that is predictable and fair, but are often thrust into uncertainty and disconnection. Children thrive in environments with consistency, structure, and care. When a trauma occurs, especially when this trauma involves a loss, this safe and structured world is turned upside down. The world can seem unfair, unsafe, and empty to children who experience such losses (Goldman, 2012). This loss of the assumptive world can create a sense of mistrust and loss of worth, leading to feelings like guilt, betrayal, and abandonment. If trauma is left untreated, these feelings are likely to persist.

Trauma and other early childhood adversity have been shown to produce a variety of health consequences that lead to health disparities throughout the life course. This toxic stress in early childhood may contribute to difficulties and disparities in learning, behavior, and health (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). The ecobiodevelopmental (EBD) framework displays a model of understanding health through a lens of toxic stress. It posits that demographic differences in health and educational attainment among other consequences emerge from exposure to adverse childhood experiences and toxic stress (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). The EBD framework explains the intersection of biology, health and development, and ecology and how it affects children's health. The social and physical environment, especially adverse childhood experiences, may have an immense impact on learning, behavior, and physical and mental health throughout development (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012).

Those who experience trauma may feel as if many strong emotions are contained in a cast (Rich, 2011). Black men typically lack outlets for these feelings, and are demonized rather than treated. In one study, Rich and Grey (2005) found that of a sample of Black men ages 18 to 30 years old who had been hospitalized after being shot or stabbed, 65% met the criteria for PTSD. This study calls for mental health services to be provided to victims, citing lack of insurance and lack of culturally competent practitioners as barriers to treatment. For young Black men who have experienced trauma or violence, there is often a tendency to pathologize and to criminalize rather than treat.

While the norm for Black men includes doing time, there have been alternative models presented for those who have experienced trauma or are part of a cycle of

violence (Bloom & Sreedhar, 2008; Rich, 2011). One such model, *The Sanctuary Model*, is based in trauma theory and works to create therapeutic communities built on growth and change. Its tenets include nonviolence, emotional intelligence, open communication, and social responsibility (Bloom & Sreedhar, 2008). This framework has been implemented in schools and human service organizations and shifts questions that imply *what's wrong with you* to a model that asks *what happened to you?* Rather than viewing victims of trauma or violence as worthy of punishment or blame, work should be done to promote healing and rehabilitation by understanding contextual factors, treating the symptoms, and preventing it from happening again (Rich, 2011).

Violence and the Code of the Streets. For socioeconomically disadvantaged Black men, many traditional ways of achieving status, such as education or job opportunities, are not viable options. One way to achieve respect and status in low-income urban communities is by participating in the violence that permeates some such neighborhoods (Rich, 2011; Anderson, 1999). Youth exposed to violence in the community have been shown to exhibit higher rates of behavioral and emotional problems (Latzman & Swisher, 2005). According to Anderson (1999), violence is one of the most relevant and pressing issues plaguing the poor inner city Black community. Young Black men in low-income urban settings are at a much higher risk of violent victimization than any other group (Macmillan, 2001). Young men can be especially vulnerable to engaging in violence when they are younger, less educated, and have less social support (Rich, 2011). Additional risk factors for violence include low economic opportunities, poor family functioning, and low parental involvement (CDC, 2014). Though much of the violence found in low-income communities can be seen as senseless,

several authors have argued that in context, violence and aggression make sense and are adaptive means to avoid victimization (Latzman & Swisher, 2005; Rich, 2005; Anderson, 1999).

Violence typically occurs before or during the transition to adulthood and can have lasting effects on development throughout the life cycle (Macmillan, 2001). Impairments in cognitive functioning and mental health have been found to occur with early exposure to violence (Ozer, 2005; Macmillan, 2001, Hall & Pizarro, 2011). When early violent victimization occurs, individuals are more likely to be involved in violence and criminal activity later in life. Violent victimization often leads to self-blame, loss of a sense of agency, lower self-esteem, and mistrust of others (Macmillan, 2001). Youth who perpetrate violence have often been victimized themselves and typically have higher levels of emotional distress and poorer behavioral control (CDC, 2014). Violence exposure occurs more frequently in households with include low parental education, low parental involvement, poor family functioning, poverty, and in disorganized neighborhoods (CDC, 2014).

Anderson (1999) discussed violence as a component of the code of the streets, necessary for survival and characterized by constant awareness of one's surroundings. In low-income urban neighborhoods, young Black men often vacillate between hypervigilance and numbness in order to cope with their surroundings (Rich, 2011). The inclination to violence may arise from daily life circumstances such as diminished hope for the future, lack of job opportunities, poverty, the stigma of race, and limited basic public services in the community (Anderson, 1999). The stressors of the neighborhood itself may also contribute to aggressive behaviors and violence (Anderson, 1999). Black

males who are victims of violence are often repeat victims, with about 45% of shot and stab victims who fall into this category incurring another one of these injuries at some point in the future (Rich, 2011). Those who are younger with less social support often are most vulnerable and less apt to deal with the effects of violence (Rich, 2011).

While many perceive Black male violence and aggression as useless and reprehensible, the utility of violence can serve as an adaptive and protective mechanism (Latzman & Swisher, 2005; Anderson, 1999; Rich, 2011). Some have posited that the adaptation of a violent and aggressive stance can be a protective means to avert violent victimization from others. By asserting dominance, one discourages others from victimizing him through violence (Latzman & Swisher, 2005). In an environment where the strongest survive, it is necessary to garner respect in order to get by in the community and avoid harm (Anderson, 1999; Rich, 2011). Desire for respect and other masculine ideals may manifest in violence, especially when one feels inadequate in other traditional roles of manhood, such as providing for one's family (Hall & Pizarro, 2011). Use of violence is protective, but also may be used to cultivate a sense of identity, to "be somebody" (Rich, 2011, p. 57). Marginalized individuals can use violence to survive, to create a sense of power, and to gain infamy within their communities (Rich, 2011). This can often create a toxic and insidious cycle of violence in such communities. Recognizing the cycle of violence in poor urban neighborhoods and beginning to view its victims and perpetrators as individuals in need of rehabilitation is one proposed path to dealing with this problem (Rich, 2011).

Role of Family in the Transition to Adulthood

Families are the first context in which children are socialized, and parents often teach their children how to navigate their environment. Families may serve as protective buffers, or may themselves be a part of cycles of violence. Both high parental involvement and involvement in the community are found to be protective factors against violence (CDC, 2014; Settersten, 2005). In a 2005 study, Latzman & Swisher found that "Youth exposed to high levels of community violence but living in well-functioning families exhibited less violent and aggressive behaviors than similarly exposed youth in other families" (p. 358). A tight knit and loving family is touted as one of the greatest forces to mitigate aggression and violence in the community (Anderson, 1999). Having adult role models who are consistent and positive, and being involved in the community are also protective factors against violence (CDC, 2014). Parental figures can help their children make sense of the world and navigate who they want to be, as well as how they want to participate as adults in school, work, or their own families.

Since the 1960s, traditional sequences of school, marriage, and parenthood have shifted along with changing cultural norms. In these last several decades, individuals have gained more autonomy over the construction of their lives (Shanahan, 2000). With the development of birth control, rise in cohabitation, and increased schooling, there exists greater diversity in the transition to adulthood now than ever before (Shanahan, 2000). Because of changing socioeconomic conditions and the individualization of society, youth today are relying more on family support for longer amounts of time. More youth are semiautonomous, often receiving assistance from their parents in the form of money, shelter, and time (Kloep & Hendry, 2011). In a 2005 study, Schoeni found that

low-income families provide less than three times the monetary support of higher income families but provided equal time resources. Schoeni discussed how parental education and income impact children's successes or failures in their transition to adulthood through various markers such as leaving the home, completing schooling, and finding employment.

Families are the first unit of socialization for individuals and can play a large part in the course of development through the life span. While the normative expectation for individuals transitioning to adulthood is that parents will help guide them and provide a safety net, this is not always possible due to lack of resources, education, and opportunity. In a 2005 article, Settersten asserted that "parents are a primary resource for young adults, and family resources can help or hinder early adult transitions." Families from disadvantaged backgrounds often have few financial resources and limited connections to jobs that pay well. Because of this, the chasm widens between the prospects of success for children in in middle class families and those in working class or poor families (Osgood et al., 2001).

Because socioeconomically disadvantaged youth tend to have a lack of familial and institutional support, Settersten (2005) argued for the strengthening of families and implementation of policies and programs to support vulnerable youth through their transitions to adulthood. Similar research calls for interventions that promote strong family relationships in order to advance positive development in emerging adulthood (O'Connor, Sanson, Hawkins, Letcher, Toumbourou, Smart, Vassallo, & Olson, 2010). One of the main institutions that young Black males navigate in the transition to adulthood is the juvenile justice system, a system that emphasizes control and

punishment over rehabilitation. Altschuler (2005) presented programs with cognitive

behavioral and interpersonal skills training as an alternative model. Such programs that

emphasize healing and rehabilitation have been found to exhibit the greatest recidivism

reduction rates, suggesting that these models are more effective in the long run

(Altschuler, 2005). Programs implemented in communities and schools, especially for

youth transition out of public system or who have experienced trauma, may be effective

models (Bloom & Sreedhar, 2008; Altschuler, 2005).

      Family as a Protective Factor. As the first unit of socialization, one's family not

only provides resources but also influences attitudes and values that assist youth in

navigating the transition to adulthood (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999; Collins,

2001). Many families are able to provide a safety net for their children and assist them

with financial and emotional resources to help them successfully navigate their

transitions (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999; Furstenberg, 2010). This is almost

essential in order to receive quality education and career opportunities because of the lack

of programs in the U.S. that assist youth in basic life skills such as attaining healthcare,

education, and jobs (Furstenberg, 2010).

      Those who have more family support spend more time gaining education and

valuable credentials that advance their social and economic standing further over their

peers from lower socioeconomic statuses. In addition to providing resources and

connections to schooling and job opportunities, parents can often serve as positive role

models for their children (Schoeni & Ross, 2005). There is increased pressure on all

families because of the lack of public support for youth in the transition to adulthood, and

this is felt most in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities (Furstenberg, 2010).

Positive family support and involvement is often seen as a protective factor against community violence and child maltreatment (CDC, 2014). O'Connor et al. (2010) found that stronger family relationships were correlated with higher levels of positive development in emerging adulthood. Over 1100 emerging adults were sampled, utilizing data from a longitudinal study to create a model of positive development in emerging adulthood. Strong relationships with parents significantly predicted positive development. In addition to this finding, O'Connor et al. (2010) found higher socioeconomic status, better control of emotions, and more community engagement to be significantly correlated with positive development. Models of positive development in emerging adulthood for socioeconomically disadvantaged populations would help to highlight differences in the experiences of each group.

Family Risk Factors for Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Youth. Vulnerable youth tend to have a lack of family support thought to be crucial to successful transitions to adulthood and overcoming challenges (Osgood, et al., 2005). Many transitions involved in the process of becoming an adult are sequential and revolve around family, such as leaving the home and establishing one's own home, yet pathways for socioeconomically disadvantaged youth can be more circuitous and less clear cut. Families with more monetary resources are able to provide for their children for longer amounts of time, supporting them through transitions in school and work. These supports help bolster successful transitions to adulthood and give individuals from more wealthy families advantages. Development in socioeconomically disadvantaged youth is impacted by the limited safety net provided by families and the immense stressors, stemming from lack of finances and community violence among other factors. High

stress levels have been associated with emotional and behavioral problems in children (Collins, 2001).

In addition to a lack of resources and high stress levels, socioeconomically disadvantaged youth often experience changes in family structure that may impact development throughout the life course (Fomby & Bosick, 2013). Family instability can have profound effects on material and emotional resources present in the household which are believed to impact cognition and behavior in children (Fomby & Bosick, 2013). Impairments in cognition and behavior can disrupt transitions to adulthood, and can be further exacerbated when resources are low and stress levels are high.

Adultification. Children from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities often assume adult roles from a young age, such as household, financial, and caretaking responsibilities (Roy, Messina, Smith, Waters, 2014; Burton, 2007). In addition to taking on adult responsibilities at an early age, many socioeconomically disadvantaged youth also move into adult roles at young ages, such as having a child or living on one's own (Roy et al., 2014). Few studies examine adultification in young Black men, though they often experience adultification in the home while also facing risks and challenges from the outside world which often characterizes them as adults when they are still children (Roy et al., 2014; Burton, 2007).

In a 2007 article, Burton explained that "Childhood adultification [in economically disadvantaged families] involves contextual, social, and developmental processes in which youth are prematurely, and often inappropriately, exposed to adult knowledge and assume extensive adult roles and responsibilities within their family networks." (p. 329). This process is often caused by the effects of poverty such as living

in neighborhood contexts in which children are exposed to violence, and must contribute to family finances at a young age (Burton, 2007). Burton's conceptual model aimed to inform practitioners and schools of the daily-lived experience for adultified children so that policies, programs, and understanding could be advanced. The four dimensions of adultification as characterized by the model include precocious knowledge, mentored adultification, peerification/ spousification, and parentification.

Precocious knowledge is common among economically disadvantaged youth because of the high-risks contexts they often exist in. Precocious knowledge involves being exposed to adult content at an early age, for example hearing adult conversations, being privy to parents' financial concerns, and witnessing trauma and violence. Children in low-income families often are exposed to advanced situations and store what they have experienced, and typically seek more information about what they have witnessed (Burton, 2007).

Mentored adultification occurs when children take on adult-like roles with some supervision. This often involves housework and caregiving responsibilities with minimal supervision, and may make children feel valued and empower them to gain skills and confidence (Burton, 2007). In the next tier of adultification, peerification or spousification brings children into the parental hierarchy, imbalancing power and cutting through generational boundaries. Children are often on the same level as their parent, serving as emotional confidantes, contributing equal finances, or becoming a co-parent to a single parent (Burton, 2007). This role can often come with ambivalence for those involved, with parents often finding this support necessary, but often feeling resentful of increasing power in their children.

Parentification involves full time responsibilities in a parental role, whether for siblings or for parents or other family members. Economically disadvantaged families often require this type of assistance, with children advocating for social services, serving as caretakers when parents work, or taking on work responsibilities of their own at a young age (Burton, 2007). This parentification can be confusing and problematic for children. They may excel in the role of caregiver at home, have many responsibilities, and be highly valued while at school are treated like a child or are not able to excel academically (Burton, 2007). Such experiences affect emotional expression and compromise a sense of self and agency for many children, while at the same time provide important skills for success in adulthood (Burton, 2007). Often, children feel pressure to ease the troubles of their parents which can take an emotional toll. Children may feel the need to assuage sadness and stress for their parents as well as lessen the financial burden of the family (Burton, 2007).

A crucial task for these children is to contextualize their behaviors, and create a greater understanding of the challenges they face. Social services and schools should be educated on adultification in order to foster social and emotional skills and translate a sense of meaning to contexts beyond the family or household (Burton, 2007). Programs should capitalize on the skills that adultified children possess so that they can translate these skills through the transition to adulthood and throughout the life course.

Theoretical Assumptions: Life Course Perspective

This study will utilize the life course perspective to examine the transition to adulthood for socioeconomically disadvantaged young Black men, and the role that their family plays in this transition. This perspective allows for their stories to be viewed

within unique contexts in time and place. It assumes that these young men are embedded in sociohistorical and temporal contexts and make meaning about themselves and their families. Bengston and Allen (1993) explained the life course perspective stating that it involves "a contextual, processual, and dynamic approach to the study of change in the lives of individual family members over time, and of families as social units as they change over historical periods" (p. 469-470). This perspective allows for analysis of the individual, family, and the greater contexts that they are embedded in, such as neighborhood or social class.

The life course perspective- originally presented by Giele & Elder in 1998- has several key concepts: location in time and place, timing of lives, linked lives, and human agency, that will be used as a framework for this study.

Location in Time and Place. Each individual is situated in a specific community and time in history (Elder & Giele, 2009). The life course theory urges the researcher to consider how contexts of time and place impact the lives of their research participants. Individual development occurs within the context of the family, but also greater societal contexts such as neighborhood and culture (Daly, 2007).

This study examines young Black men in Baltimore city from socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods; this unique context is one that is filled with uncertainty and even danger. Many of the young men from Baltimore city in this study are experiencing a dearth of resources, early experiences of trauma and loss, and disruptions in family life. In addition to this, they are faced with the reality of post-recession America, and a time of unemployment in Baltimore, formerly an industrial hub. Recent events show that police brutality, racial bias, and increasing unrest also are components

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of what it means to be a Black man in 2015 in Baltimore. Because of these factors, this specific population may experience the transition to adulthood in different ways than their peers in the same age cohort who follow a "normative" path of development.

Linked Lives. This concept holds that all individuals are constantly interacting with and influencing others through social action (Daly, 2007; Giele & Elder, 1998). This interaction happens on cultural, interpersonal, and institutional levels, and considers both individual development and expectations of the larger society. This principle examines how roles and relationships change throughout life and how individuals integrate the expectations of their culture and society into their own development (Giele & Elder, 2009; Daly, 2007).

In this study, relationships with family members are particularly salient. When the parental hierarchy is disrupted through adultification, the way that individuals in a family interact and influence each other are different than in families with a typical structure. Taking on adult-like roles at a young age may have repercussions on development and shape transitions to adulthood. There can be role confusion when young people are expected to take on adult roles at early ages, yet have little support through the transition to adulthood.

Human Agency.   The concept of human agency centers on adaptation and meeting of one's needs. Individuals seek to adapt their behavior to the environment in which they are located (Daly, 2007). Humans typically organize their lives through goals, the most basic of which include attaining financial security, safety, and happiness. Agency involves making and having choices, and participating in certain roles and situations through these choices (Elder & Giele, 2009).

This paper examined the decision-making strategies and the motives of young Black men to meet their needs in their transition to adulthood. How they create their goals and organize their lives around them through this transition was explored. This process is impacted by elements such as context, gender, and race and is contingent on the resources and opportunities available (Daly, 2007).

In this study, human agency was a large component of the transition to adulthood, and this shift was seen as a time in which one was completely responsible for his actions and decisions. The interviews utilized in the study explore themes of human agency by ascertaining what meaning is given to becoming an adult, and whether each individual believes that he is an adult. These perceptions of adulthood for young Black men are explored, including whether perceived adulthood reflects "successful" markers of the transition to adulthood.

Timing of Lives. This component of life course theory focuses on adaptation to life events and the use of resources to reach goals (Daly, 2007; Giele & Elder, 1998). This idea is one of the foundations of this study, focusing on whether life transitions, such as the transition to adulthood follows a normative path compared to others in the same age cohort (Elder & Giele, 2009).

Many changes occurred in the lives of the participants in the present study, including changes in residence and family structure and schooling. These young men also are living in a time of increased globalization and a sluggish economy. According to Daly, "to examine the timing of lives is to look at the intersection of the subjective experience of age and the social roles that one takes on in relation to changing social structural conditions" (Daly, 2007, p. 69). Today's transition to adulthood looks very

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different than decades ago, and is significantly delayed for many young people. In this moment in time, traditional markers of adulthood, like marriage and parenthood, are being delayed and are occurring in different orders. This is an especially relevant time to study the transition to adulthood. It is particularly important at this juncture to study transitions to adulthood for young Black men, both because they have largely been neglected in the literature, and because the past few decades have led to increased marginalization and inequality. Such changes have been a product of economic downturn and the rise of mass incarceration, which have left Black men with few clear options on the path to adulthood.

Purpose of the Study

Most of the literature on emerging adulthood focuses on white upper middle class populations. Literature on other populations often explores the experiences of young adults in unique circumstances such as those in the juvenile justice system or those who are hospitalized, but does not frame their experiences as variations on pathways to emerging adulthood. There is little research on socioeconomically disadvantaged Black men transitioning to adulthood and their perceptions of adulthood. This study aims to take a step to fill these gaps and to explore the stories of young Black men in the inner city and the challenges that they face daily that are not present in the lives of the middle class majority. The study will ground the participants in their contexts of time and place and focus on how families and early experiences of adultification impact their transitions into adulthood.

The present study aims to answer the following questions grounded in the life course perspective:

- How do experiences of adultification in childhood affect family relationships and the way that they shape the transition to adulthood?

- How do socioeconomically disadvantaged young Black men perceive their transitions to adulthood?

  - In what ways do relationships with family members and their perceptions of adulthood influence young men's decision-making and pathways to adulthood?

Chapter 2: Methodology

Qualitative Approach

A qualitative methodological approach will be utilized in the present study. This approach will allow for in-depth exploration of what it means to be an emerging adult for young Black men in Baltimore city. A qualitative approach assumes that human reality is understood by the meaning that people make out of their active and interactive "engagement in the world in which they find themselves" (Daly, 2007, p. 62). Unlike methodology that quantifies interaction, this approach takes into account the creation of relationships and the importance of language. Some of the central ideas of qualitative inquiry center around exploring daily, "mundane" life and examining contradictions, such as attempting to differentiate from family while still being a part of that family (Daly, 2007). This methodology often places importance on transitions and context. The family is viewed as important context for development, as it serves as the first unit of socialization and serves as a buffer between the individual and his greater cultural context (Daly, 2007).

By utilizing a modified grounded theory approach, both induction and deduction will be involved in the process of this exploration. This cycle of inquiry will allow for the data to capture the richness of the individuals interviewed and hopefully also help to explicate the transitions to adulthood in a new population (Daly, 2007). Grounded theory endeavors to study how reality is socially constructed, focusing on processes and interactions (LaRossa, 2005). The present study utilizes this coding methodology in an attempt to capture the processes of young men from Baltimore City in the transition to adulthood and the meaning they ascribe to their experiences. Grounded theory methodology aims to generate theory through comparative analysis, creating codes and identifying themes and patterns through examination of the data (Daly, 2007). This study presents a secondary data analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with socioeconomically disadvantaged young men in Baltimore, Maryland conducted to explore how family and contextual factors affect the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Sample

The data utilized in this study were collected by a research team in a youth development program called Urban Progress (UP) in Baltimore, Maryland. Over a period of eighteen months, researchers from the University of Maryland facilitated life skills sessions in areas such as coping with stress and depression and how to manage conflict and exposure to violence (Roy et al., 2014). Twenty-one male research participants from the UP program agreed to participate in interviews. These young Black men, aged 17 to 24, lived on the East Side of Baltimore, had not completed high school, and were working toward a GED as part of the UP program. This group was part of a larger study

examining the transition to adulthood for disconnected low-income young men following

alternative pathways through school and work (Smith, 2013, 2015). The study also

recruited participants from another youth development program in the area, which aimed

to serve as a contrast group who had completed high school and included ethnic and

cultural diversity (Roy et al., 2014).

Table 1

Sample Demographics

Name	Age	Race	Father
Fry	21	Black	yes
Empire	18	Black	no
Matt	20	Black	yes
Kalvin	21	Black	no
Isaiah	22	Black	stepfather
Andrew	21	Latino	no
Justin	21	Black	no
Stefan	17	Black	yes
De'Onte	17	Black	no
Mike	23	Black	no
Tyler	21	Black	no
Shawn	22	Black	no
Kevin	19	Black	no
Joie	22	Black	no
Kuron	17	Black	no
Kwame	19	Black	yes
Sal	22	Black	no
Snoop	17	Black	no
Sylvester	18	Black	no
DJ	20	Black	no

Data Collection

Data were collected after the researchers had built rapport with the students

through their life skills sessions. During this time, the researchers took field notes from

interaction with the participants and staff members, gaining valuable information about

limitations and opportunities in the community, family relationships, and processes and contexts that the young men were a part of (Roy et al., 2014). Once participants were recruited, a two-hour semi-structured life history interview was separately conducted with each individual and recorded. Structured interview questions covered topics including daily routines, school and work opportunities, what it means to be an adult, and family member's perceptions of what an adult is.

The semi-structured protocol (see Appendix A) allowed for more in-depth exploration of the young men's transitions to adulthood and how their families influenced them. This also allowed for other themes to emerge, such as family and relationship conflict, experiences of trauma and loss, and what it means to be a man (Roy et al., 2014). After the interviews were recorded, pseudonyms were given to each individual, interviews were transcribed word for word, and preliminary codes were developed. I participated in transcribing two of the interviews, transcribing audiotapes of the interviews word for word. Once the transcription was completed, I participated as part of a research team in discussing codes for each interview. Working in pairs, the team open coded the interviews in order to begin to identify themes in the data.

The researchers who conducted the initial study ensured that their data were trustworthy through several methods (Roy, et al., 2014). They utilized multiple methods of data collection and spent time engaging with their participants in the field in order to validate the credibility of the data. In addition, the interviewers checked in with their participants in the time following the interviews to ensure that researcher understanding of the participants' viewpoints on the transition to adulthood accurately reflected the experiences and viewpoint of each participant.

Data Analysis

The present secondary data analysis study utilized a modified grounded theory approach, drawing on inductive and deductive strategies to create a narrative summarizing the experiencing of the young men interviewed (LaRossa, 2005). The qualitative analysis used a grounded theory coding scheme, which included three phases of coding: open, axial, and selective (LaRossa, 2005; Daly, 2007). I utilized a software program called Dedoose to input the data and assist in the coding process.

Through participation in the transcription and coding of the interviews, I became familiar with the data and began to formulate ideas about emerging themes. I first open coded the data, meaning that the transcriptions of each interview were explored line-by-line and assigned codes. I utilized both codes that were already created for the data and my own original codes to label the data in ways meaningful to my analysis. Through this approach, segments of the data were labeled and categorized, creating labels with the aim of generating concepts that weave participants' stories together (Daly, 2007). I then searched for concepts that emerged frequently in the data (Daly, 2007). Through my involvement with the data, participating in coding in small groups, some of the relevant codes or concepts that emerged include "neighborhood," "man of the house," and "trauma." These are examples of open codes that began the process of generating patterns across interviews in the later phases of coding.

The second phase, axial coding, was conducted across interviews, creating categories to begin to group and synthesize the data (Daly, 2007). In this phase concepts were mapped and fused into broader categories explaining segments of the data and creating conceptual linkages (LaRossa, 2005; Daly, 2007). These categories were created

with the ultimate aim of theory generation, explaining how pieces that have been broken apart through the process of open coding fit together (Daly, 2007). In this stage, data was compared both within and between categories to saturate each category to ensure that multiple dimensions were covered. During this phase, categories were also compared to one another in order to identify linkages and relationships among the data. Through this process of comparison and contrast, categories were occasionally collapsed in order to make the data richer and explain different dimensions of a similar idea (Daly, 2007).

The third and final phase of coding, selective coding, aims to create a narrative that explains how the categories are interwoven. The process is typically begun by selecting a central category to base a substantive theory off of (Daly, 2007). I endeavored to create frameworks to explain the data and attempt to examine how experiences of adultification and perceptions of adulthood shape the transition to adulthood.

Through the later phases of coding, I began to return to the literature and the narrative became more trauma-informed. As I began uncovering more instances of traumatic loss in the data, I returned to the literature. The concept of a loss of the assumptive world (Goldman, 2012) made a lot of sense to me, as someone who had recently experienced a traumatic loss. This concept also seemed to speak to the data and provide a framework to think about the processes that occurred when one suffered a traumatic loss. In returning to the data, I found more instances of trauma and markers of traumatic stress (see also Smith, 2015). Both undergoing this process myself, and researching more about it caused me to realize how profoundly trauma can impact development and mental health, especially when recurring and untreated.

Data Quality

Various standards were put in place to ensure the rigor of the qualitative

study. Rather than assessing validity, various verification procedures were

examined to ensure data quality (Creswell, 1998). The researchers spent prolonged

time in the field building trust with the participants before conducted interviews.

When the semi-structured interviews were conducted, multiple researchers

collected the data. Many of the researchers provided rich description and used

memos to provide more details about the participants. During the transcription

process, interviews were transcribed and coded by two individuals and then

compared. Once this was completed, a research team assembled to discuss the open

coding process for each interview. In the process of secondary data analysis, I

participated in peer debriefing sessions with an advisor to who supported and

challenged my analysis and methodology. This advisor also served as an external

audit to the process, ensuring that the finding reflected the data (Criswell, 1998).

Reflexivity. Throughout the process of conducting the study, I engaged in

reflexivity to examine how my position as the researcher impacted the data interpretation

and analysis (Daly, 2007). As a white female from an upper middle class background,

my social position diverges from the backgrounds of the participants in the study. I was

acutely aware of these differences and focused on understanding the lived experiences of

the interviewees. I currently consider myself to be in the emerging adulthood stage, and

had to be aware of monitoring my own potential biases that may have arisen throughout

the analysis of the data. In beginning the process of writing, I began to jot down

reflections about the data and related themes in a journal, as suggested by Watt (2007).

This process has allowed me to refine my thoughts about the subject matter and to reflect on how I thought about the data.

I have worked with socioeconomically disadvantaged communities in several contexts, such as school settings and therapy settings. Much of this work has been done with children, and has allowed me to reflect on the skills, resources, and capabilities as well as setbacks and risks that some of these individuals are faced with. I look forward to thinking more about the transition to adulthood, which can be a critical time period in the life course, and what strengths and challenges socioeconomically disadvantaged young men face at this juncture.

As a systems thinker and a Couple and Family therapist, I possess a skill set to analyze patterns within the lives of the participants. Assessing family functioning and how context impacts growth are things that I have been trained to do through my clinical work. I have worked directly with low-income populations in Maryland and have gained experience working with multiple generations and formulating hypotheses about how families can help or hinder transitions to adulthood. Having previous experience working with the data, through transcription, coding, and group meetings allowed me to familiarize myself with the data set and facilitated more accurate interpretation of the data.

Chapter 3: Adultification

Of a sample of 21 socioeconomically disadvantaged young Black men (ages 17-24) living in Baltimore City, 43% (n=9) identified childhood experiences of adultification. Most exhibited multiple forms of adultification- such as both precocious knowledge and parentification- and several had co-occurring experiences of trauma during childhood.

Early experiences of adultification may help young people to gain important skills, such as independence, leadership, and caregiving skills. However, adultification can also cause adverse effects such as worry, hypervigilance, and compulsive caregiving, which can have an impact on later development (Burton, 2007). Additionally, experiences of trauma and traumatic loss are thought to shake children's sense of security and alter schema about the world (Goldman, 2012). These significant life events can drastically alter one's path and have an impact on the transition to adulthood and beyond.

Children in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods are often privy to information or witness events that are advanced for their age and developmental level. Children from low income families are also more likely to step up to assume adult roles at earlier ages, typically because of the needs of their families, including a lack of resources (Burton, 2007). In these adult-like roles, children may serve as translators, providers, or caretakers at a young age, which may have repercussions on the way these children transition into adulthood. The lived experience of adultified children may be very different than other children, and children may be expected to fulfill different roles in different contexts, for example in school and at home (Burton, 2007).

Various dimensions of adultification experiences of socioeconomically disadvantaged young Black men will be discussed, including precocious knowledge, peerification, and parentification. Scenarios such as witnessing trauma and providing for one's family will be reviewed, and possible implications of these experiences on the transition to adulthood will be introduced.

Precocious Knowledge

The most benign and likely most common dimension of adultification, termed precocious knowledge, can be difficult to identify and the can often be confusing and difficult for children to manage. Exposure to advanced knowledge can range from overhearing adult conversations to being privy to one's family financial situation. This knowledge can also take on more serious forms such as witnessing trauma in high-risk environments (Burton, 2007). Low-income families tend to have higher exposure to precocious knowledge due to several factors. In socioeconomically disadvantaged families, there is often a lack of space for adults to have private conversations, and children may be more acutely aware of financial issues. Sometimes, children share the financial burden by contributing money to the household and share in their parents' emotional burden by consoling them when finances are strained.

Several participants in the present study discussed some form of precocious knowledge. Many spoke about having knowledge of their families or members of the community that they were too young to know. Empire, age 18, claimed, **"**I was raised with old people, I was raised sitting there listening to things I'm not supposed to be listening to," highlighting his exposure to advanced knowledge at a young age. Several young men were exposed to family drug use and family violence, and a few of them discussed witnessing these moments as turning points in their lives.

Shawn, age 22, reflected on how his family changed when he entered middle school. He identified the time period that his parents began to use drugs and got the family put out of their house as a turning point, claiming that "everything just fell downhill from there." Shawn experienced confusion as a young child who was kicked

out of his home, and harbored animosity toward his parents for making these decisions. Shawn described his reaction to the experience, how he coped with it, and implications of his experiences on his own parenting practices. When asked about how his family changed from middle school to high school, Shawn admitted,

> In middle school it changed. I mean, that's when they started getting high, for real. I mean, fucking up, for real, for real. And he used to pull the gun like that, cause they had too many kids though. And crack is an addiction though. I mean, so, other than that…yeah.

While Shawn seemed sympathetic to the underlying causes of what led to him being kicked out of his home, he still acutely felt the effects of his parents' decisions. As a young child, Shawn was exposed to drugs and gun violence as well as eviction from his home. These experiences caused Shawn to reflect on his past, and think forward to the future; when asked about his reaction to this situation Shawn said,

> It was terrible, for real. I hope to never put my kids through that, for real… No should kid should ever feel like that, kicked out their house, for real. Feel me? So, yeah, that's the way I feel about it, I used to talk to the people and all that, for real. I used to just put it in the back of my mind for real.

Shawn went on to describe the anger that he felt, experiencing the ramifications of his parents' actions when he was not to blame. He goes so far to attribute this moment- when his family was put out of their house- as the defining feature in his attitude while growing up.

> It wasn't, it wasn't supposed to go like that for real, cause they messed up for real, you feel me? (Who messed up?) My mother and father, for real, you know what I

mean. That's why I was the way that I was coming up. Like basically like, fuck

the world, for real.

Shawn's conclusion to simply "fuck the world" is one that is not uncommon

among young Black men. By coming to this conclusion at such a young age, Shawn was

primed to continue this narrative throughout his life. His experiences of unfairness and

marginalization from childhood parallel experiences that are common to Black men later

in life. This "fuck the world" narrative is a reaction that seems logical when placed

contextually in a world which may be characterized by mistrust and implicit biases.

Having advanced knowledge as a child may cause worry and may lead to adult-like roles

at an accelerated rate. Taking on such roles, whether self-imposed, or expected by a

family member, may be risky for a child, and may have implications for mental health

and development, for example heightened anxiety and trouble relating to peers (Burton,

2007).

Trauma. In addition to precocious knowledge obtained within the home,

including overhearing or participating in adult conversations and witnessing family drug

use or violence, many individuals discussed witnessing adult and traumatic events within

their neighborhoods. These experiences ranged from knowing drug dealers and living

next to crack houses to experiences of traumatic loss. As described below, many of the

young men in the present study witnessed violence or had family members killed in

community violence. In addition to disclosing instances of neighborhood violence,

several young men identified symptomology that is consistent with the DSM-5

classification of post-traumatic stress disorder, including hypervigilance, anger outburst,

and sleep disturbances.

Shawn, when speaking about his neighborhood during elementary school, said "It was bad, for real. You feel me? Hood for real." He went on to describe a memory of his childhood neighborhood, recalling, "In the high rises, this man, just came out of nowhere, for real, the whole time, the man shooting in the back with a gun, he running the whole time." Shawn spoke about how young he was and how this affected his course, saying "I was young when I saw that, that's basically putting me on a life of crime, for real, when I saw that."

What Shawn witnessed was advanced for his age, and traumatic experiences often have the power to shake even adults' sense of safety or convictions about the world. Those who experience trauma often have their conceptualization of the world altered or shattered, and no longer hold the assumption that they are safe. Experiences of trauma can call into question basic assumptions about oneself, close relationships, and the world at large (Kauffman, 2002). Shawn highlighted how he viewed this experience as a catalyst, fundamentally changing his worldview and path to begin "a life of crime." Many in the present study spoke about witnessing trauma and reflected on how they believe it affected them.

Kwame, age 19, described his neighborhood as being like a zoo, and went on to explain some of the things that he witnessed as a child. "You've seen arrests… you've seeing people getting killed in front of your face, you've seen people selling drugs, you've seen people just not caring, you've seen people sitting out on their porch." We typically think of children as innocent, but when adverse experiences occur early in life, they are likely to have implications throughout the life course. Such experiences shake a child's sense of security and stability and impact opportunity and choices. Adverse

childhood experiences may have long-term effects on health and wellbeing among

individuals and communities. Risks of exposure to traumatic stressors may include

mental health problems, substance abuse, and risks for intimate partner violence (CDC,

2014).

Empire was raised by his grandparents because of a history of parental abuse and

drug use. He recounted many memories about his childhood and about his neighborhood

in particular.

> Never a dull moment. Always something happening. Whether it was people
> chasing people down the street. I have some weird memories. I seen somebody
> eat their own foot. Like literally sit there and cut it off and eat their own foot…
> You could see needles everywhere. You could see people falling off the porch.
> And I seen that. I done seen a couple, like 2 dead bodies... Seen police get chased.
> Seen my grandfather's car got hit-hit and run. I've seen parades, seen hookers,
> I've seen a lot. I've seen people get robbed right in front of their house…When I
> seen that it made me open my eyes to a lot of stuff.

Empire described these eye-opening experiences witnessed in his neighborhood before

moving out of it age the age of nine. Being privy to knowledge and witnessing traumatic

experiences can cause confusion and worry in children and lead them to emulate

behaviors that they have seen (Burton, 2007). In addition to the risk of children repeating

behaviors that they have seen, experiences of trauma can have serious consequences on

mental health. Often, these experiences are not processed and there are no interventions

to mitigate potential negative mental health consequences. For example, despite being a

witness to such extreme events in the community, Empire went on to describe his

responsibilities as a child "Go to school, do school. Like any child, keep your room clean.

Learn how to do chores. The basics."

When children experience trauma, it causes them to lose their assumptive world

of trust and safety (Goldman, 2014). Reactions to traumatic experiences can include

hypervigilance, trouble sleeping, and dissociation. Several young men mentioned that

they were stressed, paranoid, or did not sleep. While these experiences do not equate to a

diagnosis, they suggest the manifestation of stress or trauma in the body. More specific

examples of the manifestations of stress will be discussed below.

Traumatic Loss. While any loss can be devastating, traumatic losses, including

sudden or violent deaths, can be particularly jarring. The leading cause of death for

Black males up until age 34 is homicide (CDC, 2010), and community violence pervades

many socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods. Despite the high risk of

witnessing or experiencing traumatic loss, there are few resources or programs for young

Black men to work through these events. Traumatic loss is known to disrupt a child's

sense of safety and can create a sense of mistrust, diminished self-worth, and a loss of

meaning (Kauffman, 2002). Feelings of anxiety and disconnection may occur after a

traumatic loss, and are likely to persist if not properly dealt with (Goldman, 2002).

Justin, age 21, characterizes his reactions to important losses in his family and

how it shaped his trajectory.

> [If my] grandmother, great grandmother, my aunt and my little brother ain't die,
>
> man…shh…I don't know man. I wouldn't even have the mind frame I have today
>
> for real. Cause the family would still be together, like all of us are separated,
>
> doing our own thing for real. But sometimes we still meet up and what not. But if

they were still alive, the whole family would be together. Like I wouldn't have

caught my first charge, for real.

Like some other interview participants, Justin defined these losses as distinct

moments that impacted his life, and in this case, his first arrest. Justin went on to explain

his first and most traumatic loss: the loss of his three-year-old brother was he was seven

years old. Justin's brother was locked in a basement by his godparents, beaten and

burned to death. Justin was hospitalized following the traumatic loss of his brother, and

explains how it "messed him up in the head." Justin later expanded on the profound

impact this event had on his life, stating,

> But, you lose somebody that close to you, you just be like "fuck the world" for
>
> real, you're ready to go… Like if you can bring him back, then everything will go
>
> back to normal, but if you can't, just let me just go, for real man. Like I don't care,
>
> man. It ain't nothing else to live for…

Throughout the course of his interview, Justin referenced experiences or

viewpoints that fit into 5 of the 7 diagnostic categories of PTSD. Justin learned that this

horrific trauma happened to his brother, with whom he was very close. Resultant

negative alterations in cognitions included persistent negative emotional state, feelings of

detachment from others, and a viewpoint that the world was all bad, hence the "fuck the

world" stance. Justin exhibited symptoms from almost each of the criteria in the arousal

and reactivity section of a PTSD diagnosis (APA, 2013). He expressed symptoms of

hypervigilance, explaining how one must "stay on point," and referred to himself as

"paranoid." Justin also spoke about problems concentrating and his angry or physically

aggressive outbursts throughout his childhood.

Surviving trauma can cause children to lose "their assumptive world of safety, protections, and predictability" (Goldman, 2002, p. 193). Whereas children thrive with structure and stability, experiences of trauma can create new frameworks for children that are based in unpredictability and may create assumptions that there is no future, no safety, and even no meaning in their lives (Goldman, 2002). These trauma experiences that shake one's foundations can lead to numbness and disconnection, which may leave children feeling as though they have no one to rely on and turning to coping mechanisms like drugs to dull their pain.

De'Onte, age 17, who also experienced a traumatic loss at a very young age, described some struggles of his childhood, including navigating a rough neighborhood, and witnessing homicides. De'Onte reflected on his experience losing his best friend who was caught in the crossfire of gang violence. At a very young age, he was forced to confront the realities of his harsh neighborhood, experiencing a loss of safety and fairness in the world.

> When I was like 3 or 4 years old, I was witnessing people getting shot at and killed in front of me and it was nothing…cause I would just cry and walk in the house or cry and go to sleep because of what I saw that day or what reminded me of something. And I remember witnessing my best friend get killed…We weren't allowed across the street because we were so young- and I remember one of the gang members… shot him and he died that second right there. Saw him right there.

De'Onte first had to confront his new reality that his friend would not come back. He explained his mistrust and described his heart as "hardened," illustrating the

difficulties of being such a young child and experiencing such a traumatic loss. When recounting the story, De'Onte still seemed astounded that this experience happened to him. Traumatic losses can profoundly impact a child's worldview, creating issues of trust, isolation, and loss of meaning (Goldman, 2002). It can cause a fundamental shift, in which viewing the world from a childlike and innocent perspective is no longer possible. The feeling of existing in a world of safety, trust, and meaning is turned on its head. When asked what went through his mind when the event happened, De'Onte admitted,

> Pssh…a whole lot of pain… I felt like it was just a bad dream…I was just like he gone, for real…ain't no coming back. It was tough. It was a very tough experience for me. But it kind of hardened me. I felt like it kind of hardened my heart for a minute because I didn't trust anybody afterwards and it was like I didn't put anything past no body. So it was a really tough experience for me…to be young like that and experience something so drastic.

De'Onte, like Justin, exhibited several criterion for PTSD following the traumatic loss of his best friend. He went on to describe more about his feelings after losing his friend. "We depended on each other, for real, through those situations… and to see him leave here was heartbreaking…very heartbreaking…I was like very angry… it kind of changed my whole perspective on life. That's when I started fighting every day." The loss for De'Onte was of someone whom he grew up with and depended on daily. He expressed a deep sadness and anger that caused him to change his whole perspective on life. This symptom of the loss suggests a negative alteration in cognition, one of the hallmarks of a PTSD diagnosis. In additional to this negative view of the world, De'Onte

began fighting every day, a component of the arousal and reactivity cluster, defined by irritable and angry outbursts.

Experiences of trauma and traumatic loss can have a profound impact on children. When such experiences occur, the world no longer seems safe or fair. Often, the symptoms of these experiences- such as angry outbursts or withdrawal- are punished rather than treated. Cycles of traumatic loss begin in communities, and without the proper support, negative coping mechanisms develop. Trauma treatment is imperative for children to process a loss and the resulting feelings and for children to develop positive coping mechanisms. Policy interventions and supports from family members, schools, and other trusted adults may provide opportunities to help children overcome traumatic losses.

Peerification and Parentification

While traumatic experiences can suddenly and profoundly impact a child's view of the world, other adultification experiences are more benign, yet perhaps also more insidious. When children are peerified, they take on adult roles at a young age, and are often expected to provide support to parents in ways that may not be age appropriate. In the present study, peerified participants provided emotional and financial support to parents, sometimes through illegal means. Some young men took pride in their adult roles, while others felt burdened by their responsibilities as children.

Peerification occurs when children are pulled up into the parental subsystem, becoming more of a peer than a child. Children become equal in power and status to parents, and often serve as emotional supports to parents (Burton, 2007). This process again can be due to a lack of resources or support, both emotionally and financially. In

the present study, some took on responsibilities to pay or share bills with parents at a young age. De'Onte explained how he reassured his mother during her unemployment and contributed financially by playing music.

> That was basically how we got out of the projects, from me playing music. Like from when I made my first paycheck and I started saving up…I was like, "Mommy, we getting out of here, we getting out of here, don't worry." She was working at the post office and she got fired and she hadn't had a job for like 5 years and we were just living off of unemployment and social security…and I'm like, alright mom, I'm gonna find a job. So I started playing at the church and she was cleaning at the church and she stopped working and I'm like we gotta support somehow…so I started playing at the church and my first paycheck was like $500. And I was like, wow…mom, look at this check…and she was like wow…and she was looking at it, just crying…and I was like alright, mom, we're saving the checks and we're getting out of here.

De'Onte spoke about how his earnings from playing music were a large factor in getting out of his neighborhood. He assumed the role of provider at a young age when his mother got fired from her job. De'Onte, as the son of a single mother, related to his mother more like a partner than a son, by supporting her both emotionally and financially.

De'Onte went on to describe more about how he and his mother shared both the emotional and financial obligations of the household. De'Onte expressed a sense of pride at being able to assist his mother and to contribute to the family moving up in society.

> So I started playing when I was 9. I cried that whole day when I first got that paycheck. Came home in like tears. And I was like mom, look at the check! And

she was just sitting there crying. So, we put the check…we were at Providence for a long time and then when they switched to M&T she went to the credit union. Soon as we go the first paycheck we were like…wow. And ever since then we've been, moving on up!

For De'Onte, his experience of peerification was mostly positive, instilling in him a sense of hard work and independence. Peerification, however, can also cause risks, such as dissonance in various roles one occupies, like being a provider and being a student. While some, like De'Onte, fulfilled these responsibilities through legal means, others chose to provide through more unconventional methods. Providing by illegal means carried additional risks and possible legal ramifications. Fry discussed how he stepped into the provider role when he realized that his father was not fulfilling it. He described his focus on providing for his family, and his feeling of responsibility to take on the role that no one else was performing. Hustling was enticing to Fry as a means to bring in money to his family. With a lack of other options to make enough money to support a family, this was his logical choice. Fry realized that once he started on this path of providing through illegal means, he was in a position to get locked up.

Well, to be honest, the only responsibility I had at the time was the so-called provider in my family because I seen that my father wasn't doing it. So, I felt like because I was the next man in line and I was home, it was my job to be. That's really made me want to get out there and want to sell drugs and want to hustle. And that's really got me in a position to get locked up and my little brother says like, we need clothes, shoes, all that.

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Fry went on to detail more of his adult-like responsibilities that he took on as a teen. He explained his decision to forgo high school to make quick money to provide his family with clothes, food, and rent. As Fry highlighted throughout his interview, his main focus was making money to provide for his family.

So, I was the one who was doing it for real. That's responsibility… So it was like more of, well, forget about school, I'm gonna go out here and make me $500 real quick so we can have some clothes and we can have food and my mother can have some money to put towards the rent—even though it's not all the money, it's still some money. And it was just, that's what my main focus was. My main, main focus, I was focused on making money to provide for my family. That was it.

When Fry was asked whether his mother was okay with accepting money made from hustling drugs, Fry explained that while his mother did not approve of what he was doing, she had no other alternative but to accept the money.

Mom didn't like dirty money and said "it ain't good money if it's dirty money" even though the money was helping her…She had no other choice to because she understood where I was coming from. I was basically trying to be a man before I had to. So it ain't like she was going to say no, well I can't accept this right now. She had to. She had to accept it. There was no other alternative unless you want to be sitting out on the streets and that's not what we wanted.

Fry's mother was put in a difficult position; while she knew that Fry was providing through illegal means, he was generating an income that his family needed to live. Fry recounted how his mother would tell him to stop selling drugs and would question where his money came from, but at the end of the day had to accept it. While Fry was also fully

aware of the implications of his decisions, he again underscored the importance of being there to provide for his family. Fry claimed, "I mean a lot, a lot of my life experience came from me worrying about the next person… I was worrying about my family. Worrying about their well-being." Fry is acutely aware that he began to take on adult-like responsibilities at a young age in both financial and emotional realms. This burden was something that Fry shouldered, and he took on the role of provider as salient to his identity.

Others, like Matt, took on both legal and illegal work in order to provide for family members. Matt, age 20, realized that he needed to provide for his son when he found out that his girlfriend was expecting. For Matt, having both a job and hustling allowed him to save up thousands of dollars before his son was born. He also described how proving that he had a legitimate job allowed him to avoid some of the trouble with the law he may have faced if only engaging in underground ways of making money.

> I had a job when I was 15 right before my son was born. I was working and hustling at the same time…I drove fork lifts, I managed a temp room full of temps from a temp agency, pull orders, load up trucks, I was working in a warehouse… I was making $10 an hour, $400 a week, $350 after taxes. So when police hop out I tell them, I ain't selling no drugs and show them my pay stub. At the same time, I have a mouth full of crack… I needed money and I was saving all the money I could save for my son and I got all the way to $13,000 before he was born and I only saved up for a couple of months.

Justin also talked about hustling as a means to provide for family members. By engaging in an underground economy, Justin was able to make fast money to assist his

mother with paying rent and to help provide his siblings with basic necessities. When

asked about hustling, Justin stated,

> I got tired of asking people for stuff saw that my mother was paying rent and the
>
> bills and all of that and brothers and sisters needed this and that and I was just like
>
> as long as they good, that would put a smile on my face so I did what I did for real,
>
> you know help them out, have a couple of dollars in our pockets, help to knock
>
> down the rent, food in the crib and everything.

For Justin, being able to provide gave him a sense of pride and happiness. Like Fry,

Justin focused on providing for his family by any means necessary. He talked about his

experience hustling in a matter-of-fact way, highlighting how this was the best and most

logical choice for him given his situation at the time.

By making choices to provide, these young men took on a greater sense of agency.

Regardless of their parents or society, the end goal was to make sure that their families

were taken care of. For many, this provider role became a part of his identity. The

transition to adulthood for these young men is complicated by having a central identity of

provider, yet not always having the means to find viable pathways through which to

provide. Shawn was one of the participants who highlighted the role that hustling played

in his life. He explained that he never worked, only hustled, and had always been an

entrepreneur. This piece of his identity as a hustler was intricately intertwined with his

identity as a provider. When asked about responsibilities in his family, Shawn said "I

was the money man for real," explaining this role as if it had always been a part of his

identity. Shawn explained further that hustling and being able to buy clothes for himself

gave him status in school. When choosing between "having no money in [his] pocket"
and "getting fresh" Shawn chose to participate in the underground drug economy.

While some young men felt proud of being able to contribute to household
finances or serve as support for their mothers emotionally, others stepped into roles that
superseded the roles of their parents, becoming a "full-time quasi-parent to his siblings
and parents" (Burton, 2007, p. 339). Some young men towed the line between son and
caregiver, whether it was for siblings, a parent, or a grandparent. Justin described the
multifaceted nature of being the "man of the house," and touched on his responsibilities
to cook, clean, put his siblings to bed, and check on his mother. When asked if he had
responsibilities at home during middle school, Justin replied,

> Psssh…um…being the man of the house and keeping my brothers and sisters in
>
> order, help moms out… Make sure the house is cleaned up, make sure they're in
>
> bed in time. You know, food get cooked, help served the plates and everything.
>
> Help out with the homework and everything. You know, make sure the trash is
>
> took out, floor is mopped and swept. Bathrooms and all of that, make sure the
>
> door is locked. Make sure everybody has their night clothes. And you know, make
>
> sure my work was done and make sure mom's is good and get up the next
>
> morning and go to school… Checked on her, you know, ask her how her day
>
> was…do you need anything before I go to bed and stuff like that.

Again, Justin took on his "man of the house" identity which encompassed several
roles and responsibilities on a daily basis. Some of these may have been instrumental to
the household functioning as a whole, while others were self-directed tasks. Justin did
household chores, caregiving tasks for his siblings, and provided emotional support to his

mother. Justin took agency in this role as man of the house by choosing what tasks were important to himself and his family and doing them to the best of his ability. Justin, as child, took on responsibilities to maintain a household and provide caregiving for family members, and like many adultified children, did so without much explicit direction or guidance.

While this foray into adulthood through increased responsibility can empower children and help them gain valuable life skills, it can also be confusing and create dissonance with other roles in their lives (Burton, 2007; Roy, et al., 2014). Cultural narratives and family situations, especially in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts, can contribute to the narrative about what the man of the house is responsible for. Kwame discussed the childhood responsibilities that he took upon himself to help his mother out, and out of obligation to give back to his mother who provided for him.

> Like when she came home I would just tell her that she can go over there and
> relax. She ain't gotta do nothing. I take the trash out. I collect all the trash. I take
> the trash out. I vacuum the floors. I swept and cleaned the floors. I did the dishes.
> I chose to do that on my own cause that's what a male is really supposed to do for
> real.

While some children stepped in and out of caregiving roles as parents needed help, others took on more stable roles as caregivers for parents or grandparents. Empire stepped into an adult role the summer he took care of his sick grandfather. With parents who were in and out of his life, Empire shouldered the responsibility of caring for his grandfather. He discussed this experience as a turning point in his transition to adulthood,

and explained the changes and frustrations that went along with serving as a caregiver at a young age.

> When he started to get sick and stuff, things started to change in the family. I started to change. I was like, he ain't there what I got to go to school for. But for one summer I took care of him. My 9th grade going to 10th grade year of high school I took care of him. I went with him to dialysis changed his diapers for him, made him food, stayed there till my grandmother got home so I could probably go out. But sometimes I didn't even go out. Sometimes my grandmother would come home and I would cook, made sure she was ok and that was it. That was my duty. But I got sick and tired of that cause I didn't have anything to do during the summer. I'm young, I want to do something over the summer. But I couldn't do it so that was me growing up a little faster than I was supposed to do.

Empire pointed out an important facet of parentification: he grew up faster than he was supposed to. This accelerated timeline that adultification often causes can be confusing for children. Identities like provider, caregiver, or man of the house, can foster important life skills but also leave many young men without a sense of clear direction. This focus on others and lack of role models or clear pathways to adulthood can often leave young men at a loss for how to successfully transition to adulthood.

Summary

This study found that young Black men who are adultified- through precocious knowledge, peerification, or parentification- have a unique perspective and set of responsibilities at a young age. They often are recruited to step up to provider roles, or take on large amounts of responsibility of their own volition. These experiences may

profoundly impact the way these young men move through life and transition to adulthood.

While some of the effects of adultification may be positive, such as learning household management or caregiving behaviors, the data also suggest that there can be adverse effects of taking on adult roles. Children who experience traumatic loss may have assumptions that the world is unsafe, unfair, or cannot be trusted. I found that these assumptions can affect mental health, relationships, and may have implications for transitioning to adulthood.

Children who serve in provider roles or caregiving roles at a young age may learn certain skills, but are often not supported or guided through these experiences. This can create confusion and unhealthy boundaries in families that may persist throughout the life course. While many take on the agency of provider or caregiver roles, these positions can be taxing and can detract from a focus on the self in the transition to adulthood.

Chapter 4: Perceptions of Adulthood

In childhood, the participants largely lacked control over their environment and experiences that happened to them. Once the participants began to transition into adolescence and adulthood, most pinpointed instances in which they decided that it was time to mature. Many of the participants emphasized the agentic nature of the transition to adulthood, realizing that they had the power to make decisions and chart their course.

Of the 21 young men interviewed, 52% (n=11) said that they considered themselves to be an adult. 29% (n=6) replied no when asked if they were an adult, providing various reasons for this response. The remaining 19% of participants (n=4) had some ambivalence about being an adult, or were reluctant to take on the label.

While data have been collected on the experiences of young people transitioning to adulthood (Arnett, 2004; Osgood et al., 2010; Settersten, 2005), little attention has been given to minority and low-income populations. These populations face unique challenges that require different ways of conceptualizing the transition to adulthood. Because of early experiences, it is likely that many individuals in this group view the world in different ways than those that Arnett focused on. Early experiences of trauma and adultification may contribute to diverging schema, with those who have had these experiences viewing the world with mistrust rather than a sense of safety and security. For some in the transition to adulthood, life is seen as a struggle, while for others it is a time of endless possibility.

This project aims to explicate the lived experience of socioeconomically disadvantaged young Black men in the transition to adulthood, and to identify some of the needs, strengths, and challenges that may set them apart from others in the same life stage. Perceptions of life expectancy and experiences of stereotyping and bias from the outside world will be explored. Perceptions of adulthood will be discussed below.

Life Expectancy

Plans? I didn't have no plans. My plans was to live to see the next day. That was my plans. I didn't have no plans that I could say this is what I want to do, I want to go here, I want to go to college, I want to do this. My plans was to live to see next day -Fry, age 21

 (Where do you see yourself in about 5 years from now?) Dead or in a new system. -Kalvin, age 21

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(When you were young, like when you were 16 or so, what were your ideas, what did you want from life then?) I never thought that far. I never thought I'd make it past 25. -Matt, age 20

Young black men have a unique perspective on adulthood, shaped by experience, cultural narratives and perceptions of the outside world. The young men in the present study touched on narratives about perceived life expectancy, "fuck the world," and discrimination from the outside world. Experiences of loss often propelled one to either be inspired to do better, or to reject an unfair world. Being discriminated against in the workplace was a barrier to many young men getting hired, and sometimes a deterrent to even try in the first place. These narratives of perceived life expectancy, "fuck the world," and outside discrimination will be expanded upon and discussed in terms of the impact on the transition to adulthood.

In contrast to the middle class majority, the transition to adulthood for young Black men from socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods is not necessarily a time of endless possibility and self-focus. As reflected above, accepting the idea that one may not make it to adulthood has clear implications for both one's perspective and one's actions. Fry balked at the idea of making plans as a teen, because of the view that he would not make it to adulthood. It seemed futile to him to plan for college and what came after if he believed that he would not live until that point.

This adage, that one might not make it past 21, is taken on as a cultural narrative in some circles; Matt expanded upon it by discussing how his viewpoint affected his actions and worldview. He told the interviewer that this perspective affected the choices that he made because he made careless decisions. When asked if he would make

different decisions today, Matt admitted, "Yeah… I think about it before I do anything…
I didn't care about nothing at all, not even myself." When asked to reflect further on this,
Matt pointed out that it was a bad thing and a good thing, saying. "A good way cause I
know how to be independent and a bad way because I still sometimes act like it don't
care—like I act like, "I don't give a fuck" attitude sometimes."

This attitude, as Matt asserted, can be both adaptive and detrimental to these
young men given their contexts. The cutting off of emotions is logical given the high
exposure to trauma and loss. It may foster independence, as Matt suggested, but may
also sever ties to support from family or community members. This attitude is another
factor that may contribute to the disconnection of young Black men from certain
pathways through adulthood. The perception that one will not make it to adulthood may
be a way to distance oneself from adulthood, when there is a lack of support to access
pathways to adulthood. There also is evidence that this perspective is based in personal
experience. When forced to confront one's own life expectancy when a family member
or friend is killed, one can often be motivated in a positive way, or become disheartened
and emotionally numb.

Some young men viewed the circumstances in their neighborhood and
experienced untimely deaths of family members and were motivated by these events to
do things differently. De'Onte discussed his unique context in his family as the only
grandson left with both pride and apprehension.

> Well I did look up to my older cousins…but literally I am my last grandson on my
> grandmother's side because all of them got killed. I'm the last one. And the
> greatest accomplishment for me is that… I will be the first one who will ever go

to college and get a degree who has actually survived and I will probably be the

only one that passed 25. If I'm lucky.

De'Onte, the same young man who lost his best friend to gang violence at a young age,

was motivated by the losses of his cousins and friend. Experiencing these losses

firsthand has inspired De'Onte to want to live for them.   When asked what motivates

him, De'Onte said,

> My cousins and my friend once again…basically, they're the motivating sources
>
> because I don't want to…well ultimately I want to end up in the same place they
>
> are, but not right now. I still got a lot of work to do, so they're the motivating
>
> forces.

As the only grandson left in his family, De'Onte wanted to successfully make it to

adulthood. He aspired to go to college and study music, and had concrete plans to do so

yet still had some apprehension. De'Onte laid out his family situation and his hopes for

himself, yet he amended it with "If I'm lucky," highlighting his precarious position.

Both Kwame and Andrew talked about how they had "bettered" themselves,

largely through maturing and direct experiences of loss. Andrew highlighted his own

view that he would not live to adulthood, and explained how he has "bettered" himself

along the way.

> I done bettered myself since I was younger… You know… Not as ignorant as I
>
> used to be, you know…I'm just a different person. I'm just trying to make it in
>
> life. I'm glad I lived to see… 18, then I lived to see 19, 20, and 21. Most people
>
> don't live to see that. I thought about it- that I wouldn't make it to 18 or 21. But I
>
> did though.

Andrew focused on surrounding himself with positive and successful people in order to grow. Kwame also aimed to remove negative people from his life and be a positive role model for those around him. Kwame narrated the story of hearing that his friend got shot shortly after he invited him to stay at his house, telling him that there were two ways out of where he currently lived: either dead or in jail. After the retelling, Kwame reflected, "Now that I look at it, I think that's another reason I try to better myself cause I done lost a lot of homeboys to beef." His own experiences of loss inspired him to be better and to serve as a role model to his younger cousins. Kwame used the knowledge that he gained firsthand to express to his cousins that "running the streets" would get you "killed or locked up." He expressed the gravity of the situation to them saying, "You don't want to be sitting behind no bars. You don't want to see your mother, I mean hear about your mother getting dressed up in black to come see you at a funeral."

Futility and Bias

While firsthand experiences of loss can positively motivate one toward success, it can also take on a different meaning, one that highlights the futility of life. Justin, whose story of traumatic loss was told in the previous chapter, revisited the way that he felt after the experience.

> But, you lose somebody that close to you, you just be like "fuck the world" for
> real, you're ready to go. It aint no purpose, for real… Like if you can bring him
> back, then everything will go back to normal, but if you can't, just let me just go,
> for real man. Like I don't care, man. It aint nothing else to live for.

Rather than a focus on becoming better, this experience left Justin with a feeling that nothing mattered, which led him to disregard the consequences of his actions. This "fuck

the world" narrative emerged through some of the interviews, which suggested the presence of an unjust or adverse experience and the reaction to it, which typically involved numbing and anger, and rejection of the world that one was wronged by. Experiences that led to this "fuck the world attitude" included instances of loss and witnessing family violence and drug use. It seems to suggest a shift in one's worldview, and a refusal to accept a world in which such things could happen.

Shawn pointed out the adaptivity of a "fuck the world" attitude, in a world that he didn't see being accepting of him.

> I know we got a Black President but we still extinct for real, we black men, you feel me, when we came over here we was extinct for real. So, yeah. I'm trying to break that barrier, you feel me? I mean just do right for real and not be a statistic for real... I mean once I said "fuck the world," a lot of things started opening up for me for real.

The way Shawn saw it, when he decided to reject the world that he was rejected by, he was free to blaze his own trail. He had the ability to concentrate on what he thought was important, and felt as though more opportunities arose. Shawn also mentioned breaking barriers and defying statistics. This sentiment was echoed by several participants when asked about the transition to adulthood. Many were inspired to not be a statistic, to do things differently, or to be better.

These young men were acutely aware of the way that they were perceived by society, and several pointed out ways that bias and stereotyping impacted access to job opportunity. When asked if he ever felt left out of the work world, Kalvin explained,

Yeah because I get stereotyped a lot… Like- the first look- people got their own

perceptions from them being around somebody for a minute. You start to get this

kind of feeling about them– even if you don't even know them. You get this

feeling about them that they kind of… got their own issues or whatever or they

shouldn't be the type to be able to do this or do that.

Kwame continued to talk about how stereotyping had an impact on him, telling the story

of his first interview. He went in with his mother, nervous, with a tie and slacks on, and

when he later called to check in, was told that the company did not have his application.

Kwame expressed his frustration and also what he had learned through the experience.

So I just gave up. That started me being the way I like. Like– fuck a job. Forget

all this– forget it. You just got to do things the way you got to do it. It's not even

like that. You gotta still wait– as you get older– you got to still wait and be patient

for the things that happen for you.

Others highlighted specific experiences of bias or stereotyping that served as barriers to

employment. Despite setbacks and discrimination from outside sources, many young

men in the present study were hopeful about their transitions to adulthood. Several

identified turning points where they realized that they were in charge of their own path.

Perceptions of Adulthood

Over half of the participants, aged 17-24 reported that they considered themselves

to be an adult. Just over a quarter admitted that they were not yet adults, for different

reasons. A few more participants showed some ambivalence to identifying as an adult;

some admitted that they were not grown yet, while others longed to revert back to

childhood. *Responsibility* was the most commonly used word to describe what it meant

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to be an adult. This meant taking charge of one's own life, and was also defined by

taking care of whatever priorities one currently was in charge of. Being an adult meant

that one was able to handle responsibilities and priorities, including paying the bills and

providing for one's children. Most of the participants identified turning points where

they began to view themselves as adults and talked about personal human agency and

choice as significant in this phase of life.

Human Agency and Decision-Making. Even those who did not yet consider

themselves to be adults emphasized this agentic component of the transition to adulthood

characterized by independent decision-making and awareness of the repercussions of

one's actions. Most defined someone as an adult by how he handled his responsibilities

and priorities and by his awareness of his decision-making and its consequences.

Fry summed up his views on adulthood, maintaining that he had agency over his

decisions and his path to adulthood.

> When you become an adult you start to realize that you decide your fate. Simple
>
> as that. You decide. Don't nobody else decide your fate but you. Right now, I
>
> could go out here and I could decide that I want to do this and that could get me
>
> killed. I'm the one who brought that on myself because I decided that this is what
>
> I wanted to do. But if take the right path and I decide that instead of doing this,
>
> I'm gonna do this, I live to see another day. Then you are mature.

In contrast to Fry's viewpoint as a teen, in which he made no plans and did not

know if he would live to see the next day, his perspective on adulthood centered around

the idea that no one decides your fate but you. This new perspective is one that focuses

on personal human agency; the choices that one makes lead to success and maturity. Fry

spoke more about what this agency looked like as an adult, explaining that as a child "you already know what to do and what not to do" but once you become an adult, you decide whether you will do what is right, or what is wrong. Empire echoed this sentiment, stating plainly, "I know what I'm supposed to do, I know the consequences of the choice to do it, I know the consequences of not choosing to do it." These perspectives stood in contrast to what some of the young men believed throughout childhood and adolescence; many perceived adulthood to be the time that maturity, responsibility, and decision- making kick in.

This distinct shift in perspective was a narrative that many retold. Because they had been through several difficult experiences at a young age, many of the participants felt older or wiser than their years and had a very different lease on life than they did just a few years ago. Adulthood, for these young men typically marked a time when one's attitude had changed, and one's old and childish ways- including fighting or selling drugs- was put aside to take on more adult-like responsibilities. De'Onte explained how adulthood was not defined by age, but personal accountability and respect for others.

Adult is not based on a number, not 21 or 18, you could be an adult at the age of 13 if you want to. I say this because an adult is someone who takes care of a responsibility; he can fend for himself; he makes the right decisions to better not only his life but the next persons life and to help benefit another person's life…

In addition to making decisions to advance the well-being of self and others, De'Onte used an analogy equating adulthood with infancy. He described adulthood as the next step of life, equating it to infancy "it's like you're just coming out of diapers again, leaving the mother's nest." While this process sounds like "launching" of children from

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the home, it was described in a more deliberate manner. Because this subset of the population does not have a clear or prescribed pathway to adulthood, it often takes great effort to change one's perspective and do things differently. Kalvin eloquently and concisely summed up his perception of adulthood asserting, "It's not the situations you go through that make you better, it's the way you handle it. And that's what made my transition way easier and different."

Becoming Mature. At the point that these young Black men self identified as adults, there was often a shift or conscious decision involved. Typically, this decision involved a realization or a shift in the way one viewed the world. Many young men identified maturity as a key component of the transition to adulthood. Sometimes this shift was brought about after attaining a marker of adulthood, such as getting a job or becoming a parent. Often, it involved a shift in cognitions, taking on a different perspective, and changes in one's behavior. Many also emphasized the viewpoint of others about their maturity, and what this meant for their transition to adulthood.

Stefan spoke about having "tunnel vision" as a child and adolescent, "I was still thinking in my own little world." He began to mature during his transition to adulthood and expanded his viewpoint, looking more at the big picture. For Stefan, this mental shift started to take place when he began working; he claimed that at this point "I started to see what different looks like." Stefan talked about being different several times when speaking about adulthood; for him, this meant independent and successful. Though he did not have many role models for this ideal, it was nonetheless what he strove for.

Andrew similarly viewed his first job as a catalyst to becoming an adult. To him, becoming an adult meant that he needed to abandon childish ways and begin to act like

an adult. Andrew reflected on this experience and stated, "I started seeing myself doing things. I was working. I was just like, 'damn, I'm growing up' I need to stop acting like a child now. I'm a grown man, I need to start doing grown man stuff." For most of the participants, "grown man stuff" was characterized by meeting responsibilities. This meant providing for oneself by getting a job and paying the bills, and providing for any other family members.

In addition to meeting responsibilities, one must carry himself like an adult and project the image of maturity to others. Many young men brought up speaking like an adult as a way to convey maturity to others. Fry plainly stated that "You gotta know how to talk to a person." A significant benchmark of adulthood to him is being able to speak to others. He claimed, "If you can have a conversation with a grown man, a man who's already mature, who already an adult… If you can have a conversation with a business man, then you are mature because you know how to talk." Fry went on to stress the importance of first impressions and self-presentation, holding that in the first 30 seconds of an interaction that one would be able to sense his maturity. Stefan also in intentional about his speech, maintaining that "my 'adultness' – 'adultness' is not a word, but – but it comes from my speaking. I speak, if I'm talking, I want to give you the impression that I'm an adult." He used both speech and body language to project an image of maturity to the outside world.

Justin admitted that sometimes it doesn't hurt to talk things out, and that one must look at situations from an adult point of view in the transition to adulthood. For Justin, a large component of his transition involved how he viewed himself and the situations around him. He talked about petty situations in which he would have acted out as a teen

that now do not bother him. Whereas previously Justin would not consider the consequences of his actions, he later acted with forethought to not put himself in negative situations.

> Back in your younger days, you'd be like, yo I don't give a fuck, but now, you look at it like, I'm not even gonna put myself in a trick bag. Don't put yourself in a trick bag.

Justin's advice, as a mature adult, was to avoid situations in which one might be putting himself in danger. Others echoed these sentiments, describing how as adolescents they would fight or become easily upset, but in adulthood they instead focus on what they need to be doing. Becoming mature is characterized by both *talking the talk* and *walking the walk* to convey to others that one is now an adult.

Justin pointed out how he noticed recently the respect he garnered from older members of the community because of his unique and mature perspective. Many young men claimed to be "wise beyond my years" while in the transition to adulthood. It is likely that this self-perception of wisdom arises from taking on adult-like roles or having advanced knowledge or experiences at a young age. Some of these young men had seen and experienced things by adolescence that most adults would never go through. Because of this lived experience, and because most of the participants by this point have made conscious decisions to take a positive path, these young men did have wisdom beyond their years.

Some pointed out another implication of having adult experiences and taking on adult-like roles as a child. When asked whether he faced new freedoms or challenges as an adult, Matt answered, "No, I was living like an adult as a kid." This simple answer

characterizes the experience of the majority of those in the present study. The pathway to adulthood is not as clear and sequential when one feels as though he is living like an adult as a kid. With a lack of clear pathways through work and opportunity, transitions become even more elusive.

Much of what was characterized of what it means to be an adult looked like what any young adult would respond: it was defined by the way one carries himself, by the way he speaks, and by his choices. This population also identified unique perspectives on adulthood, especially in reference to experiences of trauma or adultification as children. Because they took on adult-like experiences at young ages, these young men may at times feel more equipped to handle the transition to adulthood. On the other hand, these early adverse experiences may create additional challenges such as mental health issues or negative coping mechanisms throughout the life course.

Reluctance to Become an Adult. While most of the participants characterized themselves as adults and had a clearly defined view of what this meant for them, a few participants (n=4) expressed some ambivalence about being an adult. For some, this meant that their perception of adulthood and their current situation did not quite match up; for others this was more of a reluctance to becoming an adult.

Both Shawn and De'Onte were exposed to traumatic and adult situations as children through family and community violence. Both young men had distinct experiences that impacted their worldviews as young children; De'Onte with the loss of his best friend, and Shawn when his family was put out of their home. In their narratives, each directly referenced becoming a man early or seeing the world completely differently as a young child. Though Shawn was 22 and De'Onte was 17, both considered

themselves to be growing and did not perceive themselves as full adults. Shawn phrased his situation by stating, "Like I see myself as an adult but not grown yet, you feel. Like cause I aint got the things that a grown person got." To him, adults had the ability to pay his bills, and buy a home and car. These were some of his aspirations, but he had not yet attained them, so by his own definition had not yet reached full adulthood. De'Onte expressed a similar view, admitting that often his actions matched up with those of an adult, but that he did not consider himself to be an adult yet: "I act grown sometimes but I'm not. I'll admit it, I admit to the fullest I am not an adult. I'm a young adult…I'm growing to be an adult, but not yet." For De'Onte, becoming an adult meant being able to sustain himself by buying a house or an apartment and paying for all of his meals.

While some took on an adult identity partially, others rejected it entirely. Isaiah, age 22, identified turning 21 as a significant marker of adulthood. He claimed that once he turned 21, he felt that he was really on his own and felt a pull to "do something." Isaiah admitted,

> To tell you the truth, I really don't feel right living this adult age. All because back when I was young, I wasn't even thinking about becoming an adult. I was just out there having fun, getting through school still having fun and now once you're out of school and really on your own.

Isaiah hinted at the lack of supports and clear pathways through adulthood present for young Black men. When higher education is not the next step, there is not often a clear transition from adolescence to adulthood. This extended adulthood through the pathway to college is a luxury that the socioeconomically disadvantaged cannot afford. While the next steps are unclear, Sal, also age 22, highlighted the fear among those without a clear

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course through adulthood, "I don't wanna be that guy… That guy is the guy you don't know, you've never heard of. Ain't doing nothing with his life."

Motivation to Change

Despite having encountered adverse experiences in childhood, the participants in the study found that the transition to adulthood was a time of great agency, and a time where these experiences could be left behind. Many of the young men in the present study felt as though they had overcome many things in their lives, and expressed feeling older or wiser than their years. By participating in a life history interview, they were able to reflect on their experiences leading up to the present. Several young men labeled a motivation, whether it was a distinct point in time, experience, or relationship, to improve themselves by becoming an adult or getting on a better path. As discussed above, many participants were motivated by losses of loved ones or were internally motivated in the transition to adulthood. The most salient motivator in this sample was motivation to change or become better through family. Several young men identified a similar framework to discuss their motivation to become an adult. Mothers positively motivated to give back, fathers motivated as an example of what one did not want to become during adulthood, and having children provided the opportunity to do things differently from one's own parents.

Family. Family members were frequently cited as a motivation to change. Several of the participants, especially those who served in provider roles, cited family as a reason to succeed or successfully transition into adulthood. Sometimes, the motivation arose from examples of family members whom one did not aspire to be like. More frequently, participants identified parents or their own children as motivators to succeed.

Many young men were predominantly raised by single parents and had a particular interest in giving back to the mothers who raised them. Those who had their own children were quick to point out how their lives changed with the birth of their child, and how they quickly realized that they needed to do things differently. Others cited simply the expectations of family members or the desire to make them proud as instrumental motivating factors in their lives.

Parents. Parents, especially mothers, served as a constant and underlying source of motivation for some. Kwame expressed his admiration for his mother, "I've always looked at my mother as a strong black woman because she did stuff. Like she really went out of her way," citing her willingness to provide for her children. He expanded on this, explicating the ways that his mother, as a single parent, was able to give her children everything, and summed up his feelings with "I really look up to my mother. A lot." As previously discussed, Kwame took on additional responsibilities in the household to ensure that his mother could relax.

Both Sylvester and Fry similarly viewed their mothers as strong women, and had an immense amount of respect for her and her ability to provide for her children on her own. He credited his mother with his survival, and with his motivation to succeed, explaining, "Now that we're old enough it's our turn, I feel like it's our turn now to help her because she got this far… That's why I feel like I've gotta do this. This is something that I can't just not do." Fry's sense of obligation to his mother stemmed from his respect and appreciation for her, a sentiment which Sylvester echoed. He was awed by how his mother took care of himself and his siblings on her own, and noted his mother's sacrifice for her children. He believed that when he is able to repay his mother for all he is done,

then he would be an adult: "We been through a lot, been through a lot. That's pretty much right there… That's all I want to do is take care of my mother, that's all I want to do. That right there, I think that'll make me an adult."

While mother figures tended to be held in high esteem, fathers in this sample were more likely to serve as a model for what not to do. While some harbored resentment or negative feelings toward father figures, most were more focused on setting a better example for their own children. Often, having an absent father served as motivation to take on more responsibility in the household and take on more of a provider role within the family. De'Onte, along with others, explicitly pointed out that they did not have a male role model, and did not have a father present in the household. While some lacked a father figure to emulate at all, others discussed the ambivalence toward their fathers. Justin summed up this feeling when he presented the situation with his father:

> Like, me and my father, we aight, you know. We had a bond and everything, you know. But he's done some cruddy stuff in my life, for real and everything. I still accept him cause he's my father and everything, but at the same time, we ain't that close like how we used to be like father and son for real.

Without a clear role model, many young men lacked an example of the kind of adult that they would like to be. However, those who had children cited the birth of their children as a clean slate and an opportunity to provide what they had not received in childhood.

Children. Having a child served as a significant life marker for many participants, and for several served as the moment they considered themselves to be an adult. Having a child often was spoken about in relation to maturity or responsibility and viewed as a large component of the transition to adulthood for those who became parents at that time.

This life event often served as an impetus to change one's mindset and to focus on different things.

Stefan relished in his role as provider, stating, "I've always adored the family man. Always being able to take care of your family." He aspired to be a family man "emotionally and financially" and provide his family with everything they need. Fry also underscored the importance of providing for his son, and defined his adulthood as beginning when he realized that he was struggling with his son. Fry's realization that he was beginning to act like his own father sparked him to step up to provide for his son in a way that he was not provided for. Having children gave many of the participants the chance to parent in the way that they longed to be parented. Many emphasized being present and being a provider, especially those who stepped up to fill provider roles that their fathers were not fulfilling. Fry explained the wake up call he had when he became a father.

> Me becoming an adult was when my son started getting older and we really started struggling as far as dealing with my son. So I started realizing that I was starting to be like my father and I, like, wasn't even providing for my son the way that I wanted to. So I start realizing that I got to start making my own decisions, I can't let nobody else decide my fate.

Fry's story highlighted a multigenerational narrative of motivation and change that was told by some of the participants. His motivation was driven by his mother, who raised him and provided for him, his father, as "the opposite of what I want to be" and his son, whom he provides for. Fry saw the beginning of his transition to adulthood defined by the realization that he was not providing for his son in the way that he wanted to. As

his son grew older, Fry realized that he was struggling to provide for him, and having been in that situation as a child, made a conscious effort to do something differently. Throughout his interview, Fry discussed ways of providing for his family and giving back to his mother who raised him and his siblings. In addition to this positive motivation, he used negativity as a motivator, stating, "My father, he inspires me because I don't want to be like him." Because he experienced father absence, Fry was determined to be present for his own son. Fry talked about becoming a social worker, so children like him would have someone that they could relate to.

Stefan also cited his son as his primary motivation to transition into adulthood. He decided that he wants to "build a legacy of great men" by teaching respect, manners, and to go to school. He viewed this as an opportunity that begins with himself, by setting the example of being a good and honest man who provides for his family, and raises his sons to do the same thing. Expecting a child often served as the catalyst to self-reflection, and led to clarity about one's own childhood. This life event allowed for exploration of what could be done differently from one's parents. Having a child seemed to ignite a spark or make a light bulb go off for several young men. It became an impetus to make money, to stop selling drugs, and to transition to adulthood. Kwame talked about the moment he decided to turn his life around,

> Then… my daughter was born. It was like I had to change my life around. Ever since then, I've been on a path. I don't hang around people that are negative, I don't do things that are negative. Everything I do is positive cause I got people that look up to me.. Like certain things you gotta stop. You gotta just let go. The streets is just one of the things you gotta let go.

Kwame explained that this moment was a positive turning point in his life and caused him to reflect on what he wanted. He decided to leave the streets behind and remove negative people from his life, and encouraged his younger cousins to do the same thing. Having a child served as a significant life event and opportunity for self-reflection for many young men. At this point one could make choices to do things differently, and were often motivated to make positive changes.

Motivation to begin the transition to adulthood and to succeed arose from a few different sources. Family served as a primary motivator for many young men, including from parents and once they had children of their own. Mothers were often seen as figures that exemplify what one should aspire to, as provider and caretakers, whereas fathers were more likely to serve as a model of how one does not want to raise his own children. Those who took on a provider role at a young age were more likely to look up to and be motivated by their mothers. Below I will explore the various pathways to adulthood and the perceptions of the young men in transition. Many young men reached a point where they had to take on higher levels of personal accountability, whether this stemmed from reaching legal adulthood, having a child, or other factors.

Pathways to Adulthood

Most young men identified clear markers of their transition to adulthood, such as having a child, getting a job, or reaching legal age. Despite these perceived markers of adulthood, few clear pathways exist for socioeconomically disadvantaged young Black men. Fewer job opportunities exist as a result of economic downturn, especially to those who do not attend college. A few pathways exist, but are often not clearly defined and do not come with models or supports for disconnected young men. Four main pathways to

adulthood were identified in the data: education, employment, parenting, and public systems or institutions.

Education. Young adults from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas often lag behind their middle class peers in terms of connections and supports through the education system. Men in this sample perceived education to be the most common pathway to adulthood. Higher education has become increasingly important to be competitive in the job market.

Many spoke about going to school as a way to better oneself and do something positive with one's life. Those who valued education saw it as a pathway to success, and a way out of their past lives. Empire cited his goals for his life as having "my name known for less bad than to do something positive to change something." His aim was to pay it forward, and to put a smile on others' faces. Empire viewed education, with goals to attend an ivy league school for Psychology, as a way out of his current situation. He viewed education as a way to "meet new people with different lifestyles." Education was a pathway for him to broaden his perspective and learn through coursework but also through others. Empire went on to say "I'm tired of this typical nigga mentality this nigga way of life. That's how people put it so that's how I'm gonna put it. I don't want to be a statistic. I'm not a statistic." By attending college Empire aimed to create his own pathway and be different than those around him.

Typically those who expressed clear ideas about their pathway through education and occupation had a specific interest or a focus that helped them to shape their pathway. De'Onte, who used music as a means to provide for his family as a child, continued to use this passion to carve out his own pathway. By the time De'Onte was 17, he had a

clear idea for his next steps. He had a clear plan to earn a bachelors degree in music and

a masters in ministry, with specific schools in mind for each. De'Onte wanted to use his

study to become a minister of music at a large church. Music was a huge part of

De'Onte's identity beginning at age 4 and gave him a defined sense of what to pursue

while transitioning to adulthood.

When one has role models or has an interest or a passion, the pathway through

education is somewhat elucidated. This pathway is not always expected or accessible to

socioeconomically disadvantaged youth and college is often very difficult to navigate

without resources or supports (Furstenberg, 2008).

Employment. Many characterized becoming an adult as being defined by having

one's priorities straight and being financially stable. This financial stability meant that a

young man could own a place, pay bills, and be able to provide for family members.

Some were excited by the idea of having a job, while others felt burdened or

overwhelmed by the process. Many of the young men saw getting their first job as a

distinct marker of adulthood. Some were very optimistic and hopeful about getting a job

and succeeding, while others identified barriers to procuring a job.

Some men in the sample were very grateful to have a pathway to adulthood

through getting a job. Justin explained, "It's a privilege, it's not something you just want

to take for granted." Justin went on to explain how getting a job is a way to get on one's

feet and that one should take it seriously. He stressed the importance of hard work and

timeliness, especially in a time of economic downturn. Having a job came with a sense

of pride and accomplishment for many of the participants, and a complete sense of

independence. Kalvin claimed that when he was working at a market was the first time

he truly felt like an adult, and realized one day, "Hold on, I'm on my own, this is what everybody wanted, and it feels real good." This reaction was fairly typical, in that adulthood and its freedoms felt good; on the others hand, it was difficult and the onus was focused on the individual and no one else.

Others pointed out some of the challenges or barriers they faced while pursuing this pathway. Even Empire, who was very optimistic about his current job and future, identified barriers to getting a job, and spoke about feeling as though everyone around him was getting jobs and he could not. Many referenced the difficulty of finding a job and being on your own to do so. Some discussed programs that were there to assist them through the process, but ultimately they did not find these programs to be beneficial. Some recounted stories about getting rejected by employers, feeling that stereotyping played a part. These biases have implications for young Black men transitioning to adulthood and further complicate this already difficult process.

Many referenced the challenges that they had faced in their past and how these informed their pathways through adulthood. Shawn claimed, "I mean I became a man at an early age, by myself for real." By going through this, he felt equipped to provide for himself and identified as a hard worker. Stefan went a step further to appreciate all that he had been through in his past. Rather than blame others or feel negatively about the past, he viewed his experiences as formative to who he was.

> I don't feel bad about the path I'm on now like as far as jobs or anything because then, all this that I went through, all of this fighting and struggling. It made me a better person. It made me the person I am now and I am so happy about the person that I am now. So, I said I'm glad I went through it all because it made me

a stronger person. I'm smarter. I'm wise. So, I don't feel left out by anything. If anything, I feel like I'm right on schedule.

Parenting. Having a child served as a significant life marker for many participants, and for several served as the moment they considered themselves to be an adult. Having a child often was spoken about in relation to maturity or responsibility and viewed as a large component of the transition to adulthood for those who became parents at that time. This life event often served as an impetus to change one's mindset and to focus on different things.

Kwame spoke about how he stopped selling drugs on his 18th birthday, when he found out that his girlfriend was pregnant. He snapped into maturity and accompanied his girlfriend to all of her appointments, leaving the drug trade behind. Matt also recognized the birth of his child as a significant moment in which he put childish things aside. He too left parts of his past behind, and characterized his life as a lot better since doing so. "Cause I ain't getting into trouble, not going to jail, none of that." Matt explained that once he had a child and became an adult, he no longer found himself in trouble. He stated that the birth of his child brought a humbleness about in him. Matt made conscious decisions to have children at a young age after ensuring that he could provide for them. When he talked about having a career, Matt stated that his priority was to provide for his son, that he didn't care what else happened.

As discussed in the previous section, parenting became a way for many of the participants to take agency over their lives and make choices to do things differently. While this meant often giving up things that they used to do, it also meant a second

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chance to raise children who would not experience the same difficulties that they had experienced in childhood.

Public Institutions and Systems. In addition to pathways to adulthood through education, work, and becoming a parent, the participants explicated another alternative pathway- becoming a part of public systems.

Socioeconomically disadvantaged youth are likely to interact with some form of public institutions or system throughout childhood. These systems include foster care and group homes, the welfare system, and the juvenile justice system. Some of these institutions serve as supports for young men and provide connections to work or housing. Other programs complicate the lives of young men and serve to disrupt transitions through adolescence and adulthood. Public systems such as foster care typically end at either age 18 or 21, and leave young adults with little additional support. Sometimes one has been a part of this system throughout his whole childhood, and then is left with little guidance through the transition to adulthood. Many young men interact with several systems throughout their lives, yet may have little guidance in navigating these large transitions- such as into and out of foster care or the criminal justice system.

Many young Black men have experience with the criminal justice system during the transition to adulthood. This experience often served as a turning point, as Kalvin reflected, "but then when I got locked up and realized *damn, now I am an adult*." Being locked up served as a very real wake up call that Kalvin was no longer a child and that there were consequences for his actions. Mike, age 23, lost his parents and had a similar harsh wake up call to adulthood. His first experience with a public system was when he began to enter shelters and group homes, which he described as scary and a new

experience. Both being locked up and living in shelters served as formative experiences that caused young men to snap into adulthood. These harsh pathways to adulthood offer little support and often cause young men to feel isolated during the transition to adulthood.

Summary

Perceptions of adulthood are shaped by contextual factors and views about the world. Young Black men from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds exist in unique contexts that shape their worldviews. Assumptive worldviews are informed by trauma and often characterized by futility, while also being shaped by bias from the outside world. Views on truncated life expectancy can be both damaging but also adaptive in the transition to adulthood.

For these young men, the transition to adulthood is defined by agency and decision-making. Responsibility and maturity at this stage are displayed through actions and words. Many experience a shift in cognitions and worldview, and make different decisions- such as choosing to not engage in conflict- than they did in adolescence. While most identified as adults, a few participants showed reluctance to become adults.

The motivation to change was sometimes internally driven or informed by an important loss, however family was cited as the most important driving factor to successfully transition to adulthood. Mothers often were positive motivating factors and role models of successful adults and providers. Fathers were typically characterized as an example of what not to do. Children served as a chance to start fresh and to parent in the way that one would have liked to be parented.

Pathways to adulthood are often not well defined for socioeconomic young Black men of color. Pathways to adulthood identified in the data included experiences with education, work, parenting, and public systems or institutions. These four main pathways were a way to conceptualize the transition out of adolescence and were characterized by maturity and increased responsibility. Additional supports through the transition to adulthood should be put in place to assist young Black men through education and work opportunities in order to facilitate smooth transitions.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The goal of the present study was to explore the perceptions of adulthood from the perspective of a group that is often neglected in the literature, socioeconomically disadvantaged young Black men. Experiences of early trauma and adultification were explored in addition to contextual factors that contributed to the lived experience of these young men. Bias, stereotyping, and neighborhood contexts all played a role in the transition to adulthood for this sample. In the study I aimed to explicate motivations and pathways to adulthood that exist for young Black men and identify areas for growth in this area.

While there is a growing body of literature on the transition to adulthood for youth in today's society, research is lacking on socioeconomically disadvantaged populations and how their transitions may be different. This study aimed to answer a call to present the lived experience of young Black men in order to more fully understand their experiences and develop programs or interventions (Rich, & Grey, 2005; Roy et al., 2014). While young Black men have received national attention as of late, programming and effective policies to strengthen connections and successful transitions to adulthood

still lag behind. By ascertaining what it means to be an adult directly from the

participants, this study contributes to a conversation about how to best facilitate pathways

to adulthood for socioeconomically disadvantaged youth.

While this study provided important insight into the lived experience of young

Black men, and how they are shaped by context and early experience in the transition to

adulthood, it is not without limitations. The sample size was limited to participants from

Baltimore City, which isolates the geographic region and therefore the generalizability of

the findings. While the participants in the present study may have similar experiences to

other individuals, it is not necessarily the case. Random sampling was not used in the

study and no comparison group was used. The sample size also only consisted of 21

participants, and each one of them was recruited from the same youth development

program. This suggests some level of connection to community resources and

institutions, which may not be the case for other socioeconomically disadvantaged young

Black men.

The present study examines the lived experience of a population often absent

from the literature. I provide empirical support for Linda Burton's model of

adultification, examining the impact of precocious knowledge, peerification, and

parentification on young Black men. This study helps to explicate how the lives of young

Black men in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts differ and how this shapes

transitions to adulthood. In it, I focus on family as the primary unit of socialization while

situating the family and individual in greater neighborhood and society contexts.

Adverse childhood experiences were cited frequently in the data. These

experiences- such as adultification, neighborhood violence, and traumatic loss- have

negative consequences and may lead to an accumulation of stress (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). Such experiences may lead to emotional and behavioral problems, and potentially even health problems. With no treatment, support, or way to contextualize these adverse experiences, children may experience lasting consequences. In the present study, some of these consequences included anger and fighting, cutting off of emotions, and even suicidality. By utilizing life history interviews, the present study was able to explore early adverse childhood experiences and their ramifications. Parents may not have the emotional or financial resources to prevent these adverse experiences or to help their children heal from them.

Parents in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods may not be able to shield or protect their children from the contexts that they exist in. Children often must navigate these harsh environments on their own, and assist their families in making a way. This study examined how and why young men take on provider roles at young ages, and what some of the effects of this role are. I found that many young men took pride in the role, and it allowed them to take agency, and to assist family members. Despite the positive effects of adultification, this process seemed to do little to assist in facilitating the transition to adulthood.

Human agency was a central component of the transition to adulthood for the young men in the study. By focusing on this component of the life course theory, I illustrated a shift that took place in the transition to adulthood. Despite adverse experiences in childhood, the participants chose to make decisions that would better their lives or the lives of their families. For several, this meant providing for children in a way that they were not provided for, for others, this meant pursuing education. Various

motivations existed to begin the transition to adulthood, with many centering on family members. A desire to give back to parents who provided, or to do better than parents who were not around to provide was commonly cited in the data. It is important to study the transition to adulthood in its context and focus on markers throughout the life course to better understand this time of life.

In this study, adverse childhood experiences- notably early experiences of trauma and traumatic loss- were not properly dealt with and typically led to symptoms such as numbing, anger, and fighting. These experiences, coupled with insufficient family support and bias from the outside world frequently resulted in a "fuck the world" attitude, a rejection of a place that is unfair and unsafe. These findings give important insight into the lived experience of children in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts and point to what some of their needs are before and during the transition to adulthood. The findings suggest that in addition to resources and additional pathways to adulthood, trauma- informed services are crucial for many young men to successfully transition into adulthood.

Young Black men in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts often have many obstacles to overcome, including experiences of trauma and violence, navigating respect and masculinity, and finding viable pathways to adulthood with little support. Neighborhood contexts are frequently where youth are exposed to trauma or violence, and there are typically few community resources to adequately deal with the effects of these experiences. This study has important implications for the needs of young people in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts. It is necessary for practitioners with knowledge of the symptoms of trauma to be employed in schools and communities where

experiences of trauma are frequent. Models that treat the symptoms of trauma, rather than punish them have been found to be most successful. Additionally, teachers and other adults in the community should be aware of adultification and its potential consequences. Many young men find a sense of identity and agency through provider roles, while school becomes secondary. Additional supports through taking on this role, as well as opportunities to succeed in school should be created so that more pathways to adulthood exist.

Future research in the area of the transition to adulthood for socioeconomically disadvantaged young Black men is necessary to bring adequate resources and services to these communities. Treatment should focus on adverse childhood experiences, in which one asks *what happened to you*, and attempts to bring about healing, rather than punishment. It is important to further study the benefits and risks of adultification of young men in low income families. By ascertaining more information from these individuals, solutions can be created to facilitate more successful transitions to adulthood.

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Appendix A

Young Men in Transition to Adulthood
Integrated Research Protocol

I would like to spend some time today talking about your journey toward becoming an adult. I'm interested in looking back and talking about your "life history," such as where and how you grew up, and your work and school experiences. Most importantly, I would like to better understand how your life experiences have shaped your journey toward adulthood and what being an adult means to you.

Current Situation

So I'd like to start with some basic information.

How old are you?
      What's it like to be _____ years old?

I'd like to talk about where you're living now. Tell me about the neighborhood where you live currently.

How would you describe the conditions of your neighborhood?
      Neighbors
      Safety
      Businesses/jobs in community
      Resources (programs, recreation centers, hospitals, etc.)

How long have you lived there?
      What brought you to this place?

Who do you live with?
      How long have you lived there with them?
      Are there any other places where you stay?
      If you needed a place to stay, who could you call?

Daily Round

I'd like to get a sense of your day-to-day life. Starting with when you wake up in the morning, tell me how your day usually goes.
      Where are you going? What are you doing? Who are you with?

Interviewers can use a grid to track daily routine.
Probes: Transportation— How do you get around?
               Communication—How do people get in touch with you?
               Reciprocity—who are you helping? Who is helping you?
               Variation in routine-weekend v. weekday

Vision for Your Life

You're at an important point in your life, finishing up school, thinking about what comes next.

Today, thinking about this, tell me about as best you can about what you want for your life.

What are you most proud of?

Family History

Now I'd like to talk a bit about your family and your family's heath.

Who do you consider to be your family now? — (like your parents, brothers and sisters, friends, uncles, aunts, god brothers/sisters…)

How do you spend time with your family? (ASK THIS!)

Who makes up your support system? Family members/others? (the group of people that you can depend on)
        Who are the people in your life that you have deep sharing
        relationships with? Who do you turn to for emotional support? How have these relationships changed over time?
        Who turns to you?

Are there health concerns that your family is dealing with? Can you give an
        example?
        How do you support, care for, help out with your (mom's/dad's/grandmother…)
        health issues?

Are there any health issues that you are dealing with?
        How does (asthma/whatever health concern) impact your life?
        How do you care for your health issues?

If you got sick, who would you turn to?

Life History

Let's spend a bit of time talking about growing up.
        Where did you live in grade school (from when you were a small child
        through 5th grade)? Tell me about these neighborhoods.
        Where did you live during middle school/junior high (6-8th grades)? Tell me about these neighborhoods. If the same neighborhood, how did it change?
        Where did you live in high school? Tell me about these neighborhoods.

While in grade school, who was in your family?

     Who was the most important adult to you as a young boy?

     What was your relationship with your father like when you were young?

     What was your relationship with your mother like when you were young?

     What roles and responsibilities did you have in your family then?

Did your family change at all from grade school to middle school? How?

     Who was the most important adult to you during this time?

     What roles and responsibilities did you have in your family then?

Did your family change at all from middle school to high school? How?

     Who was the most important adult to you during high school?

     What roles and responsibilities did you have in your family then?

How old were you when you moved out of your parents' house for the first time?

     What were the circumstances?

     Where did you go?

     Did you move back in at any point? If so, when and what were the circumstances?

Probe: Watch for gaps in life history. Where gaps are noted, ask interviewee to walk you through the gap.

Education History

Now let's spend sometime talking about your experiences in school.

Where did you go to grade school (pre-K to 5th grade)?

     What was your experience of grade school?

     What type of student were you?

     How was your family involved in your education?

         If you were struggling or had a problem in school, how did your family/support network help, guide, or support you? Can you give an example?

Where did you go to middle school or junior high school (6-8th grades)?

     What was your experience like?

     What type of student were you?

     How did your support network help, guide or support you in school?

     Probe: Summers?

Where did you go to high school?

     What was your experience of high school?

     Were you involved in activities?

     What type of student were you?

     How did your support network help, guide or support you in high school?

     Probe: Summers?

What's your status in school? (how far along in GED program, finished HS, etc.)

Thinking back, how has your neighborhood shaped your experiences in school?
(If participant has moved often) Were there differences between the neighborhoods and their effects on school?

How have those plans played out?
Do you have any long terms goals for education?
Are there people in your family who have completed high school and/or attended college who could give you advice, share their experiences with   you, and help you through the process? Did they?

Have you ever felt left out of or disconnected from the school world?

Peer/Romantic Relationships

 So I'd like to spend some time talking about your peer and romantic relationships.

Tell me about your friends.
How do you know them?
How long have you known them? How have they changed over time?
What are they up to? (Are they in school? Working?)
How do you spend time with them?
Do you have a best friend? (Can you tell me about that relationship? What's he/she like?
How did s/he become your best friend?
How do you help your friends? How do your friends help you?

How do you think your friends influenced your experiences at school?
How did school shape your friendships?

What about romantic relationships? Are you dating/talking to anyone? (IF NOT: Ask about most recent/significant relationships?)
Is it serious? Is it fun?
What does dating/talking to someone mean to you?
How do you know them?
How long have you known them? How have they changed over time?
What are they up to? (Are they in school? Working?)
How do you spend time with them?

Trust is an important issue in relationships. How does that play out in your friendships and romantic relationships? (Do you trust them?)

<u>Work History</u>

Now I'd like to talk about your experiences in work.

Did you work during high school?
　　　　When and what was your first job? How did you go about getting this job?
　　　　Was your family supportive of you working?

After high school, where did you work?
　　　　Did you receive any training or certification?

Has anyone in your family/community/school taught you a skill or given you the resources you need to be self-sufficient?

Are you working now?
　　　　Where?　For how long?
　　　　Full time/part time, hourly or salary, benefits
　　　　(Is this the job you envisioned when you were finished with high school?)
　　　　How long do you see yourself working there?

Is this job enough to make ends meet?　(IF UNEMPLOYED: So you're looking for a job now/unemployed, how do you make ends meet?)
　　　　If not, what else do you do?
　　　　　　　　Are there other ways that you earn money or support yourself financially?
　　　　　　　　If you were in a financial bind and needed some cash, who could you turn to? Do you usually go to this person if you need money?

Thinking back, how has your neighborhood shaped your experiences with work/making ends meet?
　　　　(If participant has moved often) Were there differences between the neighborhoods and their effects on work?

If you were looking for work or struggling to find it, how might your family/friends/organizations help, guide, hook you up, or support you? Is there someone in your family who has a lot of connections who could help you out? Can you give an example?

Have you ever felt left out of or disconnected from the work world? (IF NOT EMPLOYED but said not felt disconnected: You say that you are not currently employed but do not feel left out 0r disconnected. How do you make sense of this/help me understand this?)

For some people, their job kinda shapes who they are or work plays an important role in their lives. What does having a job mean to you?

       Is having a job a piece of your identity?

       Have you thought about long term career goals?

Adulthood

What does becoming/being an adult mean to you?

       Do you consider yourself to be an adult now?

           If you could identify a turning point when you first considered
       yourself an adult, what would it be?

       Do you look at yourself differently as an adult? How so?

       Do others look at you differently? How so?

What does it mean to be an adult in your family?

       Who considers you to be an adult?

       When did they start considering you an adult? Under what circumstances?

       Who do you consider to be an adult?

       Are there adults you strive to be like?

Is there a certain point or age when the adults in your family offer less support to the young people in your family? An age when they feel the young person should be able to handle things on their own?

       How is this point/age determined in your family?

       Did the "pulling back" of family members support happen to you? Were you
       ready for it? Resentful of it? Felt prepared?

       How does your family work to prepare young people for the "pulling back"? Who
       in your family does this preparing?

       Does this process differ for young men and women in your family?

       Where/who does the young person turn to for support once the adult
       members pull back?

How has/will your life changed since becoming an adult?

       What new roles and responsibilities do you have now as an adult?

       Freedoms/challenges associated with your being an adult?

Other

Find gaps in timelines and fill in with descriptions…

Finish

Where do you see yourself five years from now?

What is your greatest personal fear?

       What is your greatest personal hope?

What are the motivating or driving forces in your life?
What inspires you?

What are some areas that you need to improve or change?
What are some of your greatest accomplishments?