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Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

ADULTING AND WAITING: DOING, FEELING AND BEING IN LATE CAPITALISM

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Abstract

This article distinguishes between adulthood and "adulting," a state of being and a set of practices, or doing. Based on field research on youth and adulthood in Botswana and more generally on literature about youth, "waithood," and elusive adulthood globally, the article explores the idea of adulting as a performance and as a performative, but questions whether either addresses the failed sense of self in current anxieties about attaining adulthood. The article then situates "feeling adult" and its failures in late capitalism, with its marketization of emotion and the feeling self.

Keywords: Adulthood; Youth; Waithood; Africa; Late Capitalism; Feelings

Yetişkin Olarak Eyleme ve Bekleme: Geç Kapitalizmde Yapma, Hissetme ve Olma

Öz

Bu makale yetişkinlik ile olma durumu ve bir dizi pratik anlamında "yetişkin olarak eyleme" arasında bir ayrım yapmaktadır. Botswana'da gençlik ve yetişkinlik üzerine yapılan bir alan araştırmasına ve daha genel olarak küresel düzeyde gençlik, "bekleme dönemi" ve muğlak sınırları olan yetişkinlik üzerine yazılmış literatüre dayanan bu makale, bir performans ve performatif olarak yetişkin olarak eyleme fikrini araştırır. Bununla birlikte, makale her iki kavramın da yetişkinliği kazanmaya dair günümüzdeki endişeler içinde başarısız olmuş benlik duygusuna eğilip eğilmediğini sorgulamaktadır. Makale, sonrasında, "yetişkin hissetme" ve duygu pazarlama ve hisseden benlik ile birlikte onun geç kapitalizmdeki başarısızlıklarına yer vermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yetişkinlik; Gençlik; Bekleme Dönemi; Afrika; Geç Kapitalizm; Hisler

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What does it mean to "be an adult"? Is it a designation based on age that allows you, in the United States, to vote, serve in the military, buy a gun, or even buy cigarettes and alcohol? (For some of these the age is 18, for others 21.) Is it, as in Botswana, an age below which you are officially youth and eligible for the wide range of government youth development programs, yet vague in itself? Or is it a feeling ("I don't feel grown up," say many in the United States, even in their 30s)? Or a set of behaviors ("Grow up!" urges a friend when you whine about a workmate who won't do what you want)? In this essay, I examine the changing ways in which "growing up" is problematically located between these three forms, and poses challenges to people in America and in Botswana. I explore the dynamic between adulthood as a state to attain, as a form of doing, and as a feeling about oneself, all concurrent today but in their concurrence problematic for people. As a way of acting or doing, I also examine the discordance between looking at "adulting" as performative, in the sense used by Judith Butler and others, and as a performance, more in the sense of Erving Goffman. I connect the problems in the disjunctures between being adult as a state to attain, a performative and shifting practices, and a feeling with the context of late capitalism, understood to be the extension of commoditization into more and more intimate domains of life, with an attendant focus on (marketized) production of the subject, and at the same time the dissolution of a stable subject. Although there are overlaps with neoliberalism, with its focus on the flow of financial capital and devolved responsibility on the person, and which has impacted the life course, late capitalism draws attention to fragmentation and disjuncture, and not the responsibilized subject attempting to fulfill projects once defined by the state. While the latter is often blamed for failures to attain adulthood, the former provides space for performances of adulting, the ongoing investment in discrete but also disjunct aspects of the self, and shifting and partial feelings of failure.

Bringing together ideas about being adult (and doing adulting) in Botswana and the United States may seem unusual. There is a long, if sometimes problematic, history of anthropology discovering new ways to think about social institutions in their studies of Africa, bringing those insights to re-think social process in the West. In this paper, I look beyond simple constructive comparison, to explore a complex exchange of ideas, circulating institutions and discourses, whereby new popular trends in the United States allow us to revisit increasingly calcified and accepted concepts that have taken hold in both Africa itself and in the study of Africa. And the conjuncture of ideas from the West with African policy

and lives allows us to both critically re-evaluate current discourses on youth in Africa, and to rethink problems we thought we had firmly identified at home.[1]

I address adulthood – and adulting – as being and doing.[2] There seems to be an almost global feeling that adulthood, a "being," is increasingly unattainable, or at least delayed, and producing a lost generation of people "waiting" to get it. In many studies of these people, from Africa to Southeast Europe to East Asia and the United States, youth comes across as a sterile "waiting room," where people are trapped, unable to enter the office of adulthood. Unable to "be" adults, they "do" nothing. They sit around, often in their parents' home, they pass time, they wait. Descriptions of this kind of waiting are particularly common in African studies, and in America, too, at least up to the onset of the COVID-19 epidemic (which certainly changed people's relationship to both space and time). But at the same time, there emerged a discussion about how to "do" adulting, at least in bits and parts, here and there. In 2013, when younger Americans were beginning only slowly to recover from the impact of the 2007-2008 economic crisis, Kelly Williams Brown published an amusing piece of pop literature, *Adulting: How to Become a Grown-up in 468 Easy(ish) Steps*. These steps included things like how to rent an apartment, how to talk to neighbors, and how to avoid office romances, along with tips on vacuuming, and other very practical matters. Then, in 2017, the *Washington Post* (one of the United States' major newspapers) ran a video series "How to Adult," that had similar advice on how to clean your apartment, how to shop for groceries, how to apply for a credit card, etc., illustrated (significantly) with images from the 1950s, images nostalgic for the secure adulthoods quite young people seem to have lived at that time.[3] Suddenly, it seemed in these popular publications, adulthood wasn't an office you were barred from entry. It was a way of acting, perhaps a skill set akin to other skill sets people sought, a bit here, and another bit there. And you could "adult" in public, but revert to youth or childishness in private or with friends.

[1] On the colonial context of anthropology and its impact on theories and models, see Asad 1973. On more recent suggestions that significant theoretical advance is coming from the global South, see Comaroff and Comaroff 2012. Other non-Western regions have also been mined for social theory: Papua New Guinea and India on gift exchange and value, Aboriginal Australia for kinship, India for personhood.

[2] Anthropology has rarely asked what being an adult means, outside of study of age-graded societies, and initiation practices that convert "children" into "adults." Sociology, by contrast, has demanded a rethinking of the concept of adult and adulthood repeatedly over the past 40 or more years. See Blatterer 2007, Durham 2017.

[3] For one such video, and links to the rest of the series, see https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/entertainment/how-to-adult-how-to-shop-for-groceries/2017/10/24/39866212-b8d9-11e7-9b93-b97043e57a22_video.html

Perhaps "being adult" is emerging in a new form altogether, in our conceptualization of it and in its experience, and, more broadly, in our discourses about it. I will be asking us to move away from looking at the stative idea "-hood" (adulthood), or being, and to observe and analyze more the gerund form (adulting) or doing, focusing on the idea of adulting as a dynamic, malleable, and agentive form, and also one that accords with forms of individualization and situationalism that are characteristic of this moment of late capitalism and globalism. This is not a calling for a recognition of agency within an existing and oppressive structure: it is a call to dismember the structure and look at the social world as a field of opportunity, where both failure and success mingle, and where structured modernist frameworks stand on shaky grounds. It is the grounds of self-making in the conditions of late capitalism, a self-making that, in that context, is connected with "feeling."

Susan McKinnon (2017) has looked at the shift in kinship studies in anthropology from "being" kin, especially in the extended family with biological underpinnings and sets of rights and obligations attached to them, to "doing" kinship and making people (whatever their biological links) into kin through practices as varied as co-housing, eating from the same pot over time, or offering care-giving. She notes that as anthropologists shifted to the latter perspective, they tended to focus on material appurtenances to kinship, and in doing so introduced sources of hierarchy and differentiation connected with material inequalities. In looking at "doing" adulting, and contrasting it with "being" adult, we find that the being was (and is) often strongly correlated with material conditions and economic inequalities, and being adult includes being financially secure (see, for example, Silva 2013 on working class struggles for adulthood). Doing is simultaneously a more opportunistic field but one, too, that invites significant "investment," this time in new forms of self-development. Blatterer (2007) noted that we often think of youth as a time of "becoming" and "adulthood" as what one becomes – a "being." Here, and somewhat in line with Blatterer, I suggest that adulthood is, if not a "becoming," a project of being, often fragmentarily engaged and requiring ongoing work on the fragments of the self in the conditions of late capitalism.

The conflicts and tensions over debates about what adulthood or adulting might be are revealed in Botswana, where I have conducted anthropological fieldwork since 1988.[4] In the 1980s and 1990s my research was situated in one ward of a large "urban village" of over 35,000 people, and focused on ethnicity in

[4] My research since 1988 has been supported by a number of granting institutions, including Fulbright-Hays, the National Science Foundation, Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Philosophical Foundation, and Sweet Briar College Faculty Grants.

the context of liberal democracy, on various everyday practices, and on youth groups and youth. The category "urban village," a government term, meant that agriculture composed a considerable portion of household income, even as some members of households held salaried positions or were self-employed in non-agricultural ventures. Both agriculture and other forms of employment often meant the "villagers" lived elsewhere most of the time. In research conducted in 2014 and 2017 I focused on how people understood post-youth maturity, predominantly in the fast-growing urban center of Gaborone. Gabs, as it's popularly called, is the country's capital, upgraded to be called a city only in the mid-1980s, and in the 2010s a car-choked sprawling city with plentiful and increasing cosmopolitan shopping malls and restaurants, and a substantial population of people struggling for housing and food.[5] By the 2010s, Botswana had invested heavily in tertiary education, and there was a fast-growing population of young people who were attending or had attended university or one of the post-secondary "training" institutes; they received considerable subsidies and were eligible for various government development programs aimed at "youth" – until they were 35 years old. At 35, they became, for government purposes, grown up, or no longer youth, eligible only for the development programs aimed at the general population.[6]

As is common in anthropology, my research was conducted via participant observation, based on long periods of co-residence and participation in everyday life among the people around me. Because I was interested in national discourses on youth, I also conducted open-ended unstructured interviews with a wide range of people in government offices, in youth groups, and in youth development programs, along with the youth wings of the major political parties, recorded by note-taking. In 2014, I conducted open-ended unstructured interviews with college students, as well as engaging in participant observation with people with whom I had relationships via my previous fieldwork. The interviews, however, are only interpretable through my 40 months of participant observation in urban village, and later city, life. This method of fieldwork is associated with interpretive analytical strategies focusing on meaning instead of numbers and measurements, and understanding meaning as produced in dense webs of historical conjuncture and contemporary flow, with "thickness" of interpretation privileged over simple correlations (see Geertz 1973).

[5] See Durham 2019 on changes between 1988 and 2017, focusing on shopping and "malls."
[6] People remained eligible for special "youth development" programs in some areas of agriculture until 45. There were also many agricultural development programs open to the general (non-youth) population.

I found significant changes in the ways people there thought and talked about youth (in the 20th century) and adults (in the 21st century), which I discuss below. What I will focus on is a shift from a fairly open way of being and experiencing youth, often quite playful, in Botswana in the 20th century, and lack of concern with adulthood,[7] to a highly circumscribed and over-determined idea of youth organized by government projects and discourse and a new and considerable uncertainty but also playfulness, a measure of concern spanning generations, about the post-youth period. We might say that people went from "youthing" to being youth, found "adult" a new category, and engaged in adulting, but often found they "felt" youth when they were, officially, not.

Youth Stuck Without, Adulthood as Gain

Sociological and anthropological studies in Africa have, for some time now, been complaining that young people are "stuck" in youth, unable to attain adulthood, and similar ideas have circulated in America and, indeed, around the world. Anxieties that people were stuck in youth, unable to attain adulthood, surfaced in Africa mostly in the 1990s, especially in the transition of many states from more socialist governance to a West-imposed structurally adjusted neoliberalism, and increased over the next decades. "Stuck in the compound," wrote Karen Tranberg Hansen (2005), describing the plight of young people, and especially young women, in Zambia, where they were unable to find employment or other means by which to move out of parents' homes. In Rwanda, too, housing problems in the first decade of the 2000s also kept people "stuck," failing to attain adulthood by failing to acquire housing to enable marriage (Sommers 2012). Diane Singerman called the condition of young people in Egypt unable to marry "waithood," as they waited to amass the means to house and support a family (Singerman 2007; see also Inhorn and Smith-Hefner 2020). Alcinda Honwana popularized the term "waithood" for all Africa (Honwana 2012): waithood has become almost synonymous with "youth" in some writings, a youth that has no visible end.

Waithood, as Honwana and many others note, is not truly a passive period, as the term suggests, and people "waiting" for adulthood are also doing interesting things. Daniel Mains (2007) wrote about how young men in Ethiopia said they were "living like chickens," and "bored," by which they meant they were unable to find the kind of white-collar work they had anticipated as culminating

[7] There is no exact equivalent term for "adult" in the two languages I'm familiar with in Botswana (Setswana and Otjiherero), and my research in 2014 explored the various ways in which people who also spoke English much of the time sought equivalent terms in the local languages, and the different implications of those. "Adulthood" as a word is unusual in many languages, but has a history in English (see Durham 2017).

their schooling. Some, however, resorted to lower-class labor, even manual work, often going abroad to hide their undistinguished work; they did not consider it "employment" of the kind to grant adulthood. Adeline Masquelier (2019) describes young men in Niger who form "*fada*," associations in which they sit around, drinking tea, bemoaning their inability to marry, seeking recognition by claiming to do community service, but ultimately "waiting" for an age transition while making tea and talking. While young men in Dakar, Senegal in the 1980s and 90s had undertaken a range of public services, including trash removal, community policing, even water provisioning (all abandoned by the state at that time), they had done so in the community-serving role of youth (Diouf 1996); *fada* members in Niger hope to attain recognition of responsibility and community membership in such civic action, claiming their presence on street corners is a form of policing the neighborhood, for example (like, in Turkey, the *bekçi*). For both, however, they sought their status in a civic sphere when the private domain of household was difficult to access. All three examples, Ethiopia, Niger, and Senegal, also direct us to the significance of external recognition for these, and any, social status: however, we might want to attend to subjective feelings, manifest in the boredom or shame of the Ethiopians, and the clear uncertainties of the Nigeriens. But what we see especially in the sense of waiting is also a sense of lack – housing, white-collar work, a wife. This should draw our attention to class dimensions of moving from youth to adulthood, where being adult is, at least for some, associated with moving into a higher class (see Durham 2017). Even older people in their 50s in Botswana who fail to increase their class status remain, at least, partially, "boys" or youth – what once were called "herdboys" or "houseboys" whatever their age.

Honwana bemoans this stuckness of youth in "waithood," and urges governments to do more to support their transition to adulthood, especially by fostering educational, economic, and political opportunity. The latter is significant: in many African countries at the end of the 20th century, the "independence generation" who had come to power in the 1960s, often continued to hold all the reins of power, unwilling to make way for new cohorts. In Botswana, people muttered about "deadwood" occupying offices of opportunity up and down the political and civil service ladders. And while Botswana has had international recognition for transparent government and relatively low levels of corruption (something citizens might debate, however), many African countries came to be called "kleptocracies" governed by "the politics of the belly" (Bayart 1993) – a politics that consumes the wealth of a country, visualized in the fat bellies of elder men, or exports it to private accounts.

Suggesting that young people are "waiting" for governments to save them (and that their recognizable activity in that period is not leading to adulthood) is

simultaneously a critique of a general neoliberalism as well as a suggestion that reaching adulthood is a matter of accumulating things. African states were pushed to neoliberal policies under the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s and 90s, policies in which the government reduced its own capacities, curtailing many social services and programs, opened its borders to foreign capital flows, and shifted responsibilities and risks to individuals, who are likely to fail. (Kleptocratic practice of course survives the move to neoliberalism, and both kleptocrats and neoliberalism offer citizens visions of enrichment and yet impoverish their opportunities.) Shifting responsibility and risk to private individuals both gives them hope of wild success based on their hard work and determination, but also, in not only failing needed support but also corralling benefits to the already powerful, almost inevitably leads to failures and disappointments – what Lauren Berlant (2011) called "cruel optimism." We might ask to what extent such neoliberal maneuvering also underscores the affective element of achievement – that is, the role of "feeling" when people describe feeling or not feeling adult.

Honwana's call for more government action is not something to distain: good government, in a liberal (but not neoliberal) age, should provide opportunity for people to better their condition, through giving them skills (education) and making sure economic and political opportunity isn't reserved for the already privileged, as well as protecting them against utter failure. Botswana has often been designated an "exception" in Africa (Samatar 1999; but cf. Good 1992), mostly because of substantial state income coming from diamond mines, managed fairly transparently by liberal economists,[8] invested in infrastructure and health, and regular "free and fair" elections since independence in 1966. By the 2010s, the government had instituted extensive youth development programs. Yet leading up to that point, in Botswana in the 1990s, college-educated young people who until the later 1980s could count on finding comfortable employment in the civil service, began to complain about an inability to achieve positions of responsibility and power in political parties and appointments. This is when the term "deadwood," still used today, gained popularity, referring to office-holders, many of the generation that set up the first postcolonial government in the 1960s (see Werbner 2004 for a more complimentary view of that generation and discussion of the term). Many young (and not-so-young) people there today complain, undoubtedly rightly, about how access to government tenders (contract bids), a major support of developing entrepreneurial ventures, is channeled by an

[8] Liberal in the classical economic sense, not in the terms of public American discourse where it is associated with socialism. Kenneth Good (cited in text) has written extensively against the celebratory narrative of exceptional success.

already powerful minority away from ambitious newcomers; others simply fear the bureaucrats who manage the paperwork steal their entrepreneurial ideas.

So people in Botswana, exceptional as it is, share with much of Africa a feeling of being stymied (although not, I would argue, of "waiting"). Across the continent, the presence of a demographic "youth bulge," the increase in education in varying but significant measures across many nations and the "cruel optimism" of education's failed promises (Berlant 2011; Dungey and Ansell 2020), the decrease in government-paid work or the frequent failure of governments strapped by structural adjustment policies and corruption to pay civil servants, and slow (but increasing) growth in the private sector, has indeed left many young people who complete secondary or even tertiary education frustrated. What are youth waiting for, or at least looking for? Well, to attain the state of adulthood, goes the dominant analytical argument. And to do so, they must acquire things: primarily valued forms of work, housing, and marriage. Acquiring things, they acquire adulthood, so to speak, and indeed adulthood becomes depicted as a "thing" to be acquired, as much as a room or office to enter. And it is the thingness, the countability of the acquisitions, that marks certain discourses of adulthood today.

In such discourses, youth are those in a condition of lack. At least, the state of youth in which one is stuck, is a state of lack and overcoming it involves acquisitions: job, house, spouse, children. Indeed, lack almost defines the category, in some respects, although in different ways in different countries. Not-yet adults are those – of any age – who have not got a house, a spouse, a career-track job, not yet gotten children. (Botswana will both fit but also upend some of this.) When Botswana drafted a National Youth Policy, in 1996, its understanding of the people who were the object of the policy (youth) were precisely these "lackers": out-of-school people without employment, predominantly but not exclusively young, sometimes entirely homeless, often underfed (see Durham 2004). The condition of lack overrode age limits in the 1996 Policy, which noted it would include people younger than 12 and over 40, if their youthhood was signaled by being out of school and unemployed.[9] (A revised Youth Policy, in 2010, formally ended the "official" age of youth at 35, for eligibility for most youth development programs, and focused more on educated youth than the original had.)

[9] The policy, while focusing on employment, also targeted sexually transmitted diseases, as AIDS became an overwhelming problem in the country. While marriage is an important element of adulthood in other parts of Africa, the marriage rates in Botswana are extremely low, and have been for decades. Most women have children before or outside of marriage, and some women (with children) don't marry until after reproductive age. See Solway 2016.

In the United States, too, lack has come to be the measure of failed adulthood – or, in more optimistic terms, "emerging adulthood," a post-youth or late youth, period extending for many into their mid- to even late-thirties. Underwriting conceptualization of youth as lack is the reliance – especially in the field of sociology – on forms of measurement, on surveys that record "attained" and "not attained" along a series of criteria. The idea of emerging adulthood is associated with psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2004), and it is a period in which people have finished formal schooling (whether secondary or university, but not necessarily including the professional degrees many seek after starting a career), but are defined by a lack of career-defined employment, lack of purchase of a home, lack of marriage, and lack of children. Many Americans of an age that might have been considered "adult" in the 20th century report an inability acquire these things – they are "stuck" in their parents' basements, according to popular media; they feel too insecure financially to marry a partner, or to have and raise children, because of financial insecurity. In the 2000s, they trace that insecurity to poor employment opportunities and to burdensome debts taken on to attend college.[10] This lack isn't entirely "stative" (by which I mean a fixed state of being, such as "waithood"): in many analyses, youth is a stage of "becoming" and of being agentive, while adulthood is a state of "being," and of having settled into a persona, a structure, and a set of acquired things (see Blatterer 2007).

There is something terribly modern, or modernist, about all this: the fracturing of the person into measurable and improvable attributes, the universality of the idea of adulthood. For some studies of emerging adulthood, or attaining adulthood, it's simply a matter of counting and measuring (see Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2008). Boxes to be checked: job, house, wife/husband, children. We think of Foucault (1979), no doubt, when we look at the use of measurements as analytics of adulthood – a social character that does, as Foucault says of disciplined knowledges, empower the individual in many ways, but is governed through a recognition via measurements and the ways those measurements in turn cause self-evaluation, and directions for self-modification (improvement). Modern, too, in the echoes of consumerism and consumption in the focus things that must be acquired – and on things that are connected with having and using money (in the analyses offered) to be achieved. And modern, too, in an underlying neoliberal and capitalist project. Attaining adulthood is, in all this, the responsibility of an individual and failure to do so is simply a failure on the part of a – slacker, as well as lacker. Whether one isn't working hard enough, made some back decisions, or hasn't invested time and

[10] Ironically, in the 1980s, as salaries and wages dropped for the working class and union protections were eroded, some felt that young people were being forced into an early adulthood, to work to support their natal families. See Newman 1988, and compare with Newman 2012.

resources in building the skills needed to gain the job, wife, kids, independence, one should be able to self-improve. In the logic of late capitalism, with its emphasis on a skill economy, on the responsibility fo the individual, and on the partibility of the individual into skill sets that can be "purchased" through narrow training courses (leadership skills, communication skills, mindfulness skills; see Urciuoli 2008), and perhaps through, in easy steps, learning how to take out a loan, dress for work, and shop for groceries. Against the urgings of Honwana, that governments, and societies as a whole, should provide the means to adulthood, the more general ethos is that individuals who do not attain it have failed: their risks were their loss, their lack of determination and self-discipline their failure, the aging children living in their parents' basements are signs that they were poorly raised and haven't exercised their own self-discipline (see Twenge and Campbell 2010; Lythcott-Haims 2015). Furthermore, in synch with capitalist ethics, the accumulations of adulthood – the job, the house, the communication skills – are capital of a sort, that invested and used wisely bring other rewards (the wife and children, further and bigger houses, yearly salary increases and bonuses, and eventually a comfortable retirement supported by a well-saved retirement fund and care-giving children).

The idea of measuring one's age grade through a series of attainments that grant formal recognition, that are visible and countable (even if not in 468 easy steps), and are forms of self-improvement, is certainly not new, and not confined to modernist modes of measuring personhood. Large parts of East Africa, in the past (and somewhat today), placed young people, especially males, in age grades which, at specified intervals, underwent a series of tests and performances (rituals, often involving scarification, services to the community, or liminal periods outside the village), after which they were welcomed back to the village in a new, older, age grade (Baxter and Almagor 1978). In other parts of Africa, women might also undergo such a ritual marking attainment of womanhood, after which they could marry, have children, and claim a certain level of adulthood.

In the United States, in the 19th century, many young people would on their birthdays review their accomplishments over the past year in a formal (but self-addressed) piece of writing, evaluating their progress toward maturity through lists of achievements, and note "falling behind" in their progress (and progress was the key term, along with self-improvement) (Grinspan 2015). What is key in these examples, however, is a kind of "civic" adulthood, one measured by one's increasing responsibilities, rights, moral capacity and demonstrations, and contributions to a larger social sphere, the civic one – quite different from the statistical measures and normativizing. While evaluating their moral growth, not measured in terms of purchases and financial capacities, however, the 19th

century Americans engaged in a combination of moral self-examination and accounting, more akin to religious practice, than to economic modernism.[11] At the same time, as I will suggest in a later section, the combination of self-monitoring and sense of upward mobility, fit well in a late capitalist consumer logic where affect, and feelings, become the source and goal of being – and of doing.

The -ing of youthing and adulting: Botswana

Botswana offers us an interesting case where we can explore the shifts between and dynamics within adulthood (and youth) as 'gerund' forms – adulting, or youthing – and as statives – being youth, attaining the status of adult. Let me start by explaining quickly what I mean by 'gerund form'. Both adjectives and nouns in English can be "stative": they name a state that is integral to the term, a condition of its being. To refer to a red chair, for example, identifies the chairness of the chair, and its redness, as aspects of the chair's being. What I am calling "gerund forms" (with the -ing ending) are what are called "active" terms. English doesn't do this, but another language might say that a chair is "chairing" insofar as it is doing things that make it chair-like, instead of simply "is being" a chair at all times. (Otherwise, it might be, perhaps, acting as a book-holder, or a place to drape clothing, or, as in my house, accommodating a sleeping cat.) And it might be said to be "redding" – making itself appear red, instead of simply being red as part of its physical makeup.

Studying youth groups, youth programs, and how people positioned themselves, others, and activities as "youth" in Botswana in the 1990s, I suggested that youth formed a "deictic" and a "shifter" – another set of grammatical terms that refer to the situatedness of meaning (deictics are indexes that locate the speaker and the reference in her place, time, and situation, and what is referred to is not constant but dependent on these things; calling deictics shifters alludes to the fact that they also operate on a meta-level, organizing space and time, speaker and world) (Durham 2000, 2004). I suggested that indexing someone as youth was also a way of raising issues of power, economy, gender, household configurations, capacities, etc. As shifters, referring to youth situated people with respect to each other – something not unusual for age cohort categories in Africa, where being a child, youth, adult, or elder was dissociated from biological age and associated with the relationships one has with other genealogical (not age) cohorts (Fortes 1984). In Botswana, a wide range of people of different ages positioned themselves, were positioned in the National Youth Policy, or were indicated by others as "youth." The bulk were in their later

[11] Max Weber (2001), notably, suggested that such moral accounting in early protestantism led eventually to the "iron cage" of later capitalism.

20s and 30s, but many others would claim to be youth, or be targeted as youth, including people even throughout their 50s or older. What was significant was that people did so situationally – a 23-year-old might be youth when helping members of a youth club serve food and clean dishes at a wedding, but be "still a child" in other circumstances, such as desisting from voting. A 58-year-old enjoyed being youth while participating in the fun of choral competitions (where jokes, fun, and romance combined), but returned to a quite senior office position and heading a household the next week. People moved in and out of being youth, and as they did so they drew attention to issues of play, romance, work (household, community, and professional), differing forms of power (empowerment, apathy, see Durham 2007, 2008), and many other underlying socioeconomic and political forms. At the same time, the National Youth Policy proposed a new set of distinctions and situations (employment, primarily, but also liability to sexually transmitted diseases). Discourses of youth were, effectively, discourses about the way society was configured.

That people moved in and out of being youth, through the things they did in various times and places, was simultaneously a challenge to global projects to measure the success or failure of youth (and attaining adulthood) by looking at specific age ranges, as the UN and other international agencies tended to do (see Argenti and Durham 2013). But, although many people decried the condition of youth in Africa, looking at biological age categories, it should not have been surprising to suggest that youth was a state one moved in and out of. Across Africa, it had long been observed that people moved in and out of several social categories, in the course of a day, or over several years. Marriage, in particular, could be something that didn't happen all at once, but was a process that developed into marriage over several, often very many, years in much of Africa, and people who had been thought pretty much married might redefine their relationship in other terms (the observation was first made in Botswana by John Comaroff and Simon Roberts [1980], but its broad application was noted in Bledsoe and Pison 1994). Even being a mother – what would seem a biological fact – could be shifting and negotiable. Jennifer Johnson-Hanks describes how young women might give birth, and mother for a while, before leaving the child to be "mothered" by a grandparent or aunt, and become a schoolgirl again, returning periodically to motherhood, and periodically to student youth and to pursuing premarital romance. In Botswana in the 1990s, many children addressed their biological mother as "sister" and referred to the person raising them – typically a grandmother – as "my mother."[12] In Botswana and much of Africa, being a father

[12] In Botswana, marriage is less significant than other places in attaining the kind of maturity that might signal adulthood: marriage rates overall are extremely low, and the age at first marriage is later 30s, many years after first children are born (see Botswana 2014; Solway 2016).

is even more unstable, depending on transfers of rights and recognition, inside and outside marriage, and also to the ongoing practice of supporting children, when housing them or not. And, more recently, we have accounts of how people may attain recognized adulthood, but then forsake it for various reasons (Cooper 2018; Dungey and Meinert 2017).

When I described youth as a shifter, I was trying to understand the negotiable and varying status of youth; I am now interested in the shifting and inconstant idea and status of adulthood. This interest leads me to look more closely at youth, and adulthood, less as statuses or states of being (within shifting reference), than as practices and performances, that is, as gerunds, as -ings. Certainly in Botswana and in the United States people *act as* youth, or *act as* adults. People engage in youthing, if you want, by doing things associated with youth – things pegged, as I had previously suggested, to the configurations of rights, power, agencies, hierarchies, distributions, etc. that make up a social field. In Botswana, this involves extending the range of social connections, through joining groups like youth choirs or community centers, engaging in activities that are (in some sense or another) community service,[13] pursuing romance, and trying out diverse economic activities, and doing things that other people might dismiss as "just playing" (Durham 2005). Teenagers (typically seen as children in Botswana) try it on, older people with children and grandchildren "be youthful" on occasion.

This is very much the case for adults, too, in Botswana and in the United States. The situation is complicated in Botswana in that there is no local term for "adult": people describe themselves or others as being "big," mostly, until they are reaching what we might call "elderhood." Between youth and elderhood is a state which is not-youth, but not yet the elder age at which one's mature children (with their own children now getting older) take care of one. People recognize the term "adult" in English, and will respond to it, but it is not well-defined. The terms people do suggest in Setswana are by-and-large relative: bigger than, older than, another person. However, people do seek to act as a mature, post-youth person, in such things as taking care of one's own children (which might mean sending money to the actual caregiver), insisting on living apart from older siblings or parents who expect childish or youthful service, and dressing in the accoutrements of maturity (for women, carrying a handbag, perhaps, or for both genders, a briefcase). Increasingly, under the extensive youth development programs that focus on entrepreneurship, moving beyond start-up loans and supports, and having a successful business is another way to "adult" – but the

[13] I do not include paid service under the drought relief programs, which are intended to prevent the very poor from starving.

same people will also join the plentiful youth groups, pursue popular youth activities such as educating various communities about HIV/AIDS with marches or with song-drama performances, and flock to the "country parties" that are staged outside the big cities. They will help serve food at weddings and funerals (classic youth activities), and defer to elders in family disputes, in spite of being authoritative figures in a Gaborone office.

One could make a similar argument about adulting in the United States. The semi-tongue-in-cheek book mentioned earlier, *Adulting: How to Become a Grown-Up in 468 Easy(ish) Steps* (Brown 2013), and the *Washington Post* video series on "how to adult" are simple cases in point. Successfully managing weekly grocery shopping and meals; understanding retirement savings; acquiring and registering a car – not to mention marrying, having children, and buying a home – are all acts of adulting. The idea of steps suggests an additive element; the idea of situational performance suggests situational doing instead of being. In Botswana, by the 2010s you might "know" you are no longer youth at 35 because you are no longer eligible for youth programs from the government, but people aged 36, or 42, often don't know really what they are as a state. They do adulting things (buying food for an upcoming funeral, applying for a plot of land), and youthing things (serving food at a wedding, joining a youth group's choir). In these activities, they "feel" adult or youth, though they wouldn't say that they "are" so. (The term "to feel" has somewhat different meaning in Setswana and Otjiherero, but the idea behind acting and feeling can be similar without the same linguistic term.) In the United States, many people in their 30s report that they don't *feel* adult, in spite of having a house, spouse, and children. They are only acting the part. I have not seen the term invoked in studies of emerging adults and insecure adulting, but many people in the US complain of "imposter syndrome" in other respects. Especially women say that they don't feel as skilled, accomplished, mature, confident, as they act in professional roles. They feel, in other words, that they are acting something they are not. In what follows, I connect the "feeling" of adulthood with theories of performance and performativity, and with the sociality of late capitalism.

Acting and feeling adult

If we look at adulthood (and youth) not as states one is "in" but instead as ways of acting and doing, we might think of adulting as a kind of performance. The idea of social personas as kinds of performances is well-established now. Erving Goffman has directed us to see the ways in which people acted and reacted in social encounters (the approach could be traced back to Hegel). In "interaction rituals," people present themselves in roles that they expect to fit the situation and expectations of those they interact with; they try to manage "stigma"

and sustain face. (Goffman's work spans a career and many publications, but see 1959, 1967.) They register the responses from their "audience" and both integrate that reflected response to the self into their sense of who they are, but also use it to rehearse and revise their role performances to fit in and maximize their social roles. Goffman's ideas of performances remain primarily theatrical, with the actor as agent, rehearser, and reviser remaining at the core of the self. Goffman's work raises the question of how, in consequence of this acting, people develop a sense of selfhood that can negotiate these social rituals and manage stigma, shame, and other such situations. One can see, perhaps, the US adults feeling a sense of "imposter syndrome" in acting adult, but not feeling truly one inside; one also sees the neoliberal logic of assigning to the (acting) individual responsibility for managing her status and relationships.

Judith Butler's work brought linguistics into the analysis of these performances (Butler 1990, and many other works by her). She drew on John Austin's idea of "speech acts" to understand gender as "performative" and not just "a performance." Austin (1962) noted that some linguistic utterances do not refer to an already existing thing, but create that thing in the very act of stating it. A common example is when an official says, "I marry you" to a couple (or in American rituals, "I thee wed"); another is to announce a new holiday ("I declare this day "Veterans Day"), or to offer someone something and say "it's yours." These utterances create the state of marriage for the couple, changing them from unmarried to married, or create the holiday, or change the ownership of a gift. (Austin goes on to suggest, cautiously, that even referential utterances – "the books are sitting on the chair" – have a performative element, constituting books, sitting, and chairs as such and not simply referring to their external existence.) Butler applied this notion of "performatives" to performances – doing things (with or without words) that create the very thing they seem to be enacting. Concerned with gender, she noted how genders are produced and reproduced in the ways in which people assert gender in practices. This did not mean that people were free to overturn gender, but their enactments reshaped gender, and also worked upon their sense of self, gender as a subjective and not objective way of being (and doing). A gendered self does not have an existence outside of the performances that create gender, and gendered selfhood is felt in the self.

However, if we think of adulting, then, as a way of producing adulthood – always in the act of doing, and always with the creative element of performatives, we also need to ask why, then, so many people in the United States, and in other parts of the world, feel their performances to be failures, that their adulting does not connect with their inner selves, nor connect them with an adulthood they make performatively through their own (periodic) adulting.

One answer is that the possibilities of being adult, the doings of adulting, are changing as broad configurations of society change, and discourses of adulthood, and adulting, serve as shifters to a metadiscourse about those changes. I have made an argument to that point in previous writing (Durham 2017). Much as the discourses of problematic youth (which include practices as well as complaints) as "shifters" draw attention to the changing alignments of power, knowledge, relationships, and possibility, adulting is also a shifter, and its problematic performance indexes not just failures but changing organization of capital, political power, family interdependencies and forms of reproduction, etc. The complaints about "waiting" are complaints not only about feeble government support, but are addressing the ways in which the rise of a middle class has added new kinds of class transitions to the life course, for one thing. The Ethiopian men "living like chickens" do not want a maturity marked by manual labor and struggle, even if these things got them a wife, children, and home. The Nigeriens are unable to draw on family resources to marry, which once might have been joint holdings in agriculture or livestock or family merchant businesses, but must find resources themselves as marriage depends increasingly on personal salaries coming from jobs (see also Solway 2016, on Botswana). Women are becoming more educated, more independent, more able to exercise opinion or influence within natal families, or on their own (see Boddy 2017 on Sudan). Younger people are accessing oratorical venues formerly inaccessible, through the internet, and exercising challenges to the "deadwood" old guard. Children become expensive, needing school fees, uniforms, and a variety of new forms of clothing and technological devices, and do not provide support to family economies until later in life. These changes challenge older ways of adulting. In these circumstances, how does one adult successfully?

A second way to think about it – and both may be reasonable – is to ask whether, at least in some places, the growing notion that adulthood is acquired through acquiring a list of countable things (job/career, spouse, house, child), and a list of itemizable skills (how to do laundry, how to negotiate rent, how to clean a bathroom, but also how to be a leader, how to be entrepreneurial, how to communicate well, how to plan and organize) resituates adulthood and adulting in late capitalism and the consumer economy associated with it. The term "late capitalism" (or late stage capitalism, and a variety of equivalents) has been used in various ways over the last century, some predicting the end of capitalism, others referring to its later configurations and processes which result in increasing inequality, the marketization of not just people but aspects of people, the dominance of finance, and the instability and precarity of life in neoliberal times. Here, I refer to the latter: a shift in the political economy towards the marketization of aspects of people, including especially affect, in the context of rapidly shifting

investment and divestment of finance capital. While late capitalism is associated with post-industrial societies, we see many of its characteristics in places like Botswana, as well. Consumerism is fairly new to Botswana, but is fully entrenched – the last twenty years saw the sudden and explosive development of western-style shopping malls, filled with shoe stores, clothing from cheap to pricey, fast-food outlets, and arcades and movies; homes have surprising appurtenances, from fax machines to coffee-makers, for those who can afford them (and sometimes those who can't). Signs cover walls, signboards, and lampposts offering a wide variety of services (especially producing loan applications and business plans) and training opportunities from communication to accounting. ("Life skills" have become part of the primary and secondary education curriculum.) Average incomes have been rising, while older disparities in income persist, unsupported by the rural interdependencies that used to modify them, and indeed have widened. While people did not, in the 20th century, talk much about "feelings," in the 21st century some of these malls and many streets in larger settlements now house psychologists and therapists, village wards ("kgotlas" with "headmen") now include social workers, and a market in feelings is rapidly developing. (We await more research, however, on the topic.) It hardly needs pointing out that in the United States and many other consumer economies, the feelings economy associated with intensive consumerism and its promise of (short-lived) pleasures, coupled with the marketing of "skills" and mental states which might formerly be labelled "character traits" shape a self-critical, self-reflective subjectivity always in need to refreshing and improving. And never quite getting there, and never quite integral to an integrated person.

Eva Illouz (2007, 2008) has examined the ways in which emotions have become capitalized in the current era, such that they are both "sold" as items themselves, packaged with consumer products, and have become part of the labor purchased by employers. The idea that capitalism packages consumer items with emotions that cannot be fulfilled – the products never deliver the promised feelings for long, and new ones produce new desires – is much older, of course. In this way, the emotions being sold themselves are never fulfilled: one is never the happy, confident, cozy or masterful self that one has tried to acquire. There are places to purchase affective states: yoga studios and mindfulness, gyms, psychological counseling, spas and holiday 'experiences,' and of course pharmaceuticals. Emotions are also part of the production end in late capitalism, Illouz tells us: since the 20th century, businesses have tried to manage, develop, and market the emotional labor of their employees. Indeed, entire businesses have grown up around coaching and teaching people skills that are, to some extent, emotional performances (whether in the acting sense of Goffman, or the enacting one of Butler): one enrolls in courses to foster leadership,

communication, and other such skills. One is hired for patience, cheerfulness, emphathy to manage customers, employees, and the public. Bonnie Urciuoli (2008) notes how late capitalism, with its marketization of what were once born character traits of whole persons, produces a fragmented self, with compartments of skill sets paid for, perhaps disappointing in their results, that can be brought to the market and sold.

Adulting – the performance and performativity – is, in late capitalism, tied into the consumer economy of producing selfhoods. But these selfhoods are not the self who navigates social roles and adjusts performances in Goffman's enterprise: it is not even clear there is a coherent imposter behind the performance. And adulting is not quite the performative production of Butler's either, as it seems that the skills and things that need to be acquired don't succeed in reconstituting adulthood in one's self or one's milieu. One can learn how to purchase a good vacuum cleaner and use it – or pay for a course in effective communication or leadership skills – or successfully rent an apartment or even navigate the complexities of a mortgage and buy a house. One can marry; have children; start saving and managing a retirement fund. Instead of consolidating around a feeling of competence, of successfully entering the door to a room in which one feels at home in adulthood, these remain disparate acquisitions, each tinged at some level with disappointment.

Looking at both Botswana and the United States helps us to understand this emphasis on doing, and not being, better. It also helps us look beyond the disappointment. People in Botswana have long managed multiple projects at the same time: in the past they herded livestock in a precarious environment and often had to recoup losses to wildlife, theft, disease and drought; they also planted crops which might fail for similar reasons; they pursued a variety of social relationships, including romances, marriages-in-the-making, partnerships in livestock trading or house-building, all of which were unstable and subject to constant dispute and negotiation. Today, added to these, they start small businesses, and plan for larger ones with government loans that are demanding to get; they take courses to improve, and travel to make connections in neighboring districts or countries; they invest in cars or houses, and lose them when they can't meet payments. They also have been open to situating their selfhoods in different frames at different moments, doing adulting in one venue and time, testing being an elder at another, and doing youth in yet another – without losing track of themselves, and accepting failure but pressing ahead elsewhere. Their flexible "labor-of-self" (or "self-development," as I've called it elsewhere) is long-standing, but takes on new significance in the 21st century. They are fortunate in that their government has, as Honwana urged, invested in creating opportunities for youth in education and in funding entrepreneurial

ventures and for some, a few, these opportunities are highly successful, at least for a time. At the same time the extent of such support ends at the end of state-designated youth (age 35), and they must then work on a multiplicity of projects, ranging from developing a style to consolidating a particular romance into a housed relationship to engaging in scrutinizing relationships with others in their local churches. The young people in "waiting rooms" in other parts of Africa are also doing adulting, here and there, and the spaces in which they do it grow, and the aspects of their selves that they can consider mature multiply, or fail in the putting to the test.

Adulting as a practice does not necessarily lead to adulthood. It is not a set of countable acquisitions that, successfully accumulated, end in the acquisition of adulthood itself, a high modernist concept. It is not, either, a set of performances that the integrated self displays in the proper frames or to which the actor retreats in order to readjust the performance afterwards. It is, as youth in Botswana, a shifter in many ways, in that asking about adulthood, or labeling it in self or others, shifts the discourse to a meta-level, to a discourse about the nature of and distribution of aspects of self and society. Adulting as a way of doing has also been unsuccessful in reshaping subjectivity and expectation, in reconfiguring the ways in which adulthood is known and recognized. Instead, it has become a "feeling," an emotional state that always eludes satisfaction in the emotional culture of late capitalism, where feeling in one way or another, mobilizing that affect to succeed in differentiated endeavors, leaves "feeling" always subject to work upon and be worked upon. The waiting room may be all we have, but it isn't an empty (lacking) room.

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