

Research the Resonates  
Villanova CLAS Podcast  
Episode 7 Transcription  
*Youth and Identity: Adulthood*

Host: Chelsea Gerrard

Guest 1 (DP): Dana Palmisano '19 CLAS

Guest 2 (JK): John Kurtz, PhD

Intro: *Voices in background.*

DP: Immersing adulthood is this developmental period between adolescence and adulthood. It's about 18-25, so right in that college age.

HOST: That's Dana Palmisano. She just graduated from Villanova University with a degree in psychology. As a student, she focused much of her studies on personality psychology and did research on this transition period between adolescence and adulthood.

DP: It's a distinct period because, as an adolescent, you see people, they're not fully mature yet biologically and they're still under the care of their parents. And then you get to adults, who, they are biologically mature. They're living on their own, often. They have a job, stuff like this. They're very autonomous. And then you have this period in the middle where they're trying to transition from that adolescence of being dependent to living on their own and doing everything for themselves.

HOST: You're listening to Research that Resonates, a podcast from Villanova University's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences that takes you inside the labs and classrooms to learn from our distinguished faculty and students. I'm your host, Chelsea Gerrard.

In this miniseries we're talking to research teams who are exploring topics at the intersection of youth and identity.

For two years, Dana worked in the Psychological Assessment Lab alongside her faculty mentor, John Kurtz.

JK: I'm John Kurtz. I am professor of psychology in the department of Psychological and Brain Sciences here at Villanova University. I direct the Psychological Assessment Laboratory and I am interested in a variety of individual differences, human individual differences, and in particular how to capture them for research or for making clinical decisions. One of the topics that we've been interested in, especially lately, is transition to adulthood. And in particular, I would like to understand better the concept of maturity, of psychological maturity.

HOST: In psychology, there are a lot of well-defined biological, emotional, cognitive, social and environmental concepts that make clear distinctions between stages of childhood and adolescence. But that's not the case with adulthood.

JK: And it's a lot less clear what makes someone an adult. So that brings me to Dana, who uh, is kind of drilling into a, a real basic question, which is—do college students think they're adults?

HOST: In Dana's research project, she surveyed 184 college students and asked them point-blank—do you think you're an adult?

DP: And they have three choices of answers. They can say yes, no, or yes and no. And the majority of the college students fell into the yes and no category. What's interesting is that we also give them a little space to write out why they gave that answer, and there's an entire variety of different reason why they refer to themselves in adults in some ways and not an adult in others.

HOST: Those written responses can provide much more nuanced insights into this seemingly straightforward question. So Dana developed a coding system to analyze the written responses.

DP: We came up with a coding manual that put each, kind of, word that they would use to describe how they perceived their adulthood into different categories. So, they would say something like, "I'm an adult because I'm independent." So we would take that independence and put it into a specific category.

HOST: They coded words into two main categories—internal and external—which then had subcategories. Words that fell into internal were sub-categorized into autonomy, identity or developmental attributes. And words that fell into external were categorized as financial, culture, or physical attributes.

JK: And Dana's innovation with it was the idea that we should take their positive and negative attributions and consider them separately. So students, since the majority say yes and no, we're interested in why they do think they're an adult and why they don't think they're an adult. So you can get these different blends of internal and external attributions. And the internal attributions are just, if you think you're an adult because there's something about you as a person that has changed, like identity is a great example. Whereas, other people think that they are or aren't an adult, but it's because of the forces around them; It's things that are outside of their control or that aren't part of them as a person.

HOST: This coding system has becoming important not just for Dana's research but for other projects happening in Dr. Kurtz's lab. She really spearheaded the project, and it will be useful to the team as they study adulthood in relationship to other well-developed psychological concepts—such as Erik Erikson's theory of ego identity, which is this idea that individuals who seamlessly experience and know who they are have a well-developed ego identity.

JK: Erik Erikson didn't talk about immersing adulthood, but he did say that the development of an ego identity is what defines the adult and differentiates them from the adolescent. Um, so one of the things that doing, establishing, this coding scheme will allow us to do, is see whether different measures of a person's identity status relate to this evolving

sense of adulthood. So, if somebody, was, had a well-developed ego identity, than they should say, yes to the question, not yes and no. And if a person is still very diffuse in terms of defining themselves, then maybe they would say clearly just no. And then the yes and no sort of signifies that period where the identity is undergoing sort of a rapid consolidation, um, and exploration. And college, of course, provides lots of opportunities for people to experiment with who they are. So, one of the things we're trying to measure is identity itself, which is not easy.

DP: *[laughter]*

JK: You know, you can use a questionnaire. You could have people tell stories or tell their life story in fact, and there are ways to code that in terms of the quality or integrity of their sense of identity. And, we hope to someday relate these other measures to Dana's coding scheme, and it could be, it could help us understand the role that identity specifically plays in how people think they're an adult.

HOST: Dana has already related the data to another psychological concept—the big five model of personality, which is a taxonomy of personality traits. The big five are openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. She found specific correlations with openness and conscientiousness.

DP: We saw that, um, people who are high in openness tend to relate their lack of adulthood status to having internal attributions. So, they will say something like, I'm not an adult because I'm not independent.

HOST: These personality traits are on a spectrum. So individuals that are high in openness are very open and curious about a variety of different experiences, while individuals low on openness tend to be more traditional and conservative.

DP: And then those who are low in openness will attribute their adulthood status to external reasons. So they'll say something like, I'm not an adult because I don't have a job or I'm not financially independent. And we also found that people high in conscientiousness attribute their adulthood status to having internal attributions. So they are an adult because they're independent, and they have an identity and they're responsible and they know what they want to do. People who are high in conscientiousness tend to be very responsible and they're on top of everything they have to do. So, to see them attribute their adulthood status to being independent and knowing what they want to do makes a lot of sense.

HOST: Dr. Kurtz and his research team plan to further analyze the data they collected, but from these initial findings, Dr. Kurtz considered how their research on emerging adulthood could inform intervention strategies for individuals during this critical time of life.

JK: Something Dana said earlier—that it's kind of a critical time of human development, people are making decisions that will affect their lives, the rest of their lives in terms of romantic involvements, as well as achievements and careers and things like that, it is a very critical time of life. Um, but one thing that occurred to me as I thought about it a little more is interventions, you know, with people who are struggling with personality

problems or emotional problems during the turmoil of adulthood. We wonder if getting people to turn inward and to make more internal attributions for where they're at in life and where they're going in life, as opposed to seeing themselves in their—ushering into adulthood is something that's being directed by other people or there're other forces, or it's beyond their control—all these crazy things that are happening to them. Um, so that, I think that's why we were interested, in internal versus external-- it is the degree to which people recognize that they're driving their own ship more than they realize.

HOST: Working in Dr. Kurz's lab gave Dana a whole new perspective on her education about practical application and working as a team.

DP: I think being involved in a research project—it definitely changes how you look at all the things you're learning, 'cause you see the work that goes into everything that you've been learning about. But, it also, it just enhances everything you've already done because you get to actually apply all the methods that you've learned about in class and run experiments, work as a team, really trying to work together to accomplish one goal.

HOST: Thanks for listening to Research that Resonates. If you haven't listened to our first mini-series on Sustainability, be sure to check that out on Apple Podcasts, Google Play and Spotify.