

## Rites of passage: A comparison of US, Malaysian and Brazilian adolescents

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**Abstract:** This study compares the life events perceived as “rites of passage” from adolescence to adulthood by respondents between the ages of 14 and 23 in 3 countries and discusses the possible influences of culture and globalization on these perceptions. Participants include: (1) 250 adolescents from the US (125 males and 125 females); (2) 191 adolescents from southeastern Brazil (70 males and 121 females); and (3) 163 adolescents from Malaysia (76 males and 87 females). These adolescents ranked a variety of life events which may be perceived as indicative of adult status by completing a questionnaire about perceived rites of passage. Although there were similarities among the 3 groups, several differences also emerged. The most commonly noted indicator of adult status for Malaysian youth was physical maturity, followed by completing one’s education. Participants from the US cited financial independence as the major indicator of adult status, while those from Brazil cited the ability to make important decisions independently from family and to take responsibility for others, such as children, aging parents or a spouse. Brazilian youth were significantly more likely to cite a love affair and voting in major elections as rites of passage than were participants from the other 2 countries. Participants from the US were significantly more likely to cite military service, and Malaysian youth were significantly more likely to consider completion of education and achieving physical maturity as rites of passage. Gender and age differences within groups were evident on some items, but these were not consistent across groups. Possible explanations for the differences between countries and implications for educators working with adolescents in rapidly changing societies are discussed.

**Key words:** adolescence; adulthood; rites of passage

### 1. Introduction

Adolescence is generally understood as the prolonged transition period between childhood and adulthood that prepares a person for marriage, entry into an occupation and assuming adult social roles. Typically, this transition is viewed in modern societies as beginning when the physiological ability to reproduce is present and ending when adult roles are assumed. Age ranges cited for adolescence vary somewhat, but the span from ages 12-30 encompasses adolescence in most countries today, with the primary focus being on the “teen-age” years of 13-19.

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Various academic disciplines within psychology and education define adolescence differently (Muus, 1996). Psychoanalytic theorists place an emphasis on resolving early childhood conflicts, learning to control aggressive and sexual impulses and detaching from the parents, which are often referred to as the “individuation process”. Cognitive psychologists consider adolescence to be characterized by the emergence of abstract reasoning skills and higher-level thinking. Physiologists focus on puberty and completion of growth of the body and brain. Sociologists see adolescence as a period of socialization for adult roles, while anthropologists focus on symbolism and rituals, initiation rites and learning the situational needs of adult roles in a given society. Educators consider adolescents to be those students in junior high or middle schools, secondary schools and colleges.

There is probably some truth in each of these perspectives on adolescence. It is also worth noting that adolescence may be a relatively recent phenomenon, and in some societies is still not evident. If members of a society pass directly from childhood to adulthood, as in places where females are married when they reach puberty and assume the roles of wives, or children move directly from dependence on families to independence in a prescribed role and occupation with no gradual preparation or role exploration, there is no period of adolescence. Conversely, the more choices there are available to an individual in a given society in terms of available adult roles, the more exploration and preparation is required in order to achieve individuation and an adult identity, thus, resulting in a prolonged period of adolescence.

## **2. Transitions from adolescence to adulthood: Cultural comparisons**

Rogoff (2005), discussing the influences of culture on development, described adolescence as the period when individuals gradually learn to become responsible for their future roles as parents. For youth in North America, moving from adolescence to adulthood means being able to make decisions independently, accept responsibility for others and achieve financial independence from one’s family of origin (p. 149). Adolescence is generally defined as a social stage between childhood and adulthood, a transitional or marginal period during which individuals unlearn the roles of children and acquire the roles of adults.

Inhelder and Piaget (1958) noted that adolescence is the stage when formal operational thought, including the abilities for systematic logical analysis and critical thinking, are acquired. Erikson (1976), in *Identity, Youth and Crisis* described adolescence as a time of identity formation, noting that exploration of identity issues and establishment of a sense of ego-identity is the task which preoccupies adolescence. Although the specific qualities of a person’s identity and the number of options available for exploration may differ from culture to culture, the establishment of an adult identity occurs universally. As Muus (1996) noted, however, establishing one’s adult identity requires forming a meaningful self-concept in which past, present and future are brought together to form a unified whole. This makes the task far more difficult during historic periods of rapid cultural change when family or community traditions are being lost and the future is unpredictable. “In a period of rapid social change, members of the older generation are no longer able to serve as role models for the younger generation” (Muus, 1996, p. 51). It is likely that during these periods of rapid social change, when it is difficult for youth to distinguish the difference between adolescence and adulthood that, “rites of passage”, whether formal or informal, become increasingly important in negotiating adolescence.

Events or tasks perceived as “rites of passage” vary somewhat from culture to culture. Rodolpho (2004),

writing of Brazilian culture, noted that in passing from youth to adulthood, individuals form moral values and establish responsible and socially appropriate interpersonal relationships. Lamas and Rech (1999) noted that rites of passage “permit an individual to break away, change from or abandon previous states, conditions or situations (i.e., those in childhood) and enter into a new stage appropriate to one’s new social situation and age” (p. 148). Using this definition, Lamas and Rech (1999) interviewed 11 Brazilian individuals between 16 and 79 years of age asking what they perceived as their own “rites of passage” into adulthood. All of those interviewed cited the rite as being when they left their parents’ home and established their own household. This event occurred between the ages of 14 and 23 for those interviewed, and they cited it as an opportunity to have less interference from family, and more personal freedom, privacy, autonomy, responsibility and independence. Alternatively, Scott (2001) defined the entrance to adulthood for both men and women as being signified by marrying and having a child.

Torrents (2006) interviewed 53 Brazilian students between the ages of 16 and 18 about their views. The 3 most commonly cited rites of passage among this group were “financial independence”; “marrying and/or having children” and “beginning one’s career”. Bretas, et al. (2008) interviewed 751 adolescents about what they perceived as “rites of passage” into adulthood. Their responses were grouped into 6 categories: (1) physical changes; (2) psychological changes; (3) social changes; (4) sexual behavior; (5) traumatic events; and (6) achieving independence. These authors concluded that in Brazilian culture, “There is no established ritual, and it is difficult to delineate with precision when and how the passage from childhood to adolescence occurs” (Bretas, et al., 2008, p. 410). The authors did note that sexual initiation and developing one’s own identity while being away from home (traveling or at school) seemed to be the closest approximations of a rite of passage for Brazilian youth. Silva and Soares (2001) also noted that Brazilian culture has no clear rites of passage into adulthood. They suggested that career guidance is viewed as “a modern ritual, whose main objective is to facilitate the transition to the adult world” (pp. 115-116). As such, earning a college education or completing vocational training could be viewed as rites of passage into adulthood.

Manzanera, Torralba and Martin (2002) investigated the lives and health habits of young adults in Spain and noted that use of drugs and alcohol during free time and social activities seemed to be a type of rite of passage into adulthood. This trend has not been evident in Brazilian research, but has been noted in some research in the US (McCarthy, Prandini & Hollingsworth, 2001).

Research in Malaysia and other Asian cultures on “rites of passage”—at least from a modern psychological perspective—is limited but from the literature reviewed, it appears that financial independence, completion of formal education, risk-taking, entering the workplace and accepting responsibility for one’s own household, family and decision-making are “modern rites of passage” into adulthood in most cultures today. Sexual activity and use of drugs and alcohol also may be associated with adult status in some groups. In countries where alcohol is illegal and penalties for drug use are severe, such responses are of course less likely. Also, in collectivistic Asian cultures, where obligations to parents and family are viewed as a part of one’s own identity and multi-generational households extend throughout the lifespan (Jaafar & McCarthy, 2009), different aspects may be seen as important in acquiring adult status.

### 3. Development of the rites of passage questionnaire

The American Psychological Association's Division of Teaching Psychology engaged in the Psychology Partnerships Project (P3) a decade ago. One of the working groups focused on international partnerships. One of many resulting projects from this group included facilitating partnerships between instructors of psychology in various countries. Two secondary school instructors, Frank Hollingsworth and Carlo Prandini, both of whom taught psychology to students were 15 to 17 years old, developed a collaborative teaching activity to bring their students in Bologna, Italy and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in contact via the Internet. They hoped to develop cross-cultural research skills as well as to enhance intergroup/international communication. These 2 high school instructors developed a unit which included aspects of their respective US and Italian public school curriculums in thinking skills, research methods and developmental psychology. The unit began by having the students listen to a famous song by Italian vocalist and songwriter Gigliola Cinquetti, "I'm not old enough to love you". She had won an award for this song at a music festival in Italy when she was only 16 years old. The students from both countries listened to the song and read of her early success. They discussed with each other (via Internet as well as with their local classmates) whether or not they agreed with the lyrics and whether or not the young musician could be considered an adult since she had already established her career and become self-supporting at 16. They then wrote brief essays addressing the question: "What makes someone an adult?".

Students then consulted developmental psychology textbooks for information, and their essays and discussions resulted in consensus that completion of biological, psychological and social development was what defined entry to adulthood. Still, this definition seemed vague to the students in both countries, so they focused their continued discussion on several additional questions:

- (1) Which features or characteristics should be present in order for a person to be considered an adult?
- (2) Are these the same in all countries and societies, or are they specific to a particular country, culture or region?
- (3) Do all people agree on what it means to be an adult?
- (4) Do people of different ages define adulthood the same?
- (5) Do high school students in Italy and the US agree on what it means to be an adult?

In an effort to answer these questions, students engaged in reading and library research, and they also interviewed members of their community. Each student conducted 4 brief interviews to gather answers to these questions with a friend, an adult family member and an adult community member, respectively. Based on the results of these interviews and further discussion, the students then developed a 20-item questionnaire which included the various answers people had provided to the interview questions (see Table 1). The students in both countries then distributed the questionnaire they had created to 5 different age groups of 30 people each: preadolescents, high school students, college students, adults between 25 and 60 years old and adults over 60 years old. They shared their data, analyzed their results and worked in small groups to write research.

The teaching objectives for this activity—to introduce students to conducting research to answer questions related to their own experiences and to develop international exchange, collaboration and social relationships—were realized. This activity, or variations of it, is deemed suitable for secondary students in many countries (McCarthy & Hutz, 2006). The data that resulted from this original project were of interest. In general,

there were few differences among age groups in how the various items were ranked and the only significant difference in responses found between Italian and American adolescents was that the US students placed higher importance on “driving a car” and the Italian students placed more importance on “having a love affair”. The data did not necessarily contradict the hypothesis that there is a strong cultural influence in the definition of features of adulthood since similarities could be explained as an expression of the growing homogeneity within Western societies due to media influence and similarity of material conditions and shared history among the Italian and US students. US and Western European cultures are quite similar. Still there was evidence of niche-cultural traits, such as differing sexual attitudes and economic values between the Italian and US groups. Overall, though, both cultures and all age groups shared similar views on what it means to be an adult. Having a child was seen as the most common entry point into adult status among the 300 respondents to this original survey.

**Table 1 Rites of passage questionnaire**

Rites of passage: What makes someone an adult?	
Many different experiences may be considered “rites of passage” that distinguish an adolescent from an adult. Some of these experiences are listed below. Please mark the item or items you think show that someone is an adult. If you mark more than one item, please write the number “1” next to the event that you think MOST indicates that someone is now an adult. If you do not see an important event on the list that you think should be there, you may add it to the list.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Physical maturity	<input type="checkbox"/> Special social or religious ceremony
<input type="checkbox"/> Graduating from high school	<input type="checkbox"/> Making major life decisions independently
<input type="checkbox"/> Getting married	<input type="checkbox"/> Being responsible for others
<input type="checkbox"/> Having a child	<input type="checkbox"/> Owning and driving a car
<input type="checkbox"/> Going to college	<input type="checkbox"/> Getting a job
<input type="checkbox"/> Graduating from college	<input type="checkbox"/> Going to war
<input type="checkbox"/> Financial independence from parents, including having a separate home	<input type="checkbox"/> Using drugs
<input type="checkbox"/> Having a love affair/sexual intercourse	<input type="checkbox"/> Reaching age of legal adulthood
<input type="checkbox"/> Voting in regional or national elections	<input type="checkbox"/> Smoking cigarettes
<input type="checkbox"/> Joining the military	<input type="checkbox"/> Drinking alcohol

The present study builds on this teaching activity was conducted in 2001, using the same survey initially developed by these high school students. The survey was distributed to over 600 respondents between the ages of 14 and 23 in 3 different countries during 2007-2008 to explore their perceptions of rites of passage in their respective cultures.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Instrument

The “Rites of passage questionnaire”, developed by Italian and US secondary psychology students in the activity described previously, was used to collect data. It appears below.

The questionnaire was translated into Brazilian Portuguese and Bahasa Malaya using standard back-translation techniques in which one of the researchers translated the instrument and then asked 2 other academics proficient in both English and the appropriate language to translate it back into English. This process continued until there were no differences between the translation and the original survey.

## 4.2 Respondents

Participants included: (1) 250 adolescents from the US (125 males and 125 females); (2) 191 adolescents from southeastern Brazil (70 males and 121 females); and (3) 163 adolescents from Malaysia (76 males and 87 females). They completed the survey in their native language during a 45-minute period while in attendance at a secondary/high school or university class session. The classes they attended were in several different subject areas, including literature, composition, nursing, dentistry, mathematics and other areas. Questionnaires were completed anonymously in their native language. Age and sex (male or female) were the only demographic variables indicated on the surveys.

Age range for the US and Malaysian samples was from 14-20, with an average age of 16 years. The Brazilian sample was slightly older, with an age range of 22-56 years. 118 (64%) of the Brazilian respondents were between 18-22; the average age for the entire sample was 23.9. Within the US sample, 50% of the participants were male. Within the Malaysian sample, 47 % were male and among the Brazilian sample, 37% were male.

## 4.3 Analysis

Data from each country were first examined separately. Items were rank-ordered from that most frequently marked as “1” to that least frequently marked as “1”. Differences on items ranked by males and females were analyzed within each group via Chi-square. Age differences were examined in the Brazilian sample, with the answers of those under 23 compared to those over 23 years of age. Item rankings were compared across all 3 groups.

## 5. Results

Within the Brazilian sample, the only significant age difference was found on ranking for the item “being responsible for others” ( $X^2(1, N=191)=4.39, p0.036$ ), with a higher number of “1” rankings in the 23-56 year old age group compared to the younger group. Significant sex differences were obtained in the Brazilian sample for “financial independence from parents” ( $X^2(1, N=191)=4.65, p0.031$ ), with females more likely to rate this response highest and “getting married” ( $X^2(1, N=191)=4.10, p0.043$ ), with males more likely to rate this response highest.

Differences in ratings between sexes in the US sample were opposite on these items, with females significantly more likely to cite “getting married” and males more likely to cite “financial independence”. US males were also significantly more likely to cite military service than females.

Among the Malaysians, males were significantly more likely to indicate “having a child”, and females were significantly more likely to cite “responsibility for others”. There were not significant differences between males and females on any of the other items within any of the groups.

Sex differences were not analyzed across groups, but item ranking differences were. The most commonly noted indicator of adult status for Malaysian youth was physical maturity, followed by completing one’s education. Participants from the US cited financial independence as the major indicator of adult status, while those from Brazil cited the ability to make important decisions independently from family and to take responsibility for others, such as children, aging parents or a spouse. Brazilian youth were significantly more likely to cite a love affair and voting in major elections as rites of passage than were participants from the other 2 countries. Participants from the US were significantly more likely to cite military service, and Malaysian youth were significantly more likely to consider completion of education as a rite of passage. Order of item rankings for each of the 3 countries appear

in Tables 2, 3 and 4.

**Table 2** Frequencies and percentages of “1” ratings for each item among Brazilians

Items	Frequency (N=191)	Percent (%)
(1) Making important life decisions independently	105	55
(2) Being responsible for other people	97	51
(3) Becoming financially independent from parents	96	50
(4) Getting a job	35	18
(5) Having a child	29	15
(6) Physical maturity	19	10
(7) Getting married	19	10
(8) Voting in elections	18	9
(9) Love affair/sexual intercourse	14	7
(10) Attending college	10	5
(11) Graduating from college	9	5
(12) Reaching age of legal adulthood	7	4
(13) Driver’s license and owning a car	4	2
(14) Going to war	3	2
(15) Completing high school	2	1
(16) Drinking alcohol	2	1

Note: Some respondents marked more than one item “1”, so total exceeds 191.

**Table 3** Frequencies and percentages of ratings for each item among US adolescents

Items	Frequency (N=250)	Percent (%)
(1) Financial independence	76	30
(2) Making important life decisions independently	72	26
(3) Having a child	25	10
(4) Getting married	20	8
(5) Joining the military	16	6
(6) Going to war	12	5
(7) Being responsible for other people	10	4
(8) Getting a job	7	3
(9) Love affair/sexual intercourse	2	1
(10) Drinking alcohol	2	1
(11) Voting	2	1
(12) Driver’s license and owning a car	2	1
(13) Smoking	1	1
(14) Completing high school	1	1
(15) Going to college	1	1
(16) Physical maturity	1	1

**Table 4** Frequencies and percentages of ratings for each item among Malaysian adolescents

Items	Frequency (N=163)	Percent (%)
(1) Physical maturity	65	40
(2) Graduating from high school	49	30
(3) Graduating from college	10	6
(4) Attending college	10	6
(5) Financial independence	8	5
(6) Responsibility for others	8	5
(7) Making decisions independently	6	4
(8) Getting a job	3	2
(9) Owning and driving a car	2	1
(10) Reaching legal age	2	1

Tables 2, 3 and 4 provide an overview of which item the respondents in each country selected as the “1” activity which signaled entry into adulthood. Because of the wording of the questionnaire, however, some respondents selected only a number “1” choice, while others also ranked several other items as “2”, “3”, “4”, and so forth. Some respondents (particularly in Brazil), indicated more than one item as “1”. Tables 5, 6 and 7 include weighting of all rankings provided to show how answers from respondents in each country compared. Based on the overall weighted numbers for ranking, comparisons between countries were also undertaken following procedures specified by Everitt (1977). Items that were ranked significantly higher (0.01) by respondents in a particular country compared to the other countries are so indicated.

Among Brazilians, 30 respondents wrote in their own answers and ranked these as “1”. These are not included in the weighted rankings. Write-in items focused on the ability to think critically, make good decisions independently and without peer pressure, and develop acceptable moral values to function in and improve society.

**Table 5** Overall ranking: Brazil (not inclusive of “other” responses)

(1) Make decisions independently
(2) Responsibility for others
(3) Financial independence
(4) Have a child
(5) Get a job
(6) Get married
(7) Vote*
(8) Finish high school
(9) Love affair*
(10) Car/driver’s license
(11) Finish college
(12) Reach legal age
(13) Start college
(14) Go to war
(15) Physical maturity
(16) -20. (tie) Drink alcohol; Ceremony; Military service; Smoke; Use drugs

Note: \* =significantly higher ranking in Brazilian sample compared to Malaysian and US sample.

**Table 6 Overall ranking : Malaysia (not inclusive of “other” responses)**

(1) Physical maturity*
(2) Graduate from high school*
(3) Graduate from college*
(4) Attend college*
(5) Financial independence
(6) Responsibility for others
(7) Getting a job
(8) Making decisions independently
(9) Reach legal age
(10) Car/driver’s license
(11) Have a child
(12) Vote in elections
(13) Get married
(14) Ceremony
(15) Military service
(16) Use drugs
(17) Love affair
(18) Go to war
(19) Smoke
(20) Use alcohol

Note: \* =significantly higher ranking in Malaysian sample compared to Brazilian and US sample.

**Table 7 Overall ranks: US (not inclusive of “other” responses)**

(1) Financial independence
(2) Making decisions independently
(3) Military service*
(4) Having a child
(5) Getting married
(6) Going to war*
(7) Getting a job
(8) Responsibility for others
(9) Owning/driving a car
(10) Graduating from high school
(11) Using alcohol
(12) Drugs
(13) Smoking
(14) Love affair
(15) Voting
(16) College graduation
(17) Attending college
(18) Physical maturity
(19) Ceremony
(20) Legal age

Note: \* =significantly higher ranking in US sample compared to Malaysian and Brazilian sample.

As with the Brazilian sample, 30 respondents wrote in their own answers, although they did not rank these. Write-in answers were focused on Malay cultural and moral development, and included items, such as fully understanding, honoring and living by “Adat” (the Malaysian moral and social code of acceptable behavior), being tolerant and non-judgmental, developing their intellectual powers and being capable of taking care of themselves and others appropriately.

Several US respondents also wrote in their own answers. These focused on developing one’s own identity, being recognized as an individual, establishing a career or making large amounts of money.

As noted in Tables 5, 6 and 7, US respondents ranked military service and going to war significantly higher as “rites of passage” than did the other 2 groups. Malaysian respondents rated education and physical maturity higher, while Brazilian adolescents rated voting and love affairs higher. Write-in answers varied slightly between groups, but overall response patterns were similar in terms of what adolescents view as “rites of passage”, with independent decision-making, responsibility for others, financial independence, getting a job, and owning/driving a car ranked relatively high (top half) by all groups, and use of drugs, alcohol, tobacco and participating in a special ceremony ranked relatively low (bottom half) by all groups. Marriage and having a child were ranked in the top half by Brazilian and US respondents, but not by Malaysian respondents.

## **6. Discussion**

In examining the differences in answers, it becomes apparent that the social milieu in which children grow up has an influence on their perception of adult roles. Of the 3 countries examined, only the US has an active military service currently involved in a war and it is in this country that the adolescence perceives going to war or military service as “rites of passage” into adulthood. The media, social modeling and surrounding events help shape perceptions of what it means to become an adult. In Malaysia, completing education and physical maturity were emphasized. This may be in part connected to the importance in that culture of achieving an education to become knowledgeable and to fulfill one’s potential. It is a part of the “adapt”, the moral and cultural code with which children are raised which prescribes what is expected of a moral adult member of society. The emphasis in Brazil on voting and decision-making is of interest, and may be related to how, in that country, voting and participating in government is presented as an obligation of citizenship, and is a required responsibility of every adult. In short, the differences between the 3 countries seem to be related to differences within the expectations, learning and socialization processes in effect in each.

On the other hand, there were similarities in what were perceived as “rites of passage” in all 3 countries. The US and Brazilian samples were more similar than their Malaysian counterparts, perhaps reflecting a basic difference between eastern and western philosophies regarding individualism vs. collectivism. Financial independence was ranked in the top 5 for all 3 countries, however, perhaps reflecting globalization and the role of marketing and media.

## **7. Applications in education**

Adolescents are naturally curious and it is during this time that educators can help diminish prejudice and build tolerance for diversity by introducing their students to peers from other groups and cultures. Presenting the

findings of this study and encouraging secondary students in classrooms throughout the world to participate in similar data-gathering projects in their own countries, for discussion and comparison to others in collaborative peer dialogue, could be a valuable way not only to build a basic understanding of human development, maturity and social responsibility, but also to enhance international relations and peace-building by reducing prejudice and in-group/out-group bias. The authors encourage their peers teaching in secondary and university settings to utilize this questionnaire, develop similar cross-cultural collaborative projects with others and share their results. Collaborators may be found through InterTOP, Psychglobal, the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology and the Asian Psychological Association<sup>1</sup>.

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(Edited by Nicole and Sunny)

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.iaccp2010.com>, <http://icope2010.psy.unsw.edu.au/>, <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=PSYCHG-LOBAL> or <http://www.cdu.edu.au/apsya> can be visited for additional information on these groups.