

**Vitality-Centred Education for Adulthood: Exploring Alumni Perspectives on the
Influences of Springhouse School on Subjective Adulthood**

A dissertation completed in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in Educational Studies

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Acknowledgments and Thanks

A sincere thank you to my supervisor, Dr. Paul Berger, for providing me with mentorship, guidance, and reassurance throughout this project. Your willingness to let me take the research where I felt it needed to go and your understanding of the challenges I faced at several points in the process will be remembered.

I would also like to extend my deepest gratitude to Dr. David Greenwood for introducing me to Springhouse Community School and the fine people who make it what it is. I also thank you for bolstering my confidence that I have the capacity to contribute to the vision of building education that supports and encourages eco-humanist adulthood.

To Dr. Hilary Brown, I extend my thanks for your authentic and honest critiques of my work. Your insights and questions as a committee member pushed me to carefully consider my work and every part of the dissertation has been improved because of it. You truly pushed my thinking about what is required for academic rigour.

I extend my thanks to Dr. Tom Puk as internal examiner for his valuable input and careful reading of my work. I appreciated the paper copy with pencil markings in the margins that guided me in thinking more deeply about my writing and thinking – especially in the realm of incorporating critique alongside positive accounts. Thank you to Dr. Monica Johnson for bringing in your understanding of adulthood studies in psychology as external examiner. Your methodological and ethical insights have made the piece richer and have sparked my imagination about how I might best pursue further research into the connection between schooling and adulthood in the future.

Thank you to Dr. Jenny Finn and the staff at Springhouse for all you do. A special note of appreciation for assistance with recruitment. I feel as if I am already a part of the extended community and I look forward to visiting in person in the near future. Related to this, I also extend gratitude to John, Liz, Tatiana, Cassidy, Felix, Elliot, and Angelica for sharing your time and stories with me as participants in this study. I wish you all the best!

I am eternally grateful to Dr. Christina van Barneveld for not only sharing advice, conversation, and friendship with me but for welcoming me into the Humanities 101 family during my PhD graduate assistantship. I will always treasure the role that you have played in making my life richer during my doctoral studies at Lakehead.

Sincere thanks to Dr. Gerald Walton, whose mentorship was invaluable in thinking about my work, academic life, and beyond.

Thank you to Lis and Gisella in the Education Library. Lis, our conversations made the Faculty of Education feel like a warm and welcoming space where I belong. Gisella, your expertise was pivotal in my being able to track down information that was essential to my being able to pursue this research in the way I wanted.

Thank you to Ariadne, Lucas, and Claudia for being my fellow Ph.D. colleagues and friends. I hope our conversations about academic life and our mutually supportive collaboration continue into the future.

On a personal note, I thank my parents from the bottom of my heart for their unwavering love, support, and encouragement during my graduate studies and throughout my life. I feel very fortunate that you have let me follow my own path in life. I cannot express enough what this means to me.

A final thanks goes out to my dearest and deepest friend who has been on this journey with me from the start. Your constant encouragement and support have been the motivation for me to keep going and grounded during the many bumps in the road. I cannot thank you enough for being by my side on the winding path through life.

Abstract

As we enter the second quarter of the 21st century, longstanding markers of adulthood in North American society such as marriage, parenthood, educational attainment, career establishment, financial independence, and home ownership are often delayed or are no longer being reached by many people in their twenties (Cannon, 2024a; Dalessandro, 2019; Hemez & Vespa, 2025; Ho et al., 2022). This is framed as a social problem (Cerullo, 2025) and a contributor to a growing mental health crisis among young people (Ladhani et al., 2019). Education is a factor in propagating these qualifiers of adulthood since schooling is said to contribute to adult identity development (A. Dewey, 2021; Sloan, 2005). However, little research has been done regarding correlates between school experiences and conceptions of adulthood (Erentaitė et al., 2018; Rich & Schachter, 2012). I spoke with seven young adult alumni of an alternative day school designed around holistic educational principles. I asked them about how they felt their school experiences influenced their views of what it means to be an adult. The findings reveal participants emphasised developing healthy relationships with themselves and community through practises such as cultivating emotional intelligence, exploring core values, and personal introspection. These qualities are not significantly represented in adulthood research. The findings point to the participants' novel view of adulthood being influenced by a school environment grounded in relationships built on mutual trust and vulnerability.

Keywords: Education for adulthood, holistic education, philosophy of education, well-being, transformative learning, alternative education, secondary education

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Purpose and Rationale.....	8
Significance to Education Research.....	8
<i>Contributions to Research Connecting Education and Adult Identity.....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Methodological Contributions.....</i>	<i>10</i>
Shifting Ideas of Adulthood: A Brief History of Adulthood in the Euro-American World.....	11
Adulthood in the Twenty-First Century.....	16
Transitions to Adulthood, Mental-Health, and Ontological Education.....	20
Chapter Two: Theoretical, Philosophical, and Conceptual Frameworks.....	24
Conceptual Frameworks: An Overview.....	24
Site Context and Conceptual Framework: Springhouse and <i>Sourced Design</i>	26
<i>Springhouse Community: Sourced Design, Vitality, and Regenerative Culture.....</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>Sourced Design.....</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>Vitality-Centred Education.....</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>Regenerative Culture-Building.....</i>	<i>34</i>
Philosophical Threads Informing this Study.....	39
<i>Dewar's Education for Well-Being.....</i>	<i>39</i>
Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks of Adulthood.....	41
Subjective Feelings of Becoming an Adult in Early 21 st Century North America.....	42
Common Criteria of Adulthood in Social Science Research.....	43
<i>Box Check Metrics: Role and Event-Based Measures.....</i>	<i>44</i>
<i>Box Check Metrics: Internal Criteria Measures.....</i>	<i>47</i>
<i>Roles and Internal Criteria: The Confluence Approach.....</i>	<i>49</i>
Subjective Adulthood: Defining and Exploring Adulthood Under Authenticity.....	50
<i>What is Subjective Adulthood?.....</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>The Dynamic Work and Practice of Feeling Like an Adult.....</i>	<i>52</i>
<i>Measuring Subjective Adulthood.....</i>	<i>54</i>
<i>Connections to Existing Examinations of Adulthood.....</i>	<i>55</i>
Adulting: The Financialization of Homo-Economicus' Adult Identity.....	56
<i>The Paradoxes of Grinding, Bootstrapping, and Genuine Pretending in Adulting.....</i>	<i>59</i>
Chapter Three: Literature Review.....	62
Education for Adulthood in the 21 st Century.....	62
Adolescence to Adulthood: Schooling and Life Transitions.....	64
Education for Adulthood: Schooling as Identity Formation.....	65
<i>School Environment and Climate: Social and Physical Influences.....</i>	<i>67</i>
<i>Teacher Influence.....</i>	<i>70</i>
Education for 21 st Century Skills as Adulthood Training: Setting the Stage for Adulting.....	73
Chapter Four: Methodology.....	75
Phenomenological Aspects of Methodology: A Rationale.....	75
<i>Bracketing.....</i>	<i>76</i>
Method: The Interview.....	78
<i>Limitations of, Risks of, and Human Considerations in Interviewing.....</i>	<i>79</i>
<i>Creative Interviewing as a Relational Strategy.....</i>	<i>80</i>
Logistics: How the Study Unfolded.....	81
<i>Participant Recruitment and Sampling.....</i>	<i>81</i>
Second Invitation Round.....	82
Interview Process.....	83

Preliminaries.....	83
Interview Protocol.....	84
<i>Transcription and Post-Interview Preliminary Notes.....</i>	86
Ethical Considerations.....	86
<i>Invitation to Participate.....</i>	87
Trustworthiness.....	89
Analysis.....	91
<i>Phenomenological Reduction.....</i>	92
<i>Assigning Codes.....</i>	93
<i>Grouping Codes into Concept Clusters.....</i>	96
<i>Constructing Themes.....</i>	97
<i>Main Themes.....</i>	98
<i>Analysis Outside of the Main Themes.....</i>	101
Chapter Five: Findings and Discussion.....	103
Section One: What Participants Were Doing at the Time of the Interview.....	104
<i>Answers to the Question "What are you Doing Now?".....</i>	104
Section Two: Alumni views on Adulthood and Influences from Springhouse Experiences.....	107
<i>Theme One: Markers of Adulthood Related to Those Found in the Research Literature.....</i>	108
Lifecourse Stages: Adolescence to Adulthood.....	109
Lived Experience of Adulthood: Navigating Complexity and Uncertainty.....	112
Individual Measures: Independence.....	115
Individual Measures: Purpose and Meaning.....	120
Roles and Event Measures: Socially-Sanctioned Adulthood.....	123
<i>Theme Two: Healthy Relationships with the Self.....</i>	126
Commitment to Improvement.....	129
Personal Reflection Toward Personal Development.....	130
Experiments with Adulthood.....	136
Authenticity.....	138
Personal Values and Needs.....	140
Exploring Barriers from the Past that Inhibit Personal Development.....	146
Emotional Intelligence.....	150
<i>Theme Three: Healthy Relationships with Others.....</i>	158
Personal Relationships.....	159
Relationships in Community.....	164
Perspectivism and Relativism.....	171
Section Three: External Influences on Adulthood.....	177
<i>Pre-Springhouse Notions of Adulthood.....</i>	178
Familial and Adult Role-model Influences.....	180
Dominant Cultural Influences.....	182
Prior School Experiences.....	184
<i>Post-Springhouse Notions of Adulthood.....</i>	187
The Hard Lessons of Living in Society.....	188
Refining and Expanding of Personal Philosophies and Perspectives.....	199
<i>Media Influences.....</i>	201
Chapter Six: Conclusion.....	206
The Importance of Mentors.....	208
The Influence of Sourced Design: School Climate, Principles, and Practises.....	213
<i>Participant Ideas of Adulthood and Influences from Sourced Design.....</i>	215
Transformative Education and Springhouse.....	226
Contributions to Scholarship.....	229

<i>Considering Stories About the Kinds of Adults Education Should be Forming.....</i>	<i>230</i>
<i>Springhouse’s Holistic Education: Emotional Well-Being and the Mental Health Crisis.....</i>	<i>231</i>
<i>“Artificial Intelligence” and Teaching for Humanity.....</i>	<i>232</i>
Limitations.....	234
Future Research.....	235
Final Thoughts on Education for Adulthood.....	237
References.....	239
Appendix A: Preliminary Self-Interview.....	259
Appendix B: Research Ethics Board Approval Letter.....	264
Appendix C: Letter of Invitation.....	265
Appendix D: Information Package and Consent Form.....	266
Appendix E: Revised Invitation to Participate.....	270
Appendix F: Revised Information Package and Consent Forms.....	271
Appendix G: Interview Guide.....	275

Index of Tables

Table 1: Early Stage Collection of Descriptive Codes (August 8, 2025).....	94
Table 2: Constituent Elements of Theme One: Markers of Adulthood Related to Normative Factors	99
Table 3: Constituent Elements of Theme Two: Healthy Relationships with the Self.....	100
Table 4: Constituent Elements of Theme Three: Healthy Relationships with Others.....	101
Table 5: Sourced Design Principles and practises.....	216

Chapter One: Purpose and Rationale

The central concept that I am most interested in exploring through my academic work is the connection between schooling and adulthood, in particular how schooling influences one's ideas of *what adulthood means*. Specific to this study, I explore how alumni of an alternative school named Springhouse Community School feel their educational experiences at the school have influenced their idea of adulthood. The research question is:

In what ways do Springhouse alumni feel that experiences in the Springhouse learning community influenced their idea of what it means to be an adult?

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence that experiencing life-oriented holistic education has had on adult identity formation for alumni of Springhouse Community School. However, this research has also been driven by a desire to explore broader concerns and questions, such as the history of adulthood and what it means to be an adult in the 21st century.

Significance to Education Research

This study fills a gap in the education research literature regarding the influence of schooling on peoples' ideas of what it means to be an adult. Based on my review of the academic literature surrounding the connection between education and adulthood, much has been written about what education for adulthood ought to look like, however little research exists on how experiences of schooling during adolescence actually influences the ways people think, behave, and exist as adults *after* they complete their schooling. Educational theorists, philosophers, and others within the academy propose many models, explicitly and implicitly, of the ways they think education should guide people towards certain visions of adulthood. However, little research has explored the connection between school experiences and post-adolescent perceptions of how their experiences in school have actually influenced their persisting idea of what it means to be an adult. This lack of research is especially evident in the context of alternative education, where I did not find a single study exploring the perceptions of alternative school alumni of how their school

experiences influenced their post-schooling idea of what it means to be an adult.

Contributions to Research Connecting Education and Adult Identity

Despite the lack of research into schooling's influence on ideas about adulthood, studies within psychology, sociology, economics, and education explore how isolated aspects of schooling such as formal courses, interventions, and teachers influence similarly isolated parts of identity such as gender identity (Corner & Dallavis, 2022), environmental identity (A. Dewey, 2021), or civic identity (Weinschenk & Dawes, 2022). Very few studies look at schooling's influence on conceptions of adulthood more holistically. There are many models that psychologists and sociologists have developed to categorise pathways to adulthood, yet few of them consider how the vast constellation of factors contributing to people's ideas about adulthood, including education, are interdependent (Ho et al., 2022). According to Bosch et al. (2016), research on adult identity in general contains much information about various factors that influence correlated aspects of personality, yet less is known of socializing factors that can predict formation of identity. One such socialization factor that is under-researched is education. The transition to adulthood has been an area of increasing interest to psychology and sociology researchers in recent years (Piotrowski et al., 2020) and scholars are recognising the need for understanding how young people arrive at adult self-identification (Johnson et al., 2007). This study aligns with burgeoning scholarly interest in these fields in that it addresses the fact that current research does not provide meaningful points of entry to understanding the connection between school experience in adolescence and identity formation in adulthood (Erentaitė et al., 2018). The work behind my research also connects to Rich and Schachter's (2012) observation that school is a potential site for identity development. These authors point out that findings from the sociological scholarship on identity development confirm that school *is* a potential site for identity development, while also emphasising that the relationship between education and identity development is under-researched and under-theorized. It should be noted that the findings communicated in this dissertation reflect the subjective perspectives of a

limited number of participants. Thus, no assumptions of generalisability to wider populations should be made beyond the context of the individuals who participated in this study. This work's contribution lies in its exploratory nature, which provides data that can serve as a seed for further theorising about the influence of schooling on perceptions of adulthood.

Methodological Contributions

Lowe et al. (2013) point out that most inquiries exploring the link between schooling and adult identity formation rely on data collected through surveys based on participants rating predetermined, list-based factors. They suggest that qualitative, open-ended questions exploring people's ideas about what it means to be an adult may yield different results due to open-ended questions inviting spontaneous and unexpected replies. This call for qualitative work also addresses the issue of the existing sociological and psychological research on adulthood in the United States being grounded in metrics that may be out of date (Ho et al., 2022). For example, most existing research tools used to examine the transition to adulthood in the U.S. are based on sample sets that do not reflect the diversity of the population as it is in the 21st century (Ho et al., 2022). Thus, research into the idea of a normative path to adulthood should account for the diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds as well as differences in socioeconomic backgrounds (Ho et al., 2022). While the alumni of Springhouse School who participated in this study do not represent a wide range of ethnic and racial diversity, the work contributes to the literature investigating the unique ways that adulthood is seen by young people who have experienced alternative education.

Considering the changes to the markers of adulthood evidenced by recent research in various fields of adulthood studies which will be explored throughout this paper, qualitative studies that may contribute to a re-evaluation of standard metrics seems timely. In short, the purpose of this study is to explore a personal interest as well as to contribute to the limited qualitative research on the connection between alternative education and adulthood. This avenue of inquiry also opens up a neglected aspect of educational scholarship, namely the influence that educational experiences have

on post-schooling human development more broadly. This information is especially important given the shifting state of the social, cultural, ecological, and political climate as we enter the second quarter of the 21st century.

Shifting Ideas of Adulthood: A Brief History of Adulthood in the Euro-American World

Examining the history of adulthood supports the argument that ideas about what adulthood means are not static and universal. Situating adulthood as a social-historical construct provides grounding for any discussion of how education might act as an inflection point in influencing a paradigm shift in how society views adulthood. This historical approach is influenced by Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault, 1972), which is used by historians to explore how knowledge is bounded by the contextual social and cultural forces of a particular time and place.

Academic interest in adulthood is relatively recent across all periods and disciplines of history research (Youngs, 2024), yet the burgeoning findings of researchers reveal the concept of adulthood has changed considerably throughout European and North American history. In writing on the topic of understanding adulthood, Cannon (2024a) rightly points out that many scholars and researchers' views of the history of adulthood are flawed due to projection of their own 21st century ideas of adulthood onto the past and assuming their ideas about adulthood have been universal across time. However, when one looks back at the history of adulthood, it becomes clear that the stability of the concept of adulthood is a fiction (Cannon, 2024a). Markers of adulthood many take for granted, such as reaching a certain age, entering a profession, or getting married are not in fact universal but are fluid across cultures and change throughout history (Lansford et al., 2021).

The concept of adulthood is often defined in opposition, which means it only works as a category when considered against those who are excluded from it (Cannon, 2024a). Exclusion and access to adulthood can be based on intersectional criteria and these criteria have changed in various ways over the centuries, being shaped along with other life-stage categories over time by social and cultural forces (Cannon, 2024a). Thus, to more fully understand the context-based nature

of adulthood, it is important to appreciate the ways adulthood has reflected various social, cultural, and political contexts of European and North American colonial history. Cannon (2024a) asserts that historical scholarship surrounding adulthood would benefit if academics no longer treated it as an “invisible, or a desirable, norm” (p. 14). I believe this advice applies to researchers in any field, including education.

Before going further, it is necessary for me to explain that when I use the word "adult" throughout this discussion of history, I am referring to our modern understanding of what this means. This is because the word “adult” did not appear in the European context until the medieval period. It sees no appearance in connection to our modern meaning in any medieval vernacular language, being derived from Latin *adultus/adulta* which translates as "full grown" or "mature" (Youngs, 2024). *Adultus* can be seen written in church and government works; for example, William of Aylesbury used the word often in the 12th century in reference to "growth" with no attachment to chronological age (Youngs, 2024). The word “adult” first appeared in writing in the English language in Sir Thomas Elyot's 1531 text, *The Boke Named The Governour* (Cannon, 2024b), where an “adulte” is described in a manner describing chronological age and behaviour as “such persones beinge nowe adulte, that is to saye passed their childehode as well in maners as in yeres” (as cited in Youngs, 2024, p. 5). Even with the 16th century appearance, the term adult was not widely used until the end of the 18th century, during which time it slowly began to be distinguished from adolescence (Crosbie, 2024). Definitions of what we would today consider adulthood were vague in the eighteenth century, becoming clearer over time. This is evidenced through entries in the 1702 *New English Dictionary* referring to adults as “grown to full age” or by Nathan Bailey's 1721 reference to an adult as one being “grown, or come to full ripeness of age”, here likely referring entirely to physical characteristics (Crosbie, 2024). Crosbie (2024) points out that “full age” was contextual in legal terms and did not equate to adulthood in 18th century England. Regarding the history of the word "adult" in North America, an 1828 definition of adulthood in

Webster's American Dictionary of the English Language reads "a person grown to full size and strength, or to the years of manhood – a person between fourteen and twenty-five years of age" (as cited in White, 2024, p. 4).

Having clarified the use of the word "adult", in what follows I would like to explore how the concept that underlies the word has changed over time. In the western knowledge tradition, we can look to classical Greek and Roman ideas of *Ages of Man* as early models of adulthood. These represent a collection of ancient stage-based progressions of the (specifically male) life divided into anywhere from two (Youngs, 2024) or three (Cannon, 2024b) to twelve stages (Cannon, 2024b; Youngs, 2024). The explicit depiction of males throughout all such developmental theories illustrates how, until the 20th century, the history of adulthood in both Europe and the United States reflected a history of masculinity (Cannon, 2024a; White, 2024). Typically, the models portrayed the stages of infant, child, adolescent, and old age as somewhat consistent in chronology, with numerous and variable representations of what today we would consider adulthood being included in between adolescence and old age. Starting in the Middle Ages, the timing of the stages was linked to biblical texts, with the lifespan's typical end defined by the age of "three score and ten" (from Psalm 90:10), and stages of development linked to planetary symbolism important to Christian astrology (Youngs, 2024). The adult-equivalent phase was always represented at the top of the circular models or at the top step in step models and was visually depicted as a bearded, kinglike figure along with status symbols such as sceptre, sword, or bags of money (Youngs, 2024). However, achieving this state was not guaranteed. Of note, no clear rites of passage into and through adulthood existed in medieval Europe and how one handled the trials and tribulations of life defined one's development toward maturity (Youngs, 2024). Exemplary texts of the medieval period discount the inevitability of these stages, prioritising reflection on and repentance of sin as the two most important pursuits in life (Youngs, 2024).

In the European Middle Ages, as in periods before and since, adulthood was discussed

equivalently with manliness, which in turn was defined by Christian virtue (Youngs, 2024). The matching of Christian virtue with maturity can be seen in 17th century England, where *spiritual maturity* represented the pinnacle of what it meant to be an adult. The ability to attain spiritual maturity was initiated in childhood by indications that one possessed a divine connection, and it was achieved in one's old age or elderhood through a life of sober and pious religious devotion (Robson, 2024). During much of English history, adulthood was intrinsically tied to religiosity in that one was considered more mature as one's experience of, and adherence to, religion deepened over time. Those who did not understand Christian scripture properly were seen as children or *spiritual infants* by both Protestants and Catholics (Robson, 2024). Childishness was equated with not seriously following Christian doctrine, regardless of chronological age (Robson, 2024).

Aside from becoming a good Christian, secular markers of adulthood also changed over the centuries across Europe. Some were distinctly of their time, such as Henry Cuffe's 1607 assertion that one is fully grown when the humors¹ are most perfectly balanced, going on to explain that women experience this earlier than men due to their different balance of the humors (Cannon, 2024b). Other discussions of adulthood come to us through the work of a variety of authors. Writing in the 1340's, Petrarch's thoughts on his life during his thirties were that they were a time of reflection on youth and a shift to more personal, creative, moral and philosophical thinking (Youngs, 2024). In her pilgrimage-inspired work *Vision* of 1404, a forty-year-old Christine de Pizan wrote that maturity involves developing spiritual and intellectual reasoning. She dismissed youthful emotions as childish, and welcomed the sobriety of middle age (Youngs, 2024). In the early 16th century, Pedro Mexia described the mature man as one who possesses strong mental and physical powers, knows what is good for himself, and searches for honour, riches, and renown through virtuous labour (Cannon, 2024b).

In the 15th century, popular ideas about ideal adulthood included the ability to work,

¹ The theory of humours was a medieval attempt to explain human health and temperament as being a product of balance or imbalance in bodily fluids of yellow bile, black bile, blood, and phlegm. See Kuhn (2012) or Mason (1962) for more information.

establish an independent household, and become a patriarch of said household (Cannon, 2024b). Sources from the 17th century attribute reasoned judgement and control over anger and desire as adult qualities while other sources cite something as simple as being able to grow a beard as a sufficient marker of adulthood (Cannon, 2024b). Interestingly, pre-pubescent boys were seen at the time as an entirely different gender from biologically adult men (Cannon, 2024b), and even fully grown women were often referred to as *female men* (Crosbie, 2024). This is not to say that ideas about adulthood did not differ based on gender. Male markers of adulthood in 18th century England included leaving home, starting work, reaching the age of discretion (which was fourteen in 1726), establishing an independent household, and marrying (Crosbie, 2024). In this we can see the seeds of our own society's so-called traditional views of adulthood emerging. Gender, class, race, occupation, and life circumstances influence the transition between life stages (Crosbie, 2024). Between the 16th and 18th centuries, female maturity was strictly tied to biology and social role. In general, the route to adulthood for women proceeded from being a man's daughter to another's wife and then his widow, with marriage being considered a universal rite of passage (Cannon, 2024b). In America, legal adulthood was not advantageous to women until they were afforded the same rights as men. Women who were over the age of legal adulthood but were not married were considered child-like dependents of their families, yet they were considered legal adults in the eyes of the law regarding crimes (White, 2024).

Both Britain and the United States exported their idealized notions of adulthood throughout their spheres of influence (Cannon, 2024a). In early medieval times, no consistent ideas of secular adulthood were present, with criteria for maturity differing from community to community (Cannon, 2024a). Widespread ideas about childhood and adulthood changed profoundly in the Anglo-American world after the 1600's. Age and maturity did not correlate until the 1700's, when prior ideas about adulthood based on power and authority being inherited shifted to adulthood being something that was earned (Cannon, 2024a). In the 1700's age became a convenient metric to

determine who could have certain rights. It also connected to mass age-graded schooling that was developing at the time, further parsing childhood and adolescence into smaller units (Cannon, 2024a). During the 18th and 19th century, American and European colonizers also used their definitions of adulthood as a justification for oppression of minority populations.

Since the late 17th century, adulthood has been used as a category to define who gets to be a citizen in the colonies that would later become the United States and in Britain (Cannon, 2024a). This had implications on racialized populations, blurring the distinction between how adulthood was recognised between dominant and oppressed populations. In the case of Black and Indigenous peoples in the early United States and other colonial places, whites considered all non-whites and non-Christians to be children regardless of their chronological age (Cannon, 2024a; Hodgson, 2024). In British colonial India, British administrators saw Indian children as “small, perverse adults” (as cited in Cannon, 2024a, p. 11), “immune to reform” and thus “in need of punishment, not education” (Cannon, 2024a, p. 11). In Europe and North America, homosexuals were denied adult status since they were considered unlikely to marry or become parents (Cannon, 2024a). This meant that across history in these places, any non-white, non-cis gendered people felt the need to perform adulthood according to colonial, Christian standards to try and gain social acceptance and minimize oppression by colonizers (Cannon, 2024a).

As we will see, the primary markers of adulthood across the post-industrial world have many of their roots in the qualities of maturity expected of males throughout the history of Europe and America. At many levels, these male-centric models of what it means to be an adult have imposed themselves across social and cultural boundaries around the world.

Adulthood in the Twenty-First Century

“Twenty-first century adulthood is likely to be not our familiar twentieth-century version, but rather one about which we have not yet even a glimmering” (Gilmore, 2019, p. 645). This observation reveals the shifting nature of adulthood and how it is reflective of both the society of

the moment and of the ways that people adapt to and resist that society. Mitchell and Lennox (2020) claim that in our modern time, while previously established ideas of adulthood are quickly losing their meaning, there is a “paucity of research critically examining how macro-level discourses of adulthood inform and reflect young peoples’ subjective understandings of themselves as adults” (p. 214). Fortunately, transition to adulthood has been an area of increasing interest to researchers in the fields of developmental psychology and sociology in recent years (Piotrowski et al., 2020). The study of transitioning from adolescent to adult has seen growing attention recently in social sciences (Johnson et al., 2007). This is due to an increased diversity in the lives of young people and changes in how social scientists define adulthood, especially with regard to the value placed on traditional role markers (Johnson et al., 2007).

For many people in North America adulthood means something completely different than it did fifty, or even twenty years ago. The changes in how adulthood is entered and experienced for young people carries both new opportunities and risks (Johnson, 2013). Ideas about education for adulthood that applied in the 20th century are increasingly falling out of alignment with the lived realities of young people in the present. In contrast to preparing for the responsibility of stable family life and career that typified the transition to adulthood in the past, moving into adulthood in the 21st century revolves around preparing oneself to be adaptable for an unpredictable future (Landberg et al., 2019). It is a time where instead of settling down into stable roles, the young person’s life is marked by a sense of freedom and diversity of experience (Arnett, 2004; Johnson et al., 2007). Cannon (2024a) writes that academia and popular media are currently crying out about a crisis of adulthood, where millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996) are accused of being lazy and not achieving so called traditional markers of adulthood, while young people themselves declare that adulthood is dead and they are okay with that. Alongside this, Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012) are claimed by Cannon to be missing out on their youth and forced into adulthood early. Both views assume that there is a proper and natural kind of adulthood and that not adhering

to this model represents a problem. The tension between the lived experience of adulthood and the ideal of adulthood is nothing new when looked at from an historical perspective. According to numerous studies that have been published over the course of the past twenty-five years, a collection of which are represented in the literature review and theoretical framework for this dissertation, adulthood in post-industrial societies is undergoing a profound historical change driven by a complex interaction of economic, social, cultural, and political forces. As Motulsky et al. (2020) point out, “there was a time, not that long ago, when adulthood marked the end of learning and the beginning of work and family...Identity was stable and often dictated by work, race, gender, and class. That time is no longer” (p. vii). This change is often framed as a problem, both in academic work and in the popular press.

Many young people across North America between eighteen and thirty are currently finding themselves delayed, or even blocked, from meeting what are considered by some to be traditional markers of adulthood. As a recent example, an article in the popular financial magazine *Forbes* (Cerullo, 2025) cites a United States Census working paper (see Hemez & Vespa, 2025) which shows that young people are having more and more difficulty meeting so-called traditional markers of adulthood such as leaving the parental home, home ownership, entering a career, getting married, and having children. This comes as no surprise to academics studying emerging and subjective adulthood, who have been looking into this shift in what adulthood means to young people across the post-industrial world since the early 21st century (for example Arnett, 2004). In addition to a growing inability to fulfill society's expectations of adulthood, traits such as conscientiousness, which has been cited as an essential personality trait for successfully navigating the adult world, is said to be in decline among young people (Y. Y. Smith, 2025). These revelations seem grim, however as we have seen looking back on the history of adulthood, historians point out that what is considered by some to be the “standard” or “traditional” path to adulthood in the European or American sphere is not as constant as many assume (see Cannon, 2024b).

Adulthood as it has been widely viewed in North America for the past century has merely been a contingent product of social, cultural, economic, and political forces. I argue this product is now transforming in accord with the new realities of life in the 21st century under a regime of *capitalist realism*, where the rules of capitalism increasingly serve as the inescapable ontological framework guiding dominant society (as per Fisher, 2009). From a broad social, cultural, and political perspective that reflects Cannon's (2024a) assertion that “understanding adulthood is crucial to truly understanding the dynamics of power” (p. 3), this study addresses a phenomenon that may be best explored by the archive-based British documentary filmmaker, Adam Curtis (1992, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2016, 2021, 2022, 2025). Curtis portrays a growing, nearly subconscious sense among the general population that those who are supposed to be guiding our societies do not know what they are doing, cannot be trusted, and have given away their power to the inscrutable forces of international finance. Through his films, Curtis documents how three forces – individualism, technology and finance – have contributed to humans becoming alienated from one another and from the natural world, leaving people to increasingly retreat into isolated, curated personal worlds. These personal worlds help people feel safe compared to the unpredictable and complex reality they perceive the world to be. His thesis very much connects to the financialized and individualized view of adulthood reflected in the sociological and psychological literature on emerging and subjective adulthood. This makes investigating a potential connection between the adult worldview Curtis describes and how children and adolescents experience schooling urgent, terrifying, and perhaps in some ways hopeful. Considering the society of alienation many young people currently find themselves in, it is compelling to reflect on the impact that schooling experiences may have on mental health and meaning-making in the context of what young people believe will make them adults, and how they will consequently form their own adult identities.

In present-day North America, many young people are increasingly experiencing adverse

mental health effects connected to the aforementioned delays or stalling in their achievement of normative markers of adulthood such as career stability, home ownership, and starting a family (Mitchell & Lennox, 2020). Of note, the delay in adolescent to adult transitions that is described by the theory of emerging adulthood has been positively correlated with increases in mental health problems and addictions (Ladhani et al., 2019). Formal educational solutions to this problem of youth anxiety around adult transitions typically take the form of training aimed at teaching what are popularly called “Adulting” skills (Houy et al., 2020) which focus on individual economic management, financialized identity formation, social conformity, and emotional self-regulation. Informally, unease about what it means to be an adult also leads many young people to look to a growing self-help industry for answers. Both of these forms of education for adulthood tend to see overcoming personal deficiencies towards individual fending-for-oneself (Lythcott-Haims, 2021) within a competitive society as the key to a meaningful adult life. However, other solutions to this mental health problem exist and include exploring youth-directed ideas of subjective adulthood and meaning-making which bypass normative and traditional expectations of adult behaviour and achievement. This study contributes to potential ways of engaging with alternative paths to adulthood that may mitigate some of the mental health problems that young people are facing regarding their relationship with adulthood. This work also asks the reader to consider the concept of adulthood as inherently political and perhaps even the foundation upon which democracy rests (Cannon, 2024a).

Transitions to Adulthood, Mental-Health, and Ontological Education

In all, perhaps the issue lies not with the delays in reaching standard markers of adulthood. It may be in how young people both are and are not being institutionally prepared and socialized to enact society's vision of what it means to be an adult. Or perhaps dominant society's idea of what it means to be an adult is fundamentally flawed. Through this dissertation, I explore the possibility that by supporting ossified and outdated models of adulthood, official social institutions including

education may be contributing to an ever-growing youth mental health crisis. Connected to the idea of alienation, this study also aims to contribute to education scholarship by investigating the potential for alternative forms of schooling to cultivate social/ecological connection, meaning, personal development, and a sense of purpose (beyond financialized goals) that will persist into adulthood. Dewar (2016) argues that the education community at all levels from the classroom to the academy focuses too much on epistemology at the expense of ontology. His overall thesis is that education's neglect of exploring existential ideas of life, the world and what it means to be human leaves students and teachers unprepared for the task of being-in-the-world (Dewar, 2016). His observations of the neglect of ontology in education, both in his experiences within the academy and in his work as a high school teacher, align with the widespread issue of mental health problems among young people evident in the scholarship surrounding emerging adulthood. Dewar's commentary resonates well with Freinacht's (2017, 2019) argument that the modernist socio-political models underlying most post-industrial societies prioritize economic development at the expense of their citizens' psychological, behavioural, and cultural development.

A rich literature shows that a highly developed sense of identity helps one to navigate the demands of modern living (Bosch et al., 2016). In addition, adulthood is important because it represents an endpoint that shapes pre-adulthood life (Gilmore, 2019). Creating and presenting a new, mature identity, acts as a rite of passage into adulthood (Coyle, 2019) and thus it follows that the inability to form a coherent identity, acts to bar self-identification as an adult (Diaz-Strong, 2021). Adulthood can mean the point in life where people acquire new rights, responsibilities, and roles that correlate with expectations of adulthood. These rights, responsibilities, and roles are increasingly blurry in terms of importance as compared to previous generations (Ho et al., 2022). The profound social changes that have come to define adult living since the 1970s are serving to frustrate traditional paths to adult identity formation for many. This is becoming a growing social, cultural, political, and existential problem among youth since "adulthood, as traditionally defined, is

now achieved only by a minority of men and women” (Ho et al., 2022, p. 6).

Some scholars believe that the cause for the onset of psychological difficulties is situated at the level of subjective adult identity, or in other words, one’s feeling that they are an adult. Subjective adult identity is associated with mental benefits while lack of subjective adult identity is associated with depression, anxiety and social maladjustment (Lowe et al., 2013). Affirming this, Lindell et al. (2017) claim that those who feel like adults handle the transition into and through early adulthood better than those who do not feel like adults. It is not the case that the transition from adolescence to adulthood is always experienced negatively, however. Johnson et al. (2007) assert that moving out of the liminality of adolescence may influence well-being and happiness. In speaking of the supports that youth need in transitioning to adulthood Ladhani et al. (2019) suggest that a sense of belonging and feeling of being heard, coupled with help in setting clear academic and career aspirations is beneficial.

One element that K-12 schools can incorporate to aid in mental health related to identity development is incorporation of racial-ethnic identity development programs, which showed “promising effects on adolescents’ identity processes and adjustment” (Branje et al., 2021, p. 917). Related to this is the idea that schooling in a language that is not one’s traditional language can interfere with transmission of intergenerational cultural identity between parents and their children. The example given is loss of Basque identity by being taught in Spanish at school. Basque parents had an influence over the language taught at schools and thus their children’s ethnic identity was affected less than their Catalan peers, whose parents did not have influence over the language used in school (Aspachs-Bracons et al., 2008). Without special programs such as these, institutional education and society work both actively and passively to subvert qualities that young people have historically used to define their identities as adults. This correlates with Ladhani et al. (2019) who mention that marginalized youth in transition to adulthood require equity measures such as a holistic response to their needs, access to specialized cultural and social supports, early

identification of disengagement with school, and personal guidance and mentoring. This is interesting because the transition period to adulthood overlaps with high school graduation, at which point access to the aforementioned supports becomes much more difficult. Lindell et al. (2017) point this out, noting that adult transitions such as leaving school, often correlate with a sudden drop in social supports, which can lead to negative effects on mental health. Thus, it is important to investigate how schooling can better support young people as they transition between adolescence and adulthood since this work could aid in establishing and maintaining positive mental health for young people after high school.

Presenting adulthood from a historical perspective illustrates the shifting definition of what it has historically meant to be an adult in the Euro-American cultural context. Deconstructing the idea of adulthood and highlighting the markers of adulthood as products of social-historical forces draws attention to the fluid nature of what defines adulthood. This hints that education holds potential as a lever for influencing the kinds of ideas people have about what it means to be an adult. The current situation for emerging adults regarding their attainment of adulthood has been shown to be in flux. Many young people are currently struggling to fulfil the roles and accomplishments that have served as the indicators of adult status throughout the second half of the twentieth century. This is contributing to a mental health crisis. Research aimed at understanding the new shape of the transition to adulthood, and in the case of this dissertation the role of schooling in supporting young people through this period of their lives, is of great importance to the mental health of youth. The next chapter explores facets of the theoretical, philosophical, and conceptual frameworks that have guided this inquiry. This includes an explanation of the principles that guide Springhouse School, an examination of philosophical questions surrounding the connection between mental health and ontological education (Dewar, 2016), and an exploration of the current research into adulthood including the phenomenon of *Adulthood* and the field of subjective adulthood.

Chapter Two: Theoretical, Philosophical, and Conceptual Frameworks

The influence that schooling has on one's ideas of what it means to be an adult is a field of study which is under-researched and under-theorized (Rich & Schachter, 2012) and this is especially true in the context of alternative education, which is my central academic interest. Based on my review of the literature, there are no single existing theoretical frameworks available that serve as a suitable fit for this study. While there are numerous theoretical and philosophical ideas about how education ought to influence the development of adult identity, very few research studies examine how the influence of schooling on adulthood actually plays out in the real world. This lack of research thus leaves little to theorize about. This inquiry is intended to contribute to foundational theory-building around the connection between educational experiences and peoples' concept of what it means to be an adult. In the interest of this project of theory-building, I draw upon a number of conceptual frameworks to interpret and analyse the data that I have collected.

Conceptual Frameworks: An Overview

The frameworks I draw upon in this research most prominently include psychological and sociological work around subjective adulthood, or the study of what people feel makes one an adult (Cherney et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2007; Mitchell & Lennox, 2020), and the limited research on the connection between schooling and identity development (Cross, 2009; A. Dewey, 2021; Tong & Kim, 2022 also see the literature review for more details). Work in these fields serves as existing research into what adulthood means to young people in the twenty-first century as well as more limited research into how school experiences influence specific elements of identity-building. Connected to mental health struggles, the work of Dewar (2016) points out a foundational philosophical problem with education at all levels. He argues that the field focuses too much on epistemology at the expense of ontology, leaving many young people adrift with respect to creating meaning in their lives. This leads directly into ideas from relevant education scholarship such as holistic education (J. Miller, 2019, 2021; J. Miller et al., 2018; R. Miller, 2022; O'Sullivan, 2005;

Schiller, 2019), alternative education (Bascia & Maton, 2016; Hadar et al., 2018; Leiding, 2008; Raywid, 1999; Wilson, 2017; Young, 1991), and to a lesser extent transformative learning theory (Benjamin & Crymble, 2017; Dirkx et al., 2018; Finnegan, 2023; Mezirow, 1991). These elements inform my understanding of the aims and practises that students may experience in these different, but related, types of educational environments. They also provide different perspectives on how people working in these fields believe that education for the whole person should be a central priority of education. Springhouse is an alternative school whose philosophy and approach closely aligns with holistic education. Thus, familiarizing myself with ideas in the fields of alternative education and holistic education in particular has been important in understanding the context for the site, the philosophical, pedagogical and curricular approaches, and the culture of the learning community. I will be using the research site's own philosophical framework of *Sourced Design* (Finn, 2023; Finn & Stabler, 2024) as a means of contextualizing participant recollections and observations about how their experiences influenced how they view adulthood. Drawing from a broad and interdisciplinary base of literature has been invaluable in designing and executing my methodology, engaging with participants to collect data, and subsequently analyzing and interpreting that data (Lassig, 2022).

Since this project contributes to research on the connection between education and adulthood, the literature review section in chapter three is dedicated to fields related to this idea. I have done this to situate my work within the existing scholarship (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010; Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009; Sword, 2017) and to provide the reader with a more detailed picture of concepts that appear within research in this field. Overviews of the other elements that I am drawing on are briefly summarized below for reference purposes, including an exploration of *subjective adulthood*, the main theoretical framework I have used in understanding how social scientists study adulthood in general populations. In order to provide the reader with an idea of the kind of educational environment that participants would have experienced, I will describe the

school itself and the philosophy that underpins everything that the Springhouse learning community does.

Site Context and Conceptual Framework: Springhouse and *Sourced Design*

Firstly, I provide a very brief outline sketch of the school itself in terms of its history, purpose, and general functioning. Springhouse was founded in 2014 in the town of Floyd, Virginia and is now located on a forested rural property near the town. It was established as an alternative school catering to local adolescents who desired an educational experience that was in line with supporting life in all its forms (Springhouse School, 2020c). This purpose continues to the current day. In the early years of the school's history, its philosophy and approach to education were predominantly guided by the ideas of writer and depth psychologist Bill Plotkin (Springhouse School, 2022), who was on the board of directors for the school and was a visiting teacher and facilitator in the school's first years. Since 2018, the Springhouse community has been refining its own philosophy of education called *Sourced Design* (Finn, 2023; Finn & Stabler, 2024; Springhouse School, 2020a, 2022). *Sourced Design* is grounded in many of Plotkin's ideas; however, it builds upon the ongoing experiences and educational experiments within the school community. The school is accredited under Virginia law (Springhouse School, 2024) and although a private school, is a registered not-for-profit organization. School funding comes from grants, donations, and tuition fees. Notably, tuition fees are waived or reduced if the family of a student who is interested in attending Springhouse does not have the financial resources to cover the cost of tuition (Springhouse School, 2020c).

Springhouse operates as a K-12 Spanish/English language day school, with students attending mixed-age classes of varying sizes throughout the week during the months of September to June. Students move between group activities and working privately with mentor/teachers on individual projects during the school day (Springhouse School, 2020c). In accord with the school's philosophy, student achievement is not assessed with examinations or pre-determined evaluations,

but through student-designed demonstrations of self-directed and project-based learning (Finn & Stabler, 2024). The curriculum of the school is thus flexible and based largely on what the student is interested in learning. Teachers act as guides, mentors, and facilitators in helping the students find and engage with the information they need to understand the topic they are pursuing (Finn & Stabler, 2024). Teachers are selected by the school directors based on how they embody qualities that support the school philosophy. School-organised learning activities include contemplative practises, embodied activities such as dance and other movement, singing, experiences in nature, hands-on construction projects, gardening, art, printmaking, and visits to a variety of learning sites across the region (Finn & Stabler, 2024; Springhouse School, 2020b, 2020c).

In addition to the K-12 day school, Springhouse has experimented with several programs designed for adult learning over the years. A program that is also relevant to this study was called *The Well*, which was offered from 2018 until 2023. This was a nine-week program for adults where participants explored concepts from Bill Plotkin's text, *Wild Mind* alongside psychological explorations of their own fragmented subpersonalities with the aim of integrating and healing past psychological tensions and ruptures (Springhouse School, 2023). *The Well* participants used embodied practises such as rituals, creative expression, movement, wandering on the land, and roleplay, alongside writing, voice dialogue, and deep imagery to explore their inner worlds and share with others in the group (Springhouse School, 2023). Participants also engaged as assistants and observers with the K-12 day school and worked with a Springhouse mentor on personal development projects over the nine weeks (Springhouse School, 2023). All of the K-12 and adult programs that Springhouse has offered since approximately 2018 have been grounded in the school's philosophy of *Sourced Design*.

My introduction to *Sourced Design* came through conversations with staff at the school and virtual participation in a summer-long education design lab in 2020. In an attempt to understand the philosophy more thoroughly I have sought out materials discussing soul-centric learning (e.g.

Plotkin, 2003, 2008) and living systems thinking (e.g. Capra & Luisi, 2014; Meadows, 1999, 2008) as recommended to by Springhouse's director Dr. Jenny Finn. Further research into the literature in these fields has provided me with an extended vocabulary and conceptual bank to draw from in my efforts to understand the school's philosophy and practice. As my dissertation work progressed and I learned more about the school I found that the school's approach was reflected within, but was not strictly defined by, ideas described in other conceptual frameworks I have studied such as alternative education, transformative learning theory, and holistic education.

To gain direct insight into how the school operationalizes holistic, soul-centric and living systems principles, I have used relevant online and digital descriptions of the school's own aims and of its guiding philosophy of *Sourced Design* (Springhouse School, 2020e, 2020d, 2020b, 2020a, 2023, 2024), alongside a document entitled *Sourced Design: A Model of Regenerative Culture* (Springhouse School, 2022), a *Handbook for Learners and Families* (Springhouse School, 2020c), and the publications *Consider the Source: A Design for Living* (Finn, 2023) and *Sourced Education: Learning for Cultural Renewal* (Finn & Stabler, 2024) as guides. *Sourced Design* is a theory of emergent development that was devised to reflect a process of regenerative culture-building (Finn, 2023; Springhouse School, 2020b). Regenerative culture-building stands in contrast to a degenerative culture that "oppresses life, fosters fear, and does not take care of the vulnerable" (Springhouse School, 2020d). The leaders at the school believe that the three major elements of a degenerative society are the stalling of human development in adolescence, a lack of commitment over time to change, and the presence of a shared myth of separation (Springhouse School, 2020d). Degenerative cultures create these problems through its members seeking security through external means, cultivating and prioritising individualism, and extracting and consuming unsustainably (Springhouse School, 2020d).

Springhouse aims to produce and maintain regenerative culture. Its leaders place *Vitality* at the centre of all curriculum and pedagogy at the school. It is worth pointing out that the term

Vitality has recently been used by white supremacist factions worldwide in calls for their members to rise up in support of racist and violent aims (T. Norris, personal communication, September 21, 2023) aligned with notions of maintaining the “vitality” of so-called Aryan racial purity (DuBois, 2023). Springhouse imagines *Vitality* in a very different way. The *Vitality*-centred principles that have formed Springhouse’s construction of a regenerative culture include the following five *Sourced Design* elements; (a) taking care of vulnerability; (b) cultivating personhood; (c) building beloved community; (d) respecting the wisdom of the Earth; and (e) loving and serving others (Finn, 2023; Springhouse School, 2022). These elements are explored individually in greater depth below. It is important to note that these principles are descriptive and emergent in that they have been generated inductively from examination of lived experience at Springhouse, as opposed to being pre-designed, prescriptive theoretical structures conceived by the leaders of the school (Springhouse School, 2022). This is another core of Springhouse’s approach, the activity of continual self-reflection as an institution and community on the things that make the community come alive and align with the aim of cultivating regenerative culture.

As I have highlighted above, the school’s addressing what they consider to be the stalling of human development in adolescence – and the role of schooling as it relates to this phenomenon – is the major theme that I am exploring in my research. Seeing this immediately brought to mind my interest in Mezirow’s transformative learning theory and a question that arose during my master’s research around whether transformative learning is a form of *education for adults* or could actually more appropriately be considered a form of *education for adulthood*. My interest in transformative-learning-as-education-for-adulthood reflects the idea that many adult-age humans are stalled in adolescent or even pre-adolescent levels of emotional, intellectual, and psychological development (Benjamin & Crymble, 2017; Freinacht, 2017; Plotkin, 2008). I was very interested in Springhouse’s focus on addressing stalled development and was curious to not only learn the techniques they use to address this but to engage with adult alumni of the program to explore what

moving past adolescent thinking and being means to them as adults.

Springhouse Community: Sourced Design, Vitality, and Regenerative Culture

Springhouse's philosophy takes for granted that education creates culture. It also acknowledges that education is certainly not equivalent to schooling in that education takes place everywhere, all of the time. Like any learning community, the curriculum and Springhouse's implementation of it is specific to the people, the time and the place in which it is practised. That being the case, the details of the school's philosophy of *Vitality*-centred education are constantly being reworked and re-imagined and have changed since I was first introduced to the concepts in early 2020. Most of the basic principles have stayed consistent even while they have been reconfigured. According to Springhouse, regenerative culture "is connected to, and takes care of the *Vitality* in ourselves, one another, and the Earth" (Springhouse School, 2022, p. 5). Regenerative culture is the product and process of the community engaging in *Vitality*-centred human development, cultivating a shared generative purpose, and committing in place over time (Springhouse School, 2022). Each of these elements is in turn sustained by the *Sourced Design* principles and all of this hinges on the concept of *Vitality*, which is described as the realised potential of the life force that moves through everything (Springhouse School, 2022). Springhouse refers to its central aim as enacting *Vitality*-centred education in the building of a regenerative culture using the principles of *Sourced Design*. The concepts of *Sourced Design*, *Vitality*, and Regenerative culture are explored in more detail below.

Sourced Design

The branches of all education that emerges at Springhouse are entwined in a philosophy the community members call *Sourced Design*. *Sourced Design* is a set of principles that are based on living systems thinking that focus on the natural unfolding of life from the *Source*. *Source*, like *Vitality*, is an elusive and complex concept which shares commonalities with Snowber's (2005) description of *eros* as an *intangible source of life*. According to Springhouse's *Sourced Design*

website (Springhouse School, 2020b), Dr. Finn experienced a profound mystical awakening to what she recognised as a “deeper source” earlier in her life. This encounter with the Source has been the inspiration for her to pursue a number of roles and develop structures that aim to strengthen the relationships that others have with themselves. This includes establishing and nurturing Springhouse and assuming her role as director of the school. In fact, the concept of a wellspring of life is the inspiration for the school’s name, “Springhouse,” which stands as a metaphor for a structure that is built with care to protect the source of life from which the community draws its *Vitality*.

Although designing from the source has been part of the philosophy behind Springhouse since it was established in 2014, *Sourced Design* as a formal approach to educational design actually took form in 2019 as the result of a school-wide process of reflection by community members of what makes Springhouse special (Springhouse School, 2020b). In exploring this question, the following five *Vitality*-centred principles emerged (Finn, 2023; Springhouse School, 2022). The following descriptions of these principles are taken from the book *Consider the Source: A Design for Living* (Finn, 2023), published by Springhouse’s *Sourced Press*. Page numbers indicate the location of each principle in that text.

The first principle is *taking care of vulnerability* (pp. 16-18). Taking care of vulnerability is seen as being the path to authentic relationships and the foundation for exploring deeper intimacy with the self, others, and with the Earth. The first practice associated with this element is engaging in practises that take care of Life, which involves being open to trying new things that could open one up to new possibilities. This principle also involves finding or creating a physical place where one can regularly engage in new practises. However, practises that take care of life are not purely solitary affairs, so one should seek others who they can practice with over time. Finally, the guidance of a trusted mentor is essential in exploring these new practises and ways of being.

The second principle is *cultivating personhood* (pp. 19-23), which embraces full realisation

and expression of one's authentic self, while at the same time acknowledging there will always be parts of the self that are mysterious. This principle is practised in three ways. The first is getting to know your humanness, which is accomplished through embodied and contemplative practises such as yoga and meditation. The second practice is getting to know the sacredness of Life and involves noticing the things in one's life that elicit feelings of awe and wonder and connecting with these experiences through various techniques such as prayer, mindfulness, or cooking. Finally, one practises growing self-awareness by reflecting on one's strengths and areas for growth. This is done with the help of trusted others in community.

Building beloved community (pp. 24-29) is the third principle. It sees local community in the context of larger communities of care – building the currency of community to foster supportive relationships. According to *Sourced Design*, this is practised by respecting individuality, fostering unity, and taking care of relationships. Respecting individuality acknowledges the complex nature of individuals and asks the practitioner to hold empathy for others, allowing for everyone in the community to safely feel like they are a part of something larger than themselves. Fostering unity, embraces the commonalities that exist between people such as shared purpose in community and is practised through activities such as dance or singing. The practice of taking care of relationships works at the level of the individual and the collective. Taking care of relationships with the self is the first step towards developing healthy relationships with others. By cultivating safe and trusting relationships in community, the members of that community can better learn how to take care of Life from wherever they live.

The fourth principle, *respecting living systems principles and the wisdom of the Earth* (pp. 30-36), firmly places the wisdom held by the Earth itself at the heart of *Vitality*-centred design. It uses the model of the reproductive cycle as a metaphor for building and disseminating the values of the community. First, an example is built. This involves choosing a place to start and then building community around a common purpose. Growth and strength of the community comes through

reflecting on the lessons learned in place over time. As the example is established, it connects to other communities that align with taking care of Life. Thus, the values of the community are sustained through a network. Finally, communities share what they have learned with other communities and with others who are beginning to form their own communities, sharing the message far and wide.

The final principle is *love and serve* others (pp. 37-43), which involves placing trust in the power of Life to provide and guide, and through trusting this guidance, serve others. The first practice of this principle is to accept reality. This includes accepting oneself and the state of the world and aligning with what one is called to do, which is the second practice. Following one's call asks the individual to trust that they were put on Earth for a reason, and by aligning with that purpose one becomes a vessel through which Love acts on the world. Finally, to love and serve others requires that one keep going. One must be motivated by something deeper than a tangible outcome that can be achieved in the short term. Despite any barriers, one trusts in the mission and carries on.

Through striving to follow these principles, learners prepare themselves to serve the world with courage, creativity, clarity and compassion. As mentioned, *Sourced Design* principles revolve around what members of the community call *Vitality*. Although this concept is broad, a glimpse at what it means to Springhouse members, according to *Consider the Source* (Finn, 2023), follows.

Vitality-Centred Education

In conversation with Dr. Finn, I asked her what is meant by the word *Vitality*. Her answer informed my seeking out scholarly sources and framing how I might approach this study as a whole. Dr. Finn described *Vitality* as being a descriptive term for a number of ideas – with the concepts of soul and spirit being paramount. In an interview that she gave to Authority Magazine in 2021 (Finn, 2021) she put it plainly that “God for me is *Vitality*, life, and is known for me in the inner voice I described earlier.” Being a holistic school, Springhouse draws upon spirituality in

forming its core philosophy and teaching practises. In a conversation I had with Dr. Finn, she indicated that *Vitality* was chosen as a term since Springhouse's approach to education is not solely based on spirituality. Thus, the school staff sought a term that sufficiently encapsulates the full scope of what the school is trying to accomplish.

Vitality-centred development revolves around supporting the naturally unfolding manifestation of life within individuals, communities, and larger systems. This approach is based on a principle of emergence, whereby important elements and practises are identified through the staff and learners as they reflect on how well educational experiments conducted by the learning community align with the goal of regenerative culture building through *Vitality*-centred education. The concept of *Vitality* thus closely aligns with the principle of life-centred education that is part of many holistic paradigms (Mahmoudi et al., 2012) which takes for granted the existence of a fundamental Life force or process that, when acknowledged and given attention, provides humans with purpose, meaning and goals that transcend ego and socio-cultural conditioning (Mahmoudi et al., 2012). All of this reflects Miller's (2019) description of holistic education as being about

‘finding life’ through understanding and participating in the creative process of living, on direct awareness of the natural environment, on knowledge of one's role and responsibility to community, and on cultivating a sensitivity to the spiritual essences of the world. (p. x)

Ideas such as finding purpose and meaning in life contribute to the project of regenerative culture-building that Springhouse is dedicated to.

Regenerative Culture-Building

There are four essential components of regenerative culture building: (a) knowledge; (b) fortification; (c) shared generative purpose; and (d) committing to place over time (Finn, 2023). Knowledge consists of recognising the existence of, and effects of, degenerative culture along with learning about regenerative culture. Springhouse considers culture based on industrial progress, discrimination, environmental/social/psychological destruction, and greed to be degenerative

culture (Springhouse School, 2022). The school uses the lens of critical pedagogy (Finn, 2023) to highlight some of the injustices that exist in industrialized society. The school does not stop at critique, however (Finn, 2023). The knowledge of injustice and its sources is instead used as a tool to prioritize the information needed for adolescents and adults to build regenerative culture through infusing a sense of *Vitality* into self, culture, and the Earth (Finn, 2023).

Students develop knowledge about themselves through study of adolescent development, depth psychology, anatomy and physiology, and through exploring the meaning of the sacred through the lens of multiple world religions (Finn, 2023). All of this activity is guided by the *Sourced Design* principle of cultivating personhood, which involves self-reflection and exploration of one's inner world in pursuit of one's essential humanness. Cultivating knowledge of culture and community comes through examining different forms of governance and how power and political systems work. Through this work, one opens the door to participating in and building beloved community, which is another principle of *Sourced Design* that focuses on developing a sense of interconnectedness and of the sacred (Finn, 2023). In learning about community and culture, students also turn an eye towards notable social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement and Highlander Folk School and use the leaders of these movements, for example Myles Horton, Rosa Parks, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., to illustrate the qualities of leadership expressed by these leaders.

The third level of knowledge, knowledge of the Earth, is driven by the *Sourced Design* principle of learning from the wisdom of the Earth and builds from local knowledge and connection to place (Finn, 2023). Knowing the Earth cultivates appreciation of living systems principles, traces a connection between human sustenance and the planet and addresses the relationship between climate change and regenerative design. In addition to learning about ecology and systems science, Springhouse students make use of the greenhouses and fields on the school property to grow food. They also take full advantage of the expansive Appalachian Mountain forests surrounding the

school to experience the complex interaction that exists between humans and the natural world first hand through camping and hiking trips.

Developing knowledge and understanding of both degenerative culture and generative culture on these three levels leads the community members to engage in a praxis that moves them away from the degenerative and brings them closer to the generative (Finn, 2023). Fortification builds on knowledge and takes the form of connecting to the body, developing a sense of sacredness in reverence and awe at life, as well as self-study and exploration of one's inner world (Finn, 2023). Part of fortification is gaining practice in pursuing one's authentic interests, which provides exposure to subjects of interest, opportunity to commit to subjects of interest in depth, and the chance to experience mastery of a subject. Accompanying these practises is reflection, where students assess their current developmental state and what they need to progress (Finn, 2023; Finn & Stabler, 2024). Celebrations are created to mark transitions between self-assessed developmental stages while more significant developmental transitions are noted by rites of passage that are designed by elders of the community. The praxis of fortification serves simultaneously as resistance to degenerative culture and as affirmation of the value of generative culture in creating meaning and purpose in the life of the individual. This process relies on learning to pay attention to feedback from the self, the community, and the Earth in one's progress through development (Finn, 2023).

Acting on knowledge in creating generative culture and engaging in fortification against degenerative culture both depend on and produce shared generative purpose (Finn, 2023). This shared purpose is rooted in the *Sourced Design* principle of taking care of vulnerability. Taking care of vulnerability includes not only taking care of the vulnerable parts of ourselves but the most vulnerable people in our communities and the vulnerable parts of the Earth (Finn, 2023; Springhouse School, 2022). Care for vulnerability is practised beginning at the local level by commitment to place over time, which is the final of the four pillars of building regenerative culture and serves to connect the individual and the community to the Earth through enacting the practice

of supporting *Vitality* in a particular physical place over an extended period of time (Springhouse School, 2022). The intention behind this practice is to nourish a sense of belonging to both the human community and to the natural world.

I conclude this section on Springhouse by discussing some of the practises that those at the school engage in to support holistic learning. My understanding of these practises comes through my own experiences with the summer-long *Sourced Design* virtual educational design lab in 2020, study of the book *Sourced Education* (Finn & Stabler, 2024), and information shared with me by the participants in this research project. I reference the *Sourced Education* text throughout this work and participant input is considered extensively in chapter five. What follows is my personal account of my experience in the educational design lab and my reflections on how the practises we engaged in during the lab connect to holistic education.

The online *Sourced Design* learning lab group met over Zoom videoconference once per week during the summer of 2020, with a private one-on-one meeting with a Springhouse mentor flexibly scheduled between the group meetings based on participant and mentor availability. At the first meeting, participants were introduced to the five aspects of *Sourced Design* and to choose one to focus on for the duration of the design lab. This focus included an invitation to engage in journal writing about how consideration of that aspect impacted my understanding of the world. Each group meeting began with a poetry reading by Dr. Finn, followed by a few minutes of silent contemplative time.

Following the poetry reading and contemplative time, each member was invited to share their present state of mind and their thoughts about how their experiences during the previous week connected to the particular aspect of *Sourced Design* that they had been drawn to focus on for the duration of the summer-long lab. After everyone in the group had shared their thoughts about their experiences, the facilitator for the day read a passage from the text *Consider the Source: A Design for Living* (Finn, 2023) and the group broke into pairs to discuss their impressions of how the

passage related to what was shared in the larger group. Upon returning to the main group, people were invited to share what was discussed in the breakout rooms. To end each meeting, attendees took turns honoring a quality they appreciated in another member of the group by indicating who they were addressing and stating in a word or two a quality they felt that individual exhibited. The person being acknowledged then took it in turn to acknowledge another group member until everyone had a chance to share. The meeting concluded with Dr. Finn reading another poem.

The aspect of *Sourced Design* that I engaged with for the design lab was *learning from the wisdom of the Earth*. For the duration of the design lab, I went to an area of the forest on the Lakehead University campus each day for several hours and meditated, practised *dizi* (Chinese flute), practised Taiji forms, and read by the river that runs through the forest on campus. During all of these activities I kept my attention on what I was learning from the world around me and recorded my thoughts in a journal. I then discussed the thoughts I had recorded in my journal with my mentor from Springhouse, who explored the meaning I was making out of these experiences with me using their own experiences and references to concepts from *Sourced Design*. Two novel things that I remember learning from the Earth during this period of time were that it is resilient in that life always finds a way to grow back after it is destroyed by humans and that the Earth is non-judgemental in that I felt I could practice my flute without worrying about the natural world complaining about the noise.

Sharing my thoughts about my experiences with the group and hearing about the experiences of others with the other aspects of *Sourced Design* gave me a deeper, lived understanding of the concepts compared to just reading about them in a text on the internet. Engaging directly with nature as a source of learning alongside my talks with my mentor and the group brought *Sourced Design* to life and provided a glimpse into how Springhouse uses practises like contemplation, meditation, group discussion, contact with nature, dialogue, and poetry to aid individuals in understanding and internalizing ideas on their own terms and at their own pace. My

experience with the workshop strongly connects to practises that the participants shared with me. Similar to my brief experience with Springhouse practises, participants shared how their views about adulthood were shaped by introspection and reflective practises. These practises took the form of individual meditation but also group sharing and discourse in a community of trust. The participants shared experiences with learning from the natural world through spending time in nature, both in contemplation and doing physical activity. Perhaps above all, the one-on-one engagement with mentors stood out as a significant practice that had a deep impact on their learning. While my own experience with the mentor relationship was highly limited, the Springhouse alumni with whom I spoke developed meaningful relationships with their mentors over an extended period of time. The impact of this deep relationship-building is discussed at length in the findings and discussion section.

Having outlined the principles of *Sourced Design* and my experience with this framework, I now discuss some of the other conceptual, theoretical, and philosophical elements that I have drawn on in exploring the idea of schooling's influence on the ideas people have about what it means to be an adult.

Philosophical Threads Informing this Study

Other ideas beyond *Sourced Design* have served as the philosophical grounding for how I have approached this work throughout its development and unfolding. They have to do with contextualizing the concept of adulthood, identity construction, the aims of education, and existential questions of what it means to be an adult. One philosophical thread that is especially pertinent to this study's findings is the idea of ontological education for well-being proposed by Dewar (2016).

Dewar's Education for Well-Being

In his book *Education and Well-Being: An Ontological Inquiry* (Dewar, 2016), Dewar asserts that education at all levels puts too much emphasis on epistemology at the expense of

ontology, leaving many students adrift with few tools with which to make meaning in their lives. He grounds his argument in the existential phenomenology of philosopher Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, a text that explores the question of what it means to be-in-the-world. The logic Heidegger, and by extension Dewar, presents is that *being* precedes *knowing*. Thus, *being* cannot be epistemologically reduced and quantified. Dewar argues that attempting to do so leads to nihilism because *being* is not an object. *Being-in-the-world* is an attempt to break the subject/object divide, recognising we cannot exist outside of the world since nothing exists without context. Objectivising and externalising things like values is dangerous because meaning falls away. This, coupled with curriculum that focuses primarily on epistemology reduces education to curriculum centred on a technical problem without meaning (Dewar, 2016). Thus, education-as-technical-curriculum places artificial boundaries on students' authentic potential for being-in-the-world. Dewar argues that curriculum has a standardised product in mind, and that education curricula are guided by stakeholders who wish to reproduce the status-quo. In our current time, this is reflected in economic ideology. In resistance to this, he proposes a form of ontological education, which requires freedom to seek out that which provides meaning to the individual, which he believes is the source of authentic well-being.

To Dewar, education for well-being is about understanding and relating to others in a way that empowers them to own their possibilities for being. The model of education he proposes is for the teacher to act as a guide in answering the question of whether or not life is worth living with a priority on supporting the individual in working through such ontological questions of existence. His philosophical ideas concerning the aims of education resonate with Springhouse and with much of what the participants shared with me. I was especially drawn to Dewar's work because of his treatment of the concept of "well-being", which I feel resonates uncannily with Springhouse. This resonance begins with the name of the school and what it represents. A *springhouse* is a structure built over a natural spring as protection from the elements and a site where safe drinking water can

be gathered. Thus, a spring, and by extension a Springhouse shares many qualities with a well as a human-constructed container for a natural source of water.

Dewar (2016) traces the etymology of "well-being" as referring to a well-like being, which comes from the 8th century *woelum* meaning a spring, or more accurately a hole in the ground where water comes out. By 1225 CE "well" came to describe a person's presence coming from the "deep well" of their being. Thus, to Dewar, being *well* means we are connected to our deep, authentic being. He carries the metaphor further; dividing the physical well into an above-ground part which is visible (being) and a below-ground source which is concealed (non-being). Through this poetic mingling he makes a case that "education is the process of uncovering being from the well, the process of discovering and nurturing a more meaningful human way of being" (Dewar, 2016, p. 58). In this way, education makes us aware of how deep, ontological meaning percolates and wells up in our lives. Thus, Dewar's argument that the priority of education should be exploring ontology and meaning-making rather than the transmission of knowledge and skills, resonates strongly with Springhouse's philosophy.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks of Adulthood

In considering how Springhouse alumni views of adulthood may differ from those of statistically normative young adults, it is necessary to describe what adulthood means to the normative North American. In order to go beyond my own preconceptions and anecdotal understanding of the conventional adult I turned to sociological and psychological research in the fields of emerging adulthood and subjective adulthood. Emerging adulthood is a theoretical developmental stage which refers to individuals between the ages of eighteen to thirty. The research in this field reflects both this population's lived qualities and the qualities that this population values as signifiers of adulthood (see Arnett, 2024; Gilmore, 2019; Grosemans et al., 2020; Schwartz et al., 2005). Subjective adulthood is a related field of study that examines the various factors that make people feel like adults (see Axxe et al., 2022; Coyle, 2019; Diaz-Strong, 2021; Mitchell & Lennox,

2020). I performed literature reviews of both of these fields, as well as an exploration of literature discussing the modern social phenomenon of Adulting that has been a popular mode of adult self-identification among young people since 2016 (see Houy et al., 2020; Krampe, 2017; Mitchell & Lennox, 2020; Perry, 2018). These reviews revealed some surprises about the state of adulthood in the early 21st century, but also confirmed some of my long-held suspicions about what adults in North America value. References to literature from these three areas make up the majority of the scholarly references in my discussion of the findings. As I note in the literature review on the connection between schooling and identity (see Chapter 3), there is a lack of literature exploring the connection between adolescent experiences of education and peoples' concept of adulthood.

The following section exploring research in the field of subjective adulthood and Adulting is not the central literature review of this study. Scholarship in these areas is presented here as a means of familiarising the reader with one of the major conceptual frames through which I have come to understand normative views on adulthood in North America and to understand how researchers who study adulthood approach their work. Given the scant research investigating the influence of schooling on adult identity, research on subjective adulthood provides some much-needed scholarly material with which to frame the findings of the study within an existing research paradigm. A literature review that specifically explores the research on the influence of schooling on adult identity follows as Chapter 3.

Subjective Feelings of Becoming an Adult in Early 21st Century North America

Throughout the late 20th century, developmental psychologists have typically seen adulthood as being a relatively stable state as compared to childhood, adolescence and old age, which are considered to be unstable (Cannon, 2024a). However, the apparent stability of adulthood has recently come under scrutiny. Transitioning into adulthood, as defined by traditional normative standards, takes longer, is more complex, is increasingly non-linear and is occurring later than it once did (Arnett, 2016a, 2024; Coyle, 2019; Diaz-Strong, 2021; Krahn et al., 2015; Krampe, 2017,

2017; Lindell et al., 2017; Mitchell & Lennox, 2020; Olson, 2014; Vosylis, 2021; Wright et al., 2020; Wyn, 2014). Transitions to adulthood have become extended and lack social institutional direction. This makes emerging adulthood appear murky and aimless in its exploratory nature, but there are both good and bad sides to this (C. Smith et al., 2011). The timings of graduation, leaving the parental home, establishing a career, marriage, and parenting, which have served as a template for the life progression to adulthood are increasing happening later in life, are more protracted, and more complex than in the middle of the 20th century (Vosylis, 2021). For example, Arnett (2024) points out that in the 1970's, enduring life choices had been made by the age of twenty-one. A typical 21-year-old had finished school, attained a career job or was a mother, and had established a family. This is not the case in the 21st century for most people of that age.

Historically relevant markers of adulthood such as marriage, parenthood, achieving financial independence and home ownership are becoming increasingly elusive for young people (Dalessandro, 2019; Lowe et al., 2013; Wyn, 2014). In most western countries, up until the late 20th century these adult roles and rites of passage defined becoming an adult were adopted in one's late teens. They are now often delayed until the mid-twenties and beyond (Lindell et al., 2017). For example, for many emerging adults, educational attainment has become so protracted that many young people reach the point where they feel like adults before finishing post-secondary schooling (Arnett, 2024). Cannon (2024a) brings the reader's attention to the fact that young people are experiencing rising housing costs, precarious employment and increasing levels of debt (especially student debt) not seen in generations. This represents unprecedented barriers to attaining the markers that have defined adulthood in North America since the mid 20th century (Krahn et al., 2015). These markers have long served as baseline indicators for adulthood scholars in the social sciences.

Common Criteria of Adulthood in Social Science Research

The standardization of the life course began in the early 20th century, largely driven by the

establishment of age-graded institutions, mandated education, child labour laws, and other industrial and organizational initiatives (Axxe et al., 2022). Due to the special rights and responsibilities granted to adults and the protections offered to children, this standardization was particularly relevant in the transition to adulthood (Axxe et al., 2022). From early research on adulthood to the modern day, social scientists have used a variety of what are referred to as box-check metrics in assessing one's status as an adult. Beyond legal, biological, and chronological definitions of adulthood that exist (Gfellner & Bartoszek, 2015) there are numerous other markers that social scientists believe more fully describe behaviours or achievements that define adulthood. With shifts in social definitions of adulthood, adulthood has become harder to clearly define using traditional social science methods that use common definitions as explored through roles and experiences that act as initiations or rites of passage. According to Lowe et al. (2013) these roles and rites of passage classically fall into five basic categories: 1) individualism; 2) norm compliance; 3) legal/chronologically defined adulthood; 4) family capacities; and 5) role transitions. Most studies of adulthood use a variable-oriented approach; that is, looking at general patterns in adult role-transitions through attainment of milestones. These are then examined in terms of historical and cultural changes (Vosylis, 2021). Two prominent typologies used in research on emerging adulthood are the role-and-event-based model and internal criteria measures. Other measures do exist but these two approaches are the most common.

Box Check Metrics: Role and Event-Based Measures

Role-based measures typically follow a linear benchmark model of adult development. The standard linear progression of event markers typically includes completing education, leaving the home of one's family of origin, establishing a career, marriage, and having children (Diaz-Strong, 2021; Gfellner & Bartoszek, 2015; Ladhani et al., 2019; Mitchell & Lennox, 2020; Wright et al., 2020). While these five metrics remain relevant to the majority of people living in post-industrial societies, meeting these criteria is taking longer and is more difficult than in the past (Ho et al.,

2022). Piotrowski et al. (2020) emphasise that all role transitions are interdependent and contribute to development. They go on to state that adult identity, psychosocial development, and role markers are interdependent and non-linear. For example, without financial support, education options are limited and without education options, work is limited (Lansford et al., 2021). Well-being is tied to success in pursuing these markers of adulthood, and failure in attaining one marker can be compensated for by pursuing other markers (Lansford et al., 2021). Realistic availability of transition markers also influences their importance, such as when work or education are unattainable, parenthood or marriage may take their place as most important markers of adulthood (Lansford et al., 2021). For instance, more males than females leave education early, yet males consistently earn more than females, which impacts equal access to the adulthood marker of career stability (Ho et al., 2022). This can also be seen in the phenomenon of how marriage or romantic relationships play an important role in defining adulthood for youth living in challenging socio-economic circumstances who may not have access to markers such as educational attainment or financial independence (Axxe et al., 2022). Early marriage and parenthood may provide a fast track to subjective adulthood, but at the cost of not having the choice to pursue personal development (Ho et al., 2022). As an example, some low-income single mothers prioritize financial stability in a potential marriage partner. In times of a bleak economic reality, this is less and less possible, so they turn their focus toward being a good mother, which becomes a more potent signifier of subjective adulthood (Ho et al., 2022). This also connects to availability around factors other than marriage or parenthood. For example, if adolescents have little to no control over when they leave school because of various barriers, educational attainment may not have significant influence on adult identity formation (Axxe et al., 2022). The core role-based markers appear to be deeply socialized and are still often keyed to age, yet many scholars have pointed out that several role and event-based assessments of adulthood are becoming irrelevant due to the fact that marriage and parenting are increasingly seen by young people as being no longer necessary for adult membership (see for

example Piotrowski et al., 2020; Wider et al., 2021). Instead, internal criteria including self-responsibility for one's actions, forming mature relationships, and complying with social norms (Wider et al., 2021) and milestones such as completing education, being financially independent, and leaving the parental home take high-priority (Settersten, 2011). In many high-income countries, parenthood is becoming detached from adulthood as women either have children later in life or choose to not have children at all. This is not the case everywhere though, with parenthood persisting as a meaningful transition marker in many cultures where early parenthood is still the norm (Lansford et al., 2021).

In contradiction to these assertions that typical markers are losing their meaning for some young adults, other scholars point out that age, traditional roles, and rites of passage framed by normative visions of adulthood (Coyle, 2019) remain powerful predictors of subjective adulthood and traditional roles are still important to young people as markers of adulthood (Dalessandro, 2019). For most Americans, completion of education is among the most important indicators of reaching adulthood (Ho et al., 2022), and educational attainment is a critical factor in achieving the other markers of adulthood (Ho et al., 2022). The caveat may be that this might only be the case for those who have access to these roles and events (Diaz-Strong, 2021) or have achieved them (Lowe et al., 2013). Another confounding factor regarding external measures includes the phenomenon where those living in economic hardship experience early feelings of adulthood (Axxe et al., 2022). This evokes the question of whether achieving adulthood through limited means available is some sort of *stolen childhood* that has denied the person opportunity to intentionally develop their potential (Cannon, 2024a). Some factors that contribute to early adultification are mis-interpreted by youth living in privilege as barriers to their following a path to adulthood that they see as universal (Axxe et al., 2022). For example, since extended freedom to focus on identity exploration is considered by some to be a luxury available to individuals from middle to upper class backgrounds, role and event transitions may be more common self-indicators of adulthood among

working class and minority youth simply due to their comparative accessibility (Johnson et al., 2007). Interestingly, there is a discrepancy here in terms of the subjective concept of adulthood and the experience of assuming adult roles in that certain role markers will not be seen as important unless they are experienced (Piotrowski et al., 2020). Another reason why certain markers may be more prevalent in the predominantly quantitative research literature is that easily quantifiable role and event markers represent clear cut ways of defining adulthood, whereas ambiguous and subjective indicators are more difficult to quantify (Lowe et al., 2013). It also seems logical that assuming an adult role contributes to subjective feelings of adult status (Piotrowski et al., 2020). Findings by Piotrowski et al. (2020) indicate that assuming adult roles acts as a stepping stone through the roles requiring one develop responsibility, self-reliance, and the ability to support others. Thus, the *process of personal development* involved with the role, rather than achieving the role itself, is the key factor in self-identifying as an adult. Johnson et al. (2007) call for additional research on sequencing and constellation (interconnected framework) of the different roles young people occupy in order to better understand the part that roles play in identification of adulthood. It is also the case that many emerging adults rely on the validation of others that they are adults in order to consider themselves adults. There can be tension here when others do not regard them as adults when they feel like adults and when others treat them as adults when they feel like they are not (Settersten, 2011). In addition to external, role and event-based measures, adulthood researchers look at the internalization and enactment of values. This approach is exemplified by investigations that use internal criteria measures.

Box Check Metrics: Internal Criteria Measures

Although widely cited in the research literature, the method of using classical linear models of progression as the foundation for adult development has been challenged by a number of psychologists in favour of non-linear systems thinking (Gilmore, 2019). This challenge comes in the form of internal criteria measures, which do not follow linear developmental or role-based

metrics. These types of measures are becoming more popular with the majority of emerging adulthood scholars. Diaz-Strong (2021) captures the need for moving past role-based research that relies on quantitative measures. According to Diaz-Strong, “there is no survey long enough to capture all the intricate moments when young people feel transformed into adults” (p. 11). A study conducted by Lowe et al. (2013) illustrates the importance of thinking outside the context of roles. The findings showed over fifty percent of participants reported a defining adult moment as being a social experience as opposed to something related to assuming a traditional role. Internal criteria measures include such qualities as cultivating a sense of self-responsibility for one's actions, autonomy, forming mature relationships, contributing to society and complying with social norms as defining adulthood (Piotrowski et al., 2020; Wider et al., 2021).

When examining numerous studies across race, ethnicity and class in the United States, self-sufficiency consistently emerges as the dominant internal criteria theme of subjective adulthood (Diaz-Strong, 2021; Wider et al., 2021). Collectivist cultures on the other hand value family/community, norm compliance, self-regulation, and inter-dependence. This reveals proper adult behaviour in collectivist contexts is focused on maintaining harmony and social cohesion (Diaz-Strong, 2021). Supporting these points, a study by Arnett (2016a) revealed that participants' top three major adult identity factors differ by social context between the collectivist culture of China and the individualist culture in the United States. In China the top three indicators of adulthood were reported to be, in order of importance; 1) learning to care for parents; 2) settling into a long-term career; and 3) becoming a capable parent. In contrast to this, participants in the United States reported (again, in order of importance); 1) self-responsibility; 2) independent decision-making; and 3) financial independence as the most important signifiers of adulthood. In fact, it becomes obvious when reading through the literature that in the North American and European contexts, factors emphasising individualism and individual agency consistently appear as the most highly valued internal criteria of adult identity (Arnett, 2016a; Gfellner & Bartoszek,

2015; Ladhani et al., 2019; Mitchell & Lennox, 2020; Piotrowski et al., 2020; Wider et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2020). This phenomenon is more thoroughly explored in a later section discussing the financialization of identity under Adulting.

Roles and Internal Criteria: The Confluence Approach

There are many models that sociologists have developed to categorise pathways to adulthood, yet few of them consider how all factors are interdependent (Ho et al., 2022). Johnson et al. (2007) propose that there are three ways of looking at adult identity development: 1) traditional roles; 2) character qualities; and 3) the confluence model. The confluence model examines how adulthood is subjectively experienced as a blend of role and internal criteria as tempered by contextual factors of racial/ethnic group membership, socio-economic status, and age. This approach is based on studies that show individualistic personal qualities (for example responsibility for one's actions, deciding on one's own set of beliefs, and financial independence) are more subjectively important in self-identification as an adult while traditional roles maintain an influence in real life; therefore, both approaches should be acknowledged as influences (Johnson et al., 2007). Thus, although the symbolic meaning of role-changing events may have become lost, they nevertheless remain important in framing adult expectations. More in-depth analysis of the links between role-transition and the inner side of becoming an adult is therefore needed (Vosylis, 2021).

For instance, Gfellner and Bartoszek (2015) refine the idea of family creation. Rather than considering it a role-based transition marker, they reinterpret it in terms of reaching a level of maturity where one has the capacity to care for a family as opposed to simply having children. This constitutes the unpacking of a role-based metric into an underlying internal criterion. As an example of this, Dalessandro (2019) considers the purpose of emotionally-attached monogamy as providing a means of establishing maturity through one's relationships as opposed to marriage or long-term partnering as a static, achievable role. There are even instances where participant-reported measures blur the lines between roles and internal criteria. Coyle (2019) found that gender played a part in the

perception of relative importance between roles and internal criteria. In their study, the highest ranked indicator of adulthood for women was parenthood, which is a role-oriented marker. This contrasted with the men in the same study, who ranked independence and agency, both internal criteria measures, as the most important indicators of adulthood. According to participants in a study by Diaz-Strong (2021), the strongest markers of adulthood, in order of importance are: 1) marriage; 2) parenthood; and 3) financial independence. As we can see, two of these top three are roles (marriage and parenthood) with an internal criterion (financial independence) serving as the third most prevalent marker. Diaz-Strong (2021) also found that for men, financial independence and living away from the parental home did not instill feelings of adult membership. Parenthood (role) and having a feeling of agency (internal criteria) were ranked the highest. This further points to the value of both approaches when looking at adult identity, which Dalessandro (2019) describes as a “co-existence of objective and subjective definitions of adulthood” (p. 166).

Having briefly explored general concepts in adulthood research, I now more deeply explore a specific discipline within this field. My own research focuses on exploring the perspectives of alumni from an alternative learning community about how their experiences within the learning community influenced their vision of what it means to be an adult. A large part of successfully navigating the transition from adolescence to adulthood is cultivating an internal sense that one is, in fact, an adult. Feeling like an adult contributes to well-being and to cultivating the confidence necessary for coherent identity work in young adulthood (Diaz-Strong, 2021).

Subjective Adulthood: Defining and Exploring Adulthood Under Authenticity

I began my search for scholarly articles and books related to subjective adulthood by using the filter “any field + is exactly” within OMNI for “subjective adulthood” which returned 32 results. Further refining this to include AND + any field + is exactly “education” reduced this number of materials to 23. Out of these 23 articles, not one was from a journal that specializes in education scholarship with most of the papers coming from the fields of psychology and sociology.

This may be because the standardized format of institutional education generally adopts a policy of moulding minds to suit a model that lies outside of the subjective aims of the individual, not the other way around (see for example Au, 2011; R. Miller, 1990, 2022; Rodriguez & van Ruyskensvelde, 2023; Sloan, 2005). Educating to address individuals' subjective notions of adulthood therefore falls outside of the worldview of most non-alternative educators, education researchers, and education institutions. With this in mind it is not surprising that there is a lack of scholarship around the connection between education and subjective adulthood. However, I did expect to see some academic work that connects subjective adulthood and alternative education such as free and democratic schools, holistic education, and transformative education, among others. These approaches to education are fertile ground for explorations of ways in which education interacts with students' subjective notions of adulthood, yet I found none.

In this review I am using a discussion of subjective adulthood as a means of gently pivoting away from dominant cultural norms and mores and towards alternative forms of being that exist on the fringes of society. In my research I asked adult-age alumni of an alternative, *Vitality*-oriented learning community about how they perceive their educational experiences in their learning community to have shaped their ideas about what it means to be an adult. Thus, this study contributes to filling the gap in research connecting adulthood research not only with academic research on alternative education, but with education scholarship more generally.

What is Subjective Adulthood?

As we have seen, as we enter the 21st century a de-stabilization and de-standardization of the transition to adulthood has been taking place. Therefore, subjective perceptions of adulthood play an important part in defining what adulthood actually is (Axze et al., 2022). Adulthood is often viewed from a chronological or age consciousness perspective, with the subjective side of things being understudied in comparison (Cannon, 2024a). Subjective perceptions of adulthood and an emerging realisation of the cultural importance of subjective adulthood (Dalessandro, 2019) are

beginning to play an important part in defining what adulthood actually means to people (Axxe et al., 2022). Recent scholarship points towards a new view of adulthood that is ambivalent towards conventional stoicism and finality (Torkelson, 2015). Torkelson (2015) posits that instead of the box-check metrics of adult membership such as career or marriage status, researchers should focus on the subjective meanings individuals attach to adulthood. Wyn (2014) echoes this sentiment and argues that there needs to be an acknowledgement of subjectivities (individual, subjective feelings of adultness) supplementing consideration of transitional patterns in emerging research on adulthood. As an example, Dalessandro (2019) points to the fact that emotionality (one's ability to experience and understand complex emotions, especially in the context of romantic relationships) is increasingly being used in self-identifying as an adult.

At the same time that quickly changing social norms are creating barriers to traditional family building, new subjective meanings about what being an adult is and what a successful transition to adulthood looks like are emerging. As Landberg et al. (2019) explain, many young people are finding non-traditional pathways through to adulthood as opposed to adhering to traditional developmental milestones such as finding a career job, getting married, or becoming parents. Research exploring multiple paths to and through adulthood are emerging in the 21st century and there exists a need for research that focuses on how adolescent identity-building lays the foundation for future articulation of adulthood (Torkelson, 2015). The changes to adult transitioning described above lead to more diversity of adult experience than in the past (Wyn, 2014) including a push for young people to engage in intensive and intentional identity work.

The Dynamic Work and Practice of Feeling Like an Adult

The framework of subjective adulthood is often used to investigate and interpret delayed adult transitions (Axxe et al., 2022). Subjective adulthood involves the study of individuals' feelings of adult identity independent of roles and typical developmental stage theories (Axxe et al., 2022; Wider et al., 2021). Unlike within role and internal criteria approaches, Diaz-Strong (2021)

acknowledges that a period of learning is required for subjective adulthood, which is to say that one does not simply enter adulthood spontaneously through achieving milestones or attaining particular roles. Piotrowski et al. (2020) describe contemporary conceptions of subjective adulthood as being defined by individual strivings; not by classical markers. Those working in this field feel that neither developmental nor role-based models are complete and that knowledge of individual subjective experience is necessary (Diaz-Strong, 2021). This is because subjective perceptions can help identify the mismatch between an internal sense of identity and an external role or developmental stage (Axxe et al., 2022). Scholars studying subjective adulthood take for granted that life-course and life stage models of adulthood are social constructions and that the process of “adultification” (Axxe et al., 2022, p. 1), which describes the taking on of responsibilities and roles that make one feel like an adult, is a relative experience (Axxe et al., 2022). Related to this, Coyle (2019) even argues that there is a disconnect between legal adulthood and subjective adulthood since qualifiers associated with legal adulthood such as age of legal consent, legal marriage, and legal drinking age could also be considered simple chronological markers by some individuals, rather than events that create an actual sense of feeling like an adult (Cannon, 2024a). This relativism is sometimes looked at in terms of individuals who are normative, late, or early starters with reference to standard life-course models (Vosylis, 2021).

Subjective adulthood draws upon a behaviour model of adulthood (Diaz-Strong, 2021) where transformative events and internal character qualities are more important than chronological age or box-check metrics. These criteria include such factors as accepting responsibility for one’s actions, making independent decisions, and achieving perceived financial independence from one’s parents (Diaz-Strong, 2021). This is similar to findings by Lansford et al. (2021), who list the top three defining features of adulthood for young people in the United States as a) taking responsibility for one’s actions; b) forming personal values and beliefs without pressure from social/parental sources; and c) financial independence from parents, with control over one’s emotions also rated as

highly valued (Lansford et al., 2021). Researchers and theorists of subjective adulthood attempt to address the fact that studies on adulthood rarely explore subjective experiences of adult transition (Vosylis, 2021). For example, investigating the influence of individual feelings of being capable, thoughtful and competent; or how observing injustices have prompted feelings of adulthood in people (Diaz-Strong, 2021). Thus, similar to the confluence model discussed earlier, self-perceived adulthood seems to come about through a combination of individualistic personal qualities and traditional social transition markers (Johnson et al., 2007).

Investigation of subjective adulthood is important socially, as Axte et al. (2022) claim that subjective adult identity influences life satisfaction, depression, and risky behaviours. Inclusion of more subjective measures often extends beyond those typical of quantitative social science adulthood research. Using qualitative methods, Lowe et al. (2013) found that participants discussed experiences that were not on the standard lists or in existing literature. Some examples include learning to drive, immigrating to a new country, a variety of critical life experiences (CLE), feeling in control of one's life, being responsible for others, and having others acknowledge them as adults.

Measuring Subjective Adulthood

One of the recurring limitations cited with standard measures of adulthood is the reliance of their investigations on quantitative methods. Most inquiries exploring adulthood are based on surveys in which participants rate pre-determined factors (Johnson et al., 2007; Lowe et al., 2013) using list-based questions revolving around standard criteria. It is argued that this form of measurement does not allow for individuals to express the complexity of their adult identification (Lowe et al., 2013). Nor do survey-based methods address psychological changes important to adulthood including development of flexibility, agency and social competence (Lowe et al., 2013). For example, despite educational attainment being one of the most prominently cited milestones marking adulthood, many non-students consider themselves to be adults earlier than students do (Wider et al., 2021). Furthermore, regarding establishing a career, details such as the type of work

one is employed in represent variable levels of adulthood (Axxe et al., 2022). In order to build a more accurate picture of subjective adulthood, Lowe et al. (2013) advocate for qualitative, open-ended questions that may yield richer responses because they elicit spontaneous and unexpected replies. Diaz-Strong (2021) argues that the qualitative nature of subjective adulthood research can more readily point to the underlying structural forces that shape adult self-identification.

Connections to Existing Examinations of Adulthood

Some of the findings reported by scholars studying subjective adulthood serve to confirm findings of traditional adulthood research, although with perhaps more nuance. Aligned with findings discussed earlier in this review, Lowe et al. (2013) report that across a large number of studies covering all demographics, independence is the most commonly referred to marker of subjective adulthood in the U.S., Israel, Argentina, Czech Republic, China, India, and Romania. Within their meta-analysis they also found that independence related to employment and financial-related ideas were most prevalent. Supporting this, Piotrowski et al. (2020) found that independence was more important to their participants' experiences of subjective adulthood than intimacy and social connectedness. Despite the freedom in forging pathways to adulthood afforded by social changes seen over the past fifty years, and the incompatibility that subjective adulthood often has with normative models, it remains the case that normative ideas continue to drive the vision many have of ideal adult behaviour (Coyle, 2019).

According to Torkelson (2015), re-imagination and resistance to expectations of status-quo adulthood can be seen as having roots in scene affiliation with the 1950's beatnik culture where scene members considered themselves "hip" as compared to the "squares" – who followed the status quo. The author traces this through neo-Marxist youth subcultures of the 1970's that were characterized by rebellion against parents and status-quo expectations and as culminating in the 1990's, when youth culture differentiated itself from the status quo largely through consumption habits. Torkelson writes that there is no theory that describes what sorts of adults these youth

subcultures produce pertaining to resistance or assimilation into dominant culture in adulthood. He explores the straightedge² youth movement and how affiliation with this scene affects member transition to adulthood. He found that most people exit the movement by age 30 with those who continue after this age redefining their commitment to the movement's ideals by reconciling the anti-capitalist ideals that define straightedge subculture with the fruits of dominant cultural conventionality such as home ownership or job security. Interestingly, in many cases, Torkelson (2015) found that many older individuals who spent an extended period of time in the straightedge scene reported a feeling of having wasted time that could have been used in developing adult skills and attitudes that would be of benefit to them within the dominant culture.

Adulting: The Financialization of Homo-Economicus' Adult Identity

Adulting is a new and understudied phenomenon in relation to education scholarship. A search through Lakehead University's OMNI library system using the search filter "any field + is exactly + Adulting" across not just education but all fields of study only returned two scholarly articles that explicitly mentioned Adulting along with just a handful of articles from the popular press. Understanding Adulting is important in critically exploring how education researchers might address schooling's role in the preparation of young people for the adult world of today and in assessing whether or not the vision of adulthood communicated by Adulting is in line with the visions of humanity that our institutions are aiming for.

Adulting is a social media phenomenon that started on Twitter in 2008, went mainstream in 2014 and exploded in popularity as an idea among young people in 2016 (Grose, 2017). Different from emerging adulthood, where young people delay adulthood for the purposes of exploration, the central belief behind Adulting is that once one reaches a certain age one is expected to behave in "adult" ways (Grose, 2017; Krampe, 2017). As we have seen based on the earlier description of role

² Straightedge is a branch of the punk sub-culture, popularised in the 1970's and 1980's. Members of straightedge abstain from using recreational drugs and alcohol. Some members also abstain from casual sex and follow a vegan diet and lifestyle. These choices are intended as challenges to the dominant capitalist system, which straightedgers view as based on consumption, hedonism, and self-gratification.

and internal criteria assessments of adulthood in social sciences, this aligns well with Mitchell and Lennox's (2020) description of Adulting as being defined purely by a linear benchmark perspective of adulthood. Adulting revolves around celebrating being in control on one's life by completing tasks such as doing laundry, keeping one's living space tidy, going to work and working hard when there, exercising, cooking instead of eating take out, paying bills on time, sticking to a budget, taking care of pets, taking care of a car, working out regularly, getting adequate sleep and exhibiting behaviours such as having a positive attitude, being brave, expressing vulnerability and having the goal of changing the world (Grose, 2017; Krampe, 2017; Perry, 2018).

As an illustration of the Adulting mindset, Krampe (2017) asks herself questions that she considers to be important to exploring one's adult life. Her questions include personal worries such as "will I go broke? will I make friends? will I perform well at my job?, and can I suppress my negative emotions and get it together" (p. 1). Successful Adulting is described in explicitly financialized terms by Perry (2018) as keeping track of one's money, smart investing, keeping a productivity diary in order to identify habits that are making one less productive with one's time, expanding one's cognitive abilities, finding good deals on consumer goods, practising meditation/mindfulness and using book summary apps instead of reading full books as an effective means of acquiring information quickly. All of these skills and practises, even meditation and reading, are framed by the author as tools that can make one more competitive in the job market and that will enhance one's ability to be productive – specifically at work. Related to this, Chiang and Hawley (2013) argue that in the early 21st century, education is seen by many young people as a means to gain human and social capital with the aim of using this capital to secure more desirable future work and thus more financial capital. Thus, a major aspect of adult identity becomes consolidated as one's work identity and education become means to financialised ends rather than ends in themselves.

Thus, career preparation becomes a crucial developmental aspect of transitioning from

adolescent to adult (Chow et al. 2017) which can be seen reflected in the public education system's intense focus on 21st century skills and Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) education – which are keyed to workplace preparation in a technologically driven economic system. As an extension of this, many of the interventions that educational institutions enact are intended to assist young people's transition into adulthood focus on developing financial skills such as understanding the importance of credit scores, budgeting, and paying bills while at the same time offering training in basic survival skills such as cooking and doing laundry (Houy et al., 2020). These financial aims are often used by youth to legitimize the delaying of traditional markers of adulthood such as marriage, parenthood, or completion of education in favour of immediate potential for earning money (Mitchell & Lennox, 2020). In many cases, acquiring debt is seen as a necessary part of adult transition where the taking on of home loans, car loans, or student loans is seen as a form of assuming financial responsibility, and thus a marker of adulthood. Interestingly, Cherney et al. (2020) found that acquiring student debt paradoxically acts as both a rite of passage to adulthood and a barrier to financial independence in many cases due to the difficulty that many young people have in finding consistent employment that allows them to pay back the student debt that they have accrued.

It must be noted that according to the social science research surveyed for this review, work is indeed an important aspect of developing an adult identity for a great many adults. Grosemans et al. (2020) write that emerging adults' exploration serves as a transition, and this transitory exploration in large part takes the form of job explorations and identity explorations. They go on to argue that the two forms of identity that are most important to emerging adults are career identity and social identity. In fact, for many emerging adults, the type of work one is engaged in carries with it an influential level of subjective adulthood (Axxe et al., 2022) in identity formation. For example, low-paid, precarious work does little to influence financial identity formation (Bosch et al., 2016). However, a danger with defining adult identity with one's financial situation and work is

that current global economic conditions may actually serve to threaten self-sufficiency in adulthood. This could lead to more impetus on personal responsibility for independence but fewer social supports for achieving this aim (Bosch et al., 2016). This paradox is visible under Adulting's demand that one takes personal responsibility for surmounting systemic and social barriers through individual hard work, grit, resilience, self-regulation, mindset adjustment, and perseverance (Grose, 2017).

The Paradoxes of Grinding, Bootstrapping, and Genuine Pretending in Adulting

A tension is thus created between the expectations of individuals pursuing notions of adulthood as dictated by Adulting and the reality of navigating survival as a young person in the second decade of the 21st century. As Korobov (2022) notes, "we are endlessly instructed by our culture to be dextrous and able to shift who we are to get by in different situations" (p. 11). The phenomenon of Adulting is a perfect representation of this attitude. Grose (2017) describes an ongoing critique against youth that is proliferated through popular media, especially conservative popular media, that puts the blame on the youth themselves for not achieving adult accomplishment benchmarks, claiming that their inability to meet normative adult status is their own fault for not trying hard enough (see also Ho et al., 2022; Mitchell & Lennox, 2020). Accusations are often levelled that the emerging adults of today are "stalled" or stuck in adolescence, yet there exist distinctions between adolescence and the new type of adult transitions seen today (see Arnett, 2004, 2016). According to Wyn (2014), cognitive dissonance results from young people feeling they need to take personal responsibility for their own failure to achieve normative standards of adult membership. In reality, some people feel it is actually a failure of social systems to provide meaningful and gainful employment for them as part of the *neoliberal bargain* (Wyn, 2014).

The neoliberal bargain, which is reflected in what is known as hustle culture or grinding within the gig economy, can be summarised as a contract demanding that one commit all of one's time and energy to productive work that serves the needs of industrial growth capitalism. The

promised result of sacrificing one's life to work is the reward of financial stability and personal happiness in the future (Wyn, 2014). One's value as an adult is thus measured by one's capacity to act as a node through which financial capital can flow without friction. Young people are presented with a double bind where social structures themselves present an intrinsic challenge to achieving the criteria that those self-same structures demand.

Self-branding and collecting identity capital through social media interactions are a part of identity development in emerging adults (Gilmore, 2019). Life under Adulting is reliant on social media, is driven by maintaining one's public profile, and is tied to acquiring products that allow one to differentiate oneself from others (C. Smith et al., 2011). Through this practice, modern adult identity is often formed by engaging in genuine pretending (Moeller & D'Ambrosio, 2019) in order to navigate conflicting values and desires in maintaining a cohesive sense of self. As an example, Torkelson (2015) discusses his participants' engaging in what he terms "adult facework" (p. 364) where they adopt the persona of the normative adult in order to survive in a consumerist society defined almost entirely by work and money. Interestingly, the author describes affiliation with the youth movement known as straightedge as providing self-conscious awareness of when one is engaging in facework. Torkelson (2015) found that some scene affiliates from the straightedge movement believed that "their participation [in the straightedge scene] provided them footing to elaborate a sustained identity project" (p. 366). I interpret this to mean that through being in the movement and engaging in its deconstruction and challenging of social norms and mores, members gained insight into how they could adapt their identity to match different situations. Having this ability to understand how their identity is formed according to their desires, they are able to craft sub-identities in order to adapt to the social requirements they face in their workplace. This points to a possible exploration of how adolescent identity-formation contributes to cultivating "facework" that passes for genuinely feeling like an adult for some people. This may be especially true when survival in a market-oriented and competitive society strongly influences the perspectives people

take on adult membership. It also points to the idea that awareness and critique of the phenomenon is not enough to elicit resistance to it because of the importance of work and money to basic social and physical survival. The paradox between the reality of inauthentically and insincerely grinding while simultaneously curating a public profile that communicates genuine pretending (Moeller & D'Ambrosio, 2019, 2021) is at the heart of Adulting. It is worth pointing out that the facework, grinding and hustling that is part and parcel of Adulting is a form of resilience against the precarity that young people face. However, in terms of developing their full potential as human beings, resilience may not suffice in the face of social and economic inequalities. As Ho et al. (2022) remind us, resilience is a survival strategy, not a pathway to thriving adulthood.

This observation ties in directly with the research that I carried out to support my dissertation where I theorized that adolescents who are exposed to a completely different paradigm of education and who are embedded within an intergenerational community of learning would hold a different subjective view of adulthood than seen in dominant culture. Based on the research that I carried out for my master's thesis (see Lyngstad, 2020), I also predicted that the capacity for alumni to maintain their connection to the school and the alternative views of the school after graduation would be tied to maintaining the adult worldview that emerged during their time as members of the learning community of Springhouse. These theories were in many ways affirmed in the findings. What follows is a literature review based on research that considers schooling's influence on identity, which is a related realm of scholarship that serves as a useful resource for exploring the influence that schooling has on ideas of what it means to be an adult.

Chapter Three: Literature Review

This literature review serves to orient my work within existing scholarship on the connection between school experiences and adult identity and to provide the reader with a sense of how the connection between schooling and adult identity has been approached by other researchers. Much of the academic work in this area revolves around the connection between schooling and identity formation, which is much more predominant in the scholarship compared to studies concerning adulthood specifically. However, the information that does exist provides space for this study to exist within, or adjacent to, the extant research represented in this literature review.

Education for Adulthood in the 21st Century

In this literature review, I explore a selection of literature that links education with adult identity formation. In seeking material for review, I used the search terms “Education AND Schooling AND Influence AND Adulthood” in Lakehead library’s OMNI system. In one especially relevant looking article I found the subject heading “Socialization.” Including this in the search yielded 14 articles that I felt might have potential based on scanning their titles. Scanning through those 14 articles resulted in my keeping only seven and discarding the rest as not suitably relevant. Informed by keywords and subject headings from the seven articles, I added the following subject headings to my search:

effects

longitudinal studies

long-term effects

social integration

human capital theory – interesting connection to aims of education for future exploration

identity

identity formation

personality

personality traits

self concept

adult

alternative education

holistic education

Various combinations of the above keywords were tried but many combinations did not lead to relevant materials. The most valuable combination through OMNI was “alternative education AND identity AND adult” which after scanning article titles and abstracts yielded nine relevant articles out of approximately 300.

Having used OMNI to give me a general idea of what to look for, I turned to the ERIC database search tool to find more education-specific information. My first keyword search was for “education AND adulthood AND identity,” which produced 156 results. Further searches yielded 8 potentially relevant articles out of the nearly 500 surveyed. These were be retained for closer analysis. My total articles after this search stood at 17. These articles were drawn from research in the fields of psychology, sociology and economics with no articles from education journals. In order to find more materials that were explicitly from the field of education research, I met with the Thunder Bay education library’s research librarian and after experimenting with several keywords and search terms we identified the search terms “identity development”, “climate”, “high school students”, “individual development” and “longitudinal” as relevant.

Searching ERIC and the American Psychological Association Database as a supplement to ERIC, we were able to find nine potentially relevant articles. Based on these articles, we then added “transition to adulthood”, “school identity” and “identity formation” as keywords. Looking through the Credo Reference online tool, we also determined that “educational environment” and “self concept” would be useful subject headings. Various combinations of these keywords and subject headings provided us with approximately 15 potentially relevant papers. Upon closer review of

these articles, this number was reduced to nine, although none were precisely what I was looking for. Much of the section *Education for Adulthood: Schooling as Identity Formation* draws on these papers.

Having described my strategies for finding information on the subject, I now turn to exploring a sample of literature surrounding adulthood identity formation and its connection to schooling.

Adolescence to Adulthood: Schooling and Life Transitions

In the context of education, the transition from education to workplace is a significant event that signals adult membership (Grosemans et al., 2020). However, feelings of tension connected with the school-work transition are further exacerbated when individuals emerge out of a cyclic, predictable and measurable world of public school into a linear, unpredictable and measureless world of life and work (Olson, 2014). The world outside of the artificial environment of schools is a world where life becomes abstract and individualized (Krampe, 2017). It is a world where one loses a sense of control over how work, and life, can or should be done (Olson, 2014).

The work young people do around identity and the self-directed meaning-making experienced by many young people as a result of living in a constant state of tension has led to a burgeoning for-profit self-help industry aimed at youth who adopt a sense of personal responsibility for their failure to reach the normative standard demanded by society (Mitchell & Lennox, 2020). Some youth turn to self-help to assist them in identity formation and to alleviate anxieties brought on by the demands they face in day-to-day life. These self-help programs, however, often consist mainly of financial strategies for living within one's means with an emphasis on making and saving money as an essential part of being an adult (see Lythcott-Haims, 2021) with emotional and holistic maturity treated secondarily, and often in relation to the workplace or in the context of one's family unit.

As a step towards addressing this problem, some scholars claim a lack of self-esteem

brought on by young people being unprepared by schooling for the realities of adult life outside of work stands as a major contributor to psychological distress during their early adult years (Houy et al., 2020). Houy et al. (2020) present the idea that college and university students should be offered courses in self-awareness, empathy, interpersonal communication, positive relationship building, stress management, emotion management, problem solving, decision making, creative thought and critical thinking as these elements are all correlated with positive impact on self-esteem. These recommendations lead us into a discussion about role that education might play in more holistically preparing young people for life as adults outside of school.

Education for Adulthood: Schooling as Identity Formation

Ten Dam and Volman (2007) encapsulate the importance of education and development in the role of the adult as a member of society, stating that “every development and everything a child learns contribute, at least ideally, to their functioning in society” (p. 282). In line with this, A. Dewey (2021) asserts that childhood experiences, including experiences in adolescence, shape identity standards. I agree with scholars such as Sloan (2005), who writes that all approaches to education make assumptions about what it means to be human and Donald (2020), who argues that school curriculum is a collection of stories reflecting the kind of human the education system intends to produce. Brandt et al. (2019) argue that “one major goal of schooling is to shape students’ personality to provide them with skills to master future goals in various life domains such as work, family, and health” (p. 3). In addition, it has been found that education influences identity formation both quantitatively (number of years of education) and qualitatively (type of education) (Yamamura et al., 2019). Finally, Crosnoe et al. (2004) remind us that “schools can be viewed as important aspects of the ecology of human development - institutional settings influencing the more proximate contexts that, in turn, direct development” (p. 75), underlining the confluence of personal and social developmental forces that work on humans living in society.

When one steps back to take a wider view of the purpose of education, it becomes clear that

the aims of all educational endeavours are either implicitly or explicitly tied to particular visions of adulthood. This can range from the strict sincerity-based Confucian scholasticism of ancient China (see Moeller & D'Ambrosio, 2019) to religious schools that aim to produce devout adherents to a particular faith (see Fajrussalam et al., 2020; Shuster & Mongetta, 2009), to the various experiments in authenticity-based schooling (see Carr, 1985; Hadar et al., 2018; Neill, 1992), among countless other models. As a pertinent example, the central aim of public education in North America since the nineteen fifties has ostensibly been to mould people into scientifically literate, critical thinking, democratically engaged, employable adult citizens of the nation-state (Popper, 2011). Adding to these expectations, Noddings (2015) calls for education that also strives to produce caring and compassionate adults. Scholars of critical pedagogy such as Apple (2011), Giroux (1997), and McLaren (1999) present an image of the ideal adult as a free-thinking radical that is dedicated to speaking truth to power, fighting for social justice, and challenging oppression. Scholars with an affinity for thinking holistically and ecologically such as J. Miller (2019), O'Sullivan and Taylor (2004), and Plotkin (2003, 2008) argue that education should serve the purpose of spiritually connecting with nature, other individuals (both human and greater-than-human), the self, and God as a project of nurturing receptivity for what one's soul calls one to do and be as an adult. There are as many examples as there are opinions about education and all views point to schooling playing a part in the formation of the adult. If we extend this idea of education being a tool with which to mould young people and their mindsets, we can infer that beyond the developmentally normative biological and cognitive changes that occur during chronological periods of the life-course, adulthood is largely a social construct (Mitchell & Lennox, 2020), and is thus given all of its shape and meaning by social instruments such as education – both formal and informal.

However, in the context of education scholarship, current research still does not provide clear answers to understanding the connection between school experience in adolescence and identity formation in adulthood (Erentaitė et al., 2018). In examining the literature surrounding this

connection, I have found that the relationship between education and identity development remains under-researched and under-theorized, as was the case over a decade ago according to Rich and Schachter (2012). Numerous studies examine the connection between schooling and specific aspects of identity, such as volunteerism (Tong & Kim, 2022), school satisfaction and impulse control (Brandt et al., 2019), and the demands placed on children to be the workforce of the 21st century (Cross, 2009). Across the literature, the most prominent features within schools that are claimed to have influenced adult identity development are school climate, physical environment, and teachers as role-models. Tension also exists between the adult identity that schools seek to foster and the religious, cultural, and ethnic identities encouraged by students' family environment. Having explored the general landscape of the literature, I now discuss particular aspects of how schooling influences adult identity that appear across these studies.

School Environment and Climate: Social and Physical Influences

Aspects of school environment including social and physical factors influence identity development. These range from individual aspects of identity through to more holistic notions. Barber et al. (2001) investigated the ways adolescents explore personal identities (private, inward identity), crowd identities (identity associated with a social group), and public identities (outward identities that are presented socially). The authors found that crowd identities may influence personality dispositions but that adolescents continually negotiate between these multiple identities. Other research points to role identity as being continually formed through interactions with others and with environments (A. Dewey, 2021). Social networks have a strong influence on identity in terms of reconsideration of identity throughout adolescence. These social interactions, realised through participation in a variety of activities in high school, are often carried into adulthood as identity markers. Pro-social activities, sports activities, and performing arts activities in high school have been found to influence substance use, psychological adjustment and educational/occupational outcomes in adulthood (Barber et al., 2001).

In most cases, the social peer-networks of adolescents are embedded in school. As an example of the influence of one's peer group on important aspects of adult identity in a Japanese context, Yamagishi (2020) found that being bullied in school has a strong positive correlation with supporting economic redistribution in adulthood. More broadly, Barber et al. (2001) discuss how one's crowd identity (the social group that one identifies with) may be chosen by the individual but it can also be informally assigned by the broader social organisation of the school, including by one's peer group. However, Tong and Kim (2022) point out that while one's peer group has been shown to have an influence, this area remains under-researched. Despite the limits of the research, these findings hint at the power of social pressures manifest in school environments and the subtle influence that this power has on one's freedom to consciously consider and realise identity options.

Related to the limits that the social environment of school places on identity development is the specific example of religious education, which is a topic that is explicitly explored in the literature. Barber et al. (2001) argue that structured social arenas such as school and church offer less freedom for identity exploration than voluntary activities. It stands to reason then, that a combination of the two institutions would further reinforce early identity foreclosure in adolescents and emerging adults. Corner and Dellavis (2022) present the example of adult graduates of day schools and home schools that orient around conservative Protestant religious values holding views about gender identity roles that are more conservative and patriarchal than public school peers. Their study also showed that Catholic school graduates hold more egalitarian views about gender roles than many graduates of public schools. Their findings revealed that both male and female graduates of conservative Protestant education programs believed that one of the male's primary adult roles is to provide spiritual guidance for his family, which the students referred to as *male headship*. The authors theorise that Protestant religious schools and homeschooling, which is strongly correlated with adult graduates holding traditional conservative views – especially regarding female gender roles (Corner & Dallavis, 2022) – act as sites of gender socialisation and

may play a part in shaping adult behaviour and values around gender.

From another perspective, Shuster and Mongetta (2009) assert that the leaders of such conservative and traditional religious educational institutions feel that young people having too much choice about adult identity formation increases the chance of their adopting a destructive lifestyle in adulthood. They argue that Christian academies can play a role in providing what they consider to be “appropriate pathways” (p. 218) to adulthood. Their study revealed that while adult-age students are ambiguous about their adult identity in general, they hold strong convictions about their religious identity. This reflects the aim of the particular religious school that these researchers studied, which is “to challenge the emerging adult to mature in their religious identity” (Shuster & Mongetta, 2009, p. 233) as the primary aim of education. However, the authors point out that student commitment to identity in terms of religious convictions is difficult to trace to the school or to serious adult considerations of the issues because the confounding variable of family expectations could play a part (Shuster & Mongetta, 2009). In other words, individuals may feel obligations to their parents to act in ways that align with parental expectations (Weinschenk & Dawes, 2022). Limitations placed on one’s options for identity development do not, however, only come through religious education.

In a study by Cross (2009), facets of the *imagined adult* were explored verbally by teenagers. The ideas that the student participants had about what they imagined their adulthood would look like were limited by the conditioning of their prior schooling and by social class barriers. The combination of conditioning and barriers made them feel as though they are forced into being “sensible” (Cross, 2009, p. 350) about what kind of adult they should be rather than considering experimenting with a range of adult identities. Social pressures to conform to societal norms also play a part. Perceptions of authority, discipline, violence and justice during schooling influence mature identity building throughout childhood and adolescence (Cross, 2009). Cross illustrates that when children do not have the opportunity to challenge authority openly in school,

they do not feel comfortable challenging authority later in life. Cross also found that within the complex and non-linear realm of classroom communication, students in her study learned to rely on surreptitious acts of transgression to express their true feelings about the system of control in which they found themselves embedded. Furthermore, this study reveals how the contrast between infantilised docility at school and the realities of human life created psychological tension for young people forming their adult identity (Cross, 2009).

Interestingly, A. Dewey (2021) found that in the case of environmental identity, which is a particular facet of overall identity, intentional aspects of social interactions and environment at school did not have a pronounced role. In their study, they found that their participants' environmental identity was influenced most by personal experience in nature, with school experiences being ranked behind direct experience with degradation of nature and modelling of pro-environmental activism within one's family. Further, participation in direct, physical action supporting environmental awareness during schooling did not have as much of an influence as simple information exposure in the classroom. Although these results are from only one study and do not represent all cases, this finding surprised me. Even more surprising were the ways that teachers have been found to have an influence on identity.

Teacher Influence

Rich and Schachter (2012) explored the three factors of *teacher caring*, *teacher role-modeling*, and *seeing the students as whole persons rather than looking at education as a purely academic exercise* as important to enhancing student capacity for exploring identity options. In their research, they found that teacher caring was not as important in student identity development as the role-modeling teachers provided and the teacher embracing a whole-person approach to their practice. Related to the idea of the teacher as a positive role model, Cross (2009) found that students considered teachers who allowed them to *be who they are* to be positive role models.

Contrasting this, Rich and Schachter's (2012) study revealed that students are most

influenced by ideas the teacher presents that the student finds meaningful. It is worth noting that the researchers themselves point out that the school they studied is a religious private school, driven by a connection to developing traditional religious identity as opposed to encouraging more authentic identity development. Thus, the strength of the role model influence and the focus on meaning may be connected to the collectivist nature of religious education coupled with the *appeal to authority* inherent in organised religion. This echoes the idea of *education-as-proxy* in the context of schooling's influence on political participation in adulthood as presented by Persson (2012), whereby certain people choose certain types of education based on their pre-existing worldview and existing community. This results in a sort of *preaching to the converted* that makes it difficult to determine the influence that the schooling has on their perspective.

Some studies attempt to make the connection more explicit. Yamamura et al. (2019) found that in Japan, elementary school teachers have greater influence on identity formation than high school teachers and theorise that this is because they spend more time with the students as compared with high school teachers. They also found that Japanese males are statistically more likely to support the idea of corporate social responsibility if they had a female teacher in the first grade, illustrating the long-ranging influence that a factor such as the gender of one's teacher can have on seemingly disconnected aspects of identity development.

Although these findings are compelling, Persson (2012) reminds us that no research fully supports the idea that the type of education one experiences makes a difference in political participation and that political participation is actually shown to be more influenced by areas outside of school. This extends even to the connection between development of political identity and civics classes. Research over the previous 50 years has revealed mixed results about the effectiveness of civics education on adult political engagement, showing that taking civics classes does not correlate with future voter turnout in adulthood (Weinschenk & Dawes, 2022). Thus, Weinschenk and Dawes (2022) suggest that civics education courses are not an effective way to

increase participation in democratic processes. Similarly, Tong and Kim (2022) shift attention away from civics classes as having a formative effect on civic and political identity and point to scholarship that supports adolescent volunteerism in school as being one of the strongest influences on civic engagement in adulthood.

Turning back to the relationship between teachers and students, students can sometimes see teachers as people who are trying to make them into who the teachers want them to be, rather than who the student wants to be (Cross, 2009). Through a cross-sectional longitudinal study where the researcher spoke to a group of 38 students at points ranging from elementary school through high school, they found that control of behaviour through strict discipline in primary school led to students learning not to speak their mind or act as themselves – essentially producing a need to conform to survive psychologically (Cross, 2009). Specific to her study, Cross found that student calls to the school community to cease abuses to their person by adult staff at their primary and middle school would only be taken seriously when their calls were taken up by adults such as parents. In scenarios like this, the teacher-student relationship creates a situation where adulthood later becomes seen as synonymous with having power – both over children and power equal to other adults (Cross, 2009). My interpretation of this is that the idea of adulthood becomes reduced to attaining *power over* through reaching a certain age, physical size, or position of socially recognised authority. This has negative ramifications for identity development in adulthood. Another interesting connection between the influence that teachers can have on adult development is in terms of either rigorously navigating or ignoring conflicts over ethics and morals (C. Smith et al., 2011). In their study on emerging adults, C. Smith et al. (2011) write of how many of their respondents indicated that teachers intentionally avoided difficult conversations around morality that might be considered harmful to the feelings of any students in the classroom. An avoidance of conflict and the maintenance of a *safe space* for all was universal. The authors feel that this avoidance approach denies young people the exposure to exploring conflicting views and to

developing the skills and capacity for navigating the ideas of right and wrong in a robust and philosophical way. By avoiding conflict, students learn that the best way to deal with difficult moral and ethical problems is to, in effect, ignore them and to express complete tolerance for all points of view equally. The authors acknowledge that this is an understandable symptom of standards-based mass education within a pluralistic society where simply keeping order and having things run smoothly in the classroom is the priority (C. Smith et al., 2011).

As we have seen through this survey of the research, the elements of environment and teacher influence present entry points into understanding some of the influence that schooling has on adult identity development. I would like to conclude this section by touching on how C. Smith et al.'s commentary reflects the realities of outcomes and accountancy-based education (for example Apple, 2011; Au, 2011, 2016) and hints at the influence this type of schooling might have on what young people come to value as they develop their idea of what it means to be an adult.

Education for 21st Century Skills as Adulthood Training: Setting the Stage for Adulthood

The focus on skills training for the workplace that dominates notions of 21st century learning (see Bell, 2016; Donald, 2020; Drake & Reid, 2018, 2020; Rahman et al., 2010) is reflected in the attitudes on adult membership conveyed by emerging adults. These trends have their roots in the backlash against progressive education, the focus on centring the value of education as an economic contribution beginning in the 1950s (see Beck, 1965) and subsequent global shifts in economic and political priorities more generally. O'Sullivan et al. (2002) write that in the late 1960s and early 1970s education was a driver of economic development. However, partially in response to experiments occurring across education in the late 1960s (R. Miller, 2000), the education sector was blamed for not delivering on maintaining the economic growth of the early post-war era.

This led to resource cuts and the implementation of a back to basics focus in curriculum and pedagogy (Apple, 2011; Au, 2014). The end of the 1970s and through the 1980s saw the rise of a push for the privatization of public commons institutions in the United States, Canada, Great

Britain, and other countries. The project of privatizing the commons in these nations included the areas of health, welfare, and education (O'Sullivan et al., 2002). In essence, public education became a product of the market that catered to the market. Noddings (2015) implies that the unifying purpose of education now lies in a sort of civil religion that values intellectual and technical knowledge above all else, especially as it pertains to gaining economic security and competitiveness within a global market-system. She argues that education's focus on economic competitiveness does not support engaging in genuine education for wholeness in adulthood, and it arguably does not produce adults that could be considered to be mature and fully-formed human beings who are examples of actualized human potential. The deleterious global effects of an incomplete education system that produces incomplete adults is communicated starkly by Blake et al. (2013) who assert that extensive mainstream education does not mean that one is sustainability-conscious. In fact, they argue, it is precisely those who have achieved the highest levels of education under the conventional system who are responsible for causing and proliferating the most unsustainable problems facing life on Earth.

With this in mind, it is important that schooling be dedicated to more than embracing 21st century ideas that call for producing technically capable adults who can manage their anxieties and get along with one another at work (as described by Bell, 2016). I am interested in alternative education options that are dedicated to exploring what education can mean for humanity beyond training for the 21st century marketplace. This is the core of what I aimed to explore in this study.

Having surveyed the research connecting the influence of schooling to ideas about adulthood, we see that there are correlations between school experiences and the formation of identity. This research serves as the entry point into investigating the influence that alternative schooling at Springhouse school had on what adulthood means to those who attended the school in their adolescence and emerging adulthood. The methodology used in this inquiry is explained in the next chapter.

Chapter Four: Methodology

The overarching methodological approach used is that of an interview-based qualitative study which draws on some elements of phenomenology. In terms of a specific method for data-gathering, I based the approach on Douglas' (1985) *Creative Interviewing* as the relational strategy for each interview. Meaning-making through data analysis relied on several suggestions from the literature; principally on an inductive method of code and theme creation based on data gathered from one-on-one interviews (as per Seidman, 2013). A major aspect of building trustworthiness was the integration of phenomenological methods which require the researcher to bring awareness to their biases throughout the research design. This included drawing on the phenomenological techniques of *phenomenological reduction* and especially *bracketing*. The choice of phenomenology as an appropriate philosophical approach to my methodology, including the importance of the use of bracketing throughout the study follows.

Phenomenological Aspects of Methodology: A Rationale

My research question asks: *in what ways do Springhouse alumni feel that experiences in the Springhouse learning community influenced their idea of what it means to be an adult?* Taking a phenomenological approach to exploring this question, I acknowledge van Manen's (2017) caution that not all qualitative research that is inspired by phenomenology is actually phenomenology. My focus is on participants' descriptions of the structure of their own experience, which aligns with what Laverly (2003) claims is the focus of phenomenology as a research methodology. However, although this question lies at the heart of my inquiry, as an education researcher I am interested in how experiences of education influence the feeling of being an adult. Thus, this study departs from phenomenology since I explored constructivist concepts of meaning-making around experiences with participants, which van Manen (2017) rightly points out is not within the sphere of what the pure phenomenologist is interested in. This being the case, my study is inspired by many ideas from phenomenology.

Van Manen (2017) describes phenomenology as being about communicating “meaningful revelations” that must be “originary and existentially compelling to the soul” (p. 779). As a methodology in the social sciences, phenomenology is described by Ravich and Carl (2016) as an instrument with which one can explore the lived experience of individuals as a phenomenon. They describe what counts as a phenomenon of lived experience as being anything from a single event that occurs at a unique point in time to an ongoing process that occurs across time. According to Webb and Welsh (2019) phenomenological studies are not, at their core, about solving problems. They are projects undertaken with the goal of collecting and interpreting the perspectives of individuals regarding an experience. This aim fits well with my study since my intent was not to explicitly seek solutions to a problem but to explore, document, and analyse the lived experiences of individuals. Both Ravich and Carl, and Butler-Kisber (2010), make the point that phenomenology requires the researcher to look at the perceptions of participants as a primary means of identifying the character of the phenomenon. This aligns well with my research question, which is grounded in exploring participant perceptions of their own experiences.

Throughout the research design, I have drawn on ideas from phenomenology, but I do not consider the study to be purely phenomenological. Along with the technique of phenomenological reduction discussed later in this chapter, the primary tool that I have borrowed from phenomenology is the practice of *bracketing* or *epoché*, which, according to D. Smith (2006), is one of the three main elements of a phenomenological study. This tool contributed to trustworthiness in its role as a guide to acknowledging and reflecting on my researcher bias and as a reminder to make attempts to mitigate it at all levels of the research design.

Bracketing

Through bracketing, the researcher attempts to set aside their assumptions, past experiences, and judgements with the intention of more accurately seeing and conveying the essential *essence* of the phenomenon that is being studied (Creswell, 1998; Laverly, 2003; Ravich & Carl, 2016). Being

aware of the technique of bracketing prior to beginning my work on this study, I have made conscious attempts at self-reflection and analysis of my judgements and opinions about the school. Since my focus was on the perceptions of the participants and allowing for the *essence* of their experience to reveal itself with as little filtering from me as possible, I devised some methods to bracket myself in the research design, in my background reading, plans for data-collection, and in analysis.

Semi-structured, bordering on open-ended interviews reduced my own influence on the data-collection process and provided space for the participants to explore areas of meaning that are important to them, rather than my presenting partitioned categories dictated in advance (Douglas, 1985). My plan for bracketing myself in interviews was to keep my questions few and open ended, allowing the participants to speak freely with as little conceptual guidance from me as possible. A large part of the bracketing aspect of my interview method was to avoid mentioning specific factors described in the adulthood literature as *markers of adulthood* such as adoption of traditional roles, attainment of career, marriage, parenthood, independence from parents, or taking personal responsibility (see Arnett, 2004, 2014, 2016; Diaz-Strong, 2021; Gfellner & Bartoszek, 2015; Ladhani et al., 2019; Mitchell & Lennox, 2020; Wright et al., 2020). Although in rare cases I used some of these terms in probing the participants' ideas about adulthood, my use of terms in questioning mostly served as a means of confirming concepts through reflecting what the participant had said to me. This approach also served to satisfy Lowe et al.'s (2013) call for the use of vague and open-ended questions, which can help expand research in the fields of emerging and subjective adulthood.

I also attempted to consciously avoid introducing partitioned-off ideas about adult identity development discussed in the literature, such as developing career identity, political identity, environmental identity, religious identity, and student identity (see Barber et al., 2001; Brandt et al., 2019; Hatano et al., 2018; Higgins, 2013; Rich & Schachter, 2012; Shuster & Mongetta, 2009;

Williams & Chawla, 2016). I did this to avoid unintentionally prompting the participants towards concepts that related to what I might have wanted included in the transcripts, which would have amplified researcher bias (Seidman, 2013). Throughout the interviews, I continually reminded myself that the interviews should be focused on the participants' perspectives, not finding what I wanted to find.

In addition to attending to methodological considerations regarding the trustworthiness of my research design and results, I also considered several factors in my choice of method. Since I was interested in the participants' own perspectives about their experiences, one-on-one interviews seemed to be the most suitable approach. I explored several approaches to interviewing and found suggestions from Douglas (1985) and Seidman (2013) to be especially applicable to this research project. Their ideas about interviewing, along with other considerations related to the interview as a method are explored in the following.

Method: The Interview

I am particularly engaged with the idea of Brinkmann (2018) who reminds us that despite the qualitative interview becoming naturalized in the social sciences, we should be careful to appreciate the magic of the interview. The purpose of in-depth interviewing is based in a desire to learn about the lived experience of another and the meaning that they make from their experience (Seidman, 2013). Unlike the objects of scientific inquiry, humans can talk and think (Seidman, 2013), and thus interviews allow researchers to access subjective realities that cannot be observed directly (Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori, 2018). In the context of this study, which explored participants' concepts of what adulthood means and their perceptions of how their past experiences at Springhouse influenced their current ideas of adulthood, interviewing is an appropriate tool since interviews overcome distance in time and in space and thus past and faraway events can be studied through the recounting of them by the participant (Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori, 2018).

Limitations of, Risks of, and Human Considerations in Interviewing

Through reviewing a selection of literature regarding the use of interviews as a method, I made note of several points prior to carrying out the interviews to prepare myself for unexpected situations. Although interviewing may be among the best ways of exploring subjective understanding, it is a “necessary, if not always completely sufficient” (Seidman, 2013, p. 10) means of doing so. As Seidman (2013) points out, the interviewer is always part of the process, which requires that the interviewer consider the influence and impact that they have on how the participant feels, how they act, and the information that they will share. More troubling, Brinkmann (2018) points out that qualitative interviewers wield a form of concealed power because embedded in any research program there exists an intrinsic power asymmetry where the interviewer is always in a power position.

Aside from considerations of power, when interviewing, one must be also aware of the polyvocal nature of human beings, who are often self-contradictory in narratives and descriptions (Brinkmann, 2018). Thus, the researcher should avoid searching for the singular voice of the participant and allow for flexibility in interpretation (Brinkmann, 2018). There is also the problem that all interviews are influenced by situational factors. Hence, it is important to remember that “life is inherently partially situated” (Douglas, 1985, p. 22), be aware of these factors, and consider them. This situatedness extends across time and in the social space between interviewer and participant. The interviewer must also remember that human memory is constructive and conversation is socially mediated; therefore, one cannot consider interview talk to be unpolluted reports of experience (Brinkmann, 2018). Thus, I acknowledged that although the data collected through the interview process reflects what I believe to be a sincere collection of thoughts shared by the participants, it is not objective truth. This is one of the reasons I have focused on the participants’ own perceptions in the research question as it places their subjectivity at the centre of the inquiry. The next consideration was the approach to interviewing that I used.

Although I believe that this study required participant freedom to explore their own perspectives with minimal guidance, I do acknowledge Brinkmann's (2018) assertion that purely structured, and purely unstructured interviews cannot exist. Thus, I tried to balance freedom with some structure in considering my approach to interviewing. In seeking out a semi-structured, bordering on open-ended interview style, I came across Douglas' (1985) *Creative Interviewing* method.

Creative Interviewing as a Relational Strategy

Creative interviewing is a method and philosophy of inquiry proposed and described by Jack Douglas (1985) in his book *Creative Interviewing*. His approach was well-suited as an overarching philosophical framework for my data-collection. Research is always about representation of reality (Morse, 2018) and Douglas claims that overly structured approaches to interviewing create a specific truth rather than uncovering reality as-it-is. It follows then that more fluid approaches to interviewing would provide a more accurate, if less tidy, reflection of the subjective nature of participants' perceptions of reality.

Creative interviewing also avoids what Brinkmann (2018) refers to as a limitation of interviewing where the interview is a one-way dialogue where the interviewer asks questions and the participant answers, which would render inaccessible a deep well of significant meaning about the topic. Creative interviewing is grounded in establishing a trusting and open exchange where the interviewer and participant co-create a space where participants can be vulnerable and share their thoughts and stories on their own terms (Douglas, 1985). This observation is in accord with Brinkmann, who writes that "an interview is not an interaction between disembodied intellects but a joint accomplishment of vulnerable, embodied persons with all sorts of hopes, fears, and interests" (p. 577). The largely open-ended, authentic, and personal approach of creative interviewing thus fits well with the holistic paradigm that underpins the study.

Douglas (1985) suggests that to begin an inquiry and to gain a deeper perspective of the

sorts of things that may come up in interviews, the researcher should begin with themselves as the first “participant.” This means that the researcher will ask themselves the same questions that they will ask the participants and then provide honest answers to themselves through a sort of self-dialogue. This technique of the researcher beginning the inquiry with self-exploration also aligns with phenomenological research methods as described by van Manen (2017). I followed this advice and the self-interview (see Appendix A) helped me refine my questions and my questioning technique (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) with a mind to collecting data that was as rich as possible. It should be noted that I did not attend Springhouse, so the spirit of, and some specific questions from, my self-interview may have been captured, but the specifics of Springhouse could not be.

Logistics: How the Study Unfolded

In this section, I outline the stages involved with recruitment, data collection, and following up with participants over the course of the research project.

Participant Recruitment and Sampling

To recruit participants, upon receiving Research Ethics Board (REB) approval (file 1470674, see Appendix B), I sent an invitation to participate letter (see Appendix C) to the head of school at Springhouse who had agreed to forward it on to all alumni via email. The total number of alumni in the population of graduates at the time was 29. The invitation to participate was sent to all 29 graduates. In this invitation, alumni were asked to attend a virtual information session over Zoom on May 14th, 2025. The invitation also offered the option to either access an information package and consent forms (see Appendix D) on my personal website (<http://www.michaeltlyngstad.ca/SpringhouseAdulthoodStudy>) or to contact me directly through my Lakehead University email for more information. The virtual information session was intended to provide interested parties a convenient way of being introduced to me and to ask questions in real-time before making a decision about participating in the study. The attempt to host the online information session was unsuccessful, with no potential participants signing on to the Zoom

meeting. Potential participants who did respond to me by email were asked to review the information package, ask any clarifying questions, and if they were interested in participating, sign the consent form and send the signed form to my Lakehead University email address.

My aim with this study was to present the perspectives of the subset of Springhouse alumni who stepped forward to participate. As such, I have made no attempt at generalization across the population of graduates from the school or to identify characteristics of the school that are universal across the population of alumni. However, as part of recruitment I sought a wide variety of participants and attempted to attract participants who may have provided negative or contradictory data, which according to Lassig (2022) adds to richness, variety and dimension. Morse (2018) reinforces the value of seeking dissenters, asserting that there are no outliers in qualitative research – referring to them as *negative cases* and arguing that it is important to position them within the theoretical framework. To this end, I included specific mention in the initial invitation to participate that I was seeking those who have positive and negative perspectives on how their experiences at Springhouse influenced their idea of adulthood. In my approach to snowball sampling, I also asked participants to suggest alumni who may have had negative experiences. This measure was not only intended to provide richer data but also to demonstrate my openness to considering negative cases for the sake of providing as complete a picture as possible.

Upon receipt of signed consent forms, Zoom interviews were arranged at the participants' convenience over the course of May, June, and July 2025. Following a snowball sampling approach (as per Creswell & Creswell, 2018), throughout the process of organizing and carrying out interviews, I asked participants if they had suggestions for other relevant individuals who might be interested in speaking with me but may have missed hearing about the study. At the end of each interview, I asked participants to invite these others to reach out to me by email if they were interested in learning more about the study.

Second Recruitment. After I had completed four interviews over the course of May and

June and had made arrangements with another three potential participants for interviews in July, I decided to ask the staff at Springhouse to extend a second round of invitations to participate. The revised invitation letter can be found as Appendix E and the revised information package as Appendix F. I made this decision based on my desire to reach the goal of twelve participants. To incentivize participation, I included an offer of a USD \$50 honorarium. Out of fairness, this same honorarium offer was also extended to those who had already been interviewed. After receiving REB approval for the amendments in July, the invitations were sent out to remaining alumni. The second round of invitations was not successful and did not yield any further participants. I also followed up with each of the participants after interviews were completed to remind them about suggesting the study to those whom they felt might be interested. The second attempt at snowball sampling was also not successful in identifying and attracting more participants and data collection ended with the seventh interview on July 30th, 2025.

Having explained the planning and recruitment phases of the study, I now turn to how the procedures involved with data collection unfolded.

Interview Process

The overall procedures for the interviews followed the REB-approved outline based mainly on advice from Seidman (2013) and Douglas (1985). The interview guide is included as Appendix G. The main structure of each interview is described in the sections below.

Preliminaries. I began each interview by directly reviewing the terms of informed consent with the participant (as per Douglas, 1985), reviewing the rights and responsibilities of the participant and the researcher. Following this, I communicated to the participant that the interview would be open-ended and flexible. I explained what the open-ended aspect of the interview entails and emphasised that anything the participant said could be important. The participant was also reminded that the conversation would be recorded with a physical recording device. I followed the advice of Douglas (1985) to point out the recording device. I explicitly told each participant that I

can pause the recorder at any point if they would like to take a break or stop the interview. After the demonstration of the recorder's use, I placed it in an inconspicuous but accessible location to draw attention away from the recorder during the interview (as per Douglas, 1985). Upon the participant agreeing to proceed with the interview, recording of the meeting began and I asked the first question in the interview guide (See Appendix G).

Interview Protocol. A general overview of how each interview unfolded is included below, with a more detailed description of the contents of each section being presented in chapter five. The interview consisted of three main parts. In the first, I asked a set of demographic questions and the question "what are you doing now?" The second part was comprised of asking the participant two open-ended questions directly related to the research question. The third part of the interview focused on contextual questions about the participant's perspective on their ideas about adulthood before and after attending Springhouse along with their opinions of what influenced those ideas. I also asked about their perspectives on the influence that popular media may have had on their ideas about adulthood.

In the first part of the interview, I asked a set of questions about demographic information, which helped me get to know the participants as people, even in a limited way, before the interview began. These questions also informed the profiles included for each participant in the findings and discussion section, which are intended to help humanize the participants for the reader. I included the question "what are you doing now?" to get an early sense of how the participants were living as adult-aged people, which provided a glimpse of what they may value in adulthood.

In the second part of the interview, I asked two main questions. For the first question I asked: *What does adulthood mean to you?* I explored this question naturalistically with the participant through further probing questions that asked the participant to provide further details and clarification of meaning (Douglas, 1985; Seidman, 2013). When I had the sense that we had explored the participant's concept of adulthood in general in sufficient depth, I asked the second

question: *from your perspective, how do you feel your experiences at Springhouse influenced your ideas about adulthood?* I took a similar approach to question one and prompted the participant until I felt that we had exhausted the topic and informed the research question sufficiently. The questions I initially asked were intentionally open-ended to elicit the participants' own perspectives while minimising interviewer influence (as per Seidman, 2013). As each interview progressed, I asked participants to elaborate on points as they emerged. In cases where the participants had exhausted their own spontaneous ideas, I drew upon some prepared prompts based on my knowledge of the school site, the school's philosophy of Sourced Design, my own self-interview from the research planning stage, ideas from the literature, and interviews with other participants as to the influence various experiences, places, and ideas might have had on the participant's concept of adulthood. For reference, these prompts can be seen in Appendix G.

When the second part of the interview had reached a point where the participant had described their ideas of what adulthood means and how they felt Springhouse influenced those ideas to their satisfaction, I moved to the third part of the interview. In the third line of inquiry, I asked the participant about the memories they had of how they perceived adulthood prior to attending Springhouse. This part of the interview was inspired by Seidman's (2013) suggestion to build a picture of the participant's perspective before they were exposed to the phenomenon in question. In this case the phenomenon in question relates to the participants' experience with the Springhouse school. I followed up this question about their prior notions of adulthood by asking participants questions about how they feel their idea of adulthood has changed since graduating from Springhouse. I concluded the interview by asking a final question about the influence that they felt popular media had on their idea of what it means to be an adult. The explorations in the third part of the interview, although not directly related to the research question, allowed me to investigate with the participant whether their current ideas of adulthood are rooted in their experiences at Springhouse, are perhaps linked to something else that happened in their life since graduation, or

are some combination of both.

The duration of each interview was scheduled for one hour and, on average, each interview lasted just over one hour. The shortest interview was 63 minutes and the longest session spanned over 110 minutes.

Transcription and Post-Interview Preliminary Notes

For transcription of the audio interviews, I used a computer application called *Vibe*, which is an automated, predictive large language model driven transcription tool. As soon as possible after each interview I listened to the interview recording while checking the automated transcription for accuracy and made preliminary notes of anything interesting and/or unclear that was said. These notes informed initial meaning-making for the study and allowed me to reflect on improvements to my interviewing technique that I could make in future interviews. In accordance with Seidman (2013), I resisted the urge to begin categorizing the data at this point, recognising that categories would change as I conducted further interviews.

Ethical Considerations

Brinkmann (2018) writes of a qualitative progressivity myth where research is seen in ethical terms and qualitative methods are considered to uniquely embody ethical ideals. Thus, he argues, some people believe qualitative research is an ethical good-in-itself. However, despite all efforts to create a welcoming and balanced relationship between the researcher and the participant, research interviews are by their nature a means to an end and the researcher needs to reflect on the individual and social impacts of their motives (Brinkmann, 2018). It is important that the researcher considers efforts that must be made to make the relationship between interviewer and interviewee equitable from the beginning of planning the research program. I have approached the idea of engaging ethically with my participants by following the advice of Seidman (2013), who presents eight considerations. All but the seventh, which concerns special considerations for children, are explored under the sub-headings below. The research ethics protocols were approved through

Lakehead University's Research Ethics Board.

Invitation to Participate

An invitation to participate was sent to potential participants through the Springhouse school leadership. The executive director, Dr. Jenny Finn worked with her staff to first distribute invitations to all Springhouse alumni via email. They followed this initial mass invite with two rounds of individualized invitations sent directly to alumni by instant messaging and email. Having the invitations come through someone I believe the participants trust may have helped to establish a positive and trusting relationship between me and the participants.

Risks

The risks involved in participation in the research project were minimal. There was potential for discomfort as part of the self-reflective process of the participant's recalling and examining the meaning of experiences that were integral in forming their idea of adulthood. To mitigate this risk, I maintained awareness of each participant's expressed emotional state and was prepared to pause lines of questioning that were creating noticeable discomfort. Prior to beginning the interview I let the participants know that they could stop the interview at any time. I also made clear that their wellness is more important than participation in the study and that if they still wanted to participate at a later time, arrangements could be made to reschedule the interview.

Rights

The participant was notified that their participation in the study was completely voluntary. They were told they have the right to refuse to answer any questions without penalty or judgement. I also communicated to them that if for any reason they chose to withdraw from the study at any time prior to completion of the dissertation, they could inform me using a method that they are most comfortable with. They were also informed that they have the right to withdraw any data in the form of recorded audio or transcripts. This data would be destroyed or surrendered to them at their request.

Possible Benefits

One step towards equity in the researcher-participant relationship is that the participant must gain something from the encounter (Seidman, 2013). My offer to participants followed Douglas (1985), who suggests that the benefit to participants engaging in this type of inquiry is that they can learn about themselves through a process of self-understanding, self-disclosure and self-awareness that goes hand-in-hand with the interview. Exploring my research question about aspects of one's educational experiences that contribute to notions of adulthood offered participants the opportunity to understand some of these formative forces. I received some informal feedback from participants after the interviews thanking me for having the conversation with them because it revealed unexplored significance of their experiences at Springhouse to them. Other participants reacted positively to the interview, stating that it felt good to be reminded of both their school experiences and of the values and beliefs they cultivated at Springhouse. As noted elsewhere, a \$50 USD honorarium was offered as part of a second round of recruitment. This offer was extended to participants who had already completed an interview in the first round of data collection.

Confidentiality

According to Douglas (1985), a contract of absolute confidentiality is essential in ensuring ethical standards are met – but also for getting at the unvarnished truth. Confidentiality was offered to all participants. All participants had the option of using their own name, suggesting a preferred pseudonym, or having me assign a pseudonym to any references to their data. Participants were informed that they could change their minds about this at any point in the research process prior to completion of the dissertation. Prior to the oral defence, participants were sent the pre-examination draft of the dissertation and were asked if they would prefer to change their mind about their decision to have their real name or a pseudonym used in the final dissertation. For transcription, I used local hardware rather than cloud-based, technology, reducing the chance that the interviews recordings would be kept and possibly sold or accessed by third party data brokers or for training

large language models. This enhanced participant confidentiality since data security cannot be guaranteed if using online transcription tools. The interview audio and transcripts will be stored digitally on an encrypted USB key locked securely in my supervisor's office for five years as per Lakehead policy.

Dissemination

Participants were informed about how their data will be used, which reinforced the fact that all data that they provided will be subjected to the confidentiality processes mentioned above. They were told that the primary purpose of the study is to support the completion of my Ph.D. program and that the information that they communicated to me would be analysed and rendered into a dissertation document that will be available to the public. They were also informed that data may also be used as the foundation for future dissemination through academic journal articles, conference presentations, popular articles, book chapters, online videos, among other media. They were also told that findings will be included in an executive summary that will be provided to Springhouse for their consideration in developing the philosophy and methods of *Sourced Design*.

Informed Consent

Consent was secured from all participants prior to beginning data collection interviews. Potential participants were given the consent form (see Appendix D) and were invited to complete the form and return it as a digital image sent to my Lakehead University email account prior to interviews being scheduled. No interview was scheduled prior to my receiving a completed consent form.

Trustworthiness

As Stahl and King (2026) point out, the procedure of building trustworthiness in qualitative research is not exact. They stress that in qualitative work, where different researchers may find different results on different days, trustworthiness is best discussed in terms of the confidence the reader has in the researcher's reporting. Regarding the establishment of trustworthiness in

qualitative work, I agree with Merriam and Tisdell (2016) who argue that establishing credibility and believability can be achieved through explaining the research design and the analytical process in depth. The intention being that by doing so, the transparency of one's approach will convince the reader of the trustworthiness of the work. In addition to the elements related to phenomenology explained below, I took the following measures to build trustworthiness into the research design and implementation.

To temper my expectations and to resist positive researcher bias, I regularly reminded myself to not have expectations that Springhouse will be a panacea for all that I would like to see change in the world and to keep realistic expectations about the transformative and alternative nature of what I might find through pursuing this inquiry. I reminded myself that my master's thesis research (Lyngstad, 2020) suggests persistent transformation of perspective is highly context-bound and that I should not expect to find the alumni of Springhouse to be any different than normative adults after spending time away from the school site. I kept these thoughts in mind to counter-balance my underlying hope that the participants would demonstrate ideas about adulthood that differ markedly from what is seen in the dominant culture.

In terms of verification of data and interpretation, I connected my decisions for my interpretations to my theoretical and conceptual frameworks and their relevance to the research question. This process fulfils Seidman's (2013) suggestion for the researcher to devise some way of explaining the reasoning behind their choice of meaningful passages from the transcripts rather than relying purely on intuition. Seidman argues for a combination of intuition and criteria, encouraging the researcher to acknowledge that both elements contribute to the meaning-making process of analysis. I also followed Morse's (2018) suggestion of generating an audit trail over the course of data collection and analysis where one records day-to-day thinking about the process as it unfolds, keeping track of one's decisions and thinking in the moment. This took the form of retaining daily save files of my analysis work between August 2025 and the final draft of the dissertation as I

progressed so that I would have a record of how my thinking about the way the codes, themes and theoretical connections changed over time.

Further trustworthiness measures based on establishing confidence in the data extended into formal member checking of complete transcripts after the interview to offer participants a final opportunity to make corrections and clarifications before formal analysis began. All participants received a copy of their interview transcript within three days of their interview along with a request to comment on any changes that they would like to make. All participants approved their transcript as it was. I did not have participants review the results of my analysis since, according to Morse (2018), this is not a useful form of member checking. She suggests that some participants, rather than being well-positioned to consider the analysis, are likely most interested in trying to find their own data and comparing what they said to what other participants said.

In terms of checking the dependability of my interpretations of the data, I relied on repeated readings of the transcripts to interpret meaning from what the participants said (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). When examining and analysing the transcripts, I also paid attention to my own interviewer prompts and guiding (Seidman, 2013) and made note of any cases where it seemed that I was engaging in possible manipulation of the participants' responses. In these cases, to bring the reader's attention to these instances, areas of potential influence on the participant's response have been noted. Finally, I provided my supervisor with several drafts of the analysis section as it developed to ask for his feedback throughout the analysis and writing process. The analysis process used in assigning codes and themes is described in the following section.

Analysis

The analysis process involved four general cycles. The first involved a phenomenological reduction of the data in preparation for analysis. The second was assigning codes to the pieces of data. The third involved assigning meaning to the codes and organizing them through an iterative process of sorting and refining based on consideration of conceptual clusters within the codes and

consideration of the data in relation to my collection of research literature. The final cycle involved collecting these concept clusters into broader themes. It is important to point out that the entire analysis process was very non-linear and iterative in nature. The process involved continual revisiting of the raw data with the aim of considering more accurate descriptive codes for the notes and passages, exploring different combinations of codes and referencing the literature in building concept clusters, and revising themes to more accurately reflect the most relevant data with consideration of the research question. The following description reflects the general flow of the process used in analysis.

Phenomenological Reduction

In keeping with the methodological inspiration of the study, I used an analysis process aligned with phenomenological reduction. The first step of analysis was horizontalization of the interview data contained in the transcripts, meaning that I considered everything within to have equal weight (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this early stage of analysis, I took an overall approach of exploring the data within the transcripts inductively, in that I approached them from the point of view of forming probable generalizations based on the available data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2013). Part of maintaining consistency with phenomenological methods involved continuing to bracket myself while at the same time considering Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori's (2018) point that no qualitative data is purely objective and that the researcher's mark is always on it. I embraced an open attitude and aimed to consider, acknowledge and bring to consciousness my own researcher bias in analysis (Seidman, 2013). I based my identification of meaningful passages on what I found relevant (Seidman, 2013) with specific regard to addressing my research question focused on the participants' idea of how their experiences at Springhouse influenced their idea of what it means to be an adult. In reducing the text in preparation for analysis, I did not make efforts to match what was said to an existing hypothesis to test against theory developed in another context or to match with concepts that I had become familiar with in my background reading (as per

Seidman, 2013).

Assigning Codes

Reading through each transcript, I copied and pasted passages into a second document along with brief notes for my own future reference commenting on why I felt each passage was significant. I completed one document of passages and notes for each transcript. When the first round of this process was completed for each transcript, I reviewed each set of notes and passages and removed several that, although they were interesting, I did not feel contributed to answering the central questions of the study. I then copied the notes and passages from each transcript into a single, 66 page aggregate document divided by participant and used this compiled collection of all participant data that I considered potentially relevant to the research question as a basis to begin constructing codes.

In the preliminary stages of organizing the information within this collection of notes from all interviews, I began to move passages and notes into groups. These groups of text were gathered under temporary and flexible descriptive categories based on the words the participant used in their statement and my interpretation of the meaning behind what the participant was saying. I also identified which passages and notes referred to ideas influenced by Springhouse and areas where one passage could be interpreted as belonging to multiple code categories. After categorizing the preliminary set of notes, I began to think of how to organize the notes into codes based on both novel concepts emerging from the interviews themselves and connections to relevant concepts from the literature that I have reviewed.

In working through the process of creating meaningful codes I focused on several levels of significance. I first looked to common ideas that appeared across all interviews. Second, I marked concepts that were explicitly emphasised by the participants as being significant influences on their idea of adulthood. Third, I identified relevant concepts that were only mentioned by single individuals. Lastly, I considered ideas that connect to the conceptual frameworks of the study

outside of the participants' experiences at Springhouse. I created an analysis outline document where I listed working names for codes as headings as I proceeded through the data, copying and pasting text from my notes document under the relevant code heading within the analysis outline.

Table 1 represents a list of 88 codes from an early stage of this process dated August 8, 2025. As an example of the continual non-linear iteration and revisiting of codes, concept clusters, and themes throughout the analysis process, some of these codes appear in the finalized themes outlined in Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4, whereas others have been renamed to better describe the data or removed to prioritize data I deemed to be more relevant to the research question.

Table 1

Early Stage Collection of Descriptive Codes (August 8, 2025)

Responses to question “what are you doing?”			
Developmental/Spiritual adult activities	Hobbies/Passtimes	Work-related activities prioritized	Creative pursuits prioritized
Attending college	Familial participation		
Codes from Part Two of Interview			
Adulthood is complex and subjective	Adulthood is an unknown	Things you are permitted to do	Being acknowledged as an adult by other adults
Being an adult involves the understanding that everyone feels uncertainty	Independence from family household	Financial independence	Responsibility
Responsibility to family	Decision making	Meeting survival needs	Commitment over time
Responsibility to use agency	Meaning and purpose	Mentorship as adulthood	Financial necessity vs. Meaningful life
Resisting financialization of self	Awareness of self-censorship	Self-motivation	Reflection on what is really important
Holding love and empathy for others	Thinking in the long term	Rites of passage importance in transition to adulthood	Adulthood is a developmental question
Adulthood is not a fixed goal that can be achieved	Connection to chronological age	Adulthood means moving past adolescence	Identifying one’s authentic self
Reflecting on experiences for personal development	Identifying personal values and living in accord with them	Reflecting on personal motivations behind actions	Confronting latent trauma
Developing emotional intelligence	Engaging in practises for self-understanding	Healthy relationships	Community interdependence

Being open minded to other perspectives	Acknowledgement of personhood aids in opening up	Mutual vulnerability in relationships as opening up	Healthy relationships develop through human-scale interactions over time
Safe community in adolescence as safe testing ground for adulthood	Authentic community offers support for growth	Relationships deepening over time	Springhouse as a model community
Spreading Springhouse community values	Working with Springhouse's adult community contributes to a sense of adulthood	Working like an adult as a student develops adult skills and perspectives	Individual mentorship
Mentors as role models for adulthood	Informal, consistent, personal, intimate, unconditional acceptance relationship	Provide different perspectives	Peer and group mentorship
Intergenerational life-long learning	Contemplative practises	Adulthood as connection to the living/natural world	Intentional values exploration
Exploring needs	Explicit emotions-oriented learning	Outdoor adventures	Independence and independent decision-making
Long term projects in place, over time	Embodied learning	Implicit methods	Interconnectedness
Pre-Springhouse Notions of Adulthood			
recognising undesirable adult behaviour and wanting to resist it	Influences of school experiences on concept of adulthood	Media as social influence	Familial influences
General social and cultural influences	Adulthood as power and control	Financialized and adulthood	Adulthood as decision-making freedom
Adulthood as financial freedom	Adults always know what they're doing		
Post-Springhouse Notions of Adulthood			
Challenges of mainstream society	Refining and expanding of personal philosophies and perspectives	realisation of self-potential	
Springhouse			
Problem with students	Problems with approach	Problem with alignment with parental values	Integrated nature of everything at Springhouse
Intentions of the school			

As I worked through the process of considering the names of codes and organizing them, I

adapted, combined, and removed passages and codes in ways that I felt better and more meaningfully described the data. Throughout this process I also referred to my central source of annotations from the literature, seeking elements from my theoretical, conceptual, and philosophical frameworks that helped with interpreting the data itself and how I might best organize it. It is important to note that through referencing the literature, I was very conscious of not forcing the codes to fit the literature. I relied on coding descriptively rather than prescriptively, using the literature to help me interpret the data later on in an informed way. For example, in considering Liz's statement, "*it is a process and it's a process that continues right? Because you don't just turn a magical age and all of a sudden you're an adult*", I coded this under *connection to chronological age*. I then found a piece of information from the subjective adulthood literature from Diaz-Strong (2021) that *a period of learning is required for subjective adulthood* which I felt connected to this piece of data. I placed this piece from the literature next to the coded excerpt for future reference. This represents the general approach I took to all of the initial notes and excerpts I extracted from the transcripts. Having organised individual passages based on descriptive codes, I moved toward grouping these codes together into concept clusters.

Grouping Codes into Concept Clusters

After all the raw data were moved from the notes document to the analysis outline document alongside relevant pieces of information from my theoretical and conceptual frameworks, I began to identify areas of similar meaning across the codes. I refer to these groupings of coded passages and notes based on similar meaning throughout this piece as concept clusters. These concept clusters served as groups of common meaning that reflected key elements describing the participants' perspectives and insights on their experiences related to the research question (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I will provide two examples of my thinking process regarding the construction of concept clusters. A first example is my consideration of the codes: *childhood pain and trauma*, *adult disconnection from child self*, *limiting control of past trauma*, and *undoing*

embodied patterning. Over the course of the above-mentioned iterations of reviewing the codes, I felt that these coded ideas were related in that they describe a shared conceptual core of the importance of overcoming past barriers to personal development as a meaningful element of becoming an adult to some participants. I thus grouped these coded elements together and assigned the name *addressing past barriers* as a descriptive title for this concept cluster. Another example of how I approached grouping codes into concept clusters was by using my understanding of the research literature. In looking at the codes, I felt that *adulthood as many processes*, *adulthood has many aspects*, *adulthood is subjective*, *adulthood is unclear*, *adulthood is about understanding nuance*, *there is no universal path to adulthood*, and *adulthood is about accepting uncertainty* collectively reflected an idea that I had seen discussed at length in the adulthood research. Within the research literature, a widespread description of emerging adulthood is the complexity and instability that is part of becoming an adult. Thus, I grouped these coded ideas together, assigning the descriptive title of *adulthood is complex* to this concept cluster.

Similar to the process I used when relating coded passages and notes to research, as I formed concept clusters, I went through my central repository of annotations from the literature seeking information that aligned with the meaning reflected in the phenomena of each concept cluster in order to frame the data with existing findings, arguments, and concepts from the literature. Along with deciding on concept clusters by the grouping together of related coded passages, I was engaged in the process of considering how I would gather these concept clusters into distinct themes based on shared meaning.

Constructing Themes

Over the course of several iterations up to the final draft of the analysis section, I continually revisited and revised the concept clusters and connections to the literature to better organize and comment on the data in service of answering my research question. When first approaching the process of building themes, I looked at the numerous concept clusters that I had determined and

thought about potential connections between them. From my own experiences and knowledge of the literature, I felt some of these clusters were clearly related. An example of my thought process here is my consideration of connecting the cluster *addressing past barriers* and the cluster *emotional intelligence*. I based this connection on my understanding from several sources including my work with *Choice Theory* (Glasser, 1999), *Control Theory* (Powers, 1973), and other related personal therapeutic practises (Bradshaw, 2005; Csikszentmihalyi, 1994; Good, 2007), that a large part of developing emotional intelligence comes from exploring how unconscious emotional drives rooted in past events influence one's current behaviours and emotional responses. Looking at other clusters that I felt aligned well with self-improvement, I decided on a pattern that I felt was reflected in the general theme of developing and valuing *healthy relationships with the self*.

Aside from considering organization and categorisation based on themes, much of the analysis process through this period involved prioritising data based on how relevant it was to the research question. This meant discarding a great deal of less relevant material in the interest of maintaining focus on my research question. This is apparent in comparing the work-in-progress codes from Table I to the information in the findings and discussion chapter. Based on considerations of information directly related to my research question, I also considered how I would present the numerous sections, which all contribute to understanding what adulthood looks like to the seven participants. I decided on an organization that places material directly relevant to the influence of Springhouse school at the beginning, followed by contextual and supporting material. The final organization of codes, concept clusters, and themes are briefly outlined below, followed by a table for each theme that provides an at-a-glance reference for how the codes, concept-clusters, and themes are related.

Main Themes

The first theme, *markers of adulthood related to normative factors* (Table 2) revolves around participant perceptions of adulthood which are represented in adulthood research literature. I

determined this theme by grouping concept clusters based on their reflecting concepts I recognised from adulthood research and from the literature examining the connection between schooling and identity development.

Table 2

Constituent Elements of Theme One: Markers of Adulthood Related to Normative Factors

Concept Clusters	Codes
Adolescence to Adult transitions	Adolescence is unstable, adulthood is stable Some adults are underdeveloped Are underdeveloped adults real adults? Phases of adulthood Adolescent irresponsible/Adult responsible
Socially-Sanctioned adulthood	Rites of passage Being acknowledged as an adult by other adults Being in community with other adults Accepted as adult by adults outside of one's family
Adulthood is complex	Adulthood as many processes Adulthood has many aspects Adulthood is subjective Adulthood is unclear Adulthood is about understanding nuance No universal path to adulthood Adulthood is about accepting uncertainty
Independence	Independence from parents Independent managing of anxiety and fear Independent decision-making Personal responsibility
Purpose and meaning	Purpose Work and vocation Being a mentor as meaningful purpose

The second and third themes were based how I felt certain concept clusters represented facets of distinct ideas that were either rare or not seen in the research literature on adulthood. In naming the concept clusters of these themes, I used a combination of my understanding of scholarly literature within the realms of adulthood studies, holistic education, transformative education, alternative education, as well as Springhouse's philosophy of *Sourced Design* alongside my own judgement of what I felt the combined clusters were describing. These sources aided me in

categorization, contextualization, and meaning-making with regard to naming and defining the concept clusters that support each central theme. Based on my assessment of the concept clusters, the participants discussed two broad, yet I believe distinct, themes of developing and valuing *healthy relationships with the self* (Table 3) and *healthy relationships with others* (Table 4).

Table 3

Constituent Elements of Theme Two: Healthy Relationships with the Self

Concept Cluster	Codes
Self-development in service to community	Avoiding focus only on self Negative case – self-development is for the self, not others* note: balancing previous unhealthy behaviour
Reflection for Personal Development	Introspection within community of trust Personal reflection Contemplative practises
Experiments with Adulthood	Safe community to experiment with options of being adult Activities to practice adult skills and roles Exploring ideas about adulthood
Authenticity	Who you really are Embodied practises
Personal Values and Needs	Values clarification Understanding values Embodying values Intuition as value guide Values as pre-requisite for boundaries Importance of needs-fulfillment
Addressing Past Barriers	Childhood pain and trauma Adult disconnection from child-self Limiting control of past trauma Undoing embodied patterning
Emotional Intelligence (E.I.)	E.I. as resilience and independence Admiration of E.I. E.I. calmness E.I. emotional self-assessment E.I. through movement E.I. and sexuality E.I. connection to emotions Mentors as role models Comparison to mainstream peers E.I. as ideal of adulthood Community-support for E.I.

E.I. needs vulnerability
E.I. community choice

Table 4

Constituent Elements of Theme Three: Healthy Relationships with Others

Concept Cluster	Code
Awareness of interconnectedness	Connected in web to others Effects of self on others
Personal Relationships	Mutual vulnerability w/mentors Knowing values improves relationships Safe vs. Familiar Boundaries Mentorship as adulthood
Relationships in Community	Community development and personal development Restorative Justice Community as safe space Community as validation and support Model community
Perspectivism and Relativism	Honoring personhood Choosing hills to die on Patience to listen to others Being open to others Valuing different perspectives

Analysis Outside of the Main Themes

Another set of information that fell outside of the main themes addressing how the participants felt their experiences at Springhouse influenced their ideas about adulthood included contextual questions that I asked about influential experiences and ideas about adulthood that occurred before and after they attended Springhouse. I also asked a question about their perception of the influence of popular media on their ideas about what it means to be an adult. I considered these explorations outside of the central analysis and they were included in order to provide an avenue during the interview through which to question whether any particular influence cited as being from Springhouse may have had its root somewhere else. They also provided context regarding commentary I have made about the potential transformative qualities of Springhouse. In these sections, I followed an analysis process identical to the main content analysis. I horizontalized

my notes, assigned codes, created concept clusters, and grouped them according to references to pre or post Springhouse or media influences. Throughout this process I made sure to keep the material unrelated to experiences at Springhouse separate from those referring to experiences influenced by Springhouse.

Outside of the main themes related to the research question, I also identified two areas of significance while going through the process of analysis. These two areas were the *influence of mentors* and the *influence of the general climate of the school*. I decided to create this section and to place it outside of the main themes because as I went through the process of analysis, the data included in this section did not fit neatly into any single category. The influences of these two elements represented what I see as a meta-phenomenon that worked outside of, and in many ways ran through most of the distinct themes. Being significant to exploring the research question, I placed this section after the discussion of themes to highlight the widespread presence of these elements and to comment on their subtle influence across the interviews.

From this discussion of the methodology, one can see the influence of phenomenology running throughout. I was interested in exploring the experiences of the participants as they relayed those experiences. This is reflected in the open-ended question design, which was intended to elicit as unfiltered an opinion as I feel was possible about what the participants thought adulthood means and how their experiences both at Springhouse and outside Springhouse have influenced those ideas about adulthood. I treated the data in line with phenomenological reduction as well, using horizontalization, taking account of all the data, and seeking patterns within the data before applying outside theory from the literature. As I noticed patterns, I then began to think about how those patterns reflected what I had read in the literature and used my understanding of concepts from the scholarship to inform my construction of codes, concept clusters, themes, and in my discussion of phenomena contained in the data. This discussion of findings follows as chapter five.

Chapter Five: Findings and Discussion

This chapter is the result of performing content analysis on the interview data with the intention of investigating the central research question:

From the perspectives of alumni of Springhouse School, in what ways did experiences in the Springhouse learning community contribute to their ideas of what it means to be an adult?

In exploring this question, direct participant answers, conceptual connections within interviews, and comparisons to ideas about adulthood both prior to and after attending Springhouse were taken into account. This chapter, presents a view into how the participants see adulthood alongside relevant commentary regarding the explicit or inferred influence that experiences at Springhouse may have had on these ideas. Inclusion of participant perspectives on adulthood whose influence is unstated or ambiguous provides context for the participants' wider view of adulthood. This is useful in understanding the contribution that Springhouse experiences may have had in influencing the participants' wholistic views of adulthood.

I have organised this chapter into three sections that each have a particular focus. The first section centres on the first question "what are you doing now?" that was posed at the beginning of each interview. While outside of the realm of the research question, this first question serves as a gateway into how each participant is living their life as an adult. The second section is dedicated to discussing three main themes outlining trends in how the participants described adulthood. Analysis of the interview transcripts takes the form of looking at the various qualities of adulthood shared with me by the participants along with their perspectives of how these qualities have been influenced by their experiences at Springhouse. Expanding on the process of analysis outlined in the methodology section, I explore the concept clusters and themes in greater depth, using participant statements in conversation with concepts from the adulthood research literature and from Sourced Design. In chapter six, I consider the qualities and characteristics more wholistically and present a synthesis of how the influences potentially contributed to how each participant's ideas of adulthood

has been shaped. The first theme centres on the participants' views about the markers of adulthood which correlate with markers that are prominent in the research literature on adulthood. The second and third themes represent markers of adulthood mentioned by the participants that are rarely seen or absent in the research literature on adulthood, indicating potentially novel perspectives of adulthood, or possibly less-reported perspectives of outliers. The third section explores participant discussions of how their experiences outside of Springhouse have influenced their ideas of adulthood. This final section focuses on participant responses to questions regarding influences on their view of adulthood prior to attending Springhouse, since graduating from Springhouse, and influences from popular media.

Section One: What Participants Were Doing at the Time of the Interview

Throughout the following sections, I share excerpts from the interviews to illustrate points using the words of the participants as data. Participant quotes have been edited for readability, with repeated words and filler words removed in places where they do not significantly contribute to the content or tone of the passage. Profanity is left in place to preserve the emotional tone conveyed by its use. This exploration of the transcripts begins with a question about what the participants were doing at the time of the interview.

Answers to the Question "What are you Doing Now?"

Part of the overarching approach I have taken with this research was to explore the connection between literature on the values and behaviours of normative emerging adults and what participants valued and how they were living their own lives as emerging adults. While this exploration is not the core purpose of the study, which was to explore participant perspectives on how their school experiences at Springhouse influenced their ideas about what it means to be an adult, establishing what each participant was doing at the time of the interview provides some hints about how they were approaching their personal projects of entering adulthood and could thus yield insights into their views on adulthood. To this end, I included an initial question in the interview

guide that asks the participant the open-ended question of "what are you doing now?" The vagueness of this question was purposeful in that I wanted to get a sense of what each participant was prioritising in their life as an emerging adult without referring to any particular activity or state of being, and to learn why they are doing what they are doing.

When I asked John "what are you doing now?" he stated, "I am, well, primarily from a more developmental spiritual angle, I'm just going out into the city to experience what it's like to be in a more populous area versus Floyd." His response echoes an aspect of Springhouse's educational model stating that learning takes place through community, learning from those outside the community, and by visiting places outside the community (Finn & Stabler, 2024). He also mentioned that he is working on art creation. In a similar vein of engaging in development, when asked the same question Elliot responded that he was currently seeking his purpose and trying to live in accord with it. Although Elliot did not reference Springhouse directly, his response appears to embody the developmental ideas of Springhouse. According to Springhouse's principles of Sourced Education (Finn & Stabler, 2024), young adulthood is about exploration of who one is by knowing one's body and emotions, values, habits, and perceptual gaps. The main task in this stage is reflection on how one was formed during previous developmental stages. In this stage, there is less concern with social acceptance, with the focus being developing a greater understanding of one's authentic self, or why one was put on Earth. Full adults listen for how they are called to use their unique gifts to address challenges in the world (Finn & Stabler, 2024), which I interpret as another way of framing the idea of seeking one's purpose.

Felix responded to "what are you doing now?" that their focus was on promoting their rock band, explaining that they have been able to pursue this as a full-time project since they do not have a job. Cassidy was taking a gap year from college for personal self-development, and Angelica mentioned taking the summer to personally process a new addition to her family system, among other things such as working on a garden.

Arnett (2024) writes that for emerging adults, life is mostly about work and love. However, work and financial considerations hardly registered as a significant part of what the participants were doing at the time of interviews. For John, work-related activities were mentioned as an afterthought, which is similar to Angelica's response that she was working part-time at a bakery mentioned in passing between other things. As noted above, Felix was not working but was seeking part-time employment for the purpose of being able to finance moving to join their bandmates. The outlier was Elliot, whose first response focused on money-related work. Elliot qualified this with the clarifying statement "if you are talking about work" after his response. When given the prompt that he could talk about anything that he is currently doing, he said "currently, not so much. In months bygone or months in the future, maybe more so. But nothing right now outside of work and living my life." This is not to say that Elliot is focused solely on work. At the time of the interview, work was something he was doing as part of a larger project of seeking purpose, which is described in more detail below.

Educational attainment is often high priority for emerging adults and is one of the "big five" markers of adulthood in social sciences (Arnett, 2024; Ho et al., 2022). Fewer than half of the Springhouse alumni discussed college as a priority at the time of the interview. Two participants mentioned that they were attending college, with Tatiana noting that she was attending college but currently working as an intern and Cassidy was attending college but currently taking a gap year. Angelica stated that she planned to begin college in the fall of 2025. Interestingly, as discussed in the *Post-Springhouse Notions of Adulthood* sub-section below, several comments about post-secondary education emerged later in the interviews for several participants.

Angelica was the only participant to mention family activities, with her first answer to "what are you doing" being helping her sister with her new baby.

Based on this brief summary, there is diversity in how participants responded to the open question of "what are you doing now?" For the most part, the focus of their lives seems to be on

self-development, with work included as a necessity for survival. The focus on personally fulfilling activities and self-development differs from the focus of many young adults in the U.S. of seeking full-time employment (Mitchell & Lennox, 2020), orienting themselves around self-commercialization (Perry, 2018), or pursuing traditional markers of adulthood (Diaz-Strong, 2021). However, it does reflect the trend of emerging adults seeing value in living life dynamically and resisting dogma and orthodoxy (Arnett, 2024). These alumni appear to resist conforming to dominant cultural norms and seek to focus on things that have deeper meaning to them. This focus on meaning and self-development also differs from C. Smith et al.'s (2011) observation that for many in emerging adulthood, life is about asserting freedom and individuality by pushing one's limits through risky behaviours.

Having touched on some preliminary ideas about adulthood, I now move into a discussion of the open-ended interview questions that explicitly explore the participants' views on adulthood and the influences that their experiences at Springhouse had on those views. I have presented their views based on three themes divided into two categories. The first theme reflects perspectives on adulthood that relate directly to markers of adulthood that appear in the research on adults in the general population of the post-industrial world. The second and third themes include discussions of markers of adulthood that are not widely discussed or are absent from the research literature. These last two themes represent ideas about adulthood that may be novel to Springhouse. I begin with exploring how the perspectives of adulthood of Springhouse alumni with whom I spoke both align with and challenge normative notions of adulthood.

Section Two: Alumni views on Adulthood and Influences from Springhouse Experiences

To orient the reader as to what each supporting concept cluster means from the perspective of researchers in the field, I begin each section with references to the literature. I do this to clarify the meaning of the constructs I have used to categorise the data and to reduce confusion with common definitions of the terms used. In this way, I hope to illustrate how the words of the

participants reflect the concepts from the literature both in alignment and contrast. This model will be used in this first theme. However, in subsequent themes where the participant perspectives see limited or no representation in the research literature, I focus more on the words of the participants to emphasise their perspectives.

Theme One: Markers of Adulthood Related to Those Found in the Research Literature

In exploring how the participants view adulthood, the first major theme revolves around views of adulthood that are directly reflected in adult identity research. With shifts in society making the idea of adulthood more complex (Arnett, 2024; Coyle, 2019), adulthood has become harder to clearly define (Lowe et al., 2013). According to Lowe et al., common markers of adulthood fall into five basic categories of individualism (independence and responsibility), norm compliance (following social rules), legal/chronologically defined adulthood, family capacities (ability to care for children), and role transitions including those marked by rites of passage. Other pertinent concepts from the literature involve Arnett's (2024) findings about emerging adults' perceptions of living their life as adults including identification of purpose and meaning as being significant. The participant views centre a complex web of social factors, reflections on their lived experience as emerging adults, and internal criteria alongside some limited role and event-based views of adulthood that match some of these categories found in the research literature. This indicates congruence with the confluence model of adulthood with a focus on the complexity and uncertainty of adulthood itself, legal/chronological adulthood, individualism, and rites of passage. Within this theme are the five concept clusters of *adolescence to adulthood transitions*, *navigating complexity*, *independence and responsibility*, *purpose and meaning*, and *socially sanctioned adulthood*. All of these categories of markers are related to prominent markers represented in existing adult identity research and frame adulthood in different ways.

The first looks at adulthood as the stage of the lifecourse that falls after adolescence and relates participant views on the qualities that differentiate adult from adolescent. The second

characterises the participants' lived experience of being an adult with a focus on the complexity and uncertainty they feel in terms of decision-making and sense-making. The third and fourth focus on individual internal criteria measures of independence and responsibility as well as meaning and purpose. As the sole representative of role and event measures referenced in the interviews, the fifth concept cluster of socially-sanctioned adulthood explores how participants see events such as rites of passage and acceptance into the adult social world as meaningful in developing their subjective adulthood.

Lifecourse Stages: Adolescence to Adulthood. In line with the research literature (Diaz-Strong, 2021; Youngs, 2024), participants do not see adulthood as being marked by achieving an arbitrary chronological age or a particular stage of biological development. However, they do acknowledge a strong distinction between adolescence and adulthood in terms of adulthood being a more stable and consciously mindful state than adolescence. Stability in adulthood is a notion that had been common among researchers (Cannon, 2024), but is also challenged by the theory of emerging adulthood which posits a period of identity consolidation that for some individuals can extend through their twenties (Arnett, 2016, 2024). The participants shared views that portray adolescence varyingly as a period of working out who they are and as a developmental stage that is defined through mental and emotional immaturity. This is contrasted to adulthood where identity is more established (although still consciously fluid) and where one is more mentally and emotionally developed.

As part of Tatiana contrasting adulthood with adolescence, she feels that adolescence is a period of getting comfortable with oneself and learning about who one is, where adulthood represents the more stabilised self that results from the process of adolescence. She shared:

I think like a lot of time when people are in their adolescence, they're just figuring out who they are. Figuring out what it's like to be in their body and how to be in relationship with people that are your peers and also romantic relationships. Having a different relationship

with your family is a big part of adolescence. And so when I think about adulthood, I think about somebody who, like I said, has a clear sense of self and is self-aware.

John makes a distinction between chronological notions of adulthood and focuses on developmental and behavioural measures in a comment about how adults may be stalled in adolescent ways of being, John wondered if college life is just an extension of high school. He gives the reason for this line of thinking as being that most of the college students that he spends time with are somewhat “unmoored” and “act like kids.” These observations that young adults are childlike and unmoored align with findings across emerging adulthood research (Arnett, 2016b, 2024; Gilmore, 2019; Landberg et al., 2019). John acknowledged that defining an adult by these standards “throws a lot of adults out of the picture.” In his discussion of the connection between adulthood and development, specifically mental development, John extends the issue of undeveloped adults well beyond the 18-30 age range of emerging adults (Arnett, 2024), indicating that to John age is not a factor in being an adult at all. To John, true adulthood is all about development. He states that “if you look at it from a development [perspective] I would say there's so many people who are in their 40s, in their career, doing their stuff, and mentally are still 16.” This may come across as judgmental, but it aligns closely with Plotkin's (2008) sentiment asserting the under-developed nature of most adults throughout his theory of human development, stating repeatedly that the majority of western society is stalled in an early adolescent worldview. Since Plotkin and his ideas were prominent at Springhouse during John's time at the school, this may reveal a potential influence from Springhouse on John's idea of adulthood.

Liz's distinction between adolescents and adults refers to chronological adults as being in a different *phase* of adulthood reflected in behaviours that align with her notion of positive and productive community contribution in the form of “showing up in the world.” Based on what she communicates it appears that to her, a combination of maturity, responsibility, and positive community contribution is what separates adolescents from adults rather than reaching a

chronological age:

There's also different phases of adulthood, right? Like, one can be an adult but can be completely immature and irresponsible, I would say maybe they're not actually operating as an adult. I would say they're probably still acting as an adolescent depending on how they're showing up in the world.

Liz's view of adulthood being comprised of phases somewhat aligns with emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2024), and her commentary about maturity and responsibility as qualities of adulthood falls within the scope of individual measures that will be discussed below. While Liz did not directly state she conceived of this perspective while at Springhouse, her observation tracks with similar statements made by John and it is possible that she formed some of this idea in connection with her experiences at Springhouse.

With reference to exploring the qualities of what differentiates an adult, Tatiana told of her experience with exploring ideas about adulthood as part of a group activity in her senior year, which revolved around all the senior students meeting regularly to discuss adulthood and their plans for when they leave the school:

Tatiana

All of the seniors, we had a twice weekly gathering where we would talk about what it means to be a young adult and what kind of adult that we want to be when we graduate from Springhouse.

Michael

Wow, and you'd actually explicitly talk about what kind of adult you'd like to be?

Tatiana

mmhmmm [affirmative]

In a later comment, she passingly refers to these conversations as being about "personhood". Her equating adulthood and personhood is significant in the context of the conversations she was having

with her peers. Based on my understanding of personhood as it is used in the holistic education literature and in the materials discussing *Sourced Design* principle of *cultivating personhood*, the students likely would have been talking about adulthood in a context that was centred around something more akin to spiritual development than about careers, traditional roles, and material achievement as is often the case across the adulthood literature.

Contrary to typical trends that emerging adults resist the idea of adolescent closure, meaning moving beyond adolescent behaviour and interests (Arnett, 2024; Gilmore, 2019), the participants do not appear to resist moving into adulthood. They seem to value becoming their idea of what adulthood means rather than being content to remain in what they consider to be an underdeveloped, adolescent state of being. Identity-building as part of the project of moving out of adolescence through self-understanding seems to be a priority for the Springhouse alumni. The views of the participants regarding the adolescent to adulthood transition underlines the complexity of moving into adulthood and emphasises the idea that adulthood is about more than reaching a chronological age where one moves naturally from adolescent to adult. As with the transition from adolescence to adulthood, the ways in which the participants discuss this complexity and uncertainty echoes several concepts found in the research literature.

Lived Experience of Adulthood: Navigating Complexity and Uncertainty. When asked what adulthood means to him, John replied that it is complex, referring to the question as “loaded” with no simple answer. He spoke of morals and ethics involved as being complex and that there are many different ways of being an adult, referring to physical and mental possibilities, all the while returning to the idea that every aspect of the human condition is “beautiful.” Like many participants, he describes a framework of multiple overlapping processes in becoming an adult. John's views reflect the view that adulthood is increasingly seen as a multi-dimensional and holistic process as opposed to an end state (Wider et al., 2021) and that across populations in the post-industrial world, becoming an adult is considered a process, not an on/off rite of passage ritual as it

was in the past (Arnett, 2024). Not only this, in the post-modern age of the individual, "adultification" is increasingly considered a relative experience (Axxe et al., 2022) that is unique to each individual and subjectively felt. Echoing this complex and elusive vision of adulthood, Elliot's response to the question of what it means to be an adult is "I don't know what it means" but he attempts what he calls a "working answer" that he felt he could use for the sake of doing the interview. In Felix's first response to the question of what adulthood means they indicate that the question is very complicated and they could answer it in a number of ways, going on to emphasise that adulthood is a subjective experience. Felix's understanding of complexity, especially in human personality and human relationships, is considered by them to be an important aspect of being an adult. This is directly stated as something Felix picked up at Springhouse from observing and wishing to emulate the staff:

I would say that a personal idea of adulthood for me is understanding of nuance and being able to be really, I'm about to sound so Springhouse, but being really rooted in social experiences and understanding the nuances of different aspects of being alive and being able to see and understand differences between people and navigate different relationships with different people across a wide spectrum. And that is an idea of adulthood that very much comes from observing the Springhouse staff for me because they are all very centred.

While Liz was speaking about the various role models of adulthood she experienced at Springhouse, I asked a leading question about the idea that part of being an adult is recognising that there is no single, universal path to adulthood, Liz replies strongly in the affirmative:

Michael

Do you think that being a qualifier as adult, a qualifier as being an adult is understanding that there is no single path through life? And that you, by interacting with those people in the Springhouse community, they served as sort of mentor figures and exemplars that there is no one path through adulthood?

Liz

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. (affirmative) Yeah. I would say that's true.

At the same time, she also acknowledged that choosing a single path works for some people, it is just not for her and that being able to choose a socially acceptable single lifepath and pursue it throughout adulthood is somewhat of a privilege given the economic situation in the United States in 2025. She points out that most adults her age are mainly concerned with "trying to figure it out and having to pivot and iterate and take a more creative approach to what it looks like to live out one's vocation" given the precarity many young people find themselves in. In addition to complexity, this directly references the uncertainty the Springhouse alumni associate with living as an emerging adult.

Interestingly, understanding that adulthood is about uncertainty is seen by some participants as somewhat of a positive. This tracks with the views of some emerging adults, who view uncertainty as part of life (Arnett, 2024). However, to some participants, understanding the uncertain nature of life is seen as a quality of an adult mindset. To John, a major quality of becoming an adult is understanding that nobody really knows what they're doing with life and everyone is just trying to figure it out. John explored the idea that adults don't have everything figured out and everyone is just making it up as best they can. He described how he learned this at Springhouse through three main avenues. First was conversations with his mentors and understanding that although they don't have their lives figured out, they find ways to work through uncertainty. Second came in the form of an experiential learning project that drew on interdisciplinary, integrated curriculum. John described this type of experiential, discovery-based learning as the way that adults learn, which indicated to him that this gave him experience with working things through like an adult – suggesting he believes a significant quality of adulthood is learning by doing and figuring things out for yourself as you go. Finally, John described the uncertainty and learning-by-doing inherent in adulthood as represented by his watching the process

of identity development in an adult staff member who gradually embraced and expressed their authentic gender identity during the time John attended Springhouse.

Liz also spoke about how the Springhouse community reinforced the idea in her that nobody really knows what they are doing and that everyone is just making it up as they go along. Tatiana expressed a similar sentiment, stating that she learned this slowly over time through conversations with her mentor. Cassidy frames the idea of uncertainty as something that even adults who are older than her feel, and that this uncertainty is a symptom of life-long learning.

I still feel like a teenager some days and I think that having even talked to like much older adults than me, like ten years older than me, that's a common feeling of no one really has it completely figured out. I think that that each stage of life is just a learning curve and it just depends on what you're learning. You're still learning even if you're a teenager or a kid or a young adult. Everyone's still learning until they die, I believe.

Cassidy further acknowledges that she is not quite an adult yet – referring to herself as not "fully-fledged." Cassidy's point here perfectly aligns with the view of emerging adults, who feel a sense of being somewhere in-between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2024; Landberg et al., 2019; Vosylis, 2021; Wider et al., 2021). While each of the participant's points of view on uncertainty reflect common Moving from the idea of uncertainty through other descriptions of adulthood found in the literature, the topics of independence and responsibility are also widely represented in what the participants shared.

Individual Measures: Independence and Responsibility. Independence represented a central theme of adulthood for participants. This is unsurprising since across all demographics, independence is the most commonly referred to marker of adulthood in the United States (Lowe et al., 2013). For many emerging adults, self-sufficiency, especially being financially independent, is necessary for subjective adulthood (Bosch et al., 2016; Johnson, 2013). Participant responses align with research on emerging adulthood that finds much of the feeling of independence and

responsibility is in relation to parents (Arnett, 2024). For example, research by Bosch et al. (2016) suggests that protracted reliance on parents for continued emotional and financial support often leads to identity foreclosure, or the cessation of exploring identity options, so that one can maintain the financial security of parental support. This means that for many young adults, because they depend on their parents' wealth to survive, they may need to relinquish experimenting with identities that do not match what their parents expect of them in order to maintain the parental source of security. These negative effects may hold young people back from achieving subjective adulthood.

For Cassidy, independence is specifically identified as being from the comforts of the parental household, which according to her does not require an absolute independence, just a reduced reliance on her parents as compared to when she was a teenager. Related to independence, she now considers her peer group to be adults and thus relying on adults of similar age rather than those who are older or parents is a sign of adulthood. She attributes both her concept of independence and her cultivating the ability to pursue it directly to her experiences at Springhouse. She cites activities that involved planning ahead and making her own decisions in school as elements that enhanced her confidence to become less anxious about stepping outside her home and away from her parents. A specific example she brought up was a portfolio capstone project that was connected to preparing something that would be of benefit to attaining her personal goals after graduation:

Michael

Okay, so in what way did that capstone project you worked on contribute to your idea of what it meant to be an adult?

Cassidy

So I guess it contributed because it was my first time applying or thinking about my steps outside, my next steps outside of high school...and so I think part of the trend of adulthood is

thinking about next steps. I'm always thinking about what I'm going to do next, how I'm planning myself right? So as a kid, my parents would always plan my next steps. Like 'okay you're gonna go to the beach this day and then we're gonna go on a holiday over here and then by the way you're gonna start school over here' right? It's like I didn't really have a choice over that and I think part of growing out of that into an adulthood is that now I make all the choices myself. I make where I want to go for holidays. I make the choice of if I want to stay in college, where I want to work, stuff like that. And so creating that portfolio was practice for the rest of the time since then of me just like being able to create the own structures for myself, create my own essays, create my own applications for things. Job applications, applications to like change my name. Stuff like that.

Michael

So the independence that you were talking about right at the beginning, it's also tied to this decision making ability to independently consider the future and the next steps and make choices about how you're going to get there?

Cassidy

Yeah

Michael

Was the capstone project one of the first times that you can remember where you're like 'I'm in charge of my future and I'm gonna have to plan things out and make some decisions about what to do next'?

Cassidy

Honestly probably yeah. I mean before then it was just like okay, I gotta get through high school and I didn't really, at the point at that time also I was in a headspace where I didn't really care about anything. I was like I don't care about life. I don't care about high school I don't care about my future. I'm probably not gonna have a future.

This passage from Cassidy connects to concepts of perceived agency, in that it reflects her own perceptions of what she is capable of and what life holds in store for her (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015). Based on what she communicated, prior to her experiences at Springhouse, she did not have a positive outlook on her future. It may be that Springhouse's focus on personal reflexivity contributed to a change in her worldview towards being more future oriented. This hypothesis is supported by Hitlin and Johnson's (2015) point that several social psychological models of agency assume that reflexivity in social actors has an influence on how those actors perceive their future and current capacities.

Another aspect of Springhouse connected to instilling independence as a characteristic of adulthood was the *experience week*. Experience week trips involve traveling away from the school site for several days with the intention of providing an immersive learning experience outside of the home community. Based on what I heard in the interviews, it seems as though experience weeks are also crucibles for the students to practice inner growth and refining their interpersonal relationships with others. The experience week trip was noted as a formative event for Cassidy that influenced her idea of what it means to be an adult in the form of offering a space to practice being away from the family home for an extended period. She developed strategies for managing her anxieties and fears while both preparing for, and during, these trips. She refers to it as “practice for adulthood,” offering her a chance to be away from home with support systems and structures in place to experiment with independence in a safe environment. Finally, and related to the experience week trip, Cassidy told of how the solo overnight camping experience that Springhouse seniors go on showed her that she could be independent and self-sufficient. These are both traits she feels represent adult qualities. The qualities of adulthood that Cassidy expresses fall within the scope of those valued by emerging adults. This indicates that in some cases, despite the different educational experiences Springhouse offered the participants, some of their views about independence defining what it means to be an adult remain aligned with normative notions.

Aside from independence from parents, independent decision-making was brought up as a significant marker of adulthood by Springhouse alumni. Again, this is not surprising given that being able to control one's life is considered a milestone in the scholarly literature (Lowe et al., 2013). Emerging adults look forward to being able to make independent decisions as an aspirational goal and consider it something that will signal that they have become an adult (Settersten, 2011). Some participants discuss the value of independent decision making in connection to their concept of what it means to be an adult, but instead of control over their lives the point is framed as having the freedom to figure out what to do with their lives. John puts this succinctly in his observation that adulthood has a loosening of rules compared to childhood and part of the work of adulthood is creatively answering big questions, which involves working out what to do with your life and time without suffering decision paralysis. His point of view of adulthood being about constructing one's own set of rules to live by aligns with Arnett's (2024) concept of self-focus as an aspect of emerging adulthood. Part of self-focus recognises that when in childhood and adolescence one must live by the rules of the parental household but in adulthood, rules for life come from work and from one's own initiative to create rules of the household. One must make one's own rules and decisions, which contributes to a more cohesive and consciously-considered sense of self (Arnett, 2024).

Felix values the self-awareness to be able to make decisions about their capacity to handle emotional situations, and when they felt they would benefit from some help. For Felix, emotional intelligence "ties in to emotional independence in a way too because that's the ability to make decisions about what you need. Making decisions about your emotional needs and acting on them." With emotional intelligence being something that Springhouse values highly (as explored in greater depth in section 2 of this chapter), it may be that Felix's experiences at Springhouse influenced his perspective.

As a criterion of adulthood, Liz values independent decision-making that resists dominant cultural expectations to "stay in your lane." Her decision to run for political office and go against

the grain of what her culture expected of her in terms of being a woman aligns well with findings that present-day emerging adults implicitly recognise self-determination in elements of identity formation previously considered to be non-negotiable. These include, but are not limited to religious belief, group affiliation, choice of vocation, race, gender, and sexuality (Gilmore, 2019). Most clearly influenced by Springhouse is Tatiana's view of having agency over one's life choices and following one's own sense of what one feels is right without needing to have an extrinsic motivation. She shared:

I think about when my mentors would make certain significant career choices. It was a moment where I was like, 'oh, that's interesting, I guess when you're an adult, you can do whatever you want and you can learn whatever you want for as long as you want. And there doesn't have to be a huge purpose behind it other than that's what you want to do.'

Directly connected to decision-making is responsibility, with Angelica linking how taking responsibility for her personal decisions enhanced her subjective adulthood, stating that she feels like an adult when she knows that all her decisions are "on her." One responsibility that many of the participants commented on was their feeling of responsibility to live their lives as adults with meaning and purpose.

Individual Measures: Purpose and Meaning. The Springhouse alumni with whom I spoke discuss meaning and purpose in decidedly non materialistic terms, which in many cases they connect to their experiences at Springhouse. In describing the subject matter of many of the conversations he had with his two mentors, Elliot centred on the idea of purpose, stating that “most of our conversations were about purpose or it felt like, ‘why are you here, Elliot?’ and just talking about it. It's just having two people come together and think about what is your reason for being here?” When questioned about what he meant by “being here” in this statement, Elliot clarified to mean being “on Earth or in this life,” not just being at Springhouse. Flowing from this idea, Elliot went on to state that he believes adulthood is about feeling like one has a purpose. This purpose

does not need to be metaphysical, spiritual, or religious in nature. In fact, Elliot appeared to avoid referring to religious interpretations of this seeking purpose or reflection on the reasons for being. He indicated that one aspect of his purpose is leaning towards general studies in physics. His idea is that finding purpose is about connecting your inner self to the outside world, describing the phenomenon as:

It's like the feeling of being really good at something, but you're not necessarily really good at it. Where it just feels like it...It just connects. It clicks with you as a person. So that feels like finding something like that to devote a life to. Seems like what a purpose would be.

Elliot feels that internal motivation to seek purpose and pursue it is what makes the purpose and pursuit meaningful. External factors do figure in, but the internal motivation is the thing that makes finding purpose, and pursuing it, important to being an adult. In a sense, Elliot's belief that a purpose does indeed exist for him to discover reflects agency in the form of an optimistic belief in oneself through belief in the guidance of a spiritual entity (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015). Although this may not be the case, since he does seem to focus on the seeking of purpose being a personal and internal pursuit rather than having faith in the idea there is a role that has been preordained for him by a higher power. When describing the connection between adulthood and purpose, he shared:

I'll be an adult once I have a purpose and feel like I'm continually going towards that purpose. I'd say that society and parents and people around you will say that purpose is important to be part of life but I'd say the majority of it is internal.

Speaking of purpose using slightly different language, Liz makes a clear distinction between work and *vocation*, with pursuit of vocation being more important for qualifying one as an adult:

I also think that it could be an interesting point when it comes to talking about adulthood, this difference between like having a job and having a career versus having a vocation. And there is a difference there depending on the language people use and the meanings that they're putting behind things. So I think that the language of vocation and the framing

around that speaks to me more and I think is a part of my framework that's a little bit different than just, you're an adult, you have a job or you have a career and you have that career and you just you know, do the professional career. I think my work at Springhouse, so part of our work at Springhouse was also studying the work of Parker Palmer and then I went and got my Master's of Divinity and so the language of vocation and kind of understanding some of those pieces, I would say also has impacted my more, I don't know, nuanced understanding of career.

She also comments about how beyond studying the work of Parker Palmer at Springhouse, the Springhouse community reinforced her sense of the importance of vocation by providing her with a community of others who also subscribed to and valued the idea of being called to one's purpose in life, stating:

I think being a part of that community was a way to be around other people who felt a similar sense of call or a sense, a sense that they had a deeper soul level understanding of what their purpose was in this world and how they might go about living that out. And I think that they, that was a helpful container and community in which to explore what that is and to put some language around that and to be with other people that were intentionally trying to find ways to live into that with authenticity, with intention, and with this kind of consistent culture of refinement.

It appears that attending Springhouse crystallized the importance of calling and vocation in her and equipped Liz with some tools to maintain her focus on calling and vocation after leaving Springhouse.

Given my understanding of the importance of mentors to the Springhouse alumni, as discussed in chapter six, it came as no surprise that some of the participants saw the adoption of a mentorship role as being something that provided meaning and purpose in becoming an adult. For Cassidy, something as simple as her taking on a mentorship role for her peers at college contributed

to her subjective adulthood. The importance of mentorship, however, ran deep with Felix. Felix considered mentorship a central quality of adulthood, stating that this idea was instilled by the relationship that they had with their mentors at Springhouse. When describing their interactions with younger people playing in bands at music events Felix stated:

I always, always feel incredibly protective and I feel incredibly protective of these kids when I see them come into a space and I want to help steward their development into being where I'm at because I was where they were at, right? Because I started playing in a band, I've been in bands since I was thirteen, the band that I'm in now, I started when I was fifteen, so I have been that kid and I want to facilitate for other kids that I see doing this the opportunity to get to where I am at now. Because where I am at now is very good and I feel great about it. And that attitude is one hundred percent something I got from Springhouse.

Going beyond internal and individual qualities, some participants connected their sense of adulthood to social factors. As with many emerging adults (see Arnett, 2024), the Springhouse alumni with whom I spoke also identified familiar forms of what I consider *socially-sanctioned adulthood*, such as being recognised as an adult by other adults in one's community, as representing a path toward subjective adulthood.

Roles and Event Measures: Socially-Sanctioned Adulthood. Social sanctions indicate community acceptance of behaviours. In this sense, I considered markers of adulthood that involve the acceptance and acknowledgment of the individual as an adult member of society in creating this theme. This includes event-based markers such as rites of passage and phenomena where the individual expresses a subjective sense of adulthood due to feeling they are accepted as part of the adult social circle of their community. Institutional rites of passage are often cited as significant in establishing subjective adulthood and typically include such events as leaving school, entering full time work, marriage, leaving the family home, and financial independence from parents (Axxe et al., 2022). Springhouse has personalised rites of passage defined by when the staff feel an

individual has reached a certain level of personal development. Rites of passage related to adulthood were discussed by Springhouse alumni but only Felix and Elliot made explicit reference to rites of passage they had experienced as meaningful. Only Elliot described a rite of passage that occurred as part of his experiences at Springhouse. His recollection of the event is as follows:

So mine happened when I was fifteen, actually the night of my fifteenth birthday and it's when you look up to these staff members and it's been several years and you know them and you know them so well and you see them living life in a way you want to live of being mindful and being wholehearted in what they do there's just it doesn't matter if it's kind of a silly situation or doing a rite of passage or sitting around a fire with some adults at your house late on some night. It feels important to hear what they say and to hear them recognise within you your growth or your progression as a person. I don't know what words to use to state it, it's just important to be acknowledged and it feels kind of silly because it's just saying some nice words to someone or saying something that feels true about someone but it can just uplift you or give you a new sense of yourself and I actually have a painting that was given to me that night [shows me the painting over the video feed]. It's a portrait of myself by one of my mentors at the time and then on the back is a list of both the gifts they see in me and invitations. So that's almost five years old. It wasn't like from that night I understood what it meant to be an adult but just those invitations and gifts that happened throughout the years just helped solidify my feeling of me-ness. I don't know if that makes sense but like feeling like I am me and that's good.

It is notable that the rite of passage that he relays here does not conform to the collection that is usually seen in adulthood studies, which typically include such events as graduation ceremonies surrounding completion of schooling or entering one's first career job (Axxe et al., 2022). His rite of passage is intimate, is personally meaningful, and concerns inner growth as opposed to achieving a common social or singular, institutionally-contrived goal. His recollection also hints at the deeper

meaning behind rites of passage at Springhouse, that being the importance of having one's personhood recognised by a group of adults whom one admires. Beyond Elliot's experience, other participants shared the idea that the significance of rites of passage lie not in the rites themselves, but in the sense that one had been accepted into the world of adults as an equal.

Many emerging adults rely on the validation of others that they are adults in order to consider themselves adult. Similarly, one's peer group has a large influence on self-perceived adulthood (Wider et al., 2021). There can be tension here when others do not regard them as adult when they feel like adults and when others treat them as adults when they feel like they are not (Settersten, 2011). As an example, in a study by Lowe et al. (2013), over fifty percent of participants reported a defining adult moment being in the context of a social experience as opposed to something related to assuming a traditional role. Social context affects subjective adulthood (Johnson et al., 2007) and being recognised as a member of one's aspirational adult group seems to hold special significance for several participants. Elliot's story of his rite of passage emphasises the importance of being recognised for his personal qualities and his growth as a person by his mentors.

Tatiana talked about how familial interactions where she is treated like a child impinge upon her subjective adulthood, while being treated like an adult by adults outside of her family enhances her subjective adulthood. Regarding the influence of Springhouse, she pointed to how internships she engaged in as part of her time at Springhouse influenced her feelings of subjective adulthood and provided her with adult role models. During her internships at businesses/organizations in nearby communities she interacted with adults in the Floyd community. These adults, who were outside her family unit, treated her as an equal, which contributed to her feeling recognised as an adult.

In Cassidy's case, since graduating from Springhouse, she has come to see her former adult mentors from the school as equals, feeling that learning is more of a mutual exchange now that she feels more like an adult. Part of this pathway to feeling like an adult around her mentors has its

roots in her participating in an all-adult dance program while she was at Springhouse. The dance program made her feel like an adult because it was the first time that she had danced with people who were older than her. Significant to this study, she also points out that despite other adults not treating her like an adult when she was in Springhouse, the adults at Springhouse treated her like an adult before she felt like an adult.

Having explored some of the ways in which participants' views of adulthood directly reflect concepts from those found in the research literature on adulthood, I now focus on aspects of adulthood that are either not present in the adulthood research or have very different significance to the participants as compared to what is seen in the general population. While acknowledging that similar views on adulthood from the small sample size of this study could feasibly be contained in outlier data of larger research studies, it is worthwhile to note the themes about adulthood that emerged from this group of participants. The most predominant theme discussed in the interviews regarding adulthood was the development of healthy relationships. Based on my analysis of the interviews, I consider the cultivation of healthy relationships at the level of the self and at the level of the community. While both of these levels seem to be integral to the other in the Springhouse community, I begin at the level of the individual.

Theme Two: Healthy Relationships with the Self

As seen in theme one, based on what the participants shared, moving into and through adulthood for them is in line with the normative view of emerging adulthood that identity is no longer singular and static, but is a dynamic interaction of intersecting layers that are subject to reconstruction through the process of the *self* forming and reforming itself through life experiences (Motulsky et al., 2020). However, the participants' approach to self-development is markedly different than what appears in the research literature on adulthood. Some major differences are the participants' interest in establishing values, developing a sense of confidence in themselves, and in engaging in meaningful, non-romantic adult relationships, most notably with their adult mentors.

Developing healthy relationships with the self as a marker of adulthood can be as simple as Tatiana's engaging in practises that enhance self-awareness such as meditation or going to therapy. However, before moving into the specific aspects of developing a healthy relationship with the self, as discussed by the participants, I would like to outline Liz's views on how self-development fits in with her picture of adulthood. I believe that Liz's connection between the self and the community reflects the central principles of Springhouse's philosophy of *building beloved community*, and *commitment in place over time* (Finn, 2023). Regarding the Springhouse community, Liz shared:

That community, I think, was instrumental in opening up the conversation around what it does mean to be an adult and what is the work required internally and within a community to cultivate healthy adulthood and what it means to foster that in community over the long term.

This points to Springhouse having a clear influence on her thinking here. Liz also shared her views about self-development within some communities and models, stating that:

Liz

I feel like sometimes the danger of some of this work if you take it too far, even with, stuff like this [holds up Bill Plotkin's *Soulcraft* book] is that even though we are learning that there is not one path sometimes, and I'm saying this as somebody who's done a lot of spiritual work and like religious C-type stuff, that it can quickly go from that to thinking that this is the way, or that, you know? If you follow this formula, this is the formula. It can get a little, like what I, what I've also learned about doing this work and being in some containers like this is the danger of not becoming too naval-gazy. You are aware of what I mean by that?

Michael

Yeah. Absolutely yep

Liz

That it can become hyper intra-focused and lose – so that's why to me, the service component is crucial because if the service component goes, then it just becomes like a self-perpetuating gross, self-serving, personal journey for only the purpose of serving yourself and not for the purpose of refining yourself in order to be a better service to your community. So that we're not perpetuating harm, but that we're creating a better world for, they can allow all beings to thrive, you know?

Springhouse had an explicit influence on her thinking along these lines about adulthood in that Liz feels that the school community reinforced her pre-existing belief that life is not all about one's own self-interest and that developing the self should be in service of contributing to one's community rather than engaging in self-improvement solely for the sake of one's own benefit:

[Springhouse] was absolutely instrumental for that and I think it's why I feel so fiercely committed to that and why I get a little distrustful and triggered to people that I know that are on their personal development, spiritual journeys, but it's just like, that's it? It's like, there's not the other component that's like, okay, why are you doing this for any other purpose than yourself? You know? So I think for me that, yes, Springhouse was instrumental for that. But I think it's like, because of my family and how I was raised in the community that I'm from, that is very much about this very like salt of the Earth people, folks that have served in a variety of capacities. That the self-improvement piece in some ways becomes a turn off for me in a big way and it's a very much so an alarm bell goes off if I am not seeing any sort of, okay, then how are you serving your community in light of that work that you're doing?

In many ways, Liz's view represents the interdependent nature of the self and community that underlies much of what is said by other participants regarding healthy relationships. Thus, although these two themes are presented separately, they are best seen as two sides of the same coin, where a healthy relationship with oneself requires healthy relationships in community and vice-versa.

The only explicit exception to this view came from Angelica, who felt that adulthood is about being able to be self-aware of one's actions and learn from them toward developing as a human being. She adds however that this project is for one's own sake as opposed to for the sake of serving others. As we will see later, this statement reflects a shift in Angelica's *habits of mind* (Mezirow, 1991) from a focus on sacrificing her own needs in order to serve others to making sure her own needs are met. Beyond the distinction between self-development being for the purpose of serving the community or serving oneself, all participants emphasise the value of reflecting on their experiences in the world and how their actions align with how they want to live as humans.

Having explored some of the participants' general ideas about the significance of self-development as an important aspect of adulthood is tied to community, I now discuss elements that I have interpreted to be reflective of participants' views on how their experiences at Springhouse influenced their valuing *healthy relationships with the self* as a criterion of adulthood.

Commitment to Improvement. This theme ties directly into the element of *commitment in place, over time* (Finn, 2023; Springhouse School, 2022) and thus, despite participants not referring to Springhouse as being an influence in their thinking along these lines, it is likely that their experiences as members of the community at the very least reinforced existing predilections. When discussing influential people at Springhouse, Tatiana could not identify any one person as being significantly more influential on her idea of adulthood, stating that all adults had some influence. She does, however repeatedly assert the importance of remaining consistent over time in deepening her relationships with adults as a significant facet of how she views adulthood. Among the qualities she listed that make someone an adult, being able to commit to something was prominent. She gave examples of higher education or a career but she also notes that this could manifest in many different ways, depending on the person. Her inclusion of commitment to these long-term pursuits as markers, along with the stated influence of the commitment over time that the Springhouse adults modelled for her hint that this idea either came from Springhouse or was positively reinforced there.

Another example connecting adulthood with the idea that good things come from commitment over time comes from John. He shared the story of how he observed what he considered a rocky start to Springhouse and how the school community navigated adversity and grew out of earlier dysfunction. He suggested that the school's journey through this phase of its history contributed to his idea about adulthood that things don't start perfect but take commitment to improvement over time to develop. He stated "those experiences that I had in there really taught me something about how important it is to have patience and stick with things and remember that success is built cumulatively over years." John's experience stands as an example of how the adults at Springhouse serve as models for adulthood by living the philosophy that they follow. Even though the lesson learned was not an intentional part of the program, the way that the philosophy of the school is integrated into the school culture itself appears to serve as a conduit for learning. Whether intentional or not, Elliot has also absorbed the idea of commitment over time as being essential to developing internalised skills and self-consciousness, pointing out that a major aspect of learning at Springhouse was about exploring long-term development.

Personal Reflection Toward Personal Development. Cultivating a practice of personal reflection as a tool used in their growth and development as humans appeared across several of the interviews. In his project of self-reflection, Elliot places a great deal of emphasis on seeking purpose. However, through reflection, he acknowledges that he is not fully accomplishing this goal:

I think part of it is just exploring and trying to do as many new things and trying things out as you can and the other half is just thinking about your internal experience of 'Do I like this? Am I just uncomfortable because it's outside of my comfort zone? Or is this something that actually feels dangerous?' Not that I'm doing dangerous things. So I think I definitely reflect a lot on what I'm doing in my life, but I don't feel like I'm exploring many new things that I could find I'm passionate for.

Felix relays a similar reflexivity in their description of emotional maturity in adulthood which

involves being able to look back at previous beliefs and assumptions and to see and appreciate how they have grown past those beliefs and assumptions. Their observation describes a fundamental aspect of transformative learning theory, where maturity is seen as “a reflexive autobiographical project of self and identity” (Coyle, 2019, p. 1189). By constantly revisiting changes in one's perceptions of reality, one's sense of self matures over time through self-awareness of change. Felix emphasised that learning to deal with difficult situations is a core value of Springhouse, and reflecting on how they dealt with difficult situations serves as a potent illustration of their capabilities. Speaking in general terms, through their experiences at Springhouse Felix learned to not give up when things get tough by learning to do things that were uncomfortable and difficult. More specifically, reflecting on difficult physical activities like backpacking and other intense wilderness activities revealed Angelica's potential to her:

I think it helped me realise how capable I am because I don't think if I hadn't gone to Springhouse, I don't think I would have had the friends or I guess like the guts to go out and do something like that on my own. When we did our kayaking trip, that was at the point where I thought I had done the most difficult physical thing I could do because it was like thirty miles of just rowing. And yes, it was like two, three days and we would stop and camp, but it's not like you get – you're sleeping on the ground and then you're starting to get blisters and you just have to keep going. You just have to do it. And so it just taught me like really the power of what my body can be capable of. And I just want to keep testing how far I can go. So it's given me that kind of spark to keep going.

Angelica mentions that pushing herself physically has had an impact on how she sees herself as an adult. She connects this to the meditation practice she began at Springhouse as well:

I think it has given me a lot of strength to be an adult because it has made me feel like there's really nothing I can't do if. I really want to set my mind to it, you know? So just being able to do anything physically, it's so tied into your mind that I feel like really you're,

like, your mind has to, your body will always give out before your mind. So if you just really practice meditation, really get like hone into yourself and your body, I feel like there's so much that humans are capable [of].

In these accounts, we see elements of a process of mature identity building as initiated by a “redemption ritual” (Coyle, 2019, p. 1191) which is an unexpected accomplishment that the individual did not know they were capable of. By completing this seemingly impossible task, and reflecting on the significance of having done so, they develop confidence in that aspect of themselves, contributing to the development of their identity along a new pathway. Angelica's reflecting on her own potential also connects to ideas of agency in that through cultivating a sense of self-capacity, new potentials for how she might approach her future may open up (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015).

Similar to Angelica's experiences in nature, Tatiana brought up the woods as a significant space for reflection on personal growth. Referring to herself and her classmates' engaging in contemplative time in the forest as a school activity, she states:

We would just sit up there and be alone, but together. We could use [the contemplative time] however we wanted to, but the invitation was to use it as a deeper practice. To be mindful and think about your life. Then we would come back together and share anything that came up or whatever we might want to talk about.

These contemplative sessions were intended to culminate in a solo backpacking and camping trip. Tatiana's experience was slightly different because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but she describes the alternate experience that she pursued as having an impact on her, stating:

Tatiana

The idea was that it culminated in a week-long backpacking trip where for a day or so of the whole trip, we would be completely alone...I graduated in 2022, COVID, you know, is and still was very much a thing and so people actually had COVID when that trip was

scheduled. And so we adjusted it and made it much shorter and not everybody was there but other seniors, other classes have done that, successfully completed that trip, but I had chosen, myself as a personal practice and as something that kind of came out of a conversation with my mentor, to do my own 24-hour wilderness solo in the woods on the property. So I kind of got that experience anyways.

Michael

Right. 24 hours, like, just by yourself, fending for yourself in the forest. Okay.

Tatiana

Mm-hmm. Yeah. With yourself. Yeah. Yeah.

Michael

And can you think of anything that happened? Or just stuck in through your head or anything like that during that time that influenced your idea of adulthood? In terms of those things we were talking about earlier? Or something else?

Tatiana

Yeah. I mean, I think there's definitely some connection. I remember a lot of what happened because it was a very memorable moment for me. There were a lot of things that happened that felt significant. Maybe worth mentioning that my capstone project when I was a senior was on home – what is home? You know, is it physical? Is it embodied?...Kind of just exploring the theme of home. And that was part of why I ended up doing the solo in the woods, was it was a deeper exploration of that. So that was something that was on my mind and I think it's related to adulthood in the sense that when you are an adult or becoming an adult, your idea of home shifts a lot. It's no longer just your family or the house that you grew up in. You know, if you never moved away from that, and it becomes much more expansive. It could be people who you have chosen to become your family or it could be your own family that you end up having. So yeah, that definitely was a pointed experience.

Tatiana's recollection is reminiscent of Liz's assertion that the rites of passage, such as the solo camping trip, are powerful not in themselves, but in relation to what led up to them. In this case, Tatiana's exploration of the meaning of home in her capstone project found deeper meaning through her having the time to contemplate it during her camping experience rather than it simply being a task or event that she completed and moved on from.

The first Springhouse experiences that Elliot mentioned in the interview that he felt had a strong influence on his ideas about adulthood were senior year solo contemplative sessions in the woods. He describes the experience as follows:

At the beginning of the year, we each chose a separate position or an area in the woods to be our own personal spot. Then we just sit there and we'd go out each morning or at least those two or three mornings and sit there for, I think forty minutes to an hour. On different days, there were prompts given to us or things to reflect on or think about, but most of the times it was just like, what, what arises from just sitting with yourself for an hour? No phones, no drawing, nothing to distract you, just yourself in the world. And so during that time, I don't know if it was just to entertain myself from sitting in that boredom but I started coming up with a lot of definitions for myself or started thinking about like, what is, what do these words mean to me? I think adulthood was one of those where it was like, 'I'm about to graduate I'm about to enter more fully into the realm of adulthood, even though I'm already eighteen and just what is, what will that mean for me? How am I supposed to continue after I've been at Springhouse for six years? What do you do now?' So it felt like I can probably figure out what to do in the day to day, but understanding what the words that I'm living by mean felt like the first step.

This passage reveals some relevant information about how uninterrupted contemplative time led to Elliot personally reflecting on what it meant to be an adult and a working through of important questions. First, he wonders what to do after school. It is interesting that this query is not about a

career but is more general. He is seemingly working through how to continue the path that he was on in Springhouse. Second, he is interested in working out how to live by his words, which I interpret as planning how to live his life according to consciously chosen and stated values. This aligns with an earlier point he made about aligning his inner and outer lives. Finally, Elliot reinforces the value of contemplative self-work in stating that personal practice was “very formative” in the development of his ideas about what it means to be an adult. Elliot's core ideal of adulthood essentially seems to be about being true to himself and when asked about what it's like to live in a society that expects one to pursue traditional markers of adulthood early, he responded:

There's an ideal version of what an adult, what an adult would mean to be, or what adulthood would mean to be in but I think you can find a purpose anywhere. We've still created it. As creatures we've created this world in the society so why can't I exist inside of it? And even if that means counteracting it or being different or conforming, I can still feel purposeful so I don't have to change everything to feel like I'm doing what's right for me.

Through this statement, it is apparent that Elliot's idea of adulthood is personal and he feels that his pursuit of his vision of adulthood does not need to be guided or restricted by dominant culture, although he does not rule this out. The important thing for him is to live according to his purpose and to do what is right for him.

Across the adulthood literature, there is a marked absence of common markers of adulthood reflecting the kinds of self-reflection and contemplation we see here. While I referenced the redemption ritual and the importance of reflection in developing maturity (Coyle, 2019), these ideas are drawn from research on the adult education field of transformative learning and describe phenomena that can initiate or assist transformative learning in adults. Qualities such as deep reflexivity on meaning and purpose, experience, and concepts such as “home” as being formative of one's idea of adulthood do not appear in the literature on subjective and emerging adulthood surveyed.

Experimenting with Adulthood. Another significant part of the work that Springhouse alumni pursued as self-work involved experimenting with adult roles and responsibilities in a safe environment. According to Piotrowski et al. (2020), assuming an adult role does not equate to achieving subjective adult status but acts as a stepping stone to adulthood through guiding responsibility, self-reliance, and cultivating one's ability to support others. These role transitions can also serve to help develop psychosocial maturity (Piotrowski et al., 2020), which supports identity formation. However, identity consolidation can occur where meeting role markers causes a cessation of exploration of alternatives, meaning that identity becomes static (Piotrowski et al., 2020). At Springhouse, adolescents experiment with adult roles in the context of a safe community, where the experiments are seen as experiments, not necessarily as commitments to ossified identities. Cassidy believes that adolescents who do not have the kind of experimental safety net that Springhouse's community provides and the guidance to think for themselves and plan for their future in a supportive environment, become used to complacently following social norms. Springhouse offered Cassidy the opportunity to experiment with leadership positions while she was a student, where any failure was seen as an opportunity for growth in a supportive environment rather than an existential blow:

I think we need more opportunities like that for teenagers because I think a lot of people, especially coming out of high school, they don't really know what they want to do so they just do what they're told to do or just what they are doing and they just are very placid in their own lives.

This statement reinforces the value Cassidy places on being actively engaged in exploring options for her adult self. She further emphasises the influence that experimentation with role and responsibilities at Springhouse had on her idea of what adulthood could look like by noting how they contributed to her sense of whether the vision of adulthood she was striving for was attainable:

It seemed like adulthood was more attainable for me at that point. During those times I was

'oh wait this actually isn't as hard as I thought it was because I'm given these opportunities but supported in them. I know that if I fail it's not going to be the end of the school. It's going to be just like, you know, I have a safety net.'

Several participants related stories about how taking on responsibilities and roles that would typically be considered to be in the realm of adults gave them new perspectives and confidence in themselves. John was involved as a student with creating curriculum framework, something that he feels cultivated a sense of trust in his own ideas about philosophical and theoretical concepts related to learning. Similarly, Tatiana was engaged in an extra-curricular project contributing to the philosophical, curricular, and teaching approach at Springhouse. This involved her reading and studying Bill Plotkin's *Nature and the Human Soul*. Through her study of this text, she learned about Plotkin's ideas on development, which is evident in how she discusses adulthood (see Plotkin, 2008 for parallels with her comments throughout). Opportunities to take on leadership roles in the Springhouse community influenced Cassidy's feeling of subjective adulthood as well. To Cassidy, her leadership position as a student liaison between students and staff, as well as her being offered the chance to teach a class, were seen by her as distinctly adult roles:

I was given opportunity to teach a class and I think that kind of grace...that those opportunities to be a leader and to step into a more mature adult role, like the role that they were taking themselves, was really influential in what I value now as an adult and how I viewed it.

Similarly, taking on the adult role of teaching Spanish classes at Springhouse informed Angelica's view of adulthood. She found empowerment in being given the responsibility to design and teach a course to her peers. She felt that the experience also taught her the discipline and adaptability that is required of teachers, and by extension adults:

My friend...and I actually taught a Spanish class there, which I guess kind of teaches you a lot about adulthood...It teaches you a lot about adulthood to teach a class to your peers

because you know how they work more. Having to just sit down and create a curriculum with her and...another teacher, was really empowering. It really breaks down what it takes to be a teacher and then you have to adjust to it in the moment in the classroom. Also, you have a personal relationship with these people. So having like those discipline, it really taught me a lot about my abilities to help others and teach things for sure.

Experimenting with roles and responsibilities perceived as being *adult* were not the only ways that Springhouse alumni were offered opportunities to safely test adult experiences. They related several instances where as part of their school experiences, they explored ideas of adulthood through investigating ways of thinking and being that they felt reflected their true self. This idea of a true self is reminiscent of Moeller and D'Ambrosio's (2021) description of the identity construction technology of *authenticity*, where one builds identity not on adopting pre-established social roles, but based around seeking one's authentic, true self and attempting to live in accord with it. This pursuit of authenticity is another common theme that was mentioned by both John and Liz.

Authenticity. Authenticity takes different forms in terms of defining adulthood for Springhouse alumni and although it was present as an undertone in several interviews it was most evident in those of John and Liz. For John, finding out who you "really are" is one of many projects that define adulthood. Embodied practises and trusting the body's wisdom as an access point to living authentically was a core element of authenticity from Liz's perspective. She related how Bill Plotkin's books *Soulcraft* and *Wild Mind* were used as prompts for her experiences of group work as part of *The Well* program at Springhouse. This involved embodied and experiential activities, discussion, peer-mentorship, meditation, and check-in's about one's internal state. Examples of embodied activities given were dance, blindfolded walks in the forest, trust-building exercises, and self-awareness exercises that were intended to explore what she termed "the uncomfortable edges of one's self." Participation in dance at Springhouse was stated as being a large influence on Liz's idea of what it means to be an adult through communicating the importance of trusting her body's

honesty to provide her with feedback about whether she is acting authentically. In discussing the connection between dance and her idea of adulthood she said:

I feel like dance has probably been one of my primary teachers in that regard. I think one of the things that I've learned in that process and in that practice, whether it was through *The Well* or through the sacred dance program, or that particular methodology is that the body doesn't lie. And so when we can show up for ourselves in movement and in different types of movement, both as individuals and in community, it will force us to be honest with it... well, I'll say 'I' speak in the 'I' language. It forces me to be honest with myself and I think that it, in my experience helps illuminate all sorts of things.

She also connects this same idea of pursuing/maintaining authenticity through other embodied practice, especially as a long-term project over time and preferably in community:

One of the things that the embodied practises at Springhouse taught me is that one, it's important to do them, but it's important to have a practice that you are doing consistently and over time, if possible with community, but definitely, those types of, whether you want to call it an embodied practice, a spiritual practice, whatever you want to call it. I think that what it taught me is the significance of doing those types of things to help one maintain that sense of honesty and clarity within oneself...I would say it is refining in a sense of helping one know and recognise like the places in which we are or are not in integrity with oneself, or if we're out of alignment in some capacity it can help reveal some of those things and can also help shed some layers and illuminate more areas for expansiveness...I would say that those practises in general have deeply contributed to my sense of what it means to be an adult.

The experience of exploring authenticity through embodied practice is difficult for her to describe. Liz often comments on how it is hard to put into words or to logically unpack her experiences and the effect that they have had on her. The sense I have is that it is not because she lacks the

vocabulary or intellectual ability to communicate abstract ideas, but because the experiences were more *felt* than thought and to understand, one has to *do* rather than hear or express it in words. The idea of acting in accord with one's authentic self is tied in with aligning with one's core values and about healthy needs-fulfilment. Clarification around the two elements of values and needs were a major aspect of how Springhouse alumni defined adulthood that did not appear the in adulthood literature that I surveyed.

Personal Values and Needs. Adulthood scholars in the fields of psychology and sociology agree that beliefs and values form an individual's core identity (Bosch et al., 2016). However, little research in subjective or emerging adulthood illustrates normative populations placing importance on exploring these factors as a defining feature of adulthood. Many of the participants shared experiences at Springhouse related to exploring their values, providing a base from which to build their identity. The exploration of values includes explicitly stating the values of the school community, which serve as the philosophical framework of Springhouse. Elliot shares how this framework provided a structure for his investigating his own values through grounding them in values prioritized by Springhouse, stating that “well, to start at the beginning, we had the six values of integrity, connection, individuality, creativity, resiliency, and trust. I think that's all sides. And congratulations to me for remembering them.” He goes on to clarify that the values were not simply a memory task, they were treated more deeply. Elliot emphasised that deep seated skills were practised as part of internal work regarding understanding values, morals, and how to live those values in one's daily life:

Learning what your values are or what you hold almost what you consider your morals to be, but more of a, it feels laid back of what do I hold to be my principles? What do I stick to in my day-to-day life?

According to Elliot, values were explored and expanded on using clear examples in exercises. Elliot explains that this had a greater impact on him than just memorising and internalising proverbs or

aphorisms about how one should act or what they should believe. To him, this approach to defining values:

Helps make it easier not just to hear, 'you have to be with integrity throughout your days.'

It's just having like more clear examples of that so your brain can actually work around, 'oh, this is what it means to have integrity or to connect with people.'

When asked, Elliot felt that this process of investigating and clarifying his personal values at Springhouse directly informed his idea of what it means to be an adult.

Cassidy also incorporated the values of the Springhouse community in her own exploration of values, stating that keeping the Springhouse values and her own core values in mind remains important to her sense of subjective adulthood:

I think being an adult for me right now means keeping those values in mind and no matter how much I change or what I do in my life just being able to still live through them and live through the core values of me and what makes me the person I want to be, no matter what's going on around me.

The importance of values being explicitly discussed and explored at Springhouse is confirmed by Angelica who stated that these discussions are a conscious part of what the school's leaders want to communicate to learners as being important in their development as humans:

I think the whole values thing is, sometimes your peers, you would be acting a certain way and they remind you of a certain value and we would go through the values a lot and just discuss what it meant. Sometimes, so we had a book of values actually, and it was given to us when we graduated. I just remembered this, and sometimes I opened just a random page and it'll just talk to you about some random value. I guess when we were each given, I think it's five values that we had maybe, no, maybe seven, but they had chosen the top ones, the ones that they thought that were most essential to be a human adult down the road. The book itself, you can open up any, there'll be a word of values and it'll just have a whole

description of it. So, they gave us that and a compass when we graduated. So, kind of just being, you can always find home, you can always, you know, follow this to your North star, I guess. Giving you those tools to guide you through life with the book and the compass, just find yourself a little bit.

Although Elliot and Cassidy acknowledged how essential knowing one's values was to their idea of being an adult, of all the participants, Angelica went into the most depth about the importance of exploring, clarifying, and living by one's values. To Angelica, living consciously in accordance with one's values is an integral part of being an adult:

Michael

Do you feel like that activity of holding your values close and living by them is an important part of being an adult?

Angelica

Definitely. I think when you lose touch with your values or act against them, that's when you have consequences. Like I've definitely experienced that. And I've definitely just, anytime I don't listen to my intuition, I regret it every single time. I've tried to learn to just really listen because sometimes it's easier to be like, oh, but like, let's just see what happens, like it'd be interesting to see what happens. I think taking a step back to meditate before you make any big decisions can really help because you really understand who's speaking inside of you. And it's not just the part of you who's like curious to see what the bad outcome could be. It could be like, no, actually you want to go through something more positive, maybe take this route. So I think deep down we all know, and we're all really interconnected and we have a really good intuition for what's right or wrong and I think the vein of our humanity is choosing the other side sometimes. I think really connecting to values can help you have more of a clear mind of like, oh no, I'm not acting [in a way aligned with my values].

It is interesting to note that healthy values are seen by Angelica to be innate and intuitive, while

unhealthy actions that do not align with her core values are driven by some other element of human nature that is curious to see what happens when breaking from one's values. To Angelica, it seems that following her intuitive sense indicates that she is more likely to pursue actions that will be healthy and productive. Although she did not refer to a sense of authenticity or a concept such as her true self, her viewpoint aligns with the idea of living in accordance with one's authentic self described earlier.

Acting in line with her core values was not always consistent during her time at Springhouse, and she points out the value of the community in keeping her aligned with her intuition. The interaction with her community of peers worked in a complex feedback loop, with her being influenced by watching them and also by her peers monitoring her. Her Springhouse experiences improved her awareness of when she was acting in accordance with her values through how the peer and mentor community would point out when she was not acting in line with healthy values:

I remember I'd have peers who'd been in a Springhouse maybe since the beginning of Springhouse, honestly, it would always annoy me, it wouldn't always annoy me, but every time, sometimes I would do something, it was a little wrong, right? And they, 'cause you know, just teenagers do that sometimes, they'd be like, 'you're losing this value' or 'you're not connecting to this value,' 'not very this value of you.' They weren't saying like, 'oh, you're a bad person', you're not. But the fact that they're saying, 'you're not following this value' very much hit harder sometimes.

Later in the interview, Angelica reflected on how at first, these critiques were a source of resistance for her but she eventually came to see the benefit in her peers holding her to her values:

Angelica

I used to not really want to see that mirror, but now I really, when people are able to do that for me, it's, I know they really care about the outcome of whatever I'm going through.

Michael

So that community at Springhouse, that safe community was like a nice mirror so that you could see yourself reflected in it and grow and learn from it. And you trusted them to be like honest with you in a supportive way. Right?

Angelica

Definitely.

She started out resenting the feedback from others but through being engaged positively with the community of trust over time she was able to let her guard down and trust and accept their aid. This trust in community and focus on values was a major influence on her. The importance of community influence on her values is summed up by Angelica as she states that "I think the biggest thing that Springhouse taught me was definitely the strength of community and values, like really holding your values close." As an illustration of how this worked at the school, Angelica described an activity that she experienced at Springhouse called the values competition that was dedicated to exploring one's values and seeing values manifest in other members of the school community. This, among other activities taught her to recognise values in herself and to see those values reflected in others:

You would just have to show the strength of your own value and then actually really see the strength of your peers through their values and really recognise that we all do have different strengths and we can find a way to balance it.

Through this activity, community members recognised a value in her that she had not considered a strength, which made her acknowledge values that she was unaware she was expressing. This value was resilience, and prior to Springhouse, she considered the value of resilience as a negative. She now includes it as an essential part of being an adult because of deepening her understanding of what it means. In her wider description of the values competition activity, she states:

Most people voted that I should be resiliency. And at first I didn't really, I was, well that's

my least favourite one because what does resiliency really do? It just felt like you're just like a weed who can just get through things. But then at the end of the day, what really are you? But then I've realised that without resiliency, I wouldn't have been able to get through anything in my life. And it's actually the tool that I've used the most. They were, they're really accurate with that.

The influence of her peer group in this case echoes Barber et al.'s (2001) observation that crowd identity that is selected by one's group can have an influence on personal identity development. Observing her peers in the values competition also influenced Angelica in that seeing peers in the community hold and enact their own values inspired her to work on doing the same. The intent being to work on being more well-rounded, which could be interpreted as a desirable quality of adulthood:

I think knowing what all the values were and seeing my friends and people I admire hold their values close and act on them helped me eventually do the same. Also, it helped me want to work on those other parts of myself. Like maybe the ones that other peers that I admired were strong in. I'd be like, 'oh, well, the, this tool has obviously helped them reach this point, maybe I can strengthen that part of myself too.' So it can help you be more well-rounded just seeing all the different values that your peers can hold.

The influence that modelling and observation exerted on not only Angelica, but many other participants manifested in many ways, some of which are explored in greater depth in a later section on healthy relationships with others.

Angelica feels that her time at Springhouse has better equipped her to understand her needs and to make sure she is meeting them. For Angelica this means paying attention to her needs and making sure that she is not sacrificing her own needs for the sake of others:

Yeah, I think like maybe in the past, as many young people do, sometimes it was easier for me to suppress my needs or what I felt in a situation and I'd rather go along with it to keep

other people comfortable. Then I guess a new motto I found is 'don't light yourself on fire to keep other people warm' and that's basically the learning lesson for me. It's definitely to be able to be aware of other people's feelings. But at the end of the day, yours shouldn't be put aside because somebody else needs something. You know, at the end of the day, I think being an adult is learning to meet your own needs. It's nice to have community. It's nice to have people help you and support you but I've come to the realisation that at the end of the day, you really only got your own back, maybe your family a little bit, but you've got to learn to work with yourself and not against yourself.

Angelica's statement illustrates a significant aspect of Springhouse's model. Although the school has a central set of values and a core philosophy, in the end it is about helping students develop in a way that is unique to them. In Angelica's case, prior to Springhouse she emphasised the needs of others above her own, which left gaps in her own development. Her time at Springhouse helped her to recognise this imbalance and work to reconcile it. Angelica's placing value on her working through a dysfunctional behaviour rooted in her past serves as one example of how the participants in general see taking responsibility to confront internalised barriers to one's personal development as a marker of adulthood.

Exploring Barriers from the Past that Inhibit Personal Development. An element relevant to adulthood that is largely absent from most discussions on adulthood is one's commitment to engage with aspects of one's past that are holding one back from personal development. This commitment served as a foundation of what it means to be an adult to several Springhouse alumni. The first participant to speak of this was John, who feels that a requirement for considering oneself an adult is addressing childhood pain and trauma and committing to working through it. He explains that this is an ongoing thing that doesn't necessarily end, referring to it as a "processing." As an example of how his experiences at Springhouse influenced his thoughts on this, John describes an activity at Springhouse where students were to have an encounter with their inner child. The inner

child is a psychological concept related to Carl Jung's *child archetype* (Jung, 1957/2006) and is a form of therapy within depth psychology, popular psychology, self-help, and some clinical communities (Bradshaw, 2005). The inner child represents the influence of childhood experiences on one's older self, often focusing on traumatic or other negative experiences that act as barriers to development in adulthood (Bradshaw, 2005; Jung 1957/2006; Plotkin, 2008). John described how the activity began with an explanation of the inner child being compared to a soldier who acted as a defender in one's youth. In the activity, students played the role of themselves and their allegorical inner child soldier, the point of the exercise being to thank and honour their inner child for the work it has done protecting them from harm, but to let them know they don't need to keep fighting. The idea behind this is that by acknowledging the unconscious defence mechanisms that one sets up to cope with difficulty in childhood, one frees oneself from patterns that are no longer serving their purpose as protections but are holding one back from one's full potential (Jung 1957/2006). Reflecting on these barriers from the past may also hold some influence over John's sense of agency, or perception of his ability to mould his life in the future. As mentioned earlier in the cases of Liz and Tatiana, some psychosocial models connect reflexivity with a social actor's perceptions of what they are capable of in the present and in the future (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015). This may explain some of John's shift away from parasocial relationships toward vulnerability within a real community, reflecting a conscious exercise of his agency toward healthier relationships with himself and with his community.

Not only does John acknowledge the value of this activity for himself, but he points out that he can now non-judgementally see when someone is acting badly because of their inner child trying to protect them. John comments on his feeling that everyone has developmental barriers rooted in unexplored childhood experiences, sharing his view that "we all have like little child stuff in us that we're all lopsided in our development and we all have things that fell through the cracks so I just think it's really complicated it's very complicated." Cassidy also mentions a concept similar to the

inner child, but in a different context. She explores her own question of why older adults are disconnected from children and adolescents by hypothesising that older adults become disconnected from their inner child. This connection to her childhood self is something that she wants to consciously carry into her adulthood:

Cassidy

I think some adults are very much more connected to their childhood self and I think that has a lot to do with it and that's something I want to keep in myself is the connection to my childhood self

Michael

Right. So I'll ask you this - is that something that goes before Springhouse? Is that something that got cultivated there or is that something that you've come up with after Springhouse? That idea that being an adult, or being a good adult, means keeping that connection with your younger self.

Cassidy

That would be during Springhouse because I saw that the adults I looked up to had that strong connection.

The methods that were modelled at Springhouse which inspired Cassidy's desire to maintain a connection to her child-self were the adults acting in ways that were not serious or controlling. Their child-like, playful behaviour disrupted the vision of adults as serious and controlling that she had developed earlier in life. On a related and slightly hilarious note, after mentioning this, Cassidy joked that another important aspect of adulthood is “taking naps all day.”

Since leaving Springhouse, Angelica has learned through her work experiences and through navigating personal relationships that an important part of being an adult is to let go of past traumas and to not let her traumas drive her behaviour. She approaches being self-aware of when her trauma is affecting her through the self-reflective tools that she learned at Springhouse:

I think honestly, the biggest thing that I've realised is to not keep my traumas with me, which I guess is what I was touching with when it came to reflection and release and accountability is I think sometimes I used to hold close to my traumas. They were kind of like a comfort zone for me because it's what I was used to. And that would be my excuse for acting a certain way. That was my excuse for why I couldn't be vulnerable or why I couldn't open up to people. Because everybody, everything was terrible and no matter what I did, the world would never really understand me. And I think working in the food industry, getting into relationships, mainly, has reflected so much that you have to process your traumas and stop putting them out into the world because otherwise healing cannot happen.

Angelica's relationship with her mentor involved sometimes uncomfortable explorations of her inner state, which was valuable in opening her up to self-assessment regarding her own needs and whether she was able to keep them fulfilled. This is one of the major qualities that Angelica feels represents adulthood:

I think my biggest moments were definitely with peers or my mentor, she's...amazing and she saw, I guess she saw a lot of her younger self in me, is what she would say and she was trying to help me realise that I needed to fight for myself. So, every time we would have a meeting she would be like 'are you okay?' and I'd be like 'yeah of course, why wouldn't I be?' and she'd be like 'are you really?' and then I would just like break down crying sometimes.

This illustrates the deeply personal relationship that existed between Angelica and her mentor and how this intimacy allowed her mentor to help Angelica explore dysfunctional beliefs and behaviours that she was in denial of.

Finally, in connection with her previously mentioned comments about how embodied practises grounded her in her intuitive self, Liz felt Springhouse's approach to dance helped her to recognise dysfunctional behaviours and beliefs that she felt were keeping her in undesirable

patterns. She shared that “[dance] helped me get unstuck from certain things in my life or reveal certain patterning and ways to re-pattern or get free from ones that haven't been helpful in order to move into something different.”

At the core of the participants' talk about self-exploration, better knowing their values and needs, and working on healthier relationships with themselves lies emotional intelligence, which was a prominent marker of adulthood for all the Springhouse alumni with whom I spoke.

Emotional Intelligence. Adulthood can be seen as an emotional category rather than a demographic designation (Cannon, 2024a), and in adulthood studies, emotional considerations are certainly present. Among other behavioural markers, *control* over one's emotions is highly valued as an indicator of adulthood for many adults (Arnett, 2024; Gilmore, 2019). Additionally, within the realm of emerging adulthood, Lowe et al. (2013) found that older participants were more likely to list self-regulation of emotions as a marker of adulthood. Compared with this literature, Springhouse alumni with whom I spoke differ in terms of how they approach their emotions and the age at which they come to value relating to emotions as a marker of adulthood. Similar to emotional self-regulation, participants did not appear to see suppression of their emotions as a goal, instead prioritising understanding their emotions in order to better understand themselves and to make decisions that will be not only personally healthy but healthy for those around them.

Felix connects emotional intelligence with resilience as an important aspect of how they view adulthood. Felix brought this up with reference to the idea of deciding when they are capable of handling difficult emotional situations and when they may need help. With reference to emotional independence, they define it by stating "I would say that the resiliency to independently handle issues that I encounter [and] the emotional intelligence to know when I need help from a peer." Felix related their impression of the immediate and consistent immersion in an environment that supported healthy emotional awareness and development. They commented on their experiences prior to attending Springhouse as a full-time student, where they attended a once per

week program where they were introduced to the school community and its ideas. Even through this limited experience with the school community, they were already feeling a positive influence:

The whole time is a social-emotional learning experience... From even before I was enrolled. Because, again, I was doing the Friday program. So, like, that learning started for me before I even started going there full time.

This introduction to the social-emotional learning aspect of Springhouse was a motivating factor for their choosing to attend the school full-time. Felix said they learned to value emotional intelligence at Springhouse and it became a foundational part of how they now view themselves as an adult. They point out that the value of emotional intelligence was instilled by the modelling behaviour of the adults at Springhouse. Felix wishes to emulate the Springhouse adults' groundedness:

My idea of adulthood, for sure because all of the adults at Springhouse are very, like, emotionally mature and centred. And they're not always, like, you know, they're not always perfect. They're not always making the exact correct emotional decision for themselves or whatever. But they have this, like, sense of equilibrium and this sense of, like, I guess... Yeah... Just, like, I don't know how to define what I mean by emotional maturity and emotional intelligence here but I know that they all have it and it's something that I have, that I strive for.

Like Felix, Cassidy values the ability to stay calm in stressful situations in order to reassess and navigate these situations, and sees this skill not only as being useful for her own life but as an essential element of how she defines adulthood. Angelica valued how practising self-assessment and connecting to her emotions at Springhouse has helped her identify when and why she acts in an unhealthy way:

If I'm acting on something and I'm like, 'Oh, I'm acting on this 'cause I'm hurt about something' I try not to act on it. I only act on something if it feels like what's best for me and it's not based on doing things based on a fear I guess. So the biggest thing I've released

is doing things based on a fear because I had the excuse of being traumatised before – so now it's somebody else's turn to go through that. And it's, I had to learn some hard lessons with that.

This passage illustrates Angelica coming to the understanding that in her adolescence she would use her past trauma as an excuse to behave poorly, as a sort of revenge against people she had a negative view of so they would suffer as she suffered. Through the skills she learned at Springhouse about self-assessment and connecting to and understanding her emotions in a healthy way, she uncovered the source of her unhealthy behaviour as being an internalised fear.

Self-reflective activities like meditation and yoga as practised at Springhouse provided Angelica with tools to assess if and when she is in denial of her authentic self and her needs. She reiterates the importance of taking time to do this sort of thing in adulthood in order to avoid creating problems in the world by acting from a place of hurt:

I really started taking a lot of yoga classes and doing yoga on my own in my backyard and then taking a moment to like meditate or put some music on and just it's given me the ability to really take the moment to care for myself because I guess the biggest thing I've realised as an adult is time really is a concept, and if your needs, kind of like I said, if your needs aren't fully met in the moment there's always another time...I think it's important to acknowledge that we're all here once and for ourselves to some extent and if there's something you need to take care of, you need to do that before you take care of other things. Otherwise, you're like a broken person fixing other things and it's really difficult. It's better to take the time to sit back and hone in on your needs and who you are. And then you can really go out there.

Other activities, such as dance were influential on her idea of adulthood in the form of learning to acknowledge and connect to emotions in a healthy way:

Yeah, for me, [dance at Springhouse] just helped me actually, it just helped me realise the value and beauty and strength behind dancing and how it can be a tool to be in your body

and your mind at the same time, or in your emotions.

Relating physicality and emotions, Tatiana shared that for her, having a sense of one's sexuality is connected to adulthood, referring specifically to being comfortable with one's sexuality. She points out that this process begins in adolescence but becomes refined in adulthood. In the literature, developing a healthy awareness of one's sexuality during adolescence has value in emerging adulthood. Although writing fifteen years ago, C. Smith et al.'s (2011) note that "a lot, though not all, of emerging adults today are confused, hurting, and sometimes ashamed because of their sexual experiences played out in a culture that told them simply to go for it and feel good" (p. 193). Contrary to the confused and emotionally jarring sexual experiences of emerging adults conveyed by C. Smith et al., Tatiana's valuing the ability to reflect and self-assess on the connection between emotions and sexuality, and to be comfortable and confident in this awareness represents a boon and a defining feature of adulthood.

Other forms of self-assessment in reference to one's emotions at Springhouse were described by Elliot as *competencies*, which were explored through self-evaluations on how well the student felt they were living the competencies. These competencies are not technical, but intra-personal and inter-personal in nature:

So there are things like self-awareness, contextual sensitivity, things of like, am I being appropriate in class space or in the work that I'm doing currently? Being relevant...So we also had restorative justice, which we did not often implement, but it was trying to be just honest and compassionate with other people.

As with many things at Springhouse, the relationship to mentors and other adult-age individuals at the school served as a source of exploring and refining participants' connection to their emotions. Cassidy remarks on her mentors' ability to aid in connecting her to her own emotions through their presence:

It's hard to describe someone's presence but it really showed up in school when we do

dancing and when we do singing and stuff like that, that really connects you with your emotions. You could, I could feel their [her mentors'] steadiness in that.

In describing the emotional influence that her mentors had on her, Cassidy refers to the "mature presence" possessed by the adults at Springhouse. She clarified this term as representing a calmness in the face of uncertainty. Even if they did not know the answer or how to solve a problem, her mentors and teachers could remain calm and figure out how they can work things out:

It just seemed like they always had like the answers to what to do and it wasn't even that they like knew everything it was just that even if they didn't, they were so calm about it and they were like 'we'll figure this out.'

Of note, Cassidy said when she was an adolescent, she felt that she could never attain the same level of emotional maturity that Springhouse adults had. However, since graduating from Springhouse, she feels it is more possible for her to do so. Springhouse adults also influenced Tatiana's idea of adulthood by serving as role models for emotional intelligence and maturity. In discussing emotional intelligence as a marker of adulthood she shared that she was influenced by "teachers and mentors and stuff like that, I looked up to them. Their emotional intelligence and they had this seemingly endless grounded, mature presence and I was like 'that's what it means to be an adult. I want that.'" Here again we see the influence that mentors and other adults at Springhouse had on how some students perceive adulthood and build a vision of how they want to be as adults. It is worth noting that her portrayal of the Springhouse adults could be read as describing them as controlling their emotions, along the lines of normative markers of adulthood from the literature.

An attitude connected with emotional intelligence that appeared in several interviews concerned how Springhouse alumni view themselves as adults in comparison with their non-Springhouse peers. Related ideas appear in interviews with John, Cassidy, and Angelica, but Felix had the most to say about how they feel Springhouse graduates have a marked difference in their emotional development. Felix attributes this difference to how Springhouse offered the opportunity

to develop interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence in a safe environment, whereas many of Felix's peers who did not attend Springhouse first encounter emotional difficulties in the high-stakes environment of their lived experience outside of school. With no guidance or support Felix's non-Springhouse peers have to learn in situations where failures hold the potential to ruin their lives. Felix points out that they and their Springhouse colleagues have spoken about how they learned tools to develop emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills in high school, but many of their now peers are just starting to learn about these things in their early twenties:

We learned these skills in high school that most adults start learning when they're like 22. [Our] peer groups of people who are in terms of emotional growth and emotional intelligence in some ways are where we were at when we were teenagers. So, and this is a conversation that I have with other Springhouse alum all the time, we come back together and we're like, 'man...it turns out people are not doing things the way that we are emotionally. We have a different idea of healthy adult mindset.'

When addressing this difference in emotional intelligence and whether people who do not possess or are working toward emotional maturity are really adults, Felix concludes that they are adults, but just a different kind of adult:

There's also so many adults that have like zero emotional intelligence and emotional maturity. So like, are they not an adult? They are, but their experience is so different than mine. They're not, they're, we're not experiencing adulthood the same way.

Emotional intelligence is important to Felix's own sense of subjective adulthood and thus serves as a personal marker of something that makes them feel like an adult. Despite Felix's appreciation of the emotional learning they experienced at Springhouse, they acknowledge that watching their peers experience similar learning experiences in their "real life" shows Felix that these lived experiences are also valuable.

As a transition into discussions of healthy relationships with others as a defining aspect of

adulthood, emotional intelligence appears as an essential element. Cassidy's ideal of adulthood focuses on emotional awareness and intelligence, which values being in healthy and respectful community that uses non-violent communication and restorative justice to resolve conflict:

Cassidy

When I was in Springhouse, we learned a lot or we were able to practice emotional awareness and intelligence in a lot of ways. So, through mentoring, through dance, through having conversations as a community in a healthy, respectful way and also in non-violent communication and learning about these practises of restorative justice and different ways of approaching your own emotions and conflict with others...

Michael

Right. So having all that practice with all those different kinds of things that you just mentioned informed the way you wanted to be as an adult.

Cassidy

Yeah.

From Cassidy's words it is evident that emotional intelligence is not only for personal development but is seen as valuable in navigating difficult relationships and for cultivating healthy community. Community also serves as a vital source of feedback on understanding one's emotions. Angelica describes how her peers were involved in helping her to see when she was not meeting her own needs. Knowing that they as a community were doing so out of a place of caring for her well-being made her feel safe in being open to them:

Sometimes, even when I was in denial of it, they could see through my eyes, through my appearance that I wasn't okay and then not only [my mentor] but all of my peers who were especially around my age, the ones I graduated with, they were really good at giving me advice and it would always be the same advice. So I knew that they were all thinking about it very thoroughly or maybe talking about it and seeing how they could help me. I definitely

felt cared for. They definitely wanted the best for me and I think that definitely has helped me realise that I don't have to be closed off to everybody.

Thus, emotional intelligence is part of a feedback loop that both requires healthy community to build and contributes to cultivating healthy individuals in the building of the healthy community. According to the accounts of all interviewees, the Springhouse community serves as a positive model for this feedback system. Much of what makes the school community effective at autopoietically (Capra & Luisi, 2014) supporting healthy emotional development feedback systems are the activities aimed intentionally at kickstarting emotional development of both individuals and the community itself.

Angelica explained that most activities at Springhouse are geared toward opening people up to vulnerability and inner personal understanding as preparation for being in the world:

Most of our classes and activities were really based on trying to open us up and trying to not have us be like kind of like shut down teenagers like have [us] be teenagers who could communicate with one another and really understand our feelings thoroughly before going out into the world.

These experiences of intentional, emotions-oriented learning at Springhouse formed a model of adulthood that Cassidy recognises in others – one that she uses when deciding who to surround herself with in community. Cassidy felt that the ability to choose one's community is connected to emotional intelligence, which she also stated is a quality that makes one an adult. In discussing the role of emotions, she stated "I think that being able to choose and having the kind of emotional, the self-awareness and emotional intelligence to choose is also important as an adult."

The connection between one's own healthy understanding of one's emotions and a healthy community was pointed out by Felix, who felt that a large focus of their emotional learning at Springhouse was centred on self-regulation of emotions not so they could conform to rules of behaviour, but so that they could be more "in community" with the rest of those at the school.

According to them, understanding that people are “complicated” and “messy” and cultivating emotional intelligence and learning skills like conflict resolution are essential for getting along with others in community. From this, it seems that self-regulation is not a tool to establish docility and social compliance, but a means of understanding the complexities of self and how one can best interact with other complex persons in community.

Theme Three: Healthy Relationships with Others

Research on emerging adults reveals that although many do place value on taking responsibility for others, it is relatively rare that consideration for others is a central concern (Arnett, 2024). The responses of Springhouse alumni indicate they think about these concepts with reflective complexity and place a great deal of value on developing healthy relationships with others ranging from the personal to the broader community, not just those most intimate to them. As an example, John sees himself as existing within a web of complex relationships. He contemplates the numerous implications of how he is connected to everyone around him and the implications of these connections on how he should live his life. He consistently noted interconnectedness as a central element of what he learned about life while at Springhouse:

It kind of makes me a little stressed out if I'm not lying. I'm still on a very much of a figure-out-what-my-life-is-about stage of life so it just adds another complexity of thinking of how connected my life is to every other person's life and what those actions do because then it's no longer what do I want to do with my life it's, is there a right way to use my life?

It is important to note that he does not necessarily see this stress as a bad thing, if approached from the right perspective. He indicates that he adopted this view of seeing stressful situations as opportunities for growth and learning during his time at Springhouse, stating that “being stressed isn't necessarily a bad thing it can cause innovation or new thoughts so I wouldn't say it's bad to think about how connected everything is just that it's a new variable.” Cultivating healthy interpersonal connections emerged as a prominent defining feature of adulthood for several

participants, beginning with navigating one-on-one personal relationships.

Personal Relationships. Much of the presence of relationships in research on adulthood revolves around romantic, familial, and professional relationships (Arnett, 2024; Axxe et al., 2022; Dalessandro, 2019; Lindell et al., 2017; C. Smith et al., 2011). Springhouse's view of community aligns with holistic education's focus on building healthy community (J. Miller, 2019; J. Miller et al., 2018; R. Miller, 2022), that extends beyond romantic, familial and professional relationships. This is reflected in several participants' emphasis on developing healthy relationships with other people in community. A core element of learning about healthy personal relationships at Springhouse comes in the form of mentorship and relates to the *Sourced Design* aspects of *taking care of vulnerability* and *cultivating personhood* (Finn, 2023). Mutual vulnerability is evident in many of the relationships between the students and their mentors. Having a close relationship of shared vulnerability with her mentor influenced Tatiana's idea of what healthy adult relationships should look like:

I think I learned a lot watching my mentors navigate or when they would share with me how they navigate family relationships. How they had healthy relationships, even when the relationships were a little tumultuous was definitely moments where I was like, okay, that is something that I can work towards doing. It's something that adults do and that I want to do when I'm an adult.

Tatiana's response points to Springhouse adults serving as influential role models for adulthood. Through intentional instruction and modelling, Tatiana learned from her mentors about being engaged in healthy relationships and by extension how mature adults are able to recognise healthy relationships from unhealthy ones and pursue those that are healthy. To Tatiana, the process of personal development itself involves having a refined sense of self, awareness of values and a clear idea of one's identity. She believes that adults need to have a clear idea of their own values in order to set boundaries. Thus, values help one to understand what they will and will not accept in a

relationship. For Felix, values explorations in Springhouse not only provided a sense of their own values but equipped them with tools to aid in recognising shared values in others. This awareness now helps Felix in choosing people that align with their values to include in their community of friends. A similar phenomenon of recognising healthy relationships from unhealthy ones is shared by Cassidy.

At one point in her interview, Cassidy makes the distinction between being able to recognise relationships as feeling “safe” and as feeling “familiar” with feeling “familiar” not necessarily signifying a healthy relationship. This differentiation is something that emerged during her time at Springhouse:

Cassidy

I think that a lot of people, and even I've also done this a few times where it's like, I don't look for places or people I feel safe with, but more like people who remind me of my family or like, even though my family didn't always feel safe. Right? But they felt familiar. They felt, I was comforted by the familiarity of hurtful people or like of toxic environments or stuff like that. I think a lot of the world kind of revolves on that and people try – people are attracted to environments that feel familiar rather than feel safe...

Michael

Now. I have to ask now, since I'm studying Springhouse, is that differentiation between the familiar and the safe, is that something that came to your realisation during your time there?

Cassidy

Um, I guess so. I don't know. Oftentimes Springhouse was, for me kind of like a safe haven and so I think I didn't realise it at the time, but looking back, yeah.

Based on several connections to other parts of our conversation, it could be that Cassidy's revelation about the “familiar” not being the same as the “safe” was a product of being part of the school community. The school's approach to building a community of vulnerability and trust influenced her

understanding of what safety feels like. Related to recognising and building safe and healthy relationships, Tatiana asserted her views on the connection between values and boundaries:

I think it's connected because you have to know what your values are in order to set boundaries with people and to know what you will accept and what you will not and why you wouldn't accept something and then I think the other part of that is having that agency that I was talking about where you get to choose how you want to live your life and who you want in your life.

Setting boundaries with others is an important element of resolving interpersonal conflict, and Felix shared a formative experience from their time at Springhouse involving this connection. They told the story about how the solution to conflict was not to isolate themselves or to expect the other person or the school staff to accommodate their discomfort:

The beginning of my senior year I was having a lot of emotional trouble and one of my peers was very loud and rambunctious and kind of a lot person and we were on my first experience week trip of my senior year. This person got assigned to the same room as me and I was so mad that that was happening. And she had been in the car with me too on the way. So I was just, like, I need quiet space. Other people that were in the room with me were close friends and she and I weren't super close because our personalities kind of clashed, but she was others' friends so they put us all together in a room. And I just, I'm just so mad. I did not want to room with her at all. I was so angry and I was having meltdowns about it. I was being really argumentative with the staff about it. I was, like, no, I don't want to fucking do this. Give me a different room. I was trying to look at different options. I was willing to not room with my closest friends so that I didn't have to room with her. And I ended up rooming with her for the entire trip because ultimately, I sat down with my mentor...I was having an incredibly difficult time. I had brought a lunch with me for the drive that was gross and I didn't like it. So I had a gross lunch sitting with my mentor just raging to him about how I

did not want to room with this person. And he was, like, 'okay, well, you have to so we're going to work on setting boundaries and figuring out how we can make this situation work for both of you.' And I ended up sitting down and having a conversation with her about just what our boundaries were and how to navigate being in a room together for the duration of the trip. That conversation very much looked like me explaining to her that, yeah, I'm very easily overwhelmed. You know this about me. I would really appreciate it if we can have the room be a place where we don't yell. The room is an oasis of calm where we rest free and no loud, sudden outbursts kind of space. And that worked out very well. And that was very foundational to me in, like, learning boundary setting. There's just a million examples of that kind of shit all throughout my time at Springhouse.

This recollection outlines Felix's perception of the importance of boundary setting and self-awareness as qualities of adulthood but it also reiterates the importance of developing emotional intelligence and working through the emotions one is feeling rather than suppressing them. The last phrase in Felix's story is something that ran through all the interviews and is worth re-emphasising. Identifying individual interventions, activities, or interactions that were formative was often difficult for participants because they felt that immersion in the day-to-day life of the Springhouse community was the largest and most influential aspect of their time there.

Angelica shared how her time at Springhouse helped her to set boundaries for herself and work toward filling her own needs:

As a young child, my parents would describe me as like a little Buddha sometimes, like it was really hard for it to anger me. It was really difficult and I was always kind of contemplating things. My biggest motto, and I wrote a poem about it too when I was younger, was even if somebody hurts you, don't hurt them back because if they've hurt you, why would you want to do that to them? You know what it feels like. Then as I grew older, and the more I kept getting hurt, and not hurting anybody back and just taking and taking it,

I guess Springhouse was like, you're like, you know, you're about to explode. We can tell you're like a ticking bomb right now. We can see it in you and like, let it out.

Angelica's internalised idea of adulthood prior to Springhouse involved practising unconditional kindness toward others. She described her younger attitude in the following terms:

I'm going to never harm another living being, which, you know, I've realised if somebody comes at you with claws, you've got to reciprocate so that you can stay safe and sane. But otherwise, if nobody's doing anything, just treat them with the utmost kindness, something that I still align with and that I had as a child

It seems that through her experiences at Springhouse, Angelica has shifted her perspective on relationships with others beyond treating even those who might cause her harm with unconditional kindness at her own expense to finding a healthier balance where her own needs are considered in relationships with others.

Mentors provided healthy role-models and models of boundary-setting as inspiration for Tatiana. Referring to her mentors, she shares the following:

They certainly taught me a lot about boundaries and what is appropriate behavior and what is not appropriate behaviour, especially when it comes to adults and children or people who are minors. I guess that's something that I do think about a lot, actually, now that I'm an adult and what's appropriate for me to engage with people who are much younger than me.

The influence of the modelling by adult mentors at Springhouse was also seen by Felix as formative for how they should interact with younger people in their own mentorship role:

All of the students have mentors on staff. So, naturally, we're having that dynamic with adults in the community. So, we're mirroring that. We're mirroring the behaviour of our mentors, basically, to the younger students. We go to our mentors about things. And the younger students go to their mentors about things, too. But we go to our mentors. The younger students come to us about stuff in certain areas, right?

During their time at Springhouse, Felix aspired to act as a mentor to younger students as his mentors had toward them. Their experience serves as a segue into the community-oriented nature of Springhouse and how developing relationships in community influenced the participants in their adolescence.

Relationships in Community. In their study of the dark side of emerging adulthood, C. Smith et al.'s (2011) respondents indicated that their teachers intentionally avoided difficult conversations around morality that might be considered harmful to the feelings of any students in the classroom. C. Smith et al. feel that this approach to creating a *safe space* in the classroom denies students the experience of rigorously exploring moral and ethical questions surrounding difference. Springhouse takes a very different approach to both the purpose of, and the establishment of, a *safe space* in the community as a means of developing healthy relationships with the self and others. The type of safe space described by the participants appears to align with that described by Crosnoe et al. (2004) as being a setting that supports intergenerational bonding between teachers and students. This can be seen in several of the participants reflections on how they experienced the community at Springhouse and is explored in greater depth as a discussion of the importance of mentorship in chapter six.

A variety of influences from the Springhouse community were shared by the participants. A vital component of Springhouse is the community of vulnerability and trust, which appears again and again in the interviews as a safe place for experimentation. Based on what participants shared, this community of trust served as the foundation for their approach to self-reflection. Liz explained how *The Well* program emphasised the importance of introspection in community rather than as a solitary practice being instrumental in her development as an adult:

I think *The Well* program was pretty instrumental in the self-reflection piece and the community as necessity to do part of that reflecting, because you can't just do that in a vacuum. You can, but I would argue that your results aren't going to be as effective. Because

you have to have people around you serving as those mirrors and those feedback mechanisms and et-cetera. So I think that the persistent participation in that program over several years with some of the same people, that they could really get to know you on a deep level and that you could really offer substantial feedback to and like witness each other and your growth was really a huge aspect of that.

The feedback offered by the community seems to have served as a means of validity testing ideas for Liz in a space where she trusted those around her to be honest about whether or not her ideas were sound. Angelica values the safety net created by vulnerability and trust that the community had her best interests in mind in how it enhanced her ability to be self-reflexive. She internalised the idea of thinking critically about her beliefs and behaviours from a point of wanting the best relationship with herself, just as she learned to do in her interactions with members of the Springhouse community.

Liz shared how her time at Springhouse refined the importance of both internal work and healthy community to fully developed adulthood:

That community, I think, was instrumental in opening up the conversation around what it does mean to be an adult and what is the work required internally and within a community to cultivate healthy adulthood and what it means to foster that in community over the long term.

The work she refers to is connected to a myriad of practises, however building the community of vulnerability and trust that is mentioned throughout the interviews has a solid root in the concept of restorative justice. Writing from the perspective of holistic education, J. Miller (2021) defines restorative justice as a community-driven approach to dealing with social problems within a group. The goal of restorative justice is to transform behaviour by seeking root causes of undesired behaviours rather than relying on incident-oriented methods. Within restorative justice, harm to the individual is seen as harm to the community (J. Miller, 2021). These ideas are reflected in how the

participants described how restorative justice worked at Springhouse.

Elliot emphasised the importance of restorative justice in how Springhouse influenced his ideas of adulthood, clarifying what restorative justice meant to the Springhouse community and how it was used at Springhouse:

It meant that criticism, like there wasn't necessarily criticism, but there was feedback. I don't know if that makes sense as a distinction, but of not trying to cut down, but just trying to build up. So it was being able to feel like you can be honest with other people, but also not feel like you're being attacked when someone is being honest with you. And it does feel like it's a two-way thing. You have to be able to accept that someone is not trying to hurt you and then you also have to accept that you're not trying to hurt them.

Elliot connects this to the idea of community-building through establishing mutual trust and vulnerability where everyone understands that they are trying to help one another. The purpose behind organizing the community in this way is to acknowledge that tension and conflict are part of being human and that this restorative justice approach is a way of navigating the conflict that will inevitably arise when living alongside other humans.

Angelica felt that the community at Springhouse offered personal validation in the form of being heard. This contributed to a feeling of safety within the community. Elliot connects a similar idea to adulthood, saying that this is how he would like to be as an individual, with adulthood to him represented as fostering a sense of community-building:

Elliot

I guess that's, that's what I want to be as one person instead of as a community, as an adult. I feel like that's kind of like a self-feeding circle, but just one person.

Michael

So, just to clarify what you mean by that, I'm going to try to bounce some stuff off you here.

So, do you mean that in terms of your own inner dialogue and being like honest and trusting

with yourself? Or do you mean you want to foster that sort of sense of community with just the people around you and you're kind of like the, the nexus of that, I suppose?

Elliot

The second one. I think, by just being whole or being kind to yourself and to others just has an exponential effect on the people around you and then, it can continue to grow and just be kindness and trustworthiness and honesty.

Connected to the principles underlying the version of restorative justice at Springhouse outlined by Elliot, John emphasised that everyone in the community was seen at a human level, with nobody seen as being more special than anyone else. Relevant to John's case, this non-hierarchical power dynamic, which alongside authentic relationships, is essential to transformative learning (Taylor, 2007) and opens students up to new ways of thinking, being and to changing their perspectives. Connected to a recollection of how a female teacher at Springhouse opened him up to vulnerability by acknowledging his personhood, John shared his personal story about how his perspective was changed when a sense of connection and community at Springhouse overrode his desire to remain in his previous, artificial internet community of hate and how real relationships replaced his parasocial online relationships:

I slowly realised the error of my ways with it and realised like the importance of acceptance and humility. How was I taken advantage of by this [right-wing online hate community]? I was taken advantage of because I needed a community and I needed a community of people who hate women and that was the community that accepted me was the community of people who were like 'fuck women' and, you know 'fuck black people' and 'fuck you know, and you know.' I didn't need them. I didn't need that community anymore when I had a real one.

John said that through his experience at Springhouse, he came to see that true community is about non-transactional giving and receiving. He points out that he felt fulfilment in his own seeing and

loving others having a positive influence on them. John contrasts his previous online community to the community at Springhouse as follows:

With this, like Ben Shapiro³ world, it, it was, I gave everything and I received fucking nothing. I was just getting angry. Ben Shapiro doesn't know my name. If I died tomorrow, Ben Shapiro would not care. He wouldn't cry. Jenny would.

Jenny being Dr. Jenny Finn, the executive director at Springhouse. John summarised his transformative journey driven by the process of relationship-building in community at Springhouse by simply stating “I like to say that I got hate, I got the hate loved out of me.” John’s response is interesting in the context of social justice education, especially as it relates to concepts such as white privilege or male privilege when discussing anti-racism, and anti-misogynistic activism and pedagogy. Although there may be many boys and men who are beyond rehabilitation, hearing John's story made me wonder how many young males are being alienated not due to their being intrinsically problematic, but to their never having access to a healthy community that could affirm their personhood and support their positive human qualities.

In Liz's case, the Springhouse community had less of a transformative effect, providing more of a sense of validation and support for her already established beliefs:

I think being a part of that community was a way to be around other people who felt a similar sense of call or a sense, a sense that they had a deeper, a deeper, like soul level understanding of what their purpose was in this world and how they might go about living that out. I think that was a helpful container and community in which to explore what that is and to put some language around that and to be with other people that were intentionally trying to find ways to live into that with authenticity, with intention, and with this kind of consistent culture of refinement.

Liz’s experiences at Springhouse appear to be a form of what Persson (2012) refers to as *education-*

³ Ben Shapiro is a controversial online conservative political pundit who heads a media company called *The Daily Wire*.

as-proxy, meaning that the decision about one's education is informed by the institution's alignment with one's pre-existing community and outlook. This type of education serves to reinforce, rather than challenge one's worldview, allowing for deeper exploration of ideas aligned with familiar beliefs. In terms of the community acting as a model for adult relationships, experiences with people at Springhouse provided a model of the type of person Cassidy feels are healthy to be around in her adulthood:

I didn't realise at Springhouse, the people in Springhouse were like, that's the kind of people I want to surround myself with. The kind, gentle, non-judgmental, people who give grace and will try to understand me and stuff like that. Right? Those kinds of people who value connection and creativity. Those are now the people who I've found elsewhere, not at Springhouse, that still reflect those values. And a lot of them, like my girlfriend, I bring her back to Springhouse and she's like, 'this place is great. Like, we vibe.' I'm like, 'Yeah! That's why you're my girlfriend!'

One of Springhouse's overall missions is what they call *cultural renewal* (Finn, 2023; Finn & Stabler, 2024), which involves spreading the work that they are doing in the community out into the dominant culture as a means of influencing broad, long-term shifts in consciousness and ways of being in the world. Their approach to community building and maintenance is part of that project. Elliot sees his role as a Springhouse alumnus who is part of this long-term project as involving meeting as many people as he can and spreading the ideas he learned at Springhouse. The point is to take care of one person at a time and Elliot sees himself as the first person in his network, and by taking care of himself he will be able to take care of another person. He relates his understanding of the concept of spreading community as follows:

I'd say it was mostly a Springhouse idea. Of course, with some alterations from my mind, just for how I want to live it. But it was, I think in the mission of Springhouse is to create a world where all life thrives and how we do that is by taking care of one person at a time and

I kind of see myself as the one person taken care of at a time as a graduate. It's not them taking care of me, but them helping me learn how to take care of me. So now that I can take care of myself, hopefully I can help other people take care of themselves and then that effect comes in. It's an idea that was talked about frequently at Springhouse and in meetings and just anywhere associated with them but of, once you graduate, you're not here to stick around necessarily, you're here to go out and live your life to the fullest that you can and hopefully it'll change the world one person at a time.

Elliot considers this project a sub-purpose of the central purpose he has of seeking meaningful connection with something that will guide his life. The sub-purpose is simply put, being conscious of his relationships with others and trying to be kind whenever possible.

Cassidy also reflects her understanding of Springhouse's aims in her observation that the values of Springhouse are connected to the kinds of leaders, and by extension adults, that the school aims to prepare:

The world kind of is shitty sometimes right now and we need more young adults who are coming into it, into the society, to be able to be leaders in in a way that respects others and respects the Earth and holds the values of Springhouse of connection and creativity and individuality and resiliency and what's the other one? integrity. So those values they really, really, it was really important for them that we kept them going into, past coming out of Springhouse and going into the world.

The idea of that engaging in healthy community as a facet of both becoming an adult and an influence on adulthood is not explored in depth within the adulthood literature. There are references to the importance of cultural community in transmitting cultural language and knowledge (Aspachs-Bracons et al., 2008), adopting roles defined by one's community (Arnett, 2016b). There is also research about how individualistic cultural communities influence values of self-sufficiency above all else while collectivist cultures value family and community, norm compliance, self-regulation,

and interdependence – with social adulthood being equated maintaining harmony and social cohesion (Wider et al., 2021). In some ways, Springhouse appears to pursue a hybrid, where harmony and social cohesion are the aim, but individual autonomy on how one defines oneself as an adult is also prioritized over norm compliance and adherence to prescribed social roles. In the limited research on the influence of school on identity, parallels could be made here with how peer groups in schools influence personal, crowd, and public identities (Barber et al., 2001) with the participant responses indicating that crowd and public identities within the school community influenced their personal identity.

Finally, commitment to deep, protracted relationship-building figured in to John's view of how healthy relationships were formed at Springhouse, with him stating that “you get to know each other and it deepens with every mundane day at school. It deepens and deepens and deepens and deepens.” It seems that even mundane, seemingly non-transformative events have a significant and meaningful impact on John's relationships when embedded in a community like the one at Springhouse.

As a final element of developing healthy relationships with others, Springhouse alumni also extolled the value of embracing a worldview that allows for perspectivism and relativism in helping to understand and acknowledge the personhood of others.

Perspectivism and Relativism. As we have seen, much of the influence that Springhouse had on the way alumni view adulthood came in the form of prioritising healthy relationships, both with oneself and with others in community. An aspect of Springhouse's relational practises included acknowledgment and honouring personhood, a striking example of which comes from John, who felt it was important that he had been seen as a human being; with Springhouse staff speaking directly with him, asking for his input, and developing a listening relationship. He points out that this aspect of the school drew him away from right-wing hate mongering on the internet when he was in his early teens. He described how, prior to attending Springhouse, he had developed

parasocial relationships with online pundits like Ben Shapiro who John refers to as a “right-wing indoctrinator.” He explains that he became connected to these figures because he believed they understood him and his loneliness. John described himself as misogynistic, homophobic and racist at the time. When he experienced a real human connection with a teacher at Springhouse at age thirteen, someone who would listen to him and acknowledge him without harsh judgement, he realised what was happening with the online hate community and abandoned it in favour of real connection. He told a story of being misogynistic to a female Springhouse staff member:

Like she wasn't like, ‘well, that's problematic.’ She wasn't like that right? She wasn't. She wasn't finger wagging at me about it and she wasn't, ‘Oh. Well, that's just the way you feel and that's okay.’ Like it was neither. It was wasn't one of the two. It was just like, sheer, ‘I hear you. I'm hearing you. And I – I – I - I'm listening to you and I understand what you're saying.’

There are broader social implications of what John is describing here. John stated that he believes Trump won the American presidency because he had the support of young men who were like John before he attended Springhouse. He believes the reason these young men act as they do is they do not have access to the kind of love and community that he experienced at Springhouse. John emphasises the importance of not vilifying these young men but to hold love, care and empathy for them, confirming to me that he thinks this quality of holding love, care, and empathy for others is an ideal aspect of being an adult. When prompted about his experience of viewing how men in right-wing circles that he was involved with in his youth influenced his idea of adulthood at the time, he acknowledged that part of his pre-Springhouse notion of what adults do, more specifically “what men do,” involved toxic masculinity and misogyny, racism against Black people, and homophobia. As noted previously, his experiences of connection at Springhouse changed this view towards wanting to avoid becoming this way in his adulthood. He points out that reactions that attack or condemn people who are in the internet hate community trap only “causes them to fortify.”

He feels that accusations levelled aggressively against these individuals only results in their digging in and deepening their resistance. Opening up and being vulnerable, but strong, is the answer according to John.

Regarding how his views are received by others, John stated that he receives blowback from his peers about his view of unconditional human base level love and care for others. This has led him to understand that as an adult you need to choose when to say what you think and when to be quiet:

I've gotten yelled at a few times for saying that stuff [holding love and empathy vs. reacting with aggression to racism]. So, I also think that being that part of being an adult that I've had to learn in particular has been, there's a time and a place to say what you think and there's a time and a place to maybe not.

He indicates that he learned this since being at Springhouse and notes that Springhouse could be more proactive about bringing in ideas that run counter to the general beliefs that people at the school hold. John was surprised that there were fewer people in the outside world that had similar values. He feels that exposure to non-white people and confrontational ideas would have better informed his idea of what adult life outside of Floyd is really like. He indicates that some of his peers who are from marginalised groups are focused on hate and confrontation against those who are biased against them. To his peers, issues like anti-racism are binaries where you are either anti-racist or you are not:

Kinda like the idea of like anti-racism, right? In order to be, you're either, you can't be indifferent. You have to either be actively saying no...You either have to be like, nah, or you're racist and there's no, there's no middle ground on that. And I'm not necessarily like, I don't necessarily disagree with that concept. I do think it's just very complicated.

It appears the adults who interacted with John at Springhouse have instilled the type of adult thinking that Kallio (2011) refers to as integrative thinking, which involves accepting the non-

absolute nature of knowledge, of contradiction or paradox, and being capable of integrating contradiction into an overriding whole. Expanding on this, Kallio connects integrative thinking to relativistic thought, which they describe as involving the ability to understand complexity and cope with ill-structured problems with no clear, objective solutions. Relativistic thought is central to post-formal, epistemic understanding and wisdom models of adult thinking (Kallio, 2011). This stands in contrast to John's peers' reportedly hard, binary view of the complex nature of the psycho-social mechanisms involved with phenomena such as racism. This interaction also reflects research by C. Smith et al. (2011), which suggests that the majority of emerging adults tend to focus on individual differences rather than similarities.

John is not the only participant who seeks to see the world and people in more complex ways. Perspective-taking, having the ability to listen to and appreciate different perspectives, is an important part of adulthood for Angelica. Angelica's internal idea of idealised adulthood prior to Springhouse was to be totally open-minded, a quality she valued before Springhouse. She does point out that activities at Springhouse emphasised the importance of being open-minded for her and gave her practice in being able to listen to different perspectives and finding value in them:

At Springhouse, they, we would have very dedicated circles to going around opening and closing with something that you had to express yourself like 'oh, how do you feel about this today?' and then you would just say it. So I think it helped me, sitting through thirty five to forty people in a circle saying something and trying to be attentive and it happening every day when you open the day and close the day every single day without fail, even if you're late or early. It teaches you, I think, the value of being patient through that, because sometimes it's hard to listen to people, but they taught me you can just sit there and listen to forty people every day, twice a day who need to express themselves too and it helped me maybe like hear the side of people who maybe I wouldn't have connected with otherwise.

From Angelica's perspective, actively connecting with and being open to other people for the

purpose of exploring different ways of being is a defining adult quality. This is something that Angelica already possessed, and Springhouse both reinforced this value in her and helped her be more conscious of it. It also helped her to do it in a healthy way:

Just going out of your way to ask a question or try to get to know somebody, which is something I've been doing a lot more recently as an adult, I think it's definitely a value of being an adult, being open to other people, because I guess when you're younger, sometimes you're just, you want your own little world. You want what you want and see what you see. When you're an adult, seeing what other people see is kind of giving you the option to see the world that way and maybe function that way and it opens doors. So, I think Springhouse definitely helped with that.

Liz describes how for her, everyone at Springhouse brought something unique to the community and each person influenced her ideas in very different ways using different approaches. She finds value in aspects of what each of them had to offer:

I would say that Jenny had a much more direct and fiery approach to things. Whereas [another school leader's] approach to things was much more soft and open and expansive. It was just very different approaches. I did depth mentoring with both of them and so I got to experience the differences of their approaches and kind of what they cultivated in me as a young person, or how they kind of invited me into exploring different aspects of adulthood. I think that both of their approaches to leadership taught me different things about what it can look like to lead and be an adult and I mean, they're both very different people. So I think that being a part of this community in general was a helpful teacher of there's no one way to do this and there's no one way to do it right.

Through being open to different experiences and perspectives, Liz was able to draw on a wide array of ideas and approaches in developing her own idea of what it means to be an adult, as opposed to being limited by a single vision or expectation of how adulthood should look and be lived.

Elliot tells the story of how he grew up in a Christian household, then became an atheist and adopted a materialist/empiricist worldview, then he met a Buddhist student and had conversations with him. These conversations caused him to conclude that he does not have to know everything, which connects to the idea that nobody knows everything stated earlier, a core understanding that defines adulthood for him. This encouraged Elliot to embrace mindfulness and self-awareness and to think more deeply about *why* things are. He discusses how this led him to see things as a spectrum instead of in binaries, connecting directly to his thinking deeply about what it means to be an adult in the solo contemplative time mentioned earlier. He feels that by being open minded to different perspectives, his view of adulthood is much different than it would have otherwise been.

As seen in these themes, experiences at Springhouse had a variety of influences on how participants viewed adulthood at the time of the interviews. Some of the markers of adulthood, such as the importance of their being acknowledged as adults by other adults, independence, and navigating complexity, closely aligned with the views of normative populations across the post-industrial world. When considering other markers seen in the research literature, such as the adolescent to adulthood transition, we have seen the participants discuss these factors, but they have a novel perspective on what these factors mean as compared to their peers in the general population. We have also seen that a number of aspects related to cultivating healthy relationships with both the self and with community were central in how the participants viewed adulthood. These themes of healthy relationships represent considerations that are either absent or not well represented in the research literature, indicating that Springhouse stands as a site where a health-centred vision of adulthood can either take root or be sustained through adolescence.

Having discussed the central themes related to how participants view what it means to be an adult and how they felt their experiences at Springhouse influenced these ideas, I now turn to considerations outside of Springhouse. These discussions, while not central to the research question, situate Springhouse's influence within a wider life context for each individual. These conversations

also illuminate the perceived influence that schooling, family life, and culture had on the participants before and after attending Springhouse. Having this knowledge of how the participants saw adulthood prior to attending Springhouse contributed to my understanding of how Springhouse influenced the participants' views on adulthood more broadly. The responses highlight the transformative nature of Springhouse and its capacity as a sustaining force for alternative ideas about adulthood.

Section Three: External Influences on Adulthood

As part of my research methodology, I recognize that the process of developing one's ideas about what it means to be an adult is complex and begins very early in life. As a means of placing the participants' experiences at Springhouse within the broader context of their lifecourse and culture, I asked them to comment on how they perceived adulthood prior to attending the school as well as about experiences that have influenced on their view of adulthood since attending Springhouse. I also asked their views about the influence of popular media on their idea of adulthood. Some of their responses pointed to Springhouse as being a transformative space that completely changed their view of what it means to be an adult, while for others Springhouse appeared to serve as a support system for already-established views about adulthood to become refined.

Before proceeding, it is essential to note that several confounding factors are present in looking at the pre-and post- Springhouse ideas about adulthood. Most predominant among these factors is the change in age of the participants and the mental, emotional, and physical development that correlates with ageing and experience. The influences that the participants describe are likely tempered by developmental factors tied to their becoming chronologically older and therefore any changes in their perspectives on adulthood cannot be attributed only to their experiences of education.

Pre-Springhouse Notions of Adulthood

Prior to attending Springhouse, Liz felt an enormous pressure when thinking about becoming an adult because in her view, adults were supposed to be “absolute experts, moral exemplars, know exactly what they are doing and do it flawlessly for the rest of their life, and know and follow rules.” She also believed that when one reached a certain point in life, one simply passed into adulthood and acquired all these attributes. John, Cassidy and Felix held similar beliefs about adults being omniscient. Prior to Springhouse, John thought that being an adult meant that you had everything figured out, while Cassidy's idea of what it meant to be an adult was that someone possessed universal knowledge about everything, stating that “before Springhouse, I thought that what made someone adult was that they knew everything and they could answer all my questions.” Regarding the concept of believing adults knew everything, Felix commented:

When I was thirteen, I was assuming I was going to be so on top of my shit, just like a grown-ass person as soon as I hit eighteen and that's obviously not how it goes. That's not really how it works.

In line with normative markers that centre financial independence as one of the top key factors in defining adulthood (Arnett, 2016b, 2024; Axze et al., 2022; Coyle, 2019; Diaz-Strong, 2021; Gilmore, 2019; Ho et al., 2022; Lansford et al., 2021), other participants cited childhood ideas of financial freedom as something that they felt qualified one as an adult. Elliot's traced his pre-Springhouse idea of adulthood as being defined by financial freedom to a strong memory of having a desire for infinite candy when he was eight. Cassidy also had a financially-oriented idea of what adulthood was all about:

Cassidy

I saw adulthood as complete freedom. Like these bitches they can do anything, like anything. I want that. I want to do that. They can do anything. They have no restraints. I didn't think about 'oh maybe they can't do anything because they don't have the money for it'

or whatever, but I was a kid. I was like 'of course they have the money for it. They have a job. When you have a job you can do anything.'

Michael

Right. So, your vision of adulthood was like having a job and being able to have the money to do anything you want whenever you want.

Cassidy

So that's what I was like. I want to do that. I want to be an adult. I mean that's the one aspect of childhood that I thought was a thing.

Like Cassidy, Tatiana's idea of adulthood was centred around external rather than internal factors.

Thinking back to her teenage years, she describes what she thought qualified someone as an adult:

I think at that time I thought it had a lot more to do with external factors and less internal. I think I thought it had more to do with having a job and a family and making a certain amount of money. Yeah. Yeah, like owning a house and owning a car or having a pet. It definitely had a lot more to do with these material things that I thought marked somebody as being an adult.

The sources of these ideas of adulthood are not explicitly mentioned by the participants. However, in several cases, factors influencing the participants' thinking about adulthood are described in detail.

Angelica's internal idea of adulthood prior to Springhouse was to be totally independent with nobody telling her what she could or could not do. She describes her idea of adult freedom prior to Springhouse as:

Being totally independent, not having anybody really tell me what I can or can't do. That was another goal. And it's something that I'm working on every day, you know, obviously, you have to work with other people to get to where you need to be and you have to be humble for that.

It appears that Angelica is now working on overcoming her prior desire for absolute freedom, pointing to a shift in her view of adulthood toward a more interdependent idea.

Many of the participants explicitly discussed how the dominant culture that they grew up in promoted and reinforced certain ideas about what it meant to be an adult. This aligns with the work of Wider et al. (2021) that suggests culture plays a very influential part in defining self-perceptions of subjective adulthood. In the following section, I explore how participants ascribe their views of adulthood prior to attending Springhouse to being a product of the local culture that they were embedded within. This ranged in scope from individual family cultures to the more regional.

Familial and Adult Role-model Influences. Psychological research on identity indicates that parental influence on identity formation is significant (Bosch et al., 2016). Sociological research suggest that one's family of origin is closely linked to identity formation (Benson & Johnson, 2009). Tatiana, Felix and Liz stand as participants who specifically referred to their parents as having an influence on how they formed their early idea of adulthood. Tatiana explained that as a small child, her parents represented adulthood to her. Thinking back to her time before Springhouse, she has no recollection of anyone explicitly telling her what it means to be an adult, but she learned from observing her parents and her family. She states that as a child she believed “an adult has a well-paying job and a family and owns a home. That's what I saw my family do, my parents and my aunts and my uncles.” In Felix's case, they recalled that when they were very young, a band that their parents were fans of became an early role model for Felix's adult aspirations to be a musician. By extension, becoming a musician like those they saw in their youth is a part of the subjective adulthood that they feel in the present. In addition to this, Felix's idea of adulthood was dependent on the adults that they spent time with, including their parents. They give examples such as when they spent time with their parents, they assumed they would be a parent like their parents when they became an adult. Similarly, Liz points to familial influences in the form of many family members being teachers or involved in public education. She assumed her adulthood would involve

education and her college and university training followed this path. Her father was a farmer so she also assumed her adulthood would involve farming in some capacity. She sums this up by stating “it's kind of one of those like, oh, well, whatever your family does, you kind of just like follow a certain trajectory.” This relates to the words of other participants regarding both the negative and positive influences adults from within the family have had on their adult identity development.

Although they did not specify whether the adults they referred to were part of their family, Cassidy and Angelica recognised undesirable adult behaviour in the adults around them and formed their ideas of how they wanted to be as adults in opposition to those behaviours. Prior to Springhouse, Cassidy viewed adults as abusive and controlling. This aligns with research by Cross (2009) which indicated that through role-modelling, children associate adulthood with having both power over young people and power over decision-making that could either protect or harm children. In response to this, Cassidy's ideal of adulthood was that she would not be controlling. She makes specific reference to not wanting to control her own children when and if she decided to have them in her adulthood. She admits that this thinking was from her perspective as a child wanting to do whatever she wanted, without limitations. This desire to have freedom to do anything at any time reflects how many emerging adults desire to live their lives (Arnett, 2024; C. Smith et al., 2011).

Angelica was less specific about why she had an internal resentment toward adults but felt that she could be a better adult than the adults around her:

So my biggest thing was like, I honestly did not have a lot of, not necessarily respect, but because I, externally, I was very respectful. But internally, I had a lot of resentment towards adults. I never really thought they did a proper job. I could have raised myself better sometimes. So I had a lot of resentment and that's the biggest thing that I had to work past because I realised being an adult, sometimes it's so difficult to make the right decision and you never really want to make the wrong one.

She did not indicate when the shift happened, but from this we can see her thoughts on this have softened and she now recognises that some of what she perceived as inadequate adult behaviour was related to the complexities of decision-making as an adult.

Familial influences often reflect wider cultural beliefs, values, norms and mores. The participants also shared how these broader social forces influenced their idea of what adulthood meant to them before they attended Springhouse.

Dominant Cultural Influences. Moving to the influence of wider culture, we can see how prior to Springhouse, ideas from dominant culture are prominent in how Tatiana and Liz framed what it means to be an adult. There is a strong contrast between their dominant-culture-inspired, pre-Springhouse views on adulthood and the views they held after Springhouse. Tatiana's earlier ideas of adulthood were implicitly learned through family environment, local culture, and popular media:

These were things that I just kind of saw the adults around me do and assumed that's what it meant to be an adult. I also grew up in the Midwest and people in the Midwest, it's a certain way of living and people are very, generally speaking, pretty traditional. They do the things. Like, they, you know, they're a dream, right? It's like, to be an adult one has a well-paying job and a family and owns a home. I think that media and culture also puts those beliefs around... There's not a lot of resistance to that idea. I didn't know anybody before I really moved to Virginia that questioned those things.

Based on this, it appears that Springhouse may have been the first place where she encountered a community who offered an alternative to the concept of adulthood she learned in her youth. I find this interesting given her unschooling background as I expected unschooling to encourage more of a tendency to live against the grain of dominant society.

Another participant who pointed out how the dominant culture around them exerted a strong influence on how they saw adulthood was Liz. The structured view of adulthood that she held in her

youth was largely impressed upon her by her local culture and the social expectations it placed on a person like her:

Liz

In part, I would say because of how I was raised. I come from rural America and it is a place where it's very much so the narrative was, you know, work hard. Do the right thing. Follow the path. Stay on the straight and narrow. You know, get in your track. Stay there. And that's very much so the kind of narrative that I was taught.

Michael

Taught. So, was that kind of coming from only your family? Or you said rural America. So, it was just kind of like-

Liz

Yeah, I would say family and the culture here in general. It was an interesting one because it's like we want you to thrive, we want you to be successful. We don't want you to be too successful and I think being a woman also has a role to play in that as well. So, rural America. It's like, you know, don't get too far above your raising. Don't shoot for the moon. It's like stay small. Stay in your lane. Don't rock the boat. You know, you can be a teacher. You can be a nurse. You could be a teller at the bank. Or whatever the thing is. I mean, if you want to be a doctor and a lawyer, that's fine too but don't get too – it's kind of like, don't get too crazy. But it's also, if you do succeed, you're not really supposed to talk about that either. So, there's this, very much so, a stay small stay humble vibe. Don't ask for too much. Accept what you get. Like, you know, bootstrap it. Whatever the narrative is. So. Yeah. Anyway, all of those things are part of it.

Both accounts illustrate the strong pressure to conform that is exerted by their local culture (Gilmore, 2019; Lansford et al., 2021; Wider et al., 2021), which serves as a contrast to the kinds of adulthood that both Liz and Tatiana embrace now as adults. Both Liz and Tatiana's accounts also

hint at the influence that Springhouse's focus on reflexivity may have had on their sense of agency. As noted earlier, personal reflexivity has an influence on social actors' perceptions of what they are capable of in the present and what they feel they might achieve in the future (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015).

As an agent of dominant culture, institutional schooling exerts an influence over the development of one's ideas about what it means to be an adult. Several of the participants shared how their experiences in public school prior to Springhouse influenced their concept of adulthood. Other participants shared how their experiences in diverse alternative education situations instilled ideas in them about being adult, some of which were surprising and unexpected.

Prior School Experiences. Most of the participants, except for Cassidy and John, discussed how their prior school experiences influenced their idea of adulthood. In alignment with one of the assumptions I had going into this study, many of these recollections involved institutional schooling presenting a linear vision of adult life centred around employment. Elliot spent five months in public school in grade six. He remembered his brief time in public school instilling in him the idea of a linear path that one was expected to take in life, with Elliot stating that "the main idea that was pushed to me was just a path you were supposed to take." This path he described was to finish middle school, then finish high school. After high school one was expected to go to college, then get a job. As the final step, one would retire from their job. Elliot said that he thought this sounded perfectly fine until he went to Springhouse. A similar story is told by Liz, who prior to Springhouse held a linear view of adulthood from her time in public school that consisted of a plan to graduate high school, go to college, choose what you will do for work, and then get a job that you will keep for the rest of your life. Both Elliot and Liz's views of a linear progression reflect normative ideas about an idealized linear path to adulthood popular with young people engaged in Adulting as a model of what it means to be an adult (Grose, 2017; Krampe, 2017; Mitchell & Lennox, 2020).

Liz also shared a formative episode related to her school experiences. Liz attended a

prestigious private school as an adolescent and while she was a student there, she remembers an older woman judging her career choices:

I expressed an interest on [a career aptitude questionnaire] around social work and probably the pastoral or spiritual care in some capacity and I remember this lady came up behind me, who was one of the adults in the room and it said social worker on the thing and she's like, I still remember this comment. She said, 'your family has sent you to Broadwater Academy and you want to be a social worker?' And it was like, the message of that was like, 'social worker, unacceptable, not good enough.' Oh, okay. What do I do? I was like, hmm. I was like, 'why do you have a problem with social work?' Anyway, there's a lot more to unpack with that around classism and all sorts of things, discrimination but anyway, so yes, there was very strong messaging around all of those kinds of things. So it took a long time for me to kind of figure that. And I've done numerous things now with my career and it has not been one way and I have not done, I have not stayed in the lane.

This illustrates a form of institutional pressure to pursue a particular vision of adulthood that is appropriate to the school's profile. Liz's idea of adulthood opposed these constraints but it is evident that there was some uncertainty about how she should move forward because of the pressure to conform. When asked in the interview, she confirmed that her current view is that an important part of being an adult is understanding that you don't need to stay in the lane that your culture expects of you.

Angelica's experience of how alternative schooling influenced her idea of what adulthood meant prior to Springhouse was presented in the negative. In discussing her following a particular pathway, specifically her experience with a Waldorf education model, she stated:

Teachers and sometimes my parents, friends, the adults that I was surrounded with were very, I guess a lot of them came from the world of education so they very much have a very discipline like, 'this is how growing up should be. This is what you need to do. This is what

your outcome should look like and if it's not, then you're doing something wrong.' So I hated being restricted and I felt like a lot of my childhood, I was very much restricted and suppressed because of adults. I still have so much respect for the Waldorf community, but I think they can be really like forceful with children about their ideas. I felt like there was no other world. And then when I hit the real world, I was like, 'oh, there's actually other possibilities of how to be.' And I love it so much how [the Waldorf community] are but I guess it's not fully for me. It just brings me relief that it's not the path I have to go down anymore.

Influenced by the educational experiences in her youth, Angelica thought that being an adult was about having power over others through appealing to the authority of adulthood to make people into something they are not. She saw adults as using adult power to convince children their beliefs and understanding is not valid:

I think deep down, I knew that I would choose my own path. But I felt like I was wasting time being somebody I wasn't. Sometimes being a child and no matter what I said and no matter what I did, it was like, 'no, do this, like, we're the adults we know better.' Sometimes I just felt like I really did know better than them and that's what frustrated me a lot. So, but I guess it's also just being a kid sometimes. Yeah. My idea of adulthood was very much like, you just have a power trip.

This connects to the findings of Cross (2009) which indicated that young children, through observing the ways they are treated by teachers and other adults in school situations, come to associate becoming an adult largely with having power over others.

Angelica's vision how she would like to be as an adult grew in opposition to how she was treated and is grounded in a desire to have power over her own life, not the lives of others. In discussing what she perceived to be her Waldorf school's rigid set of expectations of how she should think and behave, she raises an important point about indoctrination (see Callan & Arena,

2009) and certain strict educational visions of how one *ought* to turn out. Even in the sphere of alternative and holistic education, which Waldorf is mainly associated with, in the absence of viable identity alternatives and freedom to explore those alternatives, possibilities for adulthood are limited by the single path some interpretations of alternative approaches to education present.

As a final example of how schooling influenced participants' views of adulthood, Felix remembered wanting to be a teacher when they became an adult:

Well, maybe I want to be a teacher because all of the adults that I had really positive relationships with were my teachers. So I was like, oh, well, maybe me as an adult is a teacher. Maybe I'm a teacher. But also at the same time I was having this, I want to be an emo rock star.

This seems like their valuing a teaching or mentorship role as part of adulthood was supported and amplified by their time at Springhouse. Similarly to the earlier comment regarding Liz's existing views aligning with Springhouse's, this indicates that in Felix's case Springhouse can be less as transformative and more of a space of opportunity for Felix's pre-existing idea of adulthood to develop.

As a balance to asking participants about how their experiences before Springhouse influenced their ideas about what it means to be an adult, I also asked them if they could identify any experiences they had since graduating that they felt had a significant influence on their concept of adulthood.

Post-Springhouse Notions of Adulthood

Similar to asking participants about their ideas of adulthood prior to attending Springhouse, I was interested in seeing how their thoughts about what it means to be an adult had developed since graduating from Springhouse. I was interested in exploring this line of thought for two reasons. The first was to see if any of their views of adulthood that they cited as being influenced by Springhouse were actually more significantly rooted in their experiences outside of the school since graduating.

The second was for me to make note of participant responses that seemed related to the Springhouse experiences they had shared with me in the first part of the interview or to Springhouse's philosophy as I understood it. If any potential connections emerged, I would have an opportunity to explore with the participant the possibility that what they thought might not be related to Springhouse might actually be influenced by Springhouse. Through asking follow-up questions, I could potentially catch influences from Springhouse that the participant might have overlooked during the main part of the interview where I asked them about Springhouse influences explicitly. Both of these reasons had repercussions on engaging with my research question in terms of establishing the influence that Springhouse experiences had on each participant's view of what it means to be an adult.

Springhouse alumni referenced several things that had influenced their thinking, including expansions and refinements of what they learned in Springhouse and enhancements in their subjective adulthood, but also challenges from dominant society to their Springhouse-inspired vision of adulthood.

The Hard Lessons of Living in Society. Regarding entering the world outside of Springhouse, John described it as jarring, saying that "it was definitely a real rite of passage, less cushioned rite of passage." The absence in his society of the ideal of mutual trust and vulnerability that was transformative for John at Springhouse was a challenge for him when he moved to the city of Richmond, Virginia. He feels that mutual trust with vulnerability is very rare and mentions that he would like to have the sort of connection with his therapist that he had with his mentor at Springhouse, but it does not exist. After graduation, John found that taking responsibility for *fending-for-oneself* (Lythcott-Haims, 2021) was a large part of life now, but out of necessity for survival, not as a marker of adulthood:

I have to pay bills that I have to work, not so that I can get, you know, some fun gadget I want, or like go out to dinner because I feel like it. Because I like need to sleep somewhere.

Related to this, Cassidy's current idea of adulthood is connected to the resistance to constraint in

childhood, but she makes some notable comments when discussing this idea:

I think I have this perception that the older I get the more like stable my life is going to get, meaning I will then be able to travel more. But I know that's not exactly realistic because you've got like all these different things that you're juggling.

Challenges beyond finances and survival have also shaped John's view of adult life since leaving Springhouse. John spoke of witnessing a shooting outside his apartment in Richmond, alongside regular exposure to poverty and racial discrimination as daily realities in the city. Although in some cases observation of injustices prompt feelings of becoming an adult (Diaz-Strong, 2021), reflecting on the challenges he has faced since leaving Floyd, John presented a mild critique of Springhouse for how it did not prepare him for the harshness of life outside of Floyd. He felt that the homogeneous, caring community of Floyd acted as a buffer against experiencing broader social problems. The Springhouse community was nurturing but did not prepare John for the human suffering that he was exposed to when moving to Richmond. As a similar critique of inadequate preparation for the world outside Springhouse, Cassidy also felt that Springhouse's small community did not give her a robust preparation for being able to practice making the choices of which community to surround herself with:

I think part of that process of growing up and becoming an adult is, I have the choice who I surround myself with. It took a few years for me to learn who were the kind of people I wanted to be around. And trial and error because I've had lots of bad experiences in college with friend groups that were just terrible – like ditched me. Then I was like, 'okay, is there, are there any nice people around here?' Then I found nice people and it's like, 'okay, now I know who I want to surround myself with.'

Part of John and Cassidy's difficulties with orienting to living in larger centres may be related to young people from rural areas experiencing emerging adulthood differently than urbanites. Young people from rural areas often experience emerging adulthood as transition from rural to urban and

the challenges that go along with this transition, including tensions between their internalised beliefs and new experiences of the city (San Antonio, 2020). Considering the vastly different value systems between Springhouse and the dominant culture, this sense of disorientation when moving from rural to urban areas is likely amplified even more. John and Cassidy's comments also reflect a deeper challenge of remaining resilient in the face of uncertainty and precarity that many young adults face across North America in 2025, where resilience in the face of social and economic inequalities serves as a survival strategy, not a pathway to thriving adulthood (Ho et al., 2022).

Tatiana also communicated frustration with how the world outside of Springhouse presented a barrier to living her ideals. However, her persistent relationship with Springhouse alumni continues to have an influence on her idea of adulthood and also serves to reinforce the importance of holding the values and sense of self that they cultivated at Springhouse in the face of a dominant culture that does not support those values and sense of self:

I meet often enough with my peers and my friends about how we want to navigate the world and who we want to be and our values and I guess also a lot about how we navigate the difficulty of our values, the things that we're required to do and the state of the world. Those are three points of tension that I think many young people are dealing with and it's, 'okay these are my values and this is also – I know I have to make money and also there's a genocide going on all over the world and so it's like, okay I am living in the capital of the world where everything is made for Americans and every day that I exist in this country is another day of complacency,' so I think we talk a lot about how to navigate these external systems and still stay true to our selves.

This sentiment reminds me of something participants shared with me in my previous research on an alternative school community in Saskatchewan (Lyngstad, 2020, 2022).

Several participants in that earlier study spoke of how maintaining contact with others who share the values from one's alternative school is essential for sustaining those values when leaving

the school and entering dominant culture. By keeping in contact with other Springhouse alumni and collectively discussing how they can negotiate dominant culture while keeping their values intact, they may be less likely to fall back into dominant models of adulthood. This sentiment is echoed by Liz, who shared her ideas about how supportive community throughout education is important, but the question arises as to what happens when graduates enter the world outside of school. There is a difficulty with maintaining the kind of awareness and connection present in the school when outside of the supportive environment.

Liz remarks on the "narrow, tunnel vision expectations of adulthood" that represents what she views as the normative idea and contrasts it with her own idea of what it means to be an adult. Notably, she points out the challenge with navigating between these worlds. She recognises that her idea of adulthood is different from the dominant view and must be negotiated:

To be back [in coastal Virginia] now having this new understanding of adulthood, but also be operating still in this culture that is still holding those kind of narrow, tunnel vision expectations of adulthood while holding this other awareness and like needing to somehow dance within that.

Part of Liz's concept of adulthood is to be someone who can act as a mentor/support for others who hold these alternative values in broader society. In discussing how Springhouse influenced how she sees herself as a source of community-building in her life after Springhouse, she considers the following:

So one of the things that we talk about [at Springhouse] is that, you know, we can create these containers for alternative education or facilitate people through rites of passage but if we're putting people right back into the culture from which they came that is unhealthy or immature, et-cetera, that it's difficult for people to continue to stay present to the changes that they went through or to stay close to the person that they are becoming if the culture that they're, that we're thrown back into isn't supporting that. And so I think that

Springhouse as a community was really instrumental in understanding that dynamic. And in my own personal sense of commitment of being an adult, who's going to be one of those people that can not just facilitate people through some of those processes, but to be the type of adult that can help hold that container for people post-rites-of-passage with the hope of being one of those support people over the long term.

Not having a like-minded community to engage with after leaving Springhouse made keeping her focus on calling and vocation more difficult. She has since tried to engage in similar communities whenever she can in order to keep focused. Angelica's experiences in society outside of Springhouse remind her that unlike the community at Springhouse, not everyone has her best interests in mind:

I will say honestly working in the food industry and after that studying abroad and going to college, that was like another wall of, 'oh wait not everybody has your back you know?' like 'don't just don't be too expressive with everybody because sometimes like they really don't have your best interest in mind and then they'll use it against you' and I really wish the world wasn't like that.

These general challenges that have been informing participants' continued identity construction as adults illustrates the tension that exists between the culture of Springhouse and the dominant culture and the effort required to maintain the ideal of adulthood that participants developed while at Springhouse. This extends to the experiences of graduates who have decided to attend institutional higher education.

Frustration with higher education also served as a challenge and an influence on ideas of what adulthood is all about for Springhouse alumni. When it comes to higher education, most emerging adults feel that college is what prepares you for the world of work, and thus adulthood (Arnett, 2024). American post-secondary schools are geared towards open exploration in many arenas. However, for many emerging adults, college life in the United States is about finding what

job you want to do and mating your identity to a career so that you can make money while feeling personally satisfied with the work you do (Arnett, 2024). Angelica and other Springhouse alumni continue to discuss the value of college, sharing that "the biggest debate for us as Springhouse students has been, is there value behind going to college? Should we just start our own lives based on the skills that [we developed at Springhouse]?" These questions reflect Springhouse alumni's concerns about how best to begin their lives as adults and have important consequences regarding their interactions with, and opinions of, the broader world. Tatiana's experience with college does not resonate with her idea of being an adult and, in her opinion teaches people little that is actually useful about being an adult:

Michael

Did you find your college experience informed your idea of what it means to be an adult in a positive or a negative way?

Tatiana

Yeah, that's an interesting question. Did it inform an idea? Well, I guess I should just say that I hate being in college and I think college is a big scam and so kind of my experience being in college has been full of tension. It's very different from my previous educational experience when I was at Springhouse or being unschooled. It's a very different system and structure and so, I don't know if I necessarily feel like I'm directly at odds or like I feel at odds with the place that I attend college and college as a whole in the United States, but I don't know if that has really informed – I guess it has. I think part of the reason that I really dislike college is I don't think it actually teaches young people how to be adults. I don't think it prepares people to think critically or engage with the world critically. There's a lot of people who I've met that have graduated from the place that I go to college and I just am so disappointed with how little they have actually learned about themselves or how to navigate the world and certainly think critically. That's a big thing for me and so I'm just so confused

how an individual could go through a system for four years and you come out not really changed, and how a system, how their professors, could have allowed that to continue for four years. You take so many classes every semester and it's just like math isn't mathing and it's because you know we're not, these people are not being taught you know? The point is not to actually create, or educate people that actually, in a way that's holistic and grounded.

Tatiana's critique of her college tracks with statistically normative views of what higher education is for in the eyes of many emerging adults. Arnett (2024) has found many emerging adults see college as a site for personal growth and identity formation. However, according to research by C. Smith et al. (2011), higher education is seen by the majority of emerging adults as a means to an end toward attaining financial, and by extension material, goals through earning a credential that will provide access to higher paying jobs. Few emerging adults even hint at the more abstract social and personal developmental benefits of higher education (C. Smith et al., 2011). C. Smith et al.'s observations seem to line up with Tatiana's experience, where she found it very frustrating being around others who she did not consider to be adults, when she expected college aged people to be adults and college to be preparing people for adulthood.

In this section of the interview, I risked influencing Tatiana's response by completing a sentence for her. However, she emphatically agreed with my observation, reflecting her approval that my assumption that she felt her adult-aged peers were under-developed was correct:

Michael

I guess that's an influence on your idea of adulthood too yeah

Tatiana

Yeah, yeah. Being around people who I think are not, not,

Michael

Not adults?

Tatiana

Yeah. yeah.

Michael

I shouldn't have put that in your mouth.

Tatiana

Who I do not think are adults.

Angelica related a similar sentiment, sharing with me how she and her fellow Springhouse alumni feel that they have a head start on their peers in terms of emotional intelligence and self-understanding. She shared her perspective that “sometimes we feel like we're a little more ahead of people our age because we have become in touch with ourselves and our emotions a little bit quicker. We were forced to.” Despite this feeling that other college students may not have the level of emotional and self-understanding that she does, Angelica does want to go to college in order to be exposed to more perspectives:

For me, I really wanted to go to college because I can be really academically driven and I wanted to learn things and I wanted to build more community with people around my age and hear more perspectives too. Because I love Springhouse, I love all of the experiences I've gone through. They're all, they've all been really alternative, but I also don't want to push aside other people's perspectives, if that makes sense.

Liz also experienced difficulty with institutional higher education following her time at Springhouse. The affirmation of following her calling did not factor in to Liz's post-secondary education, which seem strange to me given she did a Master of Divinity, a degree where I would expect she would find great support for her vocation. However, compared to Springhouse, she felt the traditional university education was "stale." Post-Springhouse, she has had difficulty figuring out how to integrate her idea of how to be an adult student in her subsequent experiences with educational institutions:

As someone who had been both student and faculty in this very alternative model, I very

much so struggled with how I was forced to get back into the box of, all right, this is what education looks like in America right now and this is how universities are pushing for things and this is how we're going to try to, you know, do the one plus one equals two thing again.

From these accounts of higher education, the Springhouse alumnus' attitude that education is about more than learning workplace-ready skills and completing courses strongly emerges. The lack of interpersonal connection, focus on packaged answers and lack of critical thinking, and general sense of emotional immaturity of the students seems to be seen by the participants as a reflection of the broader, under-developed dominant society.

Coming back to more general trends of challenges that Springhouse graduates face as they navigate becoming adults in dominant society, John had much to say about balancing survival and thriving as an adult in his attempts to maintain a sense of meaning while trying to meet his basic needs. Three years after graduating from Springhouse and striking out on his own, John has found that the financial need for survival interferes with his desire to engage in ongoing explorations of self and what it means to be human. Thus, for John adulthood is about balancing the need to survive with doing something meaningful. He stated that when it comes to adulthood, “you need to pay your bills, but you also like want to do something that's fulfilling and gives you depth in your life.” Still, John works to maintain his focus on the vision of adulthood that he developed at Springhouse, with some refinements based on his recent experiences. During his time at Springhouse, the idea of money buying happiness was discussed but it was abstract and rhetorical. John's lived experience has made the phenomenon more visceral. He does acknowledge though that financial stability offers the opportunity for human development that is more difficult if one does not have financial means:

I try not to relate money to development. As a person I'd really like to separate the spiritual and the financial. I don't know if that's healthy, I don't know if that's actually really the better option of the two...I do think that they're interconnected right? They have relationships with one another and I also think that the money enables the spiritual in a lot of

ways. That's why I kind of do subscribe to the idea that money does buy happiness in a way because money buys time. And time, you can meditate in that time. So, I don't like to be like 'I need money in order to be happy' but there's a reality of money buys the privilege to grow and develop right in a lot of ways. If you're too focused on your rent, I mean that's where I've been recently is I've been really struggling because I'm too focused on paying my rent to even like think about 'how am I doing?'

John's struggle reflects the fact that precarity is more extreme for millennials than for those living from previous generations, with many young Americans supplementing or replacing the traditional nine to five workday with a five to nine workday filled with side-hustles and gig-economy work in order to survive (Ho et al., 2022). His response also expresses the idea that a majority of emerging adults see adulthood as being about doing things that you have to do, not necessarily what you want to do (Arnett, 2024), with the things that one must do for survival being defined largely in economic terms such as paying bills, paying rent, and buying groceries. Frustratingly, this comes at the expense of personal emotional growth and development, which is seen as a luxury in dominant society in the United States. John's views reflect how emerging adults begin to recognise the flaws of institutions and society, which leads to questioning of how to balance conformity and realise their authentic selves (San Antonio, 2020). Something that proves to be quite challenging.

As emerging adults' sense of subjective adulthood has shifted away from traditional markers toward an emphasis on financial independence (Gilmore, 2019), many emerging adults cannot imagine what a life worth living looks like beyond financial security, starting a family, living in the suburbs and buying lots of material possessions (C. Smith et al., 2011). In contrast to John's perspective, C. Smith et al. (2011) reported their participants did not associate negatively with mass consumerism, with the majority of participants seeing it as a good thing that enhances their lives. John points out that he feels this is something unique to the hyper-capitalist society in which he lives, and this is not necessarily a universal feature of adulthood, even commenting on how he

views the state of living in the dominant culture of the United States as abnormal:

I feel like [a focus on work is] a lot of the ways that adults learn things, at least in the hyper-capitalist America system that we have here. I've been learning a lot about how incredibly just hyper-work everything is here and that's apparently not normal.

John points out that the economic system does not promote human connection and does not encourage people to explore what being human is all about and feels that employment, pursuing financial security, and prestige are not qualifiers of being an adult, they are necessities of survival. Much of what John expresses here aligns with the views that although adulthood was traditionally considered as an accomplishment that carried with it special rights and privileges (Arnett, 2024), it is now often perceived to represent stagnation, constraint, and becoming static (Arnett, 2024). To emerging adults earning lots of money and having a high-prestige job is not much of a priority as having time to enjoy life (Arnett, 2024). For many emerging adults then, getting a “real job” and moving out of this phase of enjoying life is seen as the final marker of adulthood (Arnett, 2024). The difference with John and the other participants compared to statistically normative emerging adults seems to be that their idea of enjoying life is largely about emotional and spiritual pursuits, whereas according to the literature most young adults do not seem to be as interested in such pursuits. John recognises this culturally dominant view of life and refers to being in a place of financial precarity compared to many other chronological adults. His observation of how he does not have access to the same perspective as some of his peers reflects the idea in the literature that realistic availability of transition markers influences their importance. For example, when work or education are unattainable, parenthood or marriage may take their place as most important markers of adulthood (Lansford et al., 2021).

Elliot seems to be negotiating the balance between survival and maintaining meaning in his life in a less critical way than John. Although his first response to my question of “what are you doing now” focused on work for money, his response, coupled with his previously mentioned focus

on patiently trusting the process of seeking his purpose, point to an acknowledgment that he has done and intends to do, work related to his purpose. However, for now he is content with simply living his life as it is. It also illustrates the idea that not all jobs contribute to identity exploration, with some being just for survival (Arnett, 2024).

These at times challenging experiences with engaging with the world outside the community of trust at Springhouse and the close-knit community of Floyd changed the way several of the participants view adulthood. These experiences also provided opportunities for them to reflect, expand, and refine their pre-existing ideas about what it means to be an adult and about life in general.

Refining and Expanding of Personal Philosophies and Perspectives. Not everything that the Springhouse alumni have encountered in the world have represented a struggle against their views on adulthood. Some experiences have subtly enhanced, refined, and supported ideas that they developed at Springhouse, making them more nuanced. While at Springhouse John used to think that becoming smarter made one more ethical. However, life outside Springhouse has taught him otherwise because he has learned through experience "there are so many messed up systems designed by smart people."

For Elliot, since leaving Springhouse living a life of "working and eating food" has shown him that a life like this, which he refers to as "mundane" and "confined," is an option for adulthood. He confirms that this was an option that he had not considered before living it and that he has learned life does not need to be a big adventure. Realizing this reinforces his idea of adulthood as being up to him and what he makes of it, echoing elements of Springhouse's philosophy being refined through lived experience. In Cassidy's case, through independence-supporting activities at Springhouse, she felt as though she did not need other people. However, since leaving Springhouse she has recognised the value of community as a source of support. She now sees community not something to rely on, but as a support mechanism:

I do realise as well, I've kind of gone through this phase of adulthood where at first, I was very much like, I don't want to have to rely on anyone. I don't have to want to depend on anyone. Now I'm into this phase of, it's actually okay if I do, and that's why we're here as people: that's why we're a community. I need people and I also think that I had to go through feeling like I wanted to be alone and didn't want to rely on anyone to be able to get to that point and that's, I mean, that's a journey that I've gone through since Springhouse that doesn't really have anything to do with Springhouse.

In Angela's earlier point about how she processed her relationship with trauma, she related how the community at Springhouse helped her recognise a dysfunctional part of her behaviour, which was remedied by allowing herself to be vulnerable. However, after graduating from Springhouse she realised that this vulnerability has its time and place and is not always healthy to dwell on the underlying issue that was causing her unhealthy behaviour:

And I think [at Springhouse] I let [my trauma] out. But then I had to learn how to put a cap on it. Because you can't just keep going off and really reliving all of your traumas and hoping that one day it'll just go away. I think the biggest, the biggest way to let it go away is to acknowledge it, accept it. Then the biggest acknowledgment is saying it doesn't hold any power over me anymore. Just releasing it and letting go and every action after that does not have to do with it because then it's like, if it does, then it's still holding over you, you're still giving it power to control you. So that was my biggest lesson [since leaving Springhouse], I think so far.

Liz mentioned that work in other learning communities after Springhouse has reinforced her long-standing ideas of the importance of serving community as an important part of adulthood. Observing adults has continued to influence Angelica's ideas about adulthood. Since she graduated from Springhouse, watching other adults cope with adversity by remaining psychologically resilient has provided a model for the value of being able to do this in adulthood. Her own experience

helping her sister with a new baby also reinforced her attitude that the mind has the capacity to overcome physical limitations of the body that grew out of her outdoor experiences at Springhouse.

Exploring the participants' views on adulthood before and after their experiences at Springhouse illustrate the transformative nature of the school and also its capacity to support certain visions of adulthood that align with the philosophy and set of values that the school embraces. Influences on ideas about adulthood come from many places, and one that I considered worthy of exploring with the participants was the influence that popular media may have had on their concept of what it means to be an adult. The point behind asking this question was to see how the influence of media interacted with other experiences – especially with regard to the influence of Springhouse.

Media Influences

Ideas of what adulthood should look like are communicated through popular fiction and imagination (Ho et al., 2022). This, combined with my own conscious awareness about how media of many types have influenced my own idea of what it means to be an adult, prompted me to ask participants about their views on how books, television, films, and video games have informed their concept of adulthood. For Elliot, ideas about what it means to be an adult came from the book series *Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis. He describes how as a young person, the books presented a character that resonated with him as being a positive representation of adulthood:

There's a magical talking lion that knows its purpose and knows everyone's purpose and kind of this feeling of like awe at the calm or like the wisdom of some of these creatures like the lion Aslan and kind of just seeing calmness and patience and wisdom as the epitome of adulthood. That's what the elder is, or at least that stereotype or archetype.

This description of Aslan has clear parallels with his current ideal of adulthood such as his focus on finding one's purpose and valuing calmness and patience and wisdom as echoed in his admiration of qualities expressed by the mentors at Springhouse. This seems to point to Springhouse as an *education-as-proxy* (Persson, 2012) support for pre-existing values to express themselves and

become refined. Elliot also referred to Bill Plotkin's (2008) circular model of human development in *Nature and the Human Soul*, referring to the adult phase on that wheel as something that influenced his thinking about adulthood that potentially came before Springhouse. He indicates that he possibly knew a bit about Bill Plotkin through homeschooling. He was uncertain about this. However, as stated throughout this piece, Springhouse has drawn heavily on Plotkin's ideas since its beginnings.

Tatiana explained that for her, a formative piece of media was *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* series. Buffy represented a young woman coming into herself and Tatiana clarified that in terms of adulthood, Buffy represented embracing one's identity and personhood, traits that Tatiana seems to value to this day. She also emphasised that media is not the place that she would go to learn about adulthood. Cassidy's ideals of adulthood from media were from being exposed to a negative concept of what it means to be an adult. In her childhood, the stories she read were about adventure but she herself felt trapped with little independence as a young person, especially when she moved to the United States from Australia. Thus, adulthood represented a potential pathway to independence and adventure and escape from her perceived restraints of youth. In discussing this, Cassidy shared "I think I look to media to inspire what I want to do with my life less of who I want to be as a person and more of what I want to do." Cassidy's comment here has some implications for identity construction through media. It is also interesting to see how her idea of adulthood as influenced by Springhouse certainly focuses more on who she wants to be as a person and how this approach may not have been part of her current project of identity construction if not for her time at Springhouse.

When asked about influential media, Angelica mentioned that she liked watching Studio Ghibli movies when she was young. From my own experience with these films, nearly all works from this studio such as *Princess Mononoke*, *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, and *My Neighbour Totoro*, embrace themes of non-violence and selfless kindness in their protagonists and stories.

These films could have had an influence on Angelica's ideas of unconditional kindness as a defining quality of adulthood. In this case, Springhouse served as both support for this view of adulthood, and a means of balancing Angelica's tendency to surrender her own needs for the sake of others. Another piece of media mentioned by Angelica as memorable was a film where a woman is physically objectified and subsequently stoned to death by her community. She felt this imprinted on her an idea that some adults behave in cruel and irrational ways towards women and presented a negative view of what adults are capable of.

Prior to Springhouse, Felix's idea of adulthood was largely defined visually, emphasising products and fashion, which represents in some ways a conception of adulthood grounded in outward appearances:

I have really vivid memories going back really early so, my ideas of adulthood from the jump were very much this, like, 2006 to 2009, visual aesthetic of, like, everyone, when I'm twenty, everyone's gonna have a flip phone and they're all gonna wear, like, boot-cut jeans, you know?

This visual and commodity-oriented representation of adulthood ties in with the emo subculture⁴, being a fan of the music and YouTube influencers. Felix envisioned an adulthood that aligned with the aesthetic of emo.

I was in public school from when I was ten to fourteen. My idea of adulthood was a person with a bunch of tattoos in skinny jeans with an emo fringe. I wanted to, I mean, I was really into emo YouTubers. So, my idea of an adult was those YouTubers, the people who were making these comedy videos or day in the life videos or makeup videos or whatever I was into at that point and the musicians from the bands that I liked.

In some ways, based on what they said in other parts of the interview about what being an adult is about, it seems like Felix's idea of adulthood was changed by their time at Springhouse.

⁴ Emo is a youth subculture defined by certain ways of dressing, behaving, and especially by the musical genre of the same name, which focuses on emotionally charged lyrics and intense music in a style similar to punk rock. It gained popularity with youth in the early 2000s.

Springhouse potentially drew out and supported deeper and more nuanced aspects of Felix's view of adulthood.

Finally, pieces of media that influenced Liz's idea of what it means to be an adult include books revolving around spiritual work, personal development and vocational work by Bill Plotkin, Parker Palmer, John O' Donahue, and Wendell Berry:

I would say that books in a lot of ways...have been helpful teachers. I would say whether it's from someone as concrete as Brene Brown all the way to someone who's on the more mystical end of the spectrum. I think a lot of my perspective on that can go from that more concrete side of the house to the more mystical.

She also mentioned C.S. Lewis and Lord of the Rings but did not go into detail about how these texts were influential. Based on the type of book that she is referencing here, Springhouse clearly served as a support and a place of growth for her pre-existing interest in spiritually-oriented ideas about adulthood, with all of these authors aligning closely with Springhouse's holistic educational philosophy.

In general, although many adults define their adulthood based on comparing their lives to normative standards (Settersten, 2011), Springhouse alumni reflect a more internally-defined sense of what it means to be an adult, aligning them with young people and movements of young people who choose to *opt-out* of pursuing socially acceptable markers (Lansford et al., 2021). Overall, Springhouse alumni present a picture of adulthood that aligns with normative models of emerging adulthood and subjective adulthood, but with some significant deviations. Much of what participants communicated aligns with what Diaz-Strong (2021) refer to as the *behaviour model of adulthood*, which is based on character qualities or internal criteria, not roles, typical milestones, or developmental stages. In some ways, these results reflect a general trend in emerging adults, whose criteria for adulthood rank independence, self-sufficiency, and personal responsibility as the highest indicators of adult status, with changes in role such as parenthood or marriage, ranked lowest

(Vosylis, 2021).

Through discussion of these findings, it is apparent that the Springhouse alumni with whom I spoke both represent typical emerging adults and differ from them considerably. In many ways, they struggle with the same issues that their peers do regarding identity, precarity, and relationships. However, it also appears that their educational experiences at Springhouse have equipped them with emotional and relational tools that are serving them well in developing healthy relationships within themselves and with others. Although they share a collective challenge in maintaining their worldview within the dominant culture, as a community they seem to be maintaining the bonds required to further their goals of personal and societal transformation.

In reflecting on the isolated qualities of adulthood shared by the participants and looking for themes across the stated influences of their Springhouse experiences, two major commonalities are apparent. These commonalities involve the importance of the mentorship relationship alongside a general influence flowing from the school community itself through the school climate and the educational aims that underlie the experiences. The influence of mentorship and the philosophy driving the community in the form of Sourced Design are explored as the synthesis of the findings in the final chapter. In following chapter, I present my interpretation of the significance of Springhouse's philosophy and practises as general influences on alumni alongside my own reflections on the implications of this research on the realms of education, education research, and society.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

The research question asked: *in what ways do Springhouse alumni feel that experiences in the Springhouse learning community influenced their idea of what it means to be an adult?*

This research question focused on the participants' individual perceptions, highlights of which have been explored throughout this piece in connection with research on adulthood. This study presents an entry point into investigating the influence that schooling has on what people perceive it means to be an adult – a field that has been said to be (Rich & Schachter, 2012), and I have found to be, under-theorized and under-researched. The current work may be the only existing study that specifically investigates the influence of alternative schooling on alumni perceptions of what it means to be an adult and it stands among only a handful of studies exploring the school-adulthood connection. This exploratory study is intended to contribute to the scant existing research on the connection between schooling and adult identity and to provide grounds for tentative early theory-building on how education in adolescence contributes to how people see adulthood. In terms of drawing conclusions from the data, with only seven participants, I cannot make any large and sweeping claims about the transformative potential of the school or claims that the findings could be generalized to holistic alternative schools, let alone schools in general. The findings represent only the perspectives of the participants and my interpretations of those perspectives – offering a seed from which further research can expand on. The findings and discussion present a picture of seven individuals whose ideas about adulthood evince both similarities and pronounced differences compared to the existing research involving their peers who did not experience alternative education. They contribute to establishing some conceptual fragments that could be used for further theory-building through more extensive research into the influence that schooling has on people's ideas about what it means to be an adult.

In this final chapter, I outline the two main threads of influence that flow from the findings, propose some interpretations and commentary, and conclude with some observations regarding

limitations and future research. First, I revisit the research question and, as a form of synthesis, explore some ideas of the two main influences running through the interviews of mentorship and Sourced Design as expressed through the school climate and experiences may have influenced how participants define adulthood. As their relationships with their mentors at the school was cited as a universal influence, I dedicate a section of the synthesis to discussing the ways in which mentors contributed to participant ideas about adulthood. As a means of bringing the research back to the scale of the participants, in exploring the subtle role of the school climate and experiences at Springhouse, I reverse the breaking up of how each of them discussed adulthood into abstract qualities expressed thematically across the participants as seen in chapter 5 and reintegrate each participant's view on adulthood. I then consider how the principles and practises of Sourced Design may have had an influence through the school climate and experiences on the participants' views of adulthood. Second, I comment on the degree of influence participant experiences may have had on their views of adulthood through considering elements of transformative learning theory. Finally, I conclude by recognising the study's limitations, suggesting how this work contributes to education scholarship and potential future considerations for educational practice, and proposing some ideas for future research.

As seen in the literature review, the teacher-student relationship and school environment and climate are two prominent factors that have been found to influence elements of adult identity. This is borne out in the findings of this research study as well, with the most prominent influences from the findings being interactions with mentors and the general school climate that has been built on the principles and practises of Sourced Design. Across all interviews, the influence of mentors appeared again and again, indicating that the mentorship relationship held a prominent position in the participants' minds when considering how their school experiences at Springhouse formed their view of adulthood. Second, all participants made some reference to the general social environment of the school as having a continuous influence on their ideas of adulthood. References to the school

climate ranged from allusions to a general sense of day-to-day cultural embeddedness to detailed descriptions interactions with other students and staff at the school. Springhouse's *Sourced Design* approach is the central conceptual core of how the school has developed its distinct climate and thus it can be inferred that Sourced Design, as manifest in the school climate and in the learning experiences at the school, is the core of what has influenced not only participants' view of what it means to be an adult, but how they are living their lives as emerging adults.

The Importance of Mentors

As is evident from what was shared regarding mentorship across all interviews, especially at the personal level, the relationships the participants shared with their mentors had a pronounced influence on their development and ideas about adulthood. The mentors served as the primary and most significant entry point into the personal and community systems that define Springhouse. The influence of mentors aligns with the literature on the impact of *teachers-as-role-models* for identity-building (Benson & Johnson, 2009; Cross, 2009; Persson, 2012; Rich & Schachter, 2012; Tong & Kim, 2022; Weinschenk & Dawes, 2022; Yamamura et al., 2019). However, the relationship between the participants and their mentors is deeper and more personal than any student-teacher interaction described in the literature. The influence of mentors is important to consider because, as pointed out by C. Smith et al. (2011), for many emerging adults, relationships with older adults are usually functional and performance-oriented, such as relationships with one's professor or employer. For some emerging adults, positive relationships with parents offer support for identity exploration and individuation, which has long term implications for successful and stable transition to adulthood (Lindell et al., 2017), but this is not always the case.

The mentorship program seems to mimic a healthy parental relationship in that mentors support exploring identity development, exploration, and individuation, among other roles (Lindell et al., 2017). Based on the interviews, mentors provide choice and support in achieving internal criteria of adulthood which are said to make a significant difference in achieving subjective

adulthood (Diaz-Strong, 2021). It is important to note that all participants reported developing a close bond with their mentor. This is significant to Springhouse, since Crosnoe et al. (2004) have found that intergenerational bonds between teachers and students are not independent of the educational institution, implying that some school climates, compositions, and structures are more conducive to establishing intergenerational bonds than others.

Elliot described his mentors as being influential and described how the mentoring system works, stating that:

Each of the staff members or the teachers at Springhouse, except for two I believe, were mentors...At the start of each school year students would pick one of them to be, I don't know what other word to use for, I guess, just their mentor. Not quite like a supervisor, but just a teacher who specifically you go to for advice or to talk to, or when you're struggling with something. You could also just, if you wanted to talk with someone, they were there for you both during school and, outside of it.

From this one can see that the mentors did not act solely, or even primarily, in an academic capacity. They provided personal emotional and psychological guidance to those under their tutelage. These qualities reflect aspects of teacher caring, seeing students as whole persons, and looking beyond academic performance (Rich & Schachter, 2012) as key elements of the mentorship relationship.

Tatiana's mentor provided a needed support system through adolescence that was based on mutual intentionality for learning and self-development. An example of this can be seen in how Tatiana valued her relationship with her mentor for life guidance, rather than academic guidance. She stated that she could handle the academic aspect of adolescent life on her own, however it was *well-being*, in the form of navigating emotions and life decisions that she appreciated having guidance with. According to Cassidy, an aspect of the mentor's presence was the establishment of unconditional positive regard, which fostered a sense of safety in the relationship. She stated, "I felt

so safe with them you know? It was like that presence of safety, especially with like my mentors...I just felt like no matter who I was that they would love me no matter who I was." While guidance was communicated by all participants to have been helpful for informing their idea of what it means to be an adult, the most significant impact the mentors had on the participants was as role models. Elliot looked up to his mentors and described them as "living life in a way you want to live – of being mindful and being wholehearted in what they do." Tatiana commented on the fact that one-on-one mentoring experiences with adults at Springhouse when she was in her adolescence had a major impact on her idea of what it means to be an adult through the mentors' role as someone who she "could really connect with and look up to and learn from." This held extra significance for her idea of adulthood because the mentors were adults outside of her family system.

The ways in which the mentors and students interacted was also significant to the participants in that their relationships were informal, but regular. John and Felix spoke of meeting with their mentors over lunch to discuss personal matters, while Elliot reflected on his participation in the aforementioned rite of passage ceremony at his home, around a campfire with his mentor. In some ways, it could be possible that the extra time spent outside of school with mentors may mimic the increased influence of Japanese elementary school teachers found by Yamamura et al. (2019), which the authors theorised was a result of elementary students spending more time with their teachers. The mentor relationship was also said to be very personal and intimate, with Tatiana describing how mentors shared personal details with her of how they navigated adolescence and developed into adults, citing this act of sharing as a significant influence on how she views adulthood. For Elliot, his conversations with mentors provided him with the opportunity to explore how he would like to live and what he wants out of life. These conversations involved mostly day-to-day things that might be clues about who he is but also explored the idea of a variety of practical options for the future in order to consider what resonates with him on a deep level. Elliot's relationship with his mentor stands in sharp contrast to the relationship noted in research by Cross

(2009), where students felt negatively toward teachers who forced ideas about who the teacher thought they should be on the students rather than who they would like to be. In this study, the students reacted negatively toward this treatment through surreptitious acts of disobedience. The relationship also embedded in them a sense that attaining adulthood was largely about gaining power over others. It is possible that the mentor-student relationship communicated by Elliot may have embedded the opposite idea, that surreptitious rebellion is unneeded and that adulthood is about more than having power. The informal, peer-like relationship also echoes Benson and Johnson's (2009) observation that subjective adulthood is enhanced in situations where parents establish a peer-like relationship with their young adult children. This serves to underscore the pseudo-parental role mentors appear to serve at Springhouse.

Felix's most significant early interaction with their mentor involved building a connection over navigating personal problems. Their mentor's direct, one-on-one approach to aiding in solving the problem encouraged Felix to become more confident and emotionally self-regulated. Angelica reiterated the respect she has for her mentors and emphasised how much they helped her. Her mentors, as well as her peers, could see behaviours that were acting as barriers to her development that she was unaware of. In addition, her mentors' interest in connecting to her inner life and encouragement for her to connect to her own inner life led to her valuing reflective self-awareness and self-care in adulthood:

I mean, they would always just sit with you once a week for an hour and really dig deep into how you were that week and touch base with you. It's something that I used to neglect doing and it's now something that I'm more able to do on my own or like, maybe I'm more comfortable talking to other people about my problems. [I] used to be totally opposed to really showing any part of myself in the past. So, the biggest thing is they bring light to you.

Cassidy put a lot of weight into the impact that the mentor/mentee relationship had on the development of her idea of what it means to be an adult:

We'd have mentoring sessions where we would talk personally, or we'd talk as a mentor group. So me and a few peers together, and oftentimes it would be pretty structured. They'd ask us specific questions about who we are as a person who we want to be. Take us through different exercises to try to get to know us more and for us to get to know our ***selves*** more [bolded italics indicate an obvious emphasis on the word 'selves' present in the audio].

Cassidy's statement leads to the idea of group and peer mentorship, which are other important aspects of mentorship at Springhouse.

Elliot indicated that group interactions between his mentors and other students who were working with the same mentor influenced his idea of adulthood. He could not specifically identify any one activity that informed his ideas about adulthood, but he felt that the meetings and conversations with peers had an impact. Liz observed that the entire community at Springhouse was influential to her idea of adulthood. When asked about individuals who inspired her ideas about adulthood, Liz quickly stated "everybody" reinforcing the community aspect of the environment. She broke her experience of the community up into the groups of 'leader/mentors' and 'peer figures,' who she described as fellow *The Well* participants and those who she considered to be at a similar developmental level to her. Several participants referred to experiences with their mentors where they explored ideas about adulthood and identity. Felix agreed that one-on-one mentoring and having healthy models contributed greatly to developing an idea of adulthood that they feel fits them. Felix does not state it directly, but it is implied that having healthy role models for gender identity is connected to developing their idea of what adulthood looks like.

Being a genderqueer person, I spent a couple of years in high school actually identifying as a trans man and that's not where I'm at now but it's a very important aspect of who I am and what my journey has been. And having two very positive examples of masculinity in [mentor one] and [mentor two], [mentor two] was so instrumental in my learning of my own gender identity and my learning how to move through the world. It's very refreshing to have

access to relationships with not one, but two incredibly positive male role models who are embodying what I believe to be the most core and beautiful aspects of healthy masculinity.

Although she did not speak from the perspective of exploring her gender identity, Tatiana echoed Felix's observation that having more than one mentor provided different perspectives on what it means to be an adult. This illustrates the interconnected nature of the *Sourced Design* elements in that it also reflects the mentors' dedicating themselves to the principles of *cultivating personhood, loving and serving others, and building beloved community*. It also highlights the mentors' role in establishing the principle of *taking care of vulnerability*, which is arguably the main entry point into the Springhouse community. Crosnoe et al. (2004) advocate for the inclusion of research on other intergenerational bonds that extend beyond the bounds of the family. This could certainly include the intergenerational bond between teachers and students. The findings from this study underline the importance of the intergenerational student-teacher relationship and support this call for further research.

It must be noted that the mentor-mentee relationship does not exist in a vacuum, with interpersonal relationships being at least in part dependent on the lived environments in which they take place (Crosnoe et al., 2004). Thus, it is important to consider Springhouse's school climate and culture as an often-mentioned, yet subtly ambiguous influence on participants' sense of adulthood.

The Influence of Sourced Design: School Climate, Principles, and Practises

A somewhat intangible aspect of Springhouse that was widely and abstractly credited with having an influence on participants' idea of adulthood was the overall school climate and culture. Although not explicitly discussed at length in the interviews, every participant's recounting of their experiences reflected a general sense that simply by being part of the school community over an extended period, their ideas about adulthood were subtly, yet significantly shaped. This aligns with research from the literature connecting the significant influence of school climate and environment to identity development (Bosch et al., 2016; Corner & Dallavis, 2022; Cross, 2009; A. Dewey,

2021, 2021; Klimstra et al., 2010; Shuster & Mongetta, 2009; Tong & Kim, 2022; Weinschenk & Dawes, 2022; Yamagishi, 2020). This community influence can be seen running through the entire analysis beginning with the first question that I asked after the initial demographic questions. It manifests in statements from several students. For example, Tatiana noted that there are an “uncountable number” of unconscious things that she was exposed to while part of the Springhouse community, and that these influential elements “built up over time.” She confirmed that the intention and consistency behind these small, unconscious things that are worked into the school's culture had a slow and persistent effect on her idea of what it means to be an adult. Elsewhere, when discussing Springhouse's philosophy, she asserted that it is communicated mostly through enacting it in day-to-day life rather than discussing it explicitly or learning it theoretically. Another example is Felix, who claimed that the example of boundary setting they shared with me was only one among “a million examples.” These comments reflect the aim of cultural creation and renewal that the school aims for as it builds its own cultural norms and mores (Finn, 2023), which, as with any culture, largely exist invisible to that culture's members in the background of day-to-day life. In many ways, the school climate at Springhouse seems to resemble an extended family. When looking at the social aspects of the school, ideas that support subjective adulthood in family situations such as flattened hierarchy and shared responsibility (Benson & Johnson, 2009) may be read as influencing the sense of subjective adulthood for the adolescent students.

As seen in examples in chapter 5 of the school community holding participants to their values, leaders and students alike appear to be following a model similar to religious schools which seek to enforce particular values (Corner & Dallavis, 2022) or restrict future identity pathways to those that are deemed “appropriate” (Shuster & Mongetta, 2009, p. 218). However, at the same time, the ample opportunities for self-exploration of values and identities that are embedded in the school climate and experiences allow for conscious decision-making regarding values and identity rather than imposing them from a central dogma. With the school community somewhat resembling

a familial relationship, there is also an interesting crossover here where school expectations may interact with perceptions of obligation to maintain what might be considered family values (Weinschenk & Dawes, 2022), blurring the line between the two sets of influences.

With the formation and maintenance of the school climate and the experiences at the school being driven by the principles and practises of Sourced Design, the influence of the general school climate could be interpreted through the lens of those principles and practises. The following section is an interpretation of how the Sourced Design principles and practises that define the school climate and culture can be seen as more general influences on each participants' views of adulthood.

Participant Ideas of Adulthood and Influences from Sourced Design

Throughout chapter 5, qualities of adulthood and some of their influences have been drawn from the interviews and laid out in categories informed by existing research on adulthood. To centre the inquiry more closely on how experiences at Spring house may have influenced each participant's views on adulthood, the following section synthesizes the data from chapter 5 back onto each participant and looks at how the qualities of adulthood they shared may have been influenced by the school's central philosophy through the school climate, community, and experiences. As a means by which to convey the influence that the principles and practises of Sourced Design manifest through the school climate and the various experiences participants had at Springhouse, I have composed a profile of adulthood for each participant. Each of these profiles highlights prominent pieces of each participant's views on adulthood along with commentary on how these views reflect aspects of Springhouse's principles of *Sourced Design* (Finn, 2023). These principles are *taking care of vulnerability, loving and serving others, building beloved community, learning from the Earth*, and *cultivating personhood*. As mentioned in chapter two, these principles each have practises associated with them as well. For reference, the principles and practises are provided as Table 5 below.

Table 5*Sourced Design Principles and practises*

Principle	practises
Take care of vulnerability	Engage in new practises that take care of life Find or create a regular place to practice Practice with other people over time Follow the guidance of a trusted mentor
Cultivate personhood	Get to know your humanness Get to know the sacredness of life Grow your self-awareness
Build beloved community	Respect individuality Foster unity Take care of relationships
Learn from the Earth	Build an example Sustain through a network Share the message
Love and serve others	Accept reality Follow your call Keep going

Different principles can be seen in each participant's views of adulthood, strongly reinforcing the idea that the participants' time as a member of the Springhouse community has had an influence on their ideas about what it means to be an adult. Following the order of participants from chapter five, I begin with John.

John's view of adulthood is grounded in internal development, understanding that adulthood is complex and uncertain, and in the importance of valuing different perspectives. Through his experiences with inner child work at Springhouse, John has learned about how psychological mechanisms meant to protect one as a child can have negative influences on internal and external behaviours as an adult. While he does not believe that overcoming these dysfunctional psychological phenomena is a prerequisite of adulthood, he does consider active engagement with these internal forces something that defines being an adult. This is reflected in his comment about many chronological adults in their middle age being more like adolescents due to their lack of mental development. His views directly connect to the principle of *taking care of vulnerability* in that to engage with any process of self-exploration one must be ready to engage in a new practice.

This practice is also reflective of the principle of *cultivating personhood* in the form of getting to know one's humanness and building self-awareness. Finally, this represents a facet of *building beloved community's* taking care of relationships, most specifically the idea that taking care of community involves taking care of one's self as well.

Understanding the complex nature of living and learning as an adult is also important in John's definition of adulthood. He places value on recognising that adulthood is a project of experiential learning where the answers are not always clear, but with persistence one learns and grows. This belief comes directly through his interactions with and observations of not only his mentors, but his schoolmates at Springhouse and the discovery-based learning model he experienced at the school. This aspect of adulthood is connected to *loving and serving others* as it reflects the need to accept reality and to be persistent and resilient. It also reflects *taking care of vulnerability* in the way that John came to this understanding by trusting the guidance of his mentors.

Based on his interview, John's valuing perspective-taking is rooted in his experience of having his personhood acknowledged at Springhouse and recognising the difference between being in a community where he was valued and cared about and the parasocial online community he was involved with prior to Springhouse. Through experiencing both kinds of community, he can empathize with young men who are in situations similar to the one he was in prior to Springhouse. He can understand why they are susceptible to becoming indoctrinated into misogynistic and racist beliefs. He now values this ability to restrain judgment against others and to attempt to see their humanity rather than dismissing them or directing anger at them. This quality of adulthood is rooted in the principle of *taking care of vulnerability*, both as practised by John and by the Springhouse staff member whom he first accosted. John allowed himself to attempt something new and the female staff member understood that John needed support and safety to begin his move towards new practises in the community. John's change is also an example of the principle of *loving and*

serving others in the form of accepting reality and understanding that sometimes personal change is necessary. Finally, the idea of *building beloved community* is prominent in that John has chosen to respect the individuality of others and to take an approach that fosters unity rather than sustaining discord.

For Elliot, adulthood is personal and is largely about exploring his inner purpose, engaging in the project of slow community building, and trying to live according to his values. Elliot cites numerous discussions with his mentors at Springhouse as being instrumental in why he values seeking purpose. His recollection of exploring his reason for being on Earth with his mentor stands as a prominent example from Springhouse, and this commitment to seeking purpose continued at the time of the interview. His description of purpose as being a pursuit that he feels strongly resonant with, such as exploring physics, grounds his idea of purpose in everyday reality rather than an idea of a higher purpose aimed at changing the world. His focus on purpose reflects a *taking care of vulnerability* as he followed the guidance of his trusted mentor. It is also a project of *loving and serving others* as he dedicates himself to following his call and to the patience and persistence involved in seeking purpose. Perhaps most significantly, this aspect of adulthood evokes the principle of *cultivating personhood* in the pursuit of getting to know the sacredness of life by trusting the process of finding purpose and in growing his self-awareness.

Elliot also views living his life in line with his values as representative of being an adult. In his interview, he related his desire to explore his values intentionally and to reflect on how he might live his life in accord with them. He explored his values at Springhouse through values-clarification exercises and through self-assessment according to what he referred to as *competencies* – which represented ways of being in the world and in community. He also delved into his ideas about what it means to live as an adult and what it means to live by one's values during his solo contemplative time in his senior year. All of these examples of values exploration and considerations about how to live well are aspects of the principle of *cultivating personhood*. Elliot is getting to know the

sacredness of life by exploring values and growing his self-awareness and humanness by considering which values resonate with him, deciding on which to follow, and in considering how he might live through them in his adulthood.

Related to living through his values, Elliot also commented on his commitment to serving as a seed for healthy community in connection to something he feels is an important part of being an adult. He discussed his desire for self-development and living according to his values as part of a larger project of anchoring others in the kind of relationships that he developed in community at Springhouse. He sees the development and sustenance of a healthy relationship with himself at the heart of this project. These qualities are salient examples of the principle of *learning from the Earth*. This principle adopts concepts of biological processes of growth and reproduction, supported by the idea that one first builds an example of the healthy self and community, which is then sustained through a network of like-minded people, who will then share the message of the community through its practises and values with the wider world. His desire to cultivate community also reflects the principle of *taking care of vulnerability*, which involves establishing practises with others over time.

Throughout their interview, Felix focused on the subjective nature of adulthood and their view of adulthood centred on their own experiences of feeling like an adult. They focused on building and establishing healthy relationships, developing emotional intelligence, and adopting a mentorship role as being important to their feeling like an adult. At one point, they described their opinions on adulthood as sounding “so Springhouse,” going on to highlight social experiences and understanding of human nuance as learned through interactions with and observations of Springhouse staff. The ideas they described as being characteristically “Springhouse” are firmly rooted in the principle of *building beloved community*, especially in that the ideas centre respect for individuality and a dedication to practises geared toward taking care of relationships in community.

This connects directly to building and maintaining healthy relationships as a marker of

adulthood for Felix. As demonstrated by the boundary setting experience they shared, there is clear evidence this indicator of adulthood is influenced by the principle of *building beloved community*, expanding on the idea of respecting the individuality of his classmate and also representing a desire to foster unity with them. Felix's association of this event with something they considered pivotal to their movement toward adulthood is also an example of them *cultivating their own personhood* in that the experience required they understand themselves more deeply and to grow their self-awareness.

Related to this self-exploration, Felix also emphasised emotional intelligence, strongly linked to *cultivating personhood*, as something they felt helped define them as an adult and was credited to intentional activities at Springhouse as well as to observing and interacting with mentors and other staff. Their comments about how having the opportunity to explore their emotions as part of their schooling in adolescence gave them a developmental head start over their institutionally-educated peers was notable in that they didn't feel this made them a better adult, just a different kind of adult. This serves as another example of respecting individuality drawn from the principle of *building beloved community*.

Finally, Felix's attributing their own adoption of mentorship roles as an indicator of adulthood was influenced heavily by their experiences with their own mentors. This connects directly to the principle of *taking care of vulnerability*. Emulating the mentorship of their own mentors is an example of following the guidance of their trusted mentors. Mentorship could also be considered a practice that one practises over time with others. As Felix participated in peer-mentoring they worked together with their mentors and peers in a mutually supportive relationship, reflecting the larger practises of *building a beloved community* of trust and support at Springhouse. Since Felix related several instances where they considered mentorship roles in the past, including becoming a teacher and a mentor musician, their association of moving into a mentorship role with being an adult signifies a connection with the principle of *love and serve others*, particularly as an example of Felix following their call.

The most significant markers of adulthood that appear in Liz's interview are self-development in service of community, following her vocation, and taking on the role of a mentor. According to her interview, Liz's view of adulthood is defined by a commitment to her own self-development, but most importantly she feels this should be done in service of community. Several times in her interview, she emphasised her view that personal development for one's own sake is insufficient. She asserts that any personal development should be done with the aim of contributing to healthy community building. Her focus on bridging the personal and the communal demonstrates the influence of the principle of *building beloved community*, most especially the practises of fostering unity and building healthy relationships. To her, *cultivating personhood* by exploring one's humanness and growing self-awareness allows one to more effectively contribute to the community's project of building and maintaining healthy relationships within the community and working toward community goals rather than individual goals. She also expressed influence from the principle of *love and serve others* in her pursuit of this aim of community-building, reflective of following her call, and in her commitment to this project over the long term.

On the topic of following one's call, Liz's view on adulthood also reflects a dedication to following her vocation regardless of social and cultural expectations. As evidenced by her decision not to follow a path that was laid out for her by her family, her school, or her local culture, Liz values the pursuit of what she feels is her higher purpose in life and based on what she shared in her interview, this has been a something she has dedicated herself to since her high school days. It appeared that these two markers of adulthood were in place prior to Liz attending Springhouse, indicating that Springhouse did not instill these ideas in her. However, the alignment with the principles and practises of *Sourced Design* hint that Liz's experiences at Springhouse reinforced the importance of her pre-existing values and enabled her to more deeply commit to them as markers of her own subjective adulthood. This distinction between affirmation and transformation is explored more generally later in this chapter.

As an extension of contributing to community-building, Liz also discussed the value she places on spreading ideas aligned with Springhouse's philosophy. As part of being an adult, she feels responsible for taking on a mentorship role, guiding people toward the project of *building beloved communities*. In the way she described this, the principle *learning from the Earth* is apparent in her idea of serving as a seed and example for others, spreading community and thus building a network through which to share the kinds of personal and community building that she experienced at Springhouse.

In her discussion of what qualities define adulthood, Cassidy conveys the importance of working toward independence from her parents while managing her emotions, learning to navigate relationships, and living according to her values. She cites independence from parents and building her own capacity to manage her emotions and anxieties as important personal steps toward adulthood. She developed these qualities through Springhouse trips and mentor interactions. These aims embrace the principle of *cultivating personhood* in that her experiences at Springhouse invited her to get to know her humanness and by doing so to grow her self-awareness. They also represent *taking care of vulnerability* as Cassidy's exploring new ways of being independent from her parents took the form of new practises that she could use to take care of the *Vitality* within her.

Part of her self-awareness involved developing her own understanding the difference between feeling safe and feeling familiar in relationships, which she emphasised as being an important part of her feelings of becoming an adult. She developed this awareness by participating in Springhouse's *beloved community*, which provided her with models of what the practice of building healthy relationships looks like. In exploring this question of safety and familiarity within herself, Cassidy also shows the influence of *cultivating personhood* in her nascent understanding of how her innate humanness might confuse the two and her self-awareness both at how this manifested in her past and how she can distinguish between the two in the present and future.

Like Elliot, something that Cassidy felt was an important part of being an adult was

knowing her values and living her life according to them. An example of a significant value she mentioned was staying connected with her child-self. She developed this idea through observing and interacting with Springhouse adults, who, although they conveyed a sense of mature groundedness, also expressed a playfulness in the way they explored ideas and interacted with the community. This stands as an example of how the principle of *cultivating personhood* influenced Cassidy as she reflected on the capacity for adults to maintain this positive aspect of childhood and the value that she attributes to this quality. Being a product of her following the guidance of her trusted mentors, it also evokes the principle of *taking care of vulnerability*.

According to Tatiana, adulthood is represented by a more stabilised sense of self than adolescence and is built on emotional awareness, healthy relationships, and a developed idea of the meaning of home. Most prominently, she discussed aspects of self-awareness involving emotions and sexuality alongside identification of values and cultivating the ability to set boundaries with others. Her interactions with, and observations of, Springhouse staff including her mentor, alongside intentional values-clarification activities, acted as the main experiences influencing these views. Rooted in *cultivating personhood*, the qualities she describes have direct connections to knowing her humanness and building up self-awareness in terms of her emotions and regarding how her values connect with how she chooses to set boundaries with others. The setting of boundaries reflects the influence of *building beloved community*, as understanding healthy boundaries is part of building healthy relationships with others. It also signifies respect for individuality as it shows that she both respects her own individuality and recognises the importance of the individuality of others.

Tatiana also discussed how the cultivation of healthy relationships with others was a marker of adulthood for her. She related how her conversations with mentors about how they navigated complexity in their own relationships influenced her ideas of what adult relationships should look like. Again, this reflects *building beloved community* as taking care of relationships, but it also draws on the concept of fostering unity in the desire to maintain healthy relationships over the long

term. As a clear example of following the guidance of a trusted mentor, her interactions with her mentor in this way also represent influence from the principle of *taking care of vulnerability*.

Unique to Tatiana was thinking deeply about the concept of *home* as a meaningful marker of adulthood. Her solo camping experience was combined with her capstone project as influences. This serves as an example of *cultivating personhood* as she explored her sense of what home means to her and how this meaning is flexible, indicating self-awareness and possibly an exploration of the humanness related to the idea of home.

To Angelica, being an adult involves commitment to internal emotional and reflective work toward self-development, exploring her potential as a human being, and understanding her values while living in accordance with them. Through her relationship with her mentor and participating in the Springhouse community, Angelica was invited into a new way of reflecting on her needs and how she was prioritising the needs of others over her own, thus evoking the principle of *taking care of vulnerability*. She engaged in a process grounded in *cultivating personhood* as she delved into her human desire to serve others before herself. She also grew her self-awareness of the emotional toll this was taking on her. At the time of the interview Angelica saw her self-development as being centred on herself, in contrast to Liz's assertion that self-development should be in service to community. These two aims may seem at odds. However, when looking at Springhouse's living systems design more closely, Angelica's priority on herself could be seen as part of a protracted project of community building, reflecting the principle of *love and serve others* in the form of long-term commitment to the vision of *learning from the Earth*. Living systems are similar to holograms or fractals in that the whole is reflected in the parts – and the parts are reflected in the whole (Capra & Luisi, 2014). Thus, the health of a living system requires the constituent systems within that system to be healthy while at the same time, the health of the constituent systems requires the higher-level system be healthy. Full participation in a community oriented around living systems principles therefore requires each member to be working toward *cultivating their own personhood*.

This would sometimes require that, for a time, an individual may need to do so without thought for their contribution to community. Through continued interaction with the healthy community and individual work, the community member will eventually reach the point of development with the intention of community contribution. In Angelica's case, focusing her attention on community may have caused her to continue placing the needs of others above her own, limiting her own potential by disconnecting her from understanding the importance of meeting her own needs. Her potential to contribute to the community is thus improved by her focusing on her own development first.

Understanding and exploring personal potential was also a prominent marker of adulthood for Angelica. Her experiences at Springhouse such as experimenting with adult roles and the physical and psychological challenges associated with activities in the outdoors signified two principles. First, they represent ways to *cultivate personhood* in the form of getting to know what she is capable of in terms of the work involved with adult roles and with the limits of her body and mind when placed in physically challenging situations. These experiences also allowed her to retrospectively reflect on what she is capable of and on the fullness of her human potential. Second, they reflect the principle of *taking care of vulnerability* as they represent new experiences that Angelica was able to practice that helped her cultivate her potential. Furthermore, physical activity has become a regular practice that Angelica continues to include in her project of self-development.

As with Elliot and Cassidy, Angelica placed great emphasis on the importance of understanding and clarifying her values in considering herself as an adult. The values exploration activities she described are indicative of the intimate connection between the individual and the community as they connect *cultivating personhood* and *building beloved community* through *loving and serving others*. By exploring her values Angelica developed a connection with her intuitive and authentic self and cultivated an awareness of how acting outside of her intuited values did not feel authentic. Since the values exploration activities she described were done in a group setting, they depended on taking care of relationships within the group while at the same time respecting the

individuality of others as they explored their own values. Finally, Angelica's story about her eventually accepting the group's assertion that the value of resilience was one of her defining characteristics represents accepting reality, a facet of *loving and serving others*.

In exploring the views of each participant in terms of how those views were said to be influenced by their experiences at Springhouse, connections can be made between those views on adulthood, experiences at Springhouse and principles of *Sourced Design*. It is evident that mentors and school climate played significant roles in communicating and embodying *Sourced Design* at the school. All of this points to correlations between schooling experiences and ideas about adulthood. One final question that is worth considering regarding Springhouse and its influence on the participants' views on adulthood is the degree of influence that their school experiences may have had. A tentative estimation of the amount of influence can be approached by exploring the idea of how much the participants' experiences served as a catalyst for transformative learning.

Transformative Education and Springhouse

With regard to the influence that Springhouse has had on participant views of adulthood, the question of how much influence is relative. With the school's stated aim of cultural renewal, it can be placed on Raywid's (1999) typology of alternative schools as a school designed around *changing the world*. This means that to those who are already dedicated to changing the world, Springhouse operates as what Persson (2012) calls *education-as-proxy*, meaning that those who are already aligned with the values embraced by a particular kind of education seek out and choose those kinds of education. In these cases, there is less potential for transformative learning akin to that described by Mezirow (1991) due to it being unlikely these types of learners will experience a disorienting dilemma that serves as a challenge to their existing meaning schemes, habits of mind, or frames of reference. However, in cases where newcomers to the school do not already subscribe to values aligned with those of Springhouse, there is evidence of transformation at many levels. This reconfigures Springhouse as not only a school that aims to change the world, but a school that aims

to *change the student* (Raywid, 1999) if the student is not already interested in changing the world in ways that align with Springhouse's vision.

The background of several participants make them potential candidates for being aligned with Springhouse's values before attending, suggesting that these participants may have experienced Springhouse as a form of *education-as-proxy* (Persson, 2012). Liz is perhaps the most notable of this group, having reported a history of experiences with communities that promoted alternative ways of seeing the world prior to her attending Springhouse. She also cited books that align with holistic-education-adjacent values as influences on her ideas about adulthood. In her own reporting, Springhouse served as a place of affirmation and like-minded community where she could cultivate and refine her pre-existing thoughts about how to live and be in the world, with little evidence of transformation, in the sense described by transformative learning theory (Green, 2022; Meerts-Brandsma & Sibthorp, 2021; Mezirow, 1991), taking place. Ironically, Liz was the only participant who did not report experiencing alternative forms of schooling prior to Springhouse.

All other participants experienced some form of alternative education prior to Springhouse and thus may also fall into this *education-as-proxy* group. Angelica reported experiencing several alternative approaches to schooling during her youth, including Waldorf education, which is widely recognised for its holistic approach. Other participants who reported alternative education prior to Springhouse include Cassidy, who attended a Waldorf school in Australia and John who briefly attended a Montessori school and was homeschooled. Elliot reported being homeschooled for a period as well. Felix and Tatiana reported being unschooled, with Tatiana's entire schooling reported to have been in an environment of unschooling with little to no adult involvement. Despite these experiences with alternative education, for several of the participants it appears that their experiences at Springhouse were in some ways transformative.

Two standout examples of transformative learning are John and Angelica, who both experienced disorienting dilemmas where their worldview was challenged by a significant event. In

the case of John, this was his confrontation with the female staff member who did not respond in the way he was accustomed to – opening him up to questioning his assumptions and changing his habits of mind, his methods of meaning-making, and ultimately his way of framing reality during his time at Springhouse. Angelica's disorienting dilemma came in the form of emotional release after being challenged by her mentor about her state of mental well-being. This instigated a process of self-discovery for Angelica rooted in re-evaluating habits of mind that put the needs of others above her own. Through her time at Springhouse, it appears she re-oriented her internal and external behaviours to ones that better serve her own mental well-being. While not examples of full transformative learning as it is described by transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991), there are clear examples of shifts in various facets of transformative learning represented in the participants' experiences at Springhouse. This can be seen in Cassidy's learning to differentiate between safe from familiar relationships, Felix's re-assessment of their gender identity, and Elliot's shift from atheist to appreciator of spiritual complexity and the uncertainty of knowledge.

With regard to transformations in the way the participants view adulthood, there is evidence of this seen in the apparent shifts from their pre-Springhouse notions of adulthood. Elliot's linear school-work-retirement view of adulthood became more complex and nuanced, and Felix's views moved from external and role-based markers to more internal markers such as emotional intelligence. Tatiana represents perhaps the most interesting change, considering her educational background. It appears that Tatiana's unschooling reinforced, rather than challenged, cultural norms regarding markers of adulthood and a linear path through the lifecourse, whereas Springhouse opened her up to different possibilities for adulthood that she had not experienced as part of her unschooling. As mentioned in chapter five, this could represent an interesting avenue of inquiry regarding the connection between intentional education, unschooling, and views of adulthood.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about the ideas about adulthood that participants held as children and teenagers is how their pre-Springhouse views are reflected in the adulting and

subjective adulthood literature (Arnett, 2024; Cherney et al., 2020; Mitchell & Lennox, 2020; Wright et al., 2020). That statistically-normative views of adulthood are similar to those reported by the participants as views they held as children or teenagers seems to indicate that their post-Springhouse views are more developmentally complex than their non-Springhouse peers. This further supports the transformative effect that Springhouse had on several of the participants and seems to hint that many chronological adults may be living according to static models of adulthood that they developed before or during adolescence. Further research into the connection between schooling and views on adulthood could shed light on this question, which brings us to a discussion of the contributions this work makes to education scholarship.

Contributions to Scholarship

Based on the findings pointing to the seven participants holding views of adulthood that in many ways diverge from those found in research on general populations across the post-industrial world, it appears that experiences at Springhouse had an influence that at the very least reinforced pre-existing alternative ideas about what it means to be an adult. In many ways this influence is transformative in that in several cases, experiences at the school appear to have influenced changes in the participants' frames of reference, habits of mind, assumptions, and worldviews. Most significantly, the focus on educational activities and practises that were aimed at developing emotional intelligence, awareness of core values, and healthy relationship building during their school experiences correlated with participants' valuing of these qualities in defining what it means to be an adult. The participants' valuing of these qualities highlights aspects that are not well represented in the adulthood literature, indicating a departure from normative ideas of what it means to be an adult that is partially rooted in their educational experiences. This connection between school experiences and conceptions of adulthood could have several implications for educational institutions and society as a whole.

Considering Stories About the Kinds of Adults Education Should be Forming

These findings contribute to existing research that schooling experiences in adolescence have the potential to influence ideas people have about adulthood. This approach to research adds to scholarly discussions regarding the aims of education, in particular in assessing the broader aims of education that extend beyond the end of formal schooling. Philosophers of education have long been engaged in a multitude of discussions regarding aims of education that transcend skills training or transmission of content knowledge. These include arguing that education serves as initiation into a tradition of liberalism (Peters, 1965), education should be preparation for democracy, society, problem solving, and for development of personal interests (J. Dewey, 1981), or education should be about liberation through cultivating critical consciousness (Freire, 1996). These discussions have largely centred on prescriptive theories on how education *ought* to be carried out, or about how people *ought* to think, behave and *be* after experiencing particular forms of education.

Another approach to this kind of theorizing describes these aims in terms of educational elements as they are practised. However, these visions of education do not often provide means for investigating how experiencing education designed around said principles exerts persistent influences on people later in life. As outlined in the literature review of this work, assessment of the aims of education as they are realised in adulthood after schooling is not well-represented in the research literature. This work frames the concept of *adulthood* as a malleable social construct and positions it as a projection of a socialization process containing numerous facets, including formal education. By framing adulthood in this way, this work represents an opening for education scholars to explore the role that education plays in constructing meanings of adulthood in society. By interfacing with markers of adulthood derived from sociological and psychological research, comparisons can be drawn between different approaches to education and different ideas of what people feel mark both themselves and others as being adult. This method of assessment could be of most use to those designing alternative education as a means of evaluating the lasting impacts that

alternative programs have on students. However, if the goals of public education were to shift ideas about adulthood in the general population, the methods used in this research could be useful to institutional design of public education.

Springhouse's Holistic Education: Emotional Well-Being and the Mental Health Crisis

As noted throughout this dissertation, as of 2025 many young people across North America are experiencing a mental health crisis related to numerous overlapping factors including an inability to fulfill traditional markers of adulthood (Hemez & Vespa, 2025), the demands placed on them by capitalism (Mitchell & Lennox, 2020), and difficulty dealing with existential questions of being-in-the-world (Dewar, 2016). Based on the reports of the participants in this study, it appears that Springhouse alumni have a developmental advantage over their non-Springhouse peers in terms of emotional intelligence, understanding their core values, identification of healthy relationships, and an orientation toward living with meaning and purpose. These traits could be helpful to young people in navigating some of the issues at the root of the mental health crisis – especially those issues related to existential questions of being-in-the-world. In addition, participants did not focus on the traditional markers of adulthood such as home ownership, marriage, career, and parenthood said to be a source of negative mental health for many emerging adults due to their inability to reach them (Mitchell & Lennox, 2020). Since these factors were not emphasised by participants, it may be that not achieving these markers does not represent the same sense of personal failure to reach adulthood as it does for general populations across the post-industrial world. Further research into how much these tools and skills may aid young adults in maintaining positive mental health throughout their emerging adulthood would be needed to confirm this.

If formal institutions of education could reorganize around living systems principles and enact practises akin to those the Springhouse alumni indicated as supporting emotional intelligence, values clarification, and explorations of healthy relationship-building, young people would likely be better equipped for some of the deeper challenges of navigating their existence as beings-in-the-

world (Dewar, 2016) in their post-schooling life. There are certainly many challenges to achieving this in the public school system, and in many ways, it is not realistic given the industrial structure that public education has long been based on (Beadie, 2019). The influence of the mentors is a significant example. The one-on-one and informal interactions that occurred both within and outside school stressed by participants is not an arrangement that would be easily accomplished in the current context of public schools, where classroom teachers are continually subjected to demands from upper administration to do more with less (Parker & Stuart-Hitchcox, 2025). This manifests in many ways in the day-to-day reality of teachers, including teacher to student ratios which preclude the kind of personalized and informal contact needed for the mentorship approach.

In addition, more research would be needed in terms of navigating existing professional ethics regarding the teacher-student relationship when reframing this relationship more informally, predominantly therapeutically, and extending beyond the school environment, schedule and calendar. Several other aspects of the school environment, curriculum, and pedagogy would also require more study in order to assess the compatibility of Springhouse's approach with public schooling. Based on the conflict between the living systems organization of Springhouse and the control system organization of public-school systems, compatibility is unlikely. As asserted by Raywid (1994), applying alternative education practises piecemeal to typical school environments does not usually work. The reason being that many alternative education practises are effective due to the context in which they are implemented, not necessarily because of the techniques themselves. Thus, since investigating these elements was not the aim of this study, it is difficult to say how well Springhouse's approach to education would transfer to public models. These findings would likely be of most benefit to those working in alternative educational environments.

“Artificial Intelligence” and Teaching for Humanity

Finally, the findings hold potential significance in terms of the future role of teachers as technological advancements in large-language models are increasingly integrated into educational

environments. These ideas are especially relevant as global society enters the second quarter of the 21st century and begins to reckon with the coming age of neoliberal and capitalist priorities forcing generative large language models and artificial intelligence (AI) agents into an increasingly prominent role in education. With these technologies being embraced and promoted as an inevitability (European Commission et al., 2025) throughout all levels of education to everyone from administrators to students, it seems almost guaranteed that the way public education is carried out across countries affiliated through the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) will change.

Based on my own experience and from what I have heard from several students in courses I have taught, as of early 2026 artificial intelligence agents and chatbots such as ChatGPT are already capable of providing instant, direct, subject-specific, feedback customized and optimized to the individual learner. Technology companies are currently developing education-specific predictive large language models that are intended to be used in public schools (Internet of Bugs, 2026; Kornilaev, 2021). These agentic models are geared towards presenting information to students using methods that the model has determined will be the most effective for that individual student. Through interacting with the student throughout the entirety of their schooling history and building a profile of what works and what does not, these agents will determine how to present the information so the individual learner will be most engaged with their learning and will learn most effectively (Cox, 2024; Internet of Bugs, 2026). As with ChatGPT, these models will provide real-time, on-demand, immediate feedback along with constructive instructions for improvement along whatever lines the educational outcomes demand. All of these personalized, immediate, outcomes-related abilities are physically impossible for human teachers to match (Kornilaev, 2021). If these technologies are implemented, they may soon render time-consuming human feedback obsolete on tasks such as writing, comprehension, facts memorization, and other subject-specific, performance-oriented tasks. In addition, based on my own experience, as of early 2026 artificial intelligence

agents can instantly create custom courses for any topic along with detailed reading lists, learning activities, and assessments based on what the student wants and needs to learn.

However, one area where AI may not be as effective is in helping young people work through the uniquely human experiences of human emotions, interpersonal relationships, creating meaning in their lives, and *being-in-the-world*. Connected to prioritising psychosocial maturity and emotional intelligence as essential elements of education for adulthood during adolescence, as proposed by such scholars as Greenberger and Sorensen (1973), and Nel Noddings (2015), it may be the case that in the near future, the value of human teachers will be their ability to engage in more humanistic education rather than teaching traditional subjects and technical skills. In this case, the kinds of learning communicated as being valuable by the participants in this study could present a new direction for education – a kind of education that envisions a more profoundly human idea of what it means to help people become more fully developed human beings-in-the-world.

Limitations

An element that could be considered a limitation to this study is the low number of participants. My goal was to have between 12 and 15 participants out of the alumni pool of 29 take part in interviews. A total of seven participants stepped forward and completed interviews. It is worth pointing out that this study was not looking to examine trends across the population, being more interested in how the individual experiences of alumni influenced their ideas of adulthood. This being a very small-scale qualitative and exploratory study with a small participant pool, there are no assumptions or attempt at generalisability of the findings. Findings from this study are to be considered particular to the individual participants and the site. Findings may have applicability to other, similar alternative schools and this study may be seen as a means of exploring the possibility of parallels between Springhouse and other holistic and alternative school sites. This study may also prompt further discussion and exploration of the connection between school experiences in alternative, holistic schools and subjective adulthood, thus serving to promote trans-disciplinary

work between the fields of sociology, psychology, and education.

My approach to participant recruitment also serves as a limitation of the methodology. The fact that recruitment relied on self-selection is a limiting factor since it may be the case that those who had a negative experience with Springhouse would not read emails coming from the school. Those who had a positive experience may be more likely to not only read emails from Springhouse but would possibly be more interested in sharing their experiences. Thus, this kind of selection bias could have been a factor in all the participants reporting an overall positive influence.

A final limitation of the research is the data collection being comprised of a single interview. The approach I used in this study was significant in that the single interview focuses on aspects of adulthood and school experiences that come readily to mind for the participants. However, in order to provide a more nuanced picture of how each participant viewed adulthood and their perceptions about how educational experiences influenced that idea, I feel that a cross-sectional longitudinal approach similar to that used by Cross (2009) would provide more depth and breadth to the data and would thus enrich analysis. Research on identity formation supports the idea that it is a developmental process that unfolds longitudinally (Benson & Johnson, 2009). Thus, in future research I would like to start by interviewing the participants as adolescents, again as emerging adults after graduating, and then again as they neared the end of emerging adulthood. This methodology would be more robust in tracing how school experiences influenced *persistent* ideas of what participants think it means to be an adult. It would also provide a glimpse into how the influence of schooling is perceived at different points during the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood. This is a research study that I would like to attempt within different populations in the future, which leads to the final topic of future research.

Future Research

This study suggests that in the case of Springhouse School there is a strong link between adolescent school experiences and participants' post-schooling ideas about what it means to be an

adult. As noted previously, research that examines this connection is lacking in the educational scholarship. Much of the research about adulthood cited in this work draws on findings from adult populations from across the post-industrial world regarding what adulthood means and how it is experienced but does not reference the influence of schooling on what people believe qualifies someone as an adult. While assumptions could be made of the ways school experiences have some influence on how people from general populations view adulthood, the specifics of the connection between typical school experiences and normative concepts of adulthood are not represented in the literature. Research into the perspectives of emerging adults as to how they feel their public school experiences influenced their ideas about what it means to be an adult would contribute to filling this research gap. Research into public schooling's influence on ideas of adulthood in Canada's general population would be an essential first step. Exploring connections between schooling and ideas about what it means to be an adult could provide a baseline against which the influence of alternative schooling on subjective adulthood could be compared and contrasted. Having access to findings from the public schooling population would serve as a valuable resource in developing theory regarding the influence of schooling on ideas of adulthood more generally. This kind of research would be especially valuable in a Canadian context since the Canadian population is not well-represented in the existing research literature on any of the subjects explored in this dissertation.

As a final note, being that Springhouse is a holistic school, and much of its written philosophy involves the Earth and connecting to the natural world, I was surprised there was not more of an emphasis in the interviews on qualities related to being a good steward of the Earth as a marker of adulthood. John provided the only mention linking the natural world to adulthood. He believes that fostering a connection to life is important and that adulthood is about cultivating a connection to the living world. Although I am surprised that Springhouse alumni did not comment on this, the attitude aligns with research on general populations where concepts like ecological

responsibility and stewardship or concern for the planet are entirely absent as markers of being an adult. It could be argued that many of the transformative events that were communicated by participants took place in a natural setting, which could point to the possible importance of contact with nature, despite participants not explicitly referencing the natural world as having a direct influence on their idea of adulthood. recognising this absence indicates to me that research exploring the possibility for ecological responsibility being a marker of adulthood might be an interesting avenue for future study.

Final Thoughts on Education for Adulthood

Looking at adulthood from a historical perspective is hopeful because it emphasises the role of choice regarding the qualities a community wants to see in its members. This inquiry argues that being an adult is not defined as an archetype but is socially constructed. This means that social institutions such as education can have an intentional influence over what qualities are valued as meaningful markers of adulthood in society. As this work suggests, the principles underlying educational design are reflected in the views of adulthood held by graduates of that educational design. In this case, education built around principles of building and maintaining healthy relationships with the self and in community manifest as parallel markers of adulthood for the alumni with whom I spoke. In addition to representing markers of adulthood, these ideas about adulthood appear to be influencing the ways the participants pursue being-in-the-world.

Adults are the decision-makers who guide society. Adults craft policy, pursue business ventures, teach the next generation, and engage in politics through serving in office and voting for those who run for office. Thus, society reflects the values these adults hold. Research into the connection between education and adulthood may yield further insights into the power of education to influence the forms that adulthood could take in the future. This could contribute to the broad paradigm shift that will be needed to move humanity out of the modernist and post-modernist framework that has defined Canadian society for decades and into a metamodernist listening society

(Freinacht, 2017, 2019) defined by acknowledging the complexity involved with addressing such wicked problems as climate change, maintaining social cohesion under globalization, and confronting the prioritization of unlimited growth on a planet with limited resources. Education that considers the kind of adulthood needed for this shift will most certainly be involved in unlocking this future.

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Appendix A: Preliminary Self-Interview

My Own Formative School Experiences

February 15, 2024

I am my most trustworthy source. This will provide me with some baseline ideas of how school can inform one's idea of what it means to be an adult and how one's school experiences influence their own idea of what kind of adult they want to be.

Immediate thoughts: In what ways did your experiences in high school influence your ideas about what adulthood means?

adults need to do things that they don't want to do, but that society expects them to do, in order to survive – aptitude/career test sewage engineer

An adult's self is equivalent to/expressed by their job – thinking of the teachers as teachers who are by default adults. Adults have jobs – especially serious jobs like teacher/doctor/lawyer/etc.

Success in life requires competition – grades and tests

memory of not studying but still doing well but studying and doing not as well – you can ride through life on your pre-existing intellect and talents. Working at something won't necessarily pay off in a measurable way

Thinking about the other students and groups of students...

Society is cliquish but one can move between the cliques if they don't adhere to one particular group's ideology. - Adults should be flexible and resist in-group/out-group distinctions

(clarification: this is something that I decided would be something I would do to consider myself a "good adult" based on a phenomenon that I did not approve of re: cliquishness)

Mr. Brown's English class

There are forces in the world that are attempting to make you think in certain ways and believe certain things without you being aware of this psychological manipulation – Mr. Brown's English Class

(Clarification: to be a real adult you should be aware of these things and resist being manipulated by them)

Gym class

Exercise is hard and painful – when you are an adult, you don't need to exercise anymore

(yes, I felt this way. I don't anymore though. I have discarded the specific idea around exercise but still hold the idea that adults have more freedom to do or not do whatever they want than children)

Mark Bohrsen dancing - People can be cruel and make fun of others for expressing themselves authentically. A mature person should not do this.

Teachers

Smart teachers are better teachers – Mr. Dr. Prentice, Mr. Roberts, Mr. Brown (clarification: to be a proper "adult" teacher, you should strive to be smart and creative)

Social interactions are governed by norms that are learned and practised. As an adult, you need to learn these so you can fit in – My friend group in the cafeteria

There are other, unconventional, and better ways that things can be done – Mr. Dr. Prentice's evaluation scheme (clarification: real adults don't settle for doing things "the way we've always done them" real adults are creative and look for better solutions to problems)

Being an adult means that you have power – teachers have absolute power over the children (I believed that at the time but I no longer have this belief in adulthood.)

Being an adult means that you are organised and responsible – teacher modeling (clarification: yes. This is part of my concept of being an adult – you should have your shit together, be on time, and be prepared for things)

Mr. Marsh and Mr. McLean

Adults who lose their temper are scary. Therefore, an adult should not lose their temper

Nintendo magazine

Friendship is a fragile thing that can be toxic. Friends can take advantage of you. Adulthood involves recognising and letting go of dysfunctional relationships. It also involves holding onto relationships that are worth keeping.

People from other cultures want a lot of the same things that I want –

Indigenous/Pakistani/Indian/Filipino friends. Being an adult means understanding there is a common humanity underlying visible difference.

Social dance class in grade 8 – making robot sounds and being made fun of by my dance partner
Mature people (adults) shouldn't express themselves authentically and spontaneously. To do so risks social exclusion T (Clarification, although I don't believe this anymore, it is still part of my unconscious behaviour – adults should "fit in"I still feel the need to "fit in" socially)

Band trips to Banff and Colorado Springs

The world is bigger than my little corner of it. And that outside world is interesting and diverse. Adults should expand their experience beyond the boundaries of what's comfortable and experience different places

End of Initial Thoughts: First Prompt

After an initial burst of two or three ideas, there was a lull but then the more things I thought about, the more things appeared. After about an hour I feel like I had exhausted all of the experiences that I could think of.

Used the prompt "what about locations?" I imagined moving through the spaces in my high school and in each location I thought about formative experiences that occurred there. I kept lingering on the gymnasium and a high view. My graduation ceremony. Adulthood means graduating from high school. High school was the last barrier to adulthood. Turning 18 meant that I was an adult and the grad ceremony, the dry grad party, and driving around with my high school friends on that night felt significant, yet not significant. On some level I felt that it was just for show – that I didn't feel any different. Was being a real adult recognising that these rites of passage were really meaningless? What really counts is how we feel inside?

(clarification: the essence of this is a conviction that a real adult examines meaning and shouldn't just accept socially imposed rites of passage as inherently meaningful)

Dry grad – adults learn how to game systems to enrich themselves – horse racing game

(clarification: the seed of my idea of most adults gaming the system for their own gain – developing my own concept of adulthood that resists this -a “real adult” doesn't try to game the system for their own gain.)

Stock market club – adults invest their money to create more money without working
(same as above)

Mr. Uher – Adults can be interested in many different things (electronics, stock market, science, ham radio, music). Interesting adults are interested in lots of different things

(clarification: therefore to be a “real adult” I should be interested in many things

Back to the imaginal tour through the school:

trophy case outside of the band room – experiences like band trips will end when school ends. Adults need to create their own interesting experiences.

walking through the hall on the second floor – thinking about the date and realizing that the calendar and the date system that we use are human constructions and could be different since humans created them. What would a different system of telling the date look like? - lesson is that real adults recognise that concepts like measurement are created by humans and can be changed by humans. Nothing that is human created is eternal and irrefutably true

backstage – there is hidden work that people do behind the scenes that is really important.

(clarification: this means that as an adult, you should recognise the hidden work that goes into things. You should also pay attention to opportunities that might not be so apparent that might make your life more enriching)

Playing school dance – bad performance – learned that if you don't try you won't feel the pain of failure.

(meaning: adults need to accept failure as a growth experiences)

Foods – adults should know how to cook for themselves and others. Adults should know how to make their own clothes

Shop – adults should know how to fix things and build things that they need. They should know how to be safe working with tools

I found myself jumping around through the locations in the school at this point.

Real adults are careful with dangerous things. Children are careless and need to be taught safety.

(clarification: some of my view that many adult age people is grounded in this. Dudes with trucks tearing around, adults doing dumb and dangerous things that could hurt them and others...the list goes on and has a lot to do with considering the implications of one's actions. A real adult thinks about potential harm before they act)

Drafting class – not good at it but wanted to be an architect. Being an adult means accepting the fact that you might not be able to do what you want to do if you cannot do the things that are necessary in order to attain your goal. Being an adult involves finding what you are really passionate about doing – not what you think you might want to do. Measured by commitment to doing whatever it takes to master the necessary skills and mindset.

track and field day – adults bring sunscreen – plan ahead to avoid pain

Influence of Other Students Prompt

The locations prompt led to some more ideas. At this point, I have gone through the spaces in the high school but I'm not getting any further experiences coming to mind. Tried the "were there any important experiences with teachers?" prompt but all of these experiences had already been mentioned.

"other students" prompt brought up something

conversation with high school friend where I told her that I felt like I knew her pretty well but she firmly corrected me that I did not in fact know her very well at all

adults recognise that they never really know what is going on with other people. Even if you think you understand someone else, you probably don't

interaction with another friend – invited them to a one-sided game that was only fun for me but dangerous and not fun for them. They left angry.

real adults consider whether something is good for the other person. not just whether something will be good for themselves

high school friend became alcoholic - possibly partially because he got a girl pregnant – adulthood is risky. Avoiding unnecessary risks – like sex – will avert mental health disasters in adulthood. Don't follow passions. Adults weigh the risks carefully before proceeding with anything.

same friend's parents divorced after high school. lesson learned was that adults have a profound influence on their children and can project their emotions onto their kids – negatively affecting their lives. Therefore a responsible adult makes sure they are stable psychologically and in a solid relationship before having children

(extension to this: a real adult seeks to confront and make peace with trauma from their childhood so that they are not ruled by demons from the past that harm themselves and others and nature)

damaging or messing with other people's property is childish. There are serious consequences for infringing on the rights of others and on the public commons. A real adult doesn't derive pleasure from entertaining themselves by disrespecting others or the commons. A real adult respects the property of others and respects the public commons.

(a real adult follows rules...but more like rules about respect, not necessarily legal rules)

Off track from school experiences: A Question

At this point I realised that I was thinking about things well outside of school, even though the experiences were related to a friend from school. Should I include these ideas then? No. Since it is not connected directly to the school I should direct attention away from these experiences and focus on experiences that are more directly related to school activities and the school site.

Final Prompt

Thinking about off-site activities that were directly related to school led to

Raising money for the band program by selling things to my friends and family. This taught me that society values some things more than others and that for fun and enriching things like music and art, you can't expect society to pay for it. This is something that I thought you just had to accept as an adult.

(adults need to accept the fact that what society values is not always aligned with what is good for society. Now I feel like a real adult should be seeking ways to show society-at-large the value of things that it doesn't value)

I think that's it.

It's been around 90 minutes and I feel like I have exhausted all of the experiences that are significant since I keep coming back to the same experiences. I'm also thinking of things outside of school more often now, signalling that I've run out of really memorable school experiences.

Notes for future reference.

This might be a good way to tell if the interview has reached saturation with the participant.

The prompt for locations and the idea of the imaginary tour through the school was especially fruitful. It even conjured up memories of walking through the hallway on the way to class and having an important existential thought about the nature of time and human constructs.

As was the connection to teachers. Asking about teachers/adults at the school will be a good prompt if the participant has not mentioned it already. This makes sense. People and places leave deep marks in our minds.

I will try a follow-up in 3 days to see if there is anything else that came up and I will re-read these entries and try to expand on the meaning behind them.

Follow up

Mr. Rezansoff the art teacher was involved in the community. I remember realizing that "teachers-as-adults" transcended their role as simply teachers when I thought about that.

This was the only addition, and reading back over the notes I made clarifications in BLUE This was actually really valuable in terms of clarifying for my future self what I was getting at in the moment. Definitely do the "meaning making" follow-up interview.

Appendix B: Research Ethics Board Approval Letter

Research Ethics Board
t: (807) 343-8283
research@lakeheadu.ca

November 13, 2024

Principal Investigator: Dr. R. Paul Berger
Student: Michael Lyngstad
Education\Education
Lakehead University
955 Oliver Road
Thunder Bay, ON P7B 5E1

Dear Dr. R. Paul Berger and Michael Lyngstad:

Re: Romeo File No: 1470674
Granting Agency: N/A
Agency Reference #: N/A

On behalf of the Research Ethics Board, I am pleased to grant ethical approval to your research project titled, "**Alumni perspectives of the influence of experiences at Springhouse School on subjective adulthood**".

Ethics approval is valid until **November 13, 2025**. Please submit a Request for Renewal to the Office of Research Services via the Romeo Research Portal by October 13, 2025, if your research involving human participants will continue for longer than one year. A Final Report must be submitted promptly upon completion of the project. Access the Romeo Research Portal by logging into myInfo at:

<https://erpwp.lakeheadu.ca/>

During the course of the study, any modifications to the protocol or forms must not be initiated without prior written approval from the REB. You must promptly notify the REB of any adverse events that may occur.

Best wishes for a successful research project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "C. Pousa", enclosed in a rectangular box.

Dr. Claudio Pousa
Chair, Research Ethics Board

/dgc

Appendix C: Letter of Invitation



Letter of Invitation for Potential Participants

Research Title: Alumni Perspectives of the Influence of Experiences at Springhouse School on Subjective Adulthood

Dear Potential Participant:

I invite you to participate in a research study exploring your perceptions of what it means to be an adult - with a focus on how your ideas about adulthood have been influenced by your experiences at Springhouse Community School. You are being invited to participate because you are an alumni of Springhouse Community School.

Taking part in this study is voluntary. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have before you decide whether or not you would like to take part in this study. Please reach me via the email below or at the virtual information session mentioned below.

My name is Michael Lyngstad and I am a Ph. D. Candidate in the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada. I am hoping to learn about how your experiences at Springhouse influenced your idea of what it means to be an adult. These influences could be positive or negative. The findings will also be included in an executive summary that will be provided to Springhouse School for their consideration in developing the philosophy and methods of Sourced Design.

I will be holding a virtual information session over Zoom on May 14, 2025 at 7:00 pm EDT where you are invited to learn what is involved with participation and to ask questions about the study. You can access the Zoom meeting at the following link:
<https://lakeheadu.zoom.us/j/92013627482?pwd=Y0wcOcl1afeUZPFGmtQY2S7v4okCBV.1>

Participation in the study will involve one 60-minute interview and an optional follow-up interview, both to be scheduled at your convenience during the months of May and June. These interviews will take place over Zoom videoconferencing with interview audio recorded on my local computer for later analysis. If you are interested in learning more about the study, please contact me via email at mlyngsta@lakeheadu.ca, access information on my website at www.michaellyngstad.ca/SpringhouseAdulthood, or visit the information session.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Lyngstad", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Michael Lyngstad, M.Ed., B.Ed., B.Mus.

Appendix D: Information Package and Consent Form



Alumni Perspectives of the Influence of Experiences at Springhouse School on Subjective Adulthood

Dear potential participant, you are being invited to participate in this study on the influence that your experiences at Springhouse have had on your concept of adulthood. This package reviews the details of your potential participation in this project. Please do not hesitate to ask me questions about the study or participation in the study before you decide whether to take part.

I will interpret the data and integrate it into my doctoral dissertation, articles published in academic journals, and presentations at academic conferences.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to record and interpret alumni perspectives on how their experiences at Springhouse Community School have influenced their idea of what it means to be an adult. This will add to the scholarly literature within the fields of holistic education and adulthood studies.

Interviews

Participants will take part in a 60-minute interview and will be invited to an optional shorter interview that will take place between three and seven days after the first interview. The interviews will take place via Zoom. Interviews will be audio recorded. After the interview(s), I will send you a transcript for verification purposes. Participants may choose not to answer any question and may stop the interview at any time without penalty.

Risks and Benefits

Participation in the research is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time up until the beginning of the data analysis phase of the process without consequences. I will reach out to you to confirm your wishes about your data being included in analysis prior to beginning the analysis step.

There are no perceived risks involved with taking part in the research.

There is no conflict of interest involved with participation in this study and your decision to participate or to not participate will have no bearing on your status as an alumni or your relationship with Springhouse.

Participation will offer an opportunity to reflect on significant and formative experiences connected to Springhouse as well as in your life outside of Springhouse. Through participating in this study, you will have the chance to engage in reflection and meaning-making around your concept of adulthood which could provide valuable personal insight into your sense of identity.

Confidentiality & Data Storage

Pseudonyms will be used to protect the confidentiality of all participants. Your name will not be used in the thesis or any publications unless you prefer to be named, as indicated on the consent form.

Unless you prefer to be named in the study, I will ask you to suggest a pseudonym that I can use in place of your name or I could create a pseudonym for you. Apart from this, any interview material that identifies you will be put into a secret code that only I and my supervisor will know and I will destroy the decoder when I have completed writing my dissertation.

Use and Storage of Data

I will only use what you say in the interview to write my dissertation and in creating academic presentations, journal articles and reports discussing the influences that experiences at Springhouse have had on alumni. After recording your interview, the transcripts and the audio will be stored on a password protected hard drive in a locked cabinet for seven years in Dr. Paul Berger's office at Lakehead University as per Lakehead University policy.

What happens after the study is complete?

If you would like a copy of the completed dissertation and any journal articles that I might write about this research, or if you want me to tell you if I am presenting at a conference, please let me know by filling out the area in the consent form below.

What if you want to withdraw from the study?

If you want to withdraw from the study, you can just let me know either by email, phone, or tell me in person. You may withdraw from the study at any point. There is no penalty for withdrawing from this study.

RESEARCHER CONTACT INFORMATION:

If you have questions, please contact me via email at mlyngsta@lakeheadu.ca.

Student Researcher: Michael Lyngstad

Email: mlyngsta@lakeheadu.ca

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Paul Berger

Email: paul.berger@lakeheadu.ca

Phone: 807-343-8010 ext. 8708

This research has been approved by the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions related to the ethics of the research and would like to speak to someone outside of the research team, please contact Sue Wright at the Research Ethics Board at +1 [807-343-8283](tel:807-343-8283) or research@lakeheadu.ca.

Participant Consent Form

Research Topic: Alumni Perspectives of the Influence of Experiences at Springhouse School on Subjective Adulthood

I, _____, (please print/type name) have read and understood the contents of the participant information package, including the potential risks and benefits of the study. I hereby consent to my participation in the research.

I understand and acknowledge:

- By consenting to participate, I have not waived any rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.
- The potential risks and benefits of the study;
- I may withdraw from the research at any point;
- I may choose not to answer any questions;
- All information gathered will be treated confidentially;
- All data will be securely stored by the lead researcher while completing the dissertation project. After this point, the lead researcher will securely store the data on an external hard drive for 7 years, as per Lakehead University's policy;
- I will not be identifiable in any written documents or course presentations resulting from this research, unless I explicitly agree to have my identity revealed; and
- all of my questions about the study have been answered

I understand that the results of this research may be used in the following:

- Presentation of research project as part of Michael Lyngstad's doctoral dissertation
- Presentation of findings at academic conferences
- Presentation of findings as articles in academic journals
- Presentation of findings in reports

Furthermore, I understand that if I request it, I will be provided with a summary of the results (i.e. a copy of the completed dissertation, subsequent conference presentation materials, or academic articles).

Print/Type Name	Signature	Date

I hereby consent to be audio recorded as indicated by my signature below.

Print/Type Name	Signature	Date

Please indicate your preference concerning the use of a pseudonym (please initial one)

☐ I prefer you assign a pseudonym

☐ I prefer you use the following pseudonym _____

☐ I prefer you use my real name as it appears above on this consent form

Please indicate if you would like to receive a copy of the completed dissertation (initial as many as you wish)

☐ I would like to receive a copy of the completed dissertation

☐ I would like to receive notification of published journal articles or conference presentations

Please sign and return this form to the Lead Researcher, Michael Lyngstad.

For further information concerning the study, please contact:

Michael Lyngstad, Lead Researcher: mlyngsta@lakeheadu.ca

or

Dr. Paul Berger, Faculty Supervisor: paul.berger@lakeheadu.ca

Appendix E: Revised Invitation to Participate



Letter of Invitation for Springhouse Alumni

Research Title: Alumni Perspectives of the Influence of Experiences at Springhouse School on Subjective Adulthood

Dear Potential Participant:

I invite you to participate in a research study exploring your perceptions of what it means to be an adult - with a focus on how your ideas about adulthood have been influenced by your experiences at Springhouse Community School. You are being invited to participate because you are an alumni of Springhouse Community School.

Taking part in this study is voluntary. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have before you decide whether or not you would like to take part in this study. Please reach me via the email below or at the virtual information session mentioned below.

My name is Michael Lyngstad and I am a Ph. D. Candidate in the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada. I am hoping to learn about how your experiences at Springhouse influenced your idea of what it means to be an adult. These influences could be positive or negative. The findings will also be included in an executive summary that will be provided to Springhouse School for their consideration in developing the philosophy and methods of Sourced Design.

Participation in the study will involve one 60-minute interview to be scheduled at your convenience during the months of July and August. These interviews will take place over Zoom videoconferencing with interview audio recorded on my local computer for later analysis.

Upon completion of the interview, you will receive a monetary compensation of \$50 USD via Western Union money transfer.

If you are interested in learning more about the study, please contact me via email at mlyngsta@lakeheadu.ca, access information on my website at www.michaellyngstad.ca/SpringhouseAdulthood.

Appendix F: Revised Information Package and Consent Forms



Alumni Perspectives of the Influence of Experiences at Springhouse School on Subjective Adulthood

Dear potential participant, you are being invited to participate in this study on the influence that your experiences at Springhouse have had on your concept of adulthood. This package reviews the details of your potential participation in this project. Please do not hesitate to ask me questions about the study or participation in the study before you decide whether to take part.

I will interpret the data and integrate it into my doctoral dissertation, articles published in academic journals, and presentations at academic conferences.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to record and interpret alumni perspectives on how their experiences at Springhouse Community School have influenced their idea of what it means to be an adult. This will add to the scholarly literature within the fields of holistic education and adulthood studies.

Interviews

Participants will take part in a 60-minute interview and will be invited to an optional shorter interview that will take place between three and seven days after the first interview. The interviews will take place via Zoom. Interviews will be audio recorded. After the interview(s), I will send you a transcript for verification purposes. Participants may choose not to answer any question and may stop the interview at any time without penalty.

Risks and Benefits

Participation in the research is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time up until the beginning of the data analysis phase of the process without consequences. I will reach out to you to confirm your wishes about your data being included in analysis prior to beginning the analysis step.

There are no perceived risks involved with taking part in the research.

There is no conflict of interest involved with participation in this study and your decision to participate or to not participate will have no bearing on your status as an alumni or your relationship with Springhouse.

Participation will offer an opportunity to reflect on significant and formative experiences connected to Springhouse as well as in your life outside of Springhouse. Through participating in this study, you will have the chance to engage in reflection and meaning-making around your concept of adulthood which could provide valuable personal insight into your sense of identity. Upon completing the interview, you will also receive an honorarium of \$50 USD delivered via Western Union money transfer.

Confidentiality & Data Storage

Pseudonyms will be used to protect the confidentiality of all participants. Your name will not be used in the thesis or any publications unless you prefer to be named, as indicated on the consent form.

Unless you prefer to be named in the study, I will ask you to suggest a pseudonym that I can use in place of your name or I could create a pseudonym for you. Apart from this, any interview material that identifies you will be put into a secret code that only I and my supervisor will know and I will destroy the decoder when I have completed writing my dissertation.

Use and Storage of Data

I will only use what you say in the interview to write my dissertation and in creating academic presentations, journal articles and reports discussing the influences that experiences at Springhouse have had on alumni. After recording your interview, the transcripts and the audio will be stored on a password protected hard drive in a locked cabinet for seven years in Dr. Paul Berger's office at Lakehead University as per Lakehead University policy.

What happens after the study is complete?

If you would like a copy of the completed dissertation and any journal articles that I might write about this research, or if you want me to tell you if I am presenting at a conference, please let me know by filling out the area in the consent form below.

What if you want to withdraw from the study?

If you want to withdraw from the study, you can just let me know either by email, phone, or tell me in person. You may withdraw from the study at any point. There is no penalty for withdrawing from this study.

RESEARCHER CONTACT INFORMATION:

If you have questions, please contact me via email at mlyngsta@lakeheadu.ca.

Student Researcher: Michael Lyngstad

Email: mlyngsta@lakeheadu.ca

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Paul Berger

Email: paul.berger@lakeheadu.ca

Phone: 807-343-8010 ext. 8708

This research has been approved by the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions related to the ethics of the research and would like to speak to someone outside of the research team, please contact Sue Wright at the Research Ethics Board at +1 [807-343-8283](tel:807-343-8283) or research@lakeheadu.ca.

Participant Consent Form

Research Topic: Alumni Perspectives of the Influence of Experiences at Springhouse School on Subjective Adulthood

I, _____, (please print/type name) have read and understood the contents of the participant information package, including the potential risks and benefits of the study. I hereby consent to my participation in the research.

I understand and acknowledge:

- By consenting to participate, I have not waived any rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.
- The potential risks and benefits of the study;
- I may withdraw from the research at any point;
- I may choose not to answer any questions;
- All information gathered will be treated confidentially;
- All data will be securely stored by the lead researcher while completing the dissertation project. After this point, the lead researcher will securely store the data on an external hard drive for 7 years, as per Lakehead University's policy;
- I will not be identifiable in any written documents or course presentations resulting from this research, unless I explicitly agree to have my identity revealed; and
- all of my questions about the study have been answered

I understand that the results of this research may be used in the following:

- Presentation of research project as part of Michael Lyngstad's doctoral dissertation
- Presentation of findings at academic conferences
- Presentation of findings as articles in academic journals
- Presentation of findings in reports

Furthermore, I understand that if I request it, I will be provided with a summary of the results (i.e. a copy of the completed dissertation, subsequent conference presentation materials, or academic articles).

Print/Type Name	Signature	Date

I hereby consent to be audio recorded as indicated by my signature below.

Print/Type Name	Signature	Date

Please indicate your preference concerning the use of a pseudonym (please initial one)

☐ I prefer you assign a pseudonym

☐ I prefer you use the following pseudonym _____

☐ I prefer you use my real name as it appears above on this consent form

Please indicate if you would like to receive a copy of the completed dissertation (initial as many as you wish)

☐ I would like to receive a copy of the completed dissertation

☐ I would like to receive notification of published journal articles or conference presentations

Please sign and return this form to the Lead Researcher, Michael Lyngstad.

For further information concerning the study, please contact:

Michael Lyngstad, Lead Researcher: mlyngsta@lakeheadu.ca

or

Dr. Paul Berger, Faculty Supervisor: paul.berger@lakeheadu.ca

Appendix G: Interview Guide

First Interview

Phase One

Main Question

What does adulthood mean to you?

Clarifying Question: From your perspective, what is involved with being an adult?

Further Clarifying Question: What sorts of things do you think make someone an adult?

Potential Probes

Please explain what you mean by _____?

How would _____ look in day-to-day life?

Why do you think _____ is significant to being an adult?

Second Question

From your perspective, how do you feel your experiences at Springhouse influenced your ideas about adulthood?

Clarifying question: What experiences at Springhouse influenced your ideas about adulthood?

Potential Probes

Please explain _____ activity in more depth.

How did that experience influence your idea of adulthood?

Why do you feel that experience was meaningful in influencing your idea of adulthood?

Prompts meant to aid in recall

Imagine any individual work that you did at Springhouse. Please describe how what you studied individually influenced your idea of adulthood?

Imagine any group activities that you did at Springhouse. This can be activities at the school site or field trips away from the school. Perhaps camping or hiking trips or trips to other towns or cities. Please describe how any of these group activities influenced your idea of adulthood?

Imagine each of the teachers at Springhouse. Please describe any interactions that influenced your idea of adulthood?

Imagine your schoolmates at Springhouse. Please describe any interactions with them that influenced your idea of adulthood?

Imagine walking through the main building at Springhouse. Imagine the entrance, the great hall, the classrooms, hallways, and offices. In what ways do you associate any of the spaces inside the building with events or ideas that influenced how you see adulthood?

Imagine walking through the outdoor spaces at Springhouse. Imagine the gardens, the greenhouse, the forest, the yard. In what ways do you associate any of the spaces inside the building with events or ideas that influenced how you see adulthood?

Phase Two**Main Question**

Thinking back to the time before you attended Springhouse, please describe what you thought made a person an adult.

Please describe any significant experiences prior to attending Springhouse that influenced your ideas about what it means to be an adult.

Potential prompts

Imagine things that you learned from watching your family. How has what you saw or heard from your family influenced your idea of adulthood?

Imagine experiences within your community that are memorable. How have interactions with your community influenced your idea of adulthood?

Imagine your school experiences prior to attending Springhouse. How have your experiences in school before Springhouse influenced your ideas of adulthood?

Imagine any locations, either urban or rural, in which you had experiences that you feel influenced what you think it means to be an adult. Please describe how these experiences in places have had an influence.

What memorable pieces of media, such as books, poems, television shows, movies, visual art, music, or any other form of public art, entertainment or information have influenced your ideas of adulthood?

Please describe any experiences that you have had since graduating from Springhouse that have influenced your idea of what it means to be an adult.

Throughout these questions I will stay attentive to connections to influences that were previously connected to experiences related to Springhouse, asking the participant to reflect on whether the idea about adulthood is more connected to Springhouse or more connected to experiences before or after attending the school.