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# Adulthood as Action: Changing Meanings of Adulthood for Male Part-Time Workers in Contemporary Japan

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**Abstract**

*Before the 1990s, Japanese routes to adulthood appeared to be well structured and strongly linked to the school-to-work transition and other status transitions, such as marriage, parenthood and home ownership. However, with significant changes in employment practices, a weakening of school-to-work transitions, and the rapid increase of the irregular labour market to 38.2% in 2012, there exists a greater acknowledgement of a diversity of routes into the world of employment and adulthood. Freeters, part-time workers aged between 15-34 who are neither students, nor housewives, have been at the epicentre of these discussions. By drawing on participant observation and interviews conducted since 2007, this paper explores male freeters' understandings of adulthood through their views on employment, responsibility, meaning and action. It argues that male freeters' focus on adulthood as constituted through action rather than as the successful result of status transitions is reconfiguring ideas of adulthood in contemporary Japan.*

**Keywords:**

*adulthood, action, part-time work, freeters, Japan*

## Introduction

Viewing role transitions as constitutive of social adulthood has been common in Japan and elsewhere (cf. Fortes, 1974; Grimes, 2000; Mead, 1943; Turner, 1967; van Gennep, 2004).

For most of the post-war period, routes to adulthood in Japan have been intrinsically linked to smooth school-to-work transitions. Three institutions—family, school and companies—ostensibly functioned together to move youth into employment, which constituted the first step into adulthood.[1] Leaving school and starting a full-time job was thus understood as the initial entrance to becoming a social person—a *shakaijin* (Roberson, 1995).[2] Men were seen as fully social adults (*ichininmae no shakaijin*) when they had successfully transitioned to working full-time, being married, and fulfilling the role of the main breadwinner and head of the household (*daikokubashira*) (Dasgupta, 2005; Edwards, 1990; Lunsing 2001).[3] Since the bursting of the economic bubble in the early 1990s, however, there have been growing discrepancies between these three systems, leading to concern about disrupted school-to-work transitions and elongated routes to adulthood (Brinton, 2010; Inui, 2003; Honda, 2005; Chiavacci, 2005). This has gone hand-in-hand with an intensification in public anxiety about the increase of Japanese irregular workers.[4]

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1 Families provided economic and motivational support for education and employment; schools sorted students according to company demand; and employers recruited young graduates via schools.

2 While this is broadly true for both men and women, gaining full-time employment has been considered more important for the male transition to adulthood. For women, social recognition of adulthood has generally focused more on marriage and childbirth than on full-time employment.

3 Three terms were commonly used to describe adulthood: *otona*, *shakaijin* and *ichininmae*. The meanings of each vary and may be drawn on differently according to individual understanding but, broadly speaking, *otona* is used to describe an adult generally. It includes reaching the legal age of adulthood, as well as generalised ideas of what constitutes adulthood, as outlined by Ishida *et al.* (2013). *Shakaijin* is usually associated with the shift from student life to working full time, as a responsible adult member of society (Roberson, 1995). *Ichininmae* is often used to describe a person who is seen to have accomplished all the gendered role transitions—for example, for a man, *ichininmae* is usually understood as someone working in a permanent full-time job, married with children. He is the *daikokubashira*—the head of household—with all its attendant responsibilities; though, as Bestor (2004) notes, *ichininmae* can also be used to refer to apprentices when they have accomplished the transition to full artisan status.

4 The percentage of the Japanese workforce in non-regular employment rose to 38.2% in 2012 from approximately 18% in 1990 (Anon, 2013).

During the mid-2000s much discussion focused on one particular category of irregular worker known as *freeters*: Understood to be individuals between the ages of 15 and 34 years, not a student, and not married (if female). Their lifestyles, choices, educational and family backgrounds have been debated in Japanese media and academia over the past 15 years with them described variously as lazy immature slackers or victims of deregulated labour laws and a more competitive employment market (Yamada, 1999; Genda, 2001; Kosugi, 2008; Slater, 2010). Changes in the institutions of school, employment and family have been highlighted as a reason for the increase of such workers and have been emphasised in discussions of individual life chances and future opportunities (see, for example, Allison, 2012, 2013; Brinton, 2010; Genda, 2001; Honda, 2005; Kariya 1991, 2001; Kosugi, 2008; Miyamoto, 2002).

Institutional changes that make achieving role transitions harder have implications that extend beyond employment opportunities and future earning potential because transitions continue to be used to socially assess a person's adult status. Indeed, it has been suggested by some that male freeters are unable to become adults unless they find full-time jobs (Hidaka 2010), which would make male adulthood fully contingent on the kinds of work contract that a person is able to secure.[5] Allison (2012, 2013), in her recent work on post-bubble social precarity, suggests that young people in precarious positions are unable to achieve adulthood—as defined through the transitions of gaining full-time employment, marriage, children and buying a home—and consequently feel disillusioned and hopeless. Young people, she argues, are "refugeed" from such possibilities but continue to long for these post-war statuses.

Whilst such feelings were shared by a minority of men I worked with, most thought of adulthood to be about more than transitions. They narrated a commitment (and feeling) that taking intentional action, building skills, negotiating possibilities and developing networks would facilitate their ability to achieve what they wanted as adults in terms of work and/or

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[5] Such discussions focus only on socially-constructed roles, without reference to how individuals themselves understand and define adulthood.

lifestyle (cf. Inui and Kojima, 2012). Many of the men I worked with justified their irregular labour through tapping into neo-liberal capitalist rhetoric of the market and "self-responsibility"[6]: They wanted to find and do work that is meaningful to them, but also suggested that they were responsible for carving out their work trajectories and gaining the skills to do so.[7] They were keen for people around them to recognise the actions they were taking and to understand such actions to be both productive and constitutive of adulthood, even though they did not necessarily lead to achieving any of the normative post-war transitions to adulthood. In the process, male freeters understood adulthood through actions, intention and meaning, instead of emphasising "moments of institutionally authorized transformation" (Johnson-Hanks, 2002:865). This is not to say that the concept of transition is not important to these men: It remains important as a local analytical category in assessments of adult *status* by others. However, through highlighting a more holistic reading of what it means to be an adult in the current moment, they were consequently challenging the use of transitions as a primary identifier of social adulthood.

**Methodology**

The data this paper is based on comes from a wider project focusing on irregular employment and constructions of masculinity among male freeters. Ethnographic fieldwork was carried out over 13 months between 2006-2007 with follow-up research conducted between 2009-2011 and in 2013. In 2007, I conducted participant observation whilst working part time in a large cinema for nine months with 25 male and female freeters, 66 students, and 7 full-time managers. In addition, I participated in events and meetings held by a Non-Profit

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6 Berardi (2009) argues that the organisation of life via a capitalist market model has led to people being reduced to competitive productivity. Through the rise of what he terms "post-Fordist modes of production" (2009:21) that "takes the mind, language and creativity as its primary tools for the production of value" (*ibid*.), work has become something to be identified with, psychologically and emotionally, and imbued with meaning, rather than estranged from (or refused), as was the case during Fordist modes of production, as exemplified by workers' struggles during the 1960s and 1970s.

7 Such ideas tap into neo-liberal ideals of selfhood and increasing individualisation in Japan. For a more detailed discussion of how individualisation processes factor into transitions to adulthood in the Japanese context, see Ronald and Izuhara (this issue).

Organisation (NPO) designed to help unemployed young people find work—often part-time work initially. I also spent time with male freeters I met outside of the cinema and the NPO. Since 2007, I have conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 56 male freeters. Of these, 58% were university graduates, 20% were vocational school graduates, 13% had graduated from high school, and 9% from junior high school.[8]

Over the course of fieldwork, I also had numerous conversations with both student workers and full-time workers at the cinema and the NPO about freeters, including (but not limited to) topics such as employment, gender, marriage and adulthood. This paper focuses primarily on male freeters' narratives in order to explore their self-understandings of adulthood, though non-freeter voices are also used to illustrate freeter concerns about how their adulthood is perceived by others. In addition, I concentrate on the voices of men in their mid-20s onwards because men who were younger did not tend to identify themselves as full adults (see Cook, 2012).[9] The narratives presented in the paper were chosen for their representativeness of themes that commonly emerged from interviews and conversations on the subject of adulthood.

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[8] As Ishida and Slater (2010:13-16) make clear, defining class through "class structure, formation and consciousness" is complicated. They follow Katznelson's (1986) four levels of class analysis, looking at ownership of resources and means of production, social organisation (including labour markets), shared dispositions and lived experiences (including shared values and understandings of social organisation), and collective action based on shared class consciousness (Ishida and Slater 2010:15-16). In drawing on these ideas and looking at individual education level, parents' occupation and education, cultural capital and class-consciousness, 75% of the men I worked with could be loosely classified as middle class and 25% as working class. This, however, does not take into consideration arguments about downward mobility and the possibility of freeters (and the working poor) being classified as an entirely new class due to their structural position in the labour market (Miura, 2005; Tachibanaki, 2008; Yamada, 2007).

[9] Of the 56 male freeters I have formally interviewed since 2007, 21 of them were between the ages of 20-24 years when I first began interviewing them, 24 between the ages of 25-29 years, and 11 were in their 30s.

**Emerging adulthood**

Understanding adulthood more holistically, using self-definitions and feelings, as well as transitions, can be seen in recent debates about adulthood.[10] Arnett (2004, 2007), for example, has argued that a new stage of development, dubbed "emerging adulthood", has appeared in industrialised societies. He contends that increasing numbers of young people are no longer moving directly from adolescence into adulthood, as per previous generations, but instead move through a stage of emerging adulthood: From adolescence, to "almost" adult, to adult. Imbued with feelings and emotion, the five main characteristics he identifies are: (1) identity exploration, in which individuals are trying to figure out who they are by sampling different relationships and jobs; (2) instability: their lives are unstable economically and romantically, and they are yet to commit fully to a job or intimate partner; (3) self-focused: individuals have fewer obligations and social roles than adults and can focus on themselves and what they want to do and be; (4) feeling in-between: emerging adults feel that they are neither adolescents, nor yet full adults; and (5) possibilities: individuals feel they are living in a time of possibility in which anything could happen.

Arnett (2004) argues that the typically associated markers of adulthood—full-time job, marriage and parenthood—were, contrary to previous generations, consistently at the bottom of understanding what constitutes adulthood in his study in the US, cross-cutting both class and ethnicity. Instead, the top three criteria of being a full adult were taking responsibility for yourself,[11] making decisions independently, and being financially independent (2004:209). Although this is a theory that has emerged out of a US context, Arnett has suggested that it can be profitably used to analyse other industrialised countries (see, for example, 2006, 2007a, b).

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[10] Holistic understandings of adulthood, which include the affects of social relationships, emotion, affect, feeling, class, race, gender and changing economic and employment realities, have in recent years been highlighted in studies of adulthood around the world (cf. Arnett, 2004, 2007a; Bourgois, 1995; Coté, 2002; Jamieson, 2000; Jeffrey and McDowell, 2004; McDowell, 2003; Okano, 2009; Raffe, 2003; Rosenberger, 2007).

[11] Responsibility was understood mostly in terms of their own actions—being able to accept the consequences of actions taken without resorting to blaming others (Arnett, 2004).

The concept of emerging adulthood is not, however, without critique. As Rosenberger (2007) has argued, the concept needs to be assessed within specific historical, cultural and economic contexts to gain insight into how such processes emerge, are understood and experienced in different societies (see also Nelson *et al.*, 2004).[12] Authors such as Kloep and Hendry (2011) have argued against designating emerging adulthood as a separate developmental or life stage, suggesting instead that, "What we are really discussing are not transitions to adulthood, but a series of on-going transformations that occur [in life] … all the while experiencing changes and processes that enable us at any point in the life course to be defined concurrently as 'a being', 'a has-been,' and 'a becoming'" (2011:57). It is this process of change and contingency that is highlighted by the men I worked with. Whilst the five characteristics highlighted by Arnett (2004) resonate with much of the discourse about freeter lifestyles that position such workers as no longer adolescents, but not yet full adults within Japanese society (e.g., Hidaka, 2010; Miyamoto, 2002, 2004; Yamada, 1999), this does not take into consideration freeters' self definitions of adulthood or how adulthood itself is viewed in the Japanese context beyond social transitions.

**Adulthood in Japan**

There is no denying that status transitions remain important in the Japanese context to assess adulthood (Ishida *et al*., 2013).[13] Yet, holistic understandings of adulthood have to be drawn on alongside transitions when assessing what constitutes adulthood. Whilst successful

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12 Miyamoto (2002, 2004), for example, has suggested that a new life stage has emerged between youth and adulthood in Japan, which she called the "post-adolescent period" (*posuto seinenki*). In a sense, it resonates with Arnett's work on emerging adulthood as a new stage between adolescence and adulthood but her work focuses less on individual feelings and optimism that everything will work out okay, and stresses instead how structural changes have driven elongated routes to adulthood. Her argument is based on freeters who, after years of trying, were unable to become independent (emotionally, financially or socially) due to the structural limitations upon them. She argues that this new stage emerged as a result of a weakening of the links between families, schools and work places that had previously helped young people to transition to full adulthood.

13 For example, Ishida *et al.* (2013) found that "finding employment" (*shūshoku suru koto*), marriage (*kekkon suru koto*) and having children (*kodomo o motsu koto*) continue to be linked to adulthood, with 61% of their respondents suggesting that finding full-time employment was particularly important in becoming an adult.

transitions serve to highlight the development of a mature person, so do behaviours. Lebra (1976), for example, suggested that to become a mature person in Japan, it is necessary to learn how to resign oneself (*akirame*)—an idea that puts feeling and affect at the heart of maturity. Feeling emerges in other studies that examine self-understandings of adulthood. For example, Plath (1980) suggested that adulthood in Japan was associated with feeling and audacity (*atsukamashisa*). Plath was at pains to stress the continual growth that individuals undergo as they age, rather than focusing on particular statuses or transitions (see also Plath, 1975). Ishida *et al*. (2013), meanwhile, illustrate that alongside transitions, taking responsibility for oneself and being able to always control emotion was understood by more than 60% of their respondents to be indicative of adulthood.

Overcoming difficulties, enduring, persisting and consistently trying one's best, are all also components of adulthood in Japan—in both self-definitions but also in others' assessment of adult status (see, for example, Kinsella, 1995). McVeigh (2004) similarly suggests that being an adult is conceived of through particular behaviours, such as being capable, having common sense, following social rules, working responsibly for the good of the nation, being emotionally and financially independent, able to control emotions, endure difficult situations and taking responsibility for their actions. Meanwhile, Okano (2009), in her longitudinal study of the transition to adulthood for women, highlights affective and experiential aspects when she argues that adulthood is best understood as a change in feelings that relate to purpose, motivation, growth, responsibility and independence.

We can see in these studies that adulthood in Japan is about becoming an integrated "person"—no longer an unformed entity that is outside the constraints of adult social life, but a fully functioning person with the rights and responsibilities of a full member of society. Social expectations of individuals to be and act in particular ways as adults therefore work in tandem with individual affective understandings of adulthood. For male part-time workers, many of whom struggle to successfully achieve the social role transitions that mark a person

as an adult as a result of their structural position in the irregular labour market,[14] convincing others (and themselves) of their adult status comes about through recognition of actions taken, rather than results or transitions achieved, and points to a potential disembedding of individuals from social roles that were previously highlighted in the process of becoming an adult. Emphasising actions occurs in part because their structural position in the irregular labour market effectively limits their ability to achieve the status transitions that have been used to assess male adult status: They are not in full-time work and may find it difficult (or undesirable) to move into such employment. However, it is also because of negative social discourses that position freeters as immature and irresponsible citizens. Self and social definitions of adulthood are thus intimately interlinked.

Ortner (2006) has argued that social actors are always enmeshed within a multiplicity of social relations. Whilst individuals have agency and can act intentionally, they are simultaneously never free of social relations. This helps us locate individuals' ability to act within a broader social context and to trace the ways they attempt to create change from within this context, but it also helps us understand the ways that self and social definitions of adulthood are intertwined. Notions of adulthood are complicated and enriched by focusing on action and feeling because it allows us to explore process *across* time, looking at the contingencies of lives (Bledsoe, 2002), rather than only looking at particular transitions, which take place at a particular *moment* in time and are often the culmination of a variety of transformations. Consequently, by including ideas of action, feeling and process, what emerges is a nuanced understanding of what constitutes adulthood, for the men I worked with at least, in the contemporary moment.

**Responsibility, meaning and intentional action**

Responsibility, the intentional pursuit of meaning and goals, psychological and financial independence, and looking after others (interdependence) were all understood to be

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[14] For example, irregular workers struggle to marry as compared to men working full time. A recent Cabinet Office Survey (2011), for example, found that when comparing men in their 30s, only 12.1% of men in irregular employment were married, compared with 47.6% of men in full-time employment.

constitutive of adulthood among the men I worked with. The aspect drawn upon most frequently in narratives about adulthood, however, as also highlighted in the research of Ishida *et al.* (2013), was that an adult was someone who was responsible.[15] Part-time workers argued for a greater nuance in the ways in which responsibility can be expressed beyond the status of work and marriage. Men who had experienced working full time before becoming a freeter (by choice or physical necessity)[16] were often particularly reflective of alternative readings of responsibility that went beyond financial responsibility for others. For example, Isao, a 28-year-old university graduate working as a freeter, had this to say:

> I think adulthood is a difficult concept to talk about. Erm…it used to be…you get a full-time job after graduation, then you get married and have children. You become the head of the household (*daikokubashira*). I think for my parents' generation that is adulthood. Maybe some of the students we work with think that too. But I think it is different now…I think it is changing. For example, it is more difficult to get those full-time jobs, and some graduates try them and don't want to work those long hours in that kind of hierarchy with no chance to express themselves…

Isao narrates the generally understood route to adulthood through transitions. Getting a job, getting married, and becoming the breadwinner are the ways that, in Isao's experience, his parents' generation understand, experienced and assess adulthood (and responsibility). However, he also points to changes. Not only are full-time jobs more difficult to find, but he highlights differing understandings of the link between labour and adulthood: Although work is important, he emphasises the pressures regular workers are under and suggests that many

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15 In their study, Ishida *et al.* (2013) found that 94% of respondents believed: "I take responsibility for my actions and the consequences of those actions" (*jibun no kōdō no kekka ni sekinin wo motsu*) to be a characteristic of adulthood. The second most significant aspect was, "I am financially independent from my parents" (*oya kara keizaiteki ni jiritsu suru koto*) (88%), followed by "I can always control my emotions/feelings" (*jibun no kanjō wo itsumo contoro-ru dekiru koto*) (66%). In contrast to US studies, living independently of parents did not factor highly into understandings of adulthood in Japan, reflecting long-standing cultural practices of living with and caring for elders.

16 Some men I worked with became freeters after working full time as a result of physical exhaustion caused by stress and working long hours, while others left their jobs to pursue specific goals.

young people, whilst willing to endure long hours, want a job in which meaning and expression are possible. In Isao's experience, the pressures put on him as a permanent worker were too much, leading him to change from regular to irregular employment. These actions were, however, carefully considered. After quitting he spent three months recovering—physically and mentally—but this was, in Isao's understanding, a responsible thing to do. It was a time of re-finding himself, rebuilding his sense of self, and planning what he was going to do. Having goals and taking action were consequently emphasised in his self-definitions of adulthood, and it was something he associated with other freeters we worked with:

> I think we [freeters] are trying to achieve something. A goal. A purpose. Something that has meaning. I think if someone is working hard—full time, or part-time, or contract—and if they are making effort and being responsible, that is also an adult. I am not married and maybe it will be difficult for me to marry if I don't have a full-time job, but that doesn't mean I'm not an adult…Do I seem like a child to you?[17]

Isao suggests that his actions illustrate that he is an adult, regardless of the status he holds with regards to employment or marriage because he is being responsible by taking action and making an effort to achieve what he has set his mind to. Isao's narratives of action and a search for meaning in work are undergirded by a feeling of hope that his efforts to achieve his goals are valuable regardless of the result. Such hope can be categorised as an "active hope": Hope that inspires and produces action (Genda 2006, 2009), albeit action that remains simultaneously rooted to labour and linked to proving a capacity for responsible productivity to self and others.[18] Although Ishida *et al.* (2013) argue that responsibility in adulthood is

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17 This quote is also featured in Cook (2015:80).

18 Genda (2006, 2009) draws on Ernst Bloch's (1986) ideas of hope. For Bloch, hope is a strategy that is future-oriented and located in the "Not Yet Conscious"—a consciousness that develops through looking forward in anticipation. Anne Allison (2012, 2013) suggests that for youth who are unable to achieve the post-war normative life course rooted in secure employment, hope can be stunted and crippled (see also Amamiya and Kayano, 2008; Yamada, 2007). Aspirational goals rooted in neo-liberal capitalist subjectivity can therefore lead, for some, to an "annihilation of the spirit" (Allison, 2013:69). For the majority of the men I worked with,

now being understood primarily in terms of taking responsibility for an individuals' own actions and the consequences of these actions, we can see here that Isao also appeals for others to understand his actions as responsible—he is working hard towards a goal and that should count for something. Therefore, although his narratives are ostensibly about his self-definition of adulthood, they also point to how he wants wider society to view him.

Yuto, a 27-year-old high-school graduate who had worked full time for a year after graduation and had then become a freeter concurred that adulthood emerges from actions:

> Yes, I'm an adult. I think people can see that from what I do. I work. I pay my bills. I am responsible for myself (*sekinin wo motsu*). I communicate with my family and help others by giving time. I volunteer. I am participating in society, not sitting at home in my room. I don't have a full-time job and I don't have a family yet, but that doesn't make me not an adult. Maybe in the future I will have those things, maybe not. But I am still an adult.

Yuto understands responsibility in terms of being responsible for himself, but he also highlights the ways in which he is also responsible for others—through his volunteering and by the fact that he is out in the world as an active participant in society.

Kota, a 30-year-old university graduate, similarly focuses on his own actions and not relying on others, but he also places emphasis on meaning, trust and different types of responsibility:

> Well, for me, an adult is someone who is trying to achieve something without relying on others. I think it is important to be responsible for what I do. For example, I don't take money from my parents. I do what I say I will do, so I think people can trust me. I worked at a full-time job for a couple of years and I didn't like it. I don't think working in a company full time makes someone an adult. Many people just work like robots, with no intention, doing what they are told. But is that adult? They might have more money, and can save money, get a loan, buy a house, support a family. That is responsibility…But it is just one type of responsibility.

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however, hope and intentional action towards achieving their goals continued to be actively referenced, striven for and communicated to others.

> I don't think leaving a full-time job makes me irresponsible or immature. I think it takes courage to leave a stable path to try to achieve something else. So, I would say I'm adult, even if people around me think that working like this is not adult.

Kota highlights that he is not only responsible for himself through his financial independence and not relying on others, but suggests that he was also being responsible when he left a job in which he was unhappy. For him, creating a life of meaning takes courage but is also a type of self-responsibility.

Shigeo, a 26-year-old university graduate, agreed:

> An adult takes action to get what they want in life. Intention (*ishi*) is important. I know that I want to work for myself. So I have been making networks, doing small pieces of work, building experience. Now I am getting more orders so I am doing less hours at the coffee shop. But this is happening only because I have kept working on it. If I just sat home dreaming about it, then nothing would happen. I think you are an adult when you know what you want and you try to make it happen.

The implication here is that relying on others and not taking intentional action is immature and thus not adult. For Shigeo, an adult knows who they are and what they want and correspondingly tries to make it happen.

These narratives illustrate common ideas that emerged in interviews around the subject of adulthood. Attitude, dispositions and actions taken in pursuit of a goal (whatever that goal may be) were crucial attributes to becoming an adult. The emphasis put on the importance of intentional action to signify adult status cross-cut class, education and the varying routes that led men to irregular employment. Men who had previously worked full-time and then moved into the irregular employment sector, however, tended to stress the importance of intentional action more than others. For these men, identifying adulthood via transitions is insufficient: Part of being an adult is knowing what you want and having the courage to go for it.

The men presented thus far understood themselves to unequivocally be adults regardless of their employment status as irregular workers or lack of other social transitions, such as marriage. For others, however, there was a greater degree of ambivalence and this usually came from how they are perceived within the broader social context. For example, Hiroshi, a 26-year-old vocational school graduate who had been a freeter since graduating was unsure if he could be categorised as an adult:

> Hiroshi: Am I an adult? This is a hard question. I think I am. I work hard and am responsible. I am not late [to work] and I am serious about what I do. I contribute financially at home. So, yes, I'm an adult. But I think that socially I am not an adult…
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> Emma: What do you mean?
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> Hiroshi: Well, my job is part time. So maybe people think I am not serious. I think there's an image that if you work part time you are irresponsible. Maybe for some people it's true. But, it is sometimes difficult. I am working hard to save money and get more skills...I think people should look at what someone is trying to do before thinking they are not being like an adult. I feel like an adult, but I think I have to prove it…more than someone working in a full-time job…If you are in a full-time job people think you are a *shakaijin*.[19]

Although Kota, Yuto, Isao and Shigeo are adamant that a full-time job does not make a person an adult, Hiroshi feels more social pressure to prove that he's not an irresponsible child just doing what he wants, but instead working hard to achieve his goals. Moreover, he thinks that if a man is in a full-time job he is automatically seen, socially, to be an adult. Hiroshi suggests that whilst psychologically he feels he is an adult (*otona*), he is not automatically seen as one by others—he is neither *shakaijin*, nor *ichininmae*.

In public discourses about freeters in the media, male part-time workers have been critiqued on exactly these grounds—that they are not working appropriately and are therefore not

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[19] This quote is also featured in Cook (2015:81).

acting as adults, nor as productive male citizens (Driscoll, 2007).[20] Such ideas commonly emerged in narratives of non-freeters working part-time at the cinema. Although these individuals were yet to consider themselves, or be considered, full social adults themselves (primarily because of their student status), their general views of freeters and adulthood were ones that were consistently echoed by media portrayals and by a cross-section of non-freeter individuals I spoke with during fieldwork. Yet, at the same time, their ideas were often complicated by knowing and working with freeters. I use these narratives to point to the kinds of normative discourses and ideas that freeters were interacting with and against when they framed adulthood via action, rather than through transitions.

**Male employment and adulthood**

One evening over drinks with two co-workers Masaki, a 24-year-old veterinary student, and Mayumi, a recent university graduate, our conversation turned to freeter labour. Masaki was very critical of men working in part-time jobs and directly linked it to adulthood:

> Well, working part time is not very adult, is it? I think many of the guys who work part time just don't know what they want to do, or they can't decide, or can't stick with it, so they became part timers. But what are they going to do? For them it's okay, but in the future…? They can't support a family or anyone else. Most don't have money to live alone. I don't think it's very responsible…

Masaki suggests that most freeters are indecisive and irresponsible. Echoing discourses that were critical of freeters, he suggests that they are only working part-time because they are unsure what to do with their lives. For Masaki, this is childish behaviour because male

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[20] In 2013, a television drama titled "*Furītā, ie o kau*" (Freeter, buy a house) illustrated just such a narrative. Initially, it showed the protagonist as a picky childish youth who was unwilling to continue working at a job he did not like and causing discord and heartache within his family, ultimately being the trigger for his depressed mother to have a breakdown. However, over the course of the series we begin to see him mature into "full" adulthood, through both his labour and by taking responsibility for a mortgage to buy his parents a family home. He consequently transitions from thinking only of himself to thinking about the welfare of others in his movement into adulthood.

adulthood is tied to the financial provision and support of a family. Here, he alludes to his expectation that men should become the head of a household and that through being financially responsible for a family a man becomes an adult. Mayumi, however, continued the conversation with a more sympathetic view suggesting that men in part-time jobs are in a difficult position. She then turned the conversation to a co-worker in his mid-20s who worked part time for a few years after graduating from university but then passed the manager exam and had started working full-time. Both Mayumi and Masaki felt that he was now more serious than he had been previously. I asked whether this was linked to adulthood and Mayumi responded:

> It might sound a bit strange, but now he passed the exam and is a manager—he's the same guy—but…I think he is more adult…. He has become a *shakaijin*. He has more responsibility now. If something goes wrong he will have to deal with Head Office. We [part-timers] just deal with the managers in the cinema, not Head Office. And I think he and his girlfriend will get married soon. […] Before he took the exam I didn't think he wasn't an adult. I guess I didn't think about it. But now that he's full time it's like…something changed a little. He's still the same guy, but he's got more responsibility now.

For Masaki and Mayumi, the extra responsibilities that they perceive as coming from full-time positions imbues an individual with an adult status that was not necessarily lacking before, but which socially affirms them as an adult member of society.

Nishimoto, a fourth-year university student at the cinema, also understood full-time labour as indicative of adult status and freeter labour to be indicative of a lack of such status, but when thinking about individuals he knew and worked with his ideas began to break down. In response to a question about his ideas of freeters and if they were adults, he responded:

> Erm…that's a hard question. I think in some ways they are [adults]…If I think about Kenji or Tatsu [two co-workers in their mid- to late 20s], I think they are not immature or like children…When I think of my image of freeters I think they're not adults. Their jobs are not that responsible, they can change jobs if they want more easily, it's hard to be responsible for others—they don't earn much so how can they support a family in the future? But, when I

> think of Kenji or Tatsu…it's more complicated. They are good at their job. They are serious. They work hard. They help people…erm…Kenji is really good with training new workers, right? So, I think they're responsible and serious about the work. So, I'd describe them as adult. But still, I wonder what will happen in the future…on our wages they can't support a family—it would be really hard.

Nishimoto sees the individuals themselves as adults, but as unable to fulfil their social role as adult men in the future (as breadwinners supporting families) as a result of the low wages and unstable conditions that irregular labour engenders (see Cook, 2013; Hidaka, 2010). For Nishimoto, these men were adults (*otona*), but not necessarily fully adult social persons (*ichininmae*).

**Adults or emerging adults?**

I have argued thus far that freeters in their late 20s and early 30s felt themselves to be adults as a result of actions taken. However, it is also clear that full-time employment, marriage and parenthood continue to function as social markers of adulthood. So, how are we to understand these part-time workers' understandings of adulthood? Are they adults, as many of them *feel* themselves to be, or are they better understood as "emerging adults"—almost adults but not quite, as Nishimoto suggested—because of their lack of status accomplishments?

As already discussed, rather than focusing on transitions, the idea of emerging adulthood proposed by Arnett (2004, 2007) has been influential in re-focusing understandings of adulthood in industrialised countries as a stage of life that an individual gradually grows into. He has stressed that emerging adulthood is characterised by identity exploration, instability, a focus on the self, feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood, and feeling optimistic about the possibilities of the future. Yet, the narratives Arnett (2004) presents of how *full* adulthood is perceived reveal that his respondents conceptualised it in terms of a cessation of change, self-focus, and identity building—that an adult identity becomes fixed and unchanged, with a lessening of possibilities. However, many of the freeters I worked with—who arguably would fit into Arnett's characterisations of emerging adults—already thought of themselves as adults. They suggested that instability (of selves, working environments, the future), identity

exploration (seeking work with meaning) and possibilities (working towards goals) were not seen to halt on becoming an adult, but were understood to be a fundamental part of adult life.

From the different terms commonly used to describe adulthood in Japan—*otona*, *shakaijin*, *ichininmae*—we can see that there is an emic understanding of various types (or gradations) of adults: Becoming an adult is a complicated process. It is both individual but also social and socially dependent on how others view you. In self-definitions of adulthood, individuals may feel themselves to be full adults but not be recognised as one socially (and vice versa). Therefore, for those who felt in-between it was not necessarily the result of feeling that they had not yet become adults, but rather was about how the people around them viewed them. Therefore, similar to Kloep and Hendry's (2011) arguments about adulthood as an on-going process, men in their mid-20s onwards did not conceptualise themselves as emerging adults in their self-definitions of adulthood, but understood process and change to be a fundamental part of adulthood.

For male freeters, adulthood and the process of transformation that continues *through* adulthood were characterised through expressions of responsibility (for self and other), independent decision-making, financial responsibility, and taking action to achieve goals. While the statuses of work and marriage were understood to still reflect adult status in society, freeters argued that more focus should be placed on the dimension of feeling and intentional actions taken in social definitions of adulthood. Therefore, whilst a claim can be made that male freeters are stuck in a form of emerging adulthood, this is only valid if we are looking solely at the acquisition of specific social roles and transitions to adulthood and ignoring self-definitions of adulthood.

**Conclusion: Adulthood as action**

In exploring male part-time workers' self-definitions of adulthood, I have argued that the men I worked with are, through their actions and the ways they desire their actions to be socially recognised, attempting to refocus understandings and assessments of adulthood through fluid and individualistic action and intention, rather than through status transitions. They understood adulthood to be not only individual, but also social and socially embedded.

However, given their position in the labour market and the difficulties irregular workers have successfully completing social role transitions, they considered these to be less representative of adult status than the intentional action that they were taking in pursuit of creating lifestyles and working lives of meaning. Therefore, men highlighted the ways in which they are responsible, how and why they are trustworthy, and what kinds of action they are taking to achieve their goals.

From the narratives, it is clear that male part-time workers feel they have to prove their adulthood *through* their actions precisely because transitions continue to be used socially as markers of adult status and because public discourses of freeters in the mid-2000s posited them as either being immature and motivation-less or victims of a changing employment world. With established transitions to adulthood becoming harder to attain for a wider segment of the population, however, male freeters' definitions of adulthood through the terms of intention, motivation, effort, and action, and their desire for others to recognise these terms of adulthood as valid, become important indicators of potential change in social (and self) definitions of adulthood.

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