

Emerging Adulthood and Social Class: Rejoinder to Furstenberg, Silva, and du Bois-Reymond

Emerging Adulthood
2016, Vol. 4(4) 244-247
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DOI: 10.1177/2167696815627248
ea.sagepub.com



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Abstract

Here I reply to the commentaries by Furstenberg, Silva, and du Bois-Reymond on my essay concerning emerging adulthood (EA) and social class. I support Furstenberg's suggestion to use national data from other projects to examine questions concerning the relation between EA and social class as well as the distinctiveness of ages 18–25 compared to other age-groups. I also support Silva's suggestion to dig deeper in the quantitative survey results by using qualitative methods to examine what people mean by their responses. I agree with du Bois-Reymond, too, about the ambiguity of interpreting survey results but argue that other data also support my finding that most American emerging adults hope to find jobs that do good in the world. In sum, this exchange between me and the three critics is an important and constructive step forward in the debate on EA and social class.

Keywords

academic achievement, career choice/development, education, employment, qualitative methods

I appreciate the commentaries by Frank Furstenberg, Jennifer Silva, and Manuela du Bois-Reymond on my article “Does Emerging Adulthood Theory Apply Across Social Classes? National Data on a Persistent Question” (Arnett, 2016). The intention of my article was to promote a constructive exchange on the topic of emerging adulthood (EA) and social class, and their commentaries represent important contributions toward that goal.

Furstenberg: Making Use of National Data Sets

Frank Furstenberg has made many conceptual and empirical contributions to our understanding of development at ages 18–25 (e.g., Furstenberg, Settersten, & Rumbaut, 2005). He is one of many sociologists who have drawn attention to the crucial role of social class background in the entry to adult work and family roles. In his paper for the special section (Furstenberg, 2016), he agreed with several aspects of EA theory. He concurred, as I have proposed in EA theory, that “it is highly plausible for adult identities to be forged five to ten years later than they were a half century ago” in developed countries, given later entry to family and work roles. He also agreed that the swift transition to adulthood that occurred in the decades following World War II is now greatly extended, so that it makes sense to conceptualize a new life stage that comprises this extended transition. Although he expressed doubts about the data I presented to show similarities in the

experiences of emerging adults across social classes, he concluded that

emerging adulthood is an attractive concept because it implies that young adults do not consolidate their identity during adolescence (if they ever did!) but require the experience of entering work and family roles that typically do not occur until well beyond the adolescent years.

Furstenberg's (2016) commentary contained the important suggestion that EA researchers should make better use than they have so far of existing national data sets, such as those collected by the Pew Research Center, the General Social Survey (GSS), the Monitoring the Future (MTF) project, and Add Health. As Furstenberg (2016) noted, the data I presented from the 2012 Clark Poll focused only on 18- to 25-year-olds, and a better test of the claim that EA is developmentally distinctive would require comparisons between the 18–25 age-group and other age-groups, ideally with longitudinal data. The Pew and GSS data sets include samples from age 18 through late adulthood, and MTF and Add Health both contain longitudinal data,

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beginning with samples in their early teens and following them through at least their 30s.

Pew has already published many reports showing how 18- to 29-year-olds are different from older age-groups of Americans in many ways, including higher use of social media, lower religiosity, and more positive attitudes toward gay marriage and legalizing marijuana (Pew Research Center, 2012, 2014; Taylor & Keeter, 2010; Wang, 2012). GSS, MTF, and Add Health are all public data sets, available to any researcher who wishes to examine them. I strongly support Furstenberg's suggestion. The data that I presented were intended to begin a data-based conversation about EA and social class, not to be the last word, and the conversation could be substantially moved forward by making use of the information available in these data sets to test specific propositions about the developmental distinctiveness of EA.

Silva: Digging Deeper With Qualitative Methods

I am acquainted with Jennifer Silva's (2016) research through her book *Coming Up Short: Working Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (Silva, 2013), which I highly recommend. It is an excellent example of what I have long advocated (Arnett, 2000, 2011, 2016) that we investigate the many EAs that people experience within and across societies. Using qualitative methods, Silva (2013) portrayed vividly the hopes and frustrations of entering adulthood as part of the American working class. She showed that working-class emerging adults have adopted wholesale the American ideology that they are responsible for their own success (or lack of it), rather than blaming inequality of opportunity. In her critique of my article, Silva (2016) made an interesting connection between the 2012 Clark Poll results I presented and her own findings, noting that "The large percentage of low-income youth who report being focused on 'who I really am' in Arnett's recent survey may well reflect this quest for self-improvement." She views these working-class emerging adults as misled by their society into believing that they are personally responsible if they fail to lift themselves up to the middle class. I agree, but I think Silva should also acknowledge that their self-belief in the possibility of success can be a powerful motivator to reach education and work goals. Believing they have the power to reach any goal they set for themselves may be overly optimistic, and it will not make structural obstacles to their goals disappear, but without this self-belief, they have little chance to overcome their disadvantages.

Silva made two important, testable points based on her examination of my 2012 Clark Poll results. Noting that I found that there were no social class differences in the proportion of emerging adults in the 2012 Clark Poll who agreed that "This time of my life is full of changes," Silva (2016) proposed that

In the realms of both work and family, the instability that characterizes emerging adulthood for the working class will likely persist far into their adult years. . . For the working class, the mixture of

hope, uncertainty, and constraint that marks their early adulthood years are not simply a life stage, but rather a precursor to the cycle of unrelenting instability, persistent hope, and repeated failures to come.

There is existing support for her claim, but it is worth testing further. We already know that instability in work during the 20s and 30s is strongly related to educational attainment, which is in turn predicted by social class background. In one analysis, using national U.S. Department of Labor data, Yates (2005) found that young people who obtained a 4-year college degree averaged 4 years (after completing their education) before obtaining their first long-term job (defined as a job lasting at least 5 years). In contrast, for those who had obtained only a high school diploma or less, it took *15 years* to find a job that lasted at least 5 years. So, instability in work does eventually wane for emerging adults in the American working class, but most do not attain a long-term job until their early 30s.

Regarding entry to family roles, the patterns related to the attainment of adult stability are complex and interwoven with ethnicity. Overall, American emerging adults from lower social class backgrounds enter marriage and parenthood earlier than their counterparts from the middle class and above; but among poor African Americans, the median marriage age is especially high, the median age of entry to parenthood is especially low (and usually unconnected to marriage), and a relatively high proportion of them never marry (Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011; Edin & Tach, 2012). Silva (2016) rightfully points out that there is more to be learned about the relation between social class and the entry to stable adult roles in work and family, including the subjective experience of instability, for example, the question of when people from different social classes begin to feel that their lives are settled down and no longer "full of changes."

Another important and testable point made by Silva (2016) concerns the finding that a striking proportion of emerging adults in the 2012 Clark Poll, across social classes, agreed with the statement, "At this time of my life, it still seems like anything is possible." Silva (2016) acknowledged the apparent similarity across social classes but objected that

when working-class and poor youth claim that 'anything is possible' (Arnett, 2015), they should not be interpreted as predicting likely outcomes. On the contrary, they may be staking a normative claim to social inclusion and self-worth that hinges on the prevailing cultural narrative of self-help and self-reliance.

This is a useful reminder that in any large-scale survey, including the 2012 Clark Poll that I relied upon in my paper (Arnett, 2016), there are many questions that remain unanswered about what the responses mean. Statements like "anything is possible" may mean different things to different people. Silva's (2013) own research demonstrates the vital place of the qualitative, narrative approach as a complement to quantitative studies. I have always sought to use both qualitative and quantitative methods in my research, to balance the

strengths and weaknesses of each approach (Arnett, 2004, 2015). The 2012 Clark Poll is full of intriguing quantitative findings, but an important next step is to explore, in interviews, what people mean by their agreement or disagreement with the survey questions.

du Bois-Reymond: What Do the Survey Results Really Mean?

Manuela du Bois-Reymond (2016) has been writing and researching for many years on European emerging adults, and here she provides a valuable perspective on the American data I presented (Arnett, 2016). For a more detailed critique of EA theory from a social class perspective, I recommend her chapter in the *Oxford Handbook of Emerging Adulthood* (du Bois-Reymond, 2015).

Like Silva (2016), du Bois-Reymond (2016) drew attention to the ambiguity inherent in the interpretation of large-scale survey results. Specifically, she pointed out the apparent contradiction in the findings that a strong majority (over 70%) in the 2012 Clark Poll agreed that “One of the most important keys to success in life is a college education,” but over 60% also agreed that “It’s possible to get a good job even if you don’t have a college education.” Her interpretation was that

while the first item indeed does not discriminate between classes, the second does, albeit implicitly. If high and medium social class kids tell you can get a good job without a college education, they probably argue this position with much or at least sufficient, cultural and financial capital of their families in the background.

This is an intriguing possible interpretation and points again to the importance of following up survey results with more in-depth qualitative investigations.

du Bois-Reymond (2016) objected more strenuously to the 2012 Clark Poll finding that a strong majority of American 18- to 25-year-olds across social classes agreed that “It is important to me to have a career that does some good in the world.” She dismissed this as “a nice example of socially desirable answers” rather than truly displaying an impressive idealism in emerging adults. Here again, a qualitative investigation might help reveal what this response really means. However, it is notable that other findings support the interpretation that today’s American emerging adults mean what they say when they express their desire to do good in the world. For example, they are more likely than young people in previous generations to volunteer their time for a cause or project they care about (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007). They are also more likely than older people to volunteer for long-term service in organizations such as the Peace Corp, AmeriCorps, and Teach for America (Arnett, 2015). Perhaps du Bois-Reymond (2016) is right that they claim to want their work to do good in the world because that is the socially desirable response, but contrary data would be more persuasive than the unsubstantiated claim that they are only giving the socially desirable answer.

Conclusion: Moving the Discussion Forward

Once again, I would like to thank Furstenberg, Silva, and du Bois-Reymond for their contributions to this exchange on EA and social class. At times, debates on EA and social class have generated more heat than light, but I believe this exchange demonstrates that a constructive, empirically based exchange of views on this topic is the best way to move the field forward.

As I argued in the paper that led off this exchange (Arnett, 2016), EA is essentially a demographic phenomenon. Over the past half century, across developed countries, the median ages of entering marriage and parenthood have risen steeply, and the entry to stable work has come steadily later as a consequence of the extended education and training required for finding stable work in the “knowledge economy.” These demographic changes have opened up a space from around age 18 to around age 25 that is neither adolescence nor a settled young adulthood, but something different, something entirely new, and it can be helpful for understanding these changes to see ages 18–25 as a new life stage, EA, with its own distinct features.

What are those distinct features? I proposed five features about a decade ago (Arnett, 2004), based on years of research on American emerging adults, but I never claimed those five features to be universal. On the contrary, I always viewed them as the opening statement of what I hoped would be a long and varied conversation, with contributions from scholars studying other groups of Americans and from scholars around the world studying diverse groups in their own countries. This hope has been realized over the past decade beyond my highest expectations, with the booming growth of a diverse international field of EA, the initiation in 2013 of the Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood (www.ssea.org), and the birth of a thriving journal (www.sagepub.com/eax). My hope for the decades to come is that we will continue to challenge each other in constructive ways in order to expand what we know about the many EAs experienced around the world.

Author Contributions

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett contributed to conception and design; contributed to acquisition; drafted the manuscript; critically revised the manuscript; gave final approval; agreed to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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