

# Are the Features of Emerging Adulthood Developmentally Distinctive? A Comparison of Ages 18–60 in the United States

Emerging Adulthood  
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DOI: 10.1177/2167696818810073  
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## Abstract

A large national sample of adults ages 18–60 was surveyed on features proposed in the theory of emerging adulthood, including *identity explorations*, *self-focus*, *feeling in-between*, *instability*, and *possibilities/optimism*. Additional items were included on feeling that this time of life is a time of freedom and a time that is fun and exciting and on feelings of anxiety and depression. Emerging adults (ages 18–25) were more likely to endorse nearly all the items proposed in the theory of emerging adulthood, yet a surprisingly high proportion of adults in the older age groups (26–29, 30–39, and 40–60) also agreed that the items apply to their current time of life. Thus, the results indicate that the features proposed in the theory of emerging adulthood are more likely to be found among 18- to 25-year-olds than among people in older age groups, but they may not be as distinctive to emerging adulthood as the theory predicted.

## Keywords

emerging adulthood, adult development, identity, mental health, optimism

The theory of emerging adulthood was originally proposed as a way of drawing attention to the question of what may be developmentally distinctive to ages 18–25 (Arnett, 2000). It was proposed as a cultural and historically based theory, in that it was recognized that cultures vary widely in how this age period is experienced and that there have been dramatic changes in recent decades in the demographic patterns of the period, specifically pertaining to rises in participation in tertiary education and later timing of entry to marriage and parenthood. For the American context that was the original empirical basis of the theory of emerging adulthood, five normative features were proposed: *identity explorations*, *instability*, *self-focus*, *feeling in-between*, and *possibilities/optimism* (Arnett, 2004). It was emphasized that other features may be prominent in other cultural contexts (Arnett, 2011), but within the United States, it was proposed that these features would be a normative part of the experience of 18- to 25-year-olds.

Subsequently, these features have been supported in a variety of studies; strong majorities of 18- to 25-year-old Americans agree that these features are characteristic of their current time of life (Arnett, 2015a; Reifman, Arnett, & Colwell, 2007). However, few studies have yet examined the five features across developmental periods. The original proposal was not just that the five features would apply to most Americans ages 18–25, but that they would be developmentally

distinctive, that is, that they would apply more to ages 18–25 than to other age periods.

The goal of the present study was to investigate this question. A national sample of 18- to 60-year-olds responded to items pertaining to the five features proposed in the theory of emerging adulthood. Four age groups were compared: 18–25, 26–29, 30–39, and 40–60.

## The Five Features of Emerging Adulthood in the United States

When Arnett (2004) proposed that the American experience of emerging adulthood is characterized by five features, it was emphasized that these features were not proposed as unique to emerging adulthood because they would be found in many people before and after ages 18–25, but rather that they would be found to be most prominent during the emerging adult years. According to the theory, emerging adulthood is distinctive for

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*identity explorations*, in that it is an age when people explore various possibilities in love, work, and worldviews as they move toward making enduring choices (Arnett, 2015a). In the course of trying out these possibilities, emerging adults develop a more definite identity, that is, an understanding of who they are, what their capabilities and limitations are, what their beliefs and values are, and how they fit into the society around them. Erikson (1950), who was the first to develop the idea of identity, stated that it was most prominent as a developmental “crisis” of adolescence. However, he proposed that theory nearly 70 years ago, and today, it is mainly in emerging adulthood that *identity explorations* take place (Arnett, 2015a; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Richie, 2015).

The explorations of emerging adulthood also make it a time of *instability*. As emerging adults explore possibilities in love and work, their lives change frequently. For example, rates of residential change in American society are much higher at ages 18–29 than at any other period of life (Benetsky, Burd, & Rapino, 2015). Similarly, job changes are frequent during emerging adulthood; the average American holds eight different jobs from ages 18–29. These residential and job changes can take place for a variety of reasons, but they arise in part as a consequence of emerging adults’ identity explorations in love and work (Arnett, 2015a).

Emerging adulthood is also a *self-focused* period. Most American emerging adults move out of their parents’ home at age 18 or 19 and do not marry and have their first child until at least their late 20s (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adulthood is a time in between adolescents’ reliance on parents and adults’ long-term commitments in love and work. During these years, emerging adults focus on themselves as they develop the knowledge, skills, and self-understanding they will need for adult life. In the course of emerging adulthood, they learn to make independent decisions about everything from how late to stay out with friends to whether or not to cohabit with a romantic partner.

Another distinctive feature of emerging adulthood is that it is a time of *feeling in-between*, not adolescent but not fully adult either. When asked, “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?,” a majority of emerging adults in most countries respond neither yes nor no but with the ambiguous “in some ways yes, in some ways no” (Arnett, 1998, 2015a; Nelson & Luster, 2015). It is only when people reach their late 20s and early 30s that a clear majority of Americans feel they have reached adulthood. Most emerging adults have the subjective feeling of being in a transitional phase of life.

Finally, emerging adulthood is the age of *possibilities/optimism*, when most people believe that many different futures remain possible. It tends to be an age of optimism, in part because they are just entering adult life and many questions remain unanswered about how that life will go. Few of them imagine in emerging adulthood that the future may hold failures and disappointments. Rather, they expect to get what they want out of life (Arnett, 2015a).

Also included in the present study were items on quality of life (“fun and exciting” and “freedom”) as well as on mental

health, specifically on reports of feeling anxious or depressed. The items on quality of life were derived from qualitative research on emerging adults (Arnett, 2004). The items on feeling anxious and depressed were included because some research has found high rates of affective disorders among 18- to 29-year-olds, relative to older adult age groups (Arnett, Žukauskienė, & Sugimura, 2014; Kessler, Chiu, Demler, & Walters, 2005). In the present study, we sought to examine whether feelings of anxiety and depression, short of a diagnosable mental health disorder, would also be more prevalent among emerging adults than among older adults.

## Previous Studies of the Five Features

Reifman, Arnett, and Colwell (2007) developed a measure of the five features of emerging adulthood, the Inventory of Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA), in a series of five studies. A factor analysis with varimax rotation revealed five factors consistent with emerging adulthood theory: *identity exploration*, *negativity/instability*, *self-focused*, *feeling in-between*, and *experimentation/possibilities*, as well as an *other-focused* factor hypothesized to be lower during emerging adulthood than at older age periods. Comparisons of emerging adults with adolescents (ages 12–17) and older adults (in age groups through “50-plus”) showed that the five features of emerging adulthood were generally more prominent during emerging adulthood than at other ages. However, the samples in the five studies were small, local convenience samples.

Over the decade since the IDEA was published, many other studies have used it to examine the features of emerging adulthood, in a variety of countries. For example, Crocetti and colleagues (2015) compared Italian and Japanese emerging adults (ages 18–30) and found that Japanese emerging adults scored higher on most of the dimensions of the IDEA. Hill, Lalji, van Rossum, van der Geest, and Blokland (2015) investigated emerging adulthood in the Netherlands using the IDEA and reported small but significant differences by ethnic group and social class in a diverse urban sample. Sirsch, Dreher, Mayr, and Willinger (2009) examined responses to the IDEA among emerging adults in Austria and found that most of them experienced all five features proposed in the theory. Although adolescents and older adults were also included in the study, they were not assessed with the IDEA.

In one study that included older adult participants, Barlett and Barlett (2015) investigated responses on IDEA subscales in relation to traits such as narcissism and psychopathy, in an online sample of American adults. Although the age range of the sample was not reported, the median age was 33. The five features were negatively correlated with age, as would be predicted by emerging adulthood theory, whereas the relation between age and the other-focused subscale was nonsignificant.

In sum, thus far few studies have compared emerging adults to older adults on the five features of emerging adulthood, with the exception of the studies that were the original basis for the development of the IDEA (Reifman et al., 2007) and the study

just described (Barlett & Barlett, 2015). Such studies are important for establishing the developmental distinctiveness of emerging adulthood, as proposed in emerging adulthood theory, within the national context of the United States. The primary goal of the present study was to make this age comparison on the five features. It was hypothesized that for each of the five features, emerging adults (ages 18–25) would be more likely than older adults (ages 26–29, 30–39, and 40–60) to agree that the features describe their current time of life. Twenty-six to 29 years is often used as part of an extended range for emerging adulthood, depending on the question studied (Arnett, 2015a), but in the present study, it was analyzed separately to discern if 26- to 29-year-olds were more similar to 18- to 25-year-olds or to 30- to 39-year-olds.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

There were 2,905 participants, ages 18–60, from across the United States. The data collection for this survey was conducted by Purple Strategies, a survey research firm. Three methods were used to obtain participants: 589 via landline telephone, 599 via mobile phones, and 1,717 via an Internet panel. The landline and mobile phone participants were obtained via random-digit dialing. The Internet sample consisted of members of a demographically diverse online panel assembled by the survey research firm. No participants were paid or provided with other compensation in return for their participation.

These three methods were used in order to obtain a diverse sample that would reflect the population of 18- to 60-year-olds in the United States. Using landline telephone sampling alone is no longer adequate for survey research. Survey sampling of mobile phones via random-digit dialing is restricted by federal law in the United States, and rates of participation for those who are reached via landline are low (Blumberg & Luke, 2013). Consequently, the Internet sample was necessary to reach segments of the population that would not be accessible via either landlines or cell phones.

### Measures

The participants were asked questions about their experience of their current time of life and general questions about their well-being.

**Demographic variables.** The survey included items on a range of demographic characteristics, including age, gender, ethnicity, and educational attainment. A summary of these characteristics is shown in Table 1, by age-group (18–25, 26–29, 30–39, and 40–60). Participants in all four categories were ethnically diverse, in proportions roughly reflecting the current American population (United States Census Bureau, 2017).

**Features of emerging adulthood.** Statements regarding participants' experience of their current time of life were used to gather information about the features of emerging adulthood.

**Table 1.** Demographics of Sample.

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Age		
18–25	771	27
26–29	613	21
30–39	687	24
40–60	834	29
Gender		
Female	1,503	52
Male	1,402	48
Ethnicity		
White	1,886	65
Latino/a	421	15
African American	343	12
Asian/Other	230	8
Educational attainment		
High school or less	719	25
Some college	963	33
4-Year degree or more	1,188	41

Note. Regarding educational attainment, for 18- to 25-year-olds, it was measured by mother's educational attainment, whereas for the older age groups, it was their own reported educational attainment.

Participants were asked to rate how they evaluate this time in their life as a time for finding out who they really are (identity), for focusing on themselves (self-focus), as full of changes (*instability*), and as a time when it seems anything is possible (possibilities/optimism). They also responded to items on their current time of life as a time of "freedom" and as a "fun and exciting" time and 2 items on negative emotional states: "I often feel anxious" and "I often feel depressed." The full set of items is shown in Table 2. For each item, participants responded on a 4-point Likert-type scale. A different format was used to measure the emerging adulthood feature of "*feeling in-between*," with the question "Do you feel you have reached adulthood?" and response options of yes, no, or "in some ways yes, in some ways no." This format was used for this question because it is the format that has been used in over two decades of research on when people perceive themselves to have reached adult status (Arnett, 2015a; Nelson & Luster, 2015).

## Results

Table 2 presents the overall frequencies for the items assessing features of emerging adulthood. The "agree" column combines the "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree" responses for clarity of presentation. Across age groups, a majority of participants agreed with all the items in Table 2 except "I often feel anxious" and "I often feel depressed." Item correlations (using the whole 4-point scale) are presented in Table 3, along with age as a continuous variable.

A  $\chi^2$  analysis was conducted to examine the relation between age groups and responses to the question "Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?" The analysis was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(6, 2,901) = 451.17, p < .001$ . Forty-four

**Table 2.** Percentage Agreement by Age-Group on Features of Emerging Adulthood and Negative Emotions.

	Age-Group	Agree	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
This is a time in my life for finding out who I really am (identity)	18–25	81	43	38	11	8
	26–29	69	29	40	21	10
	30–39	59	19	40	24	17
	40–60	55	21	34	23	22
This is a time in my life for focusing on myself (self-focus)	18–25	75	35	40	14	11
	26–29	62	27	35	24	14
	30–39	53	20	33	24	23
	40–60	56	21	35	28	16
This time of my life is full of changes (instability)	18–25	85	52	33	10	5
	26–29	75	34	41	20	5
	30–39	63	25	38	29	8
	40–60	76	32	44	17	7
At this time of my life, it still seems like anything is possible (possibilities/optimism)	18–25	82	45	37	11	7
	26–29	80	41	39	15	5
	30–39	75	33	42	19	6
	40–60	77	37	40	17	6
At this time of my life, I feel I have a great deal of freedom	18–25	75	35	40	16	9
	26–29	71	34	37	23	6
	30–39	74	32	42	17	9
	40–60	71	31	40	19	10
This time of my life is fun and exciting	18–25	82	45	37	12	6
	26–29	81	35	46	14	5
	30–39	73	26	47	20	7
	40–60	71	26	45	20	9
I often feel anxious	18–25	58	18	40	24	18
	26–29	52	15	37	29	19
	30–39	43	12	31	30	27
	40–60	38	10	28	28	34
I often feel depressed	18–25	35	11	24	27	38
	26–29	30	8	22	27	43
	30–39	27	8	19	28	45
	40–60	25	7	18	26	49

Note. “Agree” comprises the combined percentage of “strongly agree” and “somewhat agree” responses.

**Table 3.** Correlations Among Features of Emerging Adulthood and Age.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	—								
2. This is a time in my life for finding out who I really am (identity)	-.233	—							
3. This is a time in my life for focusing on myself (self-focus)	-.118	.419	—						
4. My life is full of changes (instability)	-.106	.324	.199	—					
5. It still seems like anything is possible (possibilities/optimism)	-.061	.246	.207	.249	—				
6. I feel I have a great deal of freedom	-.025	.218	.317	.078	.387	—			
7. My life is fun and exciting	-.146	.211	.194	.214	.458	.421	—		
8. I often feel anxious	-.171	.199	.097	.171	-.115	-.169	-.180	—	
9. I often feel depressed	-.094	.109	.078	.093	-.232	-.240	-.322	.545	—

Note. All correlations are significant at  $p < .001$ . Higher ratings on all variables indicate stronger agreement to the statement.

percent of emerging adults, 64% of 26- to 29-year-olds, 76% of 30- to 39-year-olds, and 91% of 40- to 60-year-olds reported that they feel that they have reached adulthood. The “in-between” response of “in some ways yes, in some ways no” was reported by 50% of the emerging adults, 33% of the 26- to 29-year-olds, 21% of the 30- to 39-year-olds, and 7% of 40- to 60-year-olds. Six percent of emerging adults reported

that they did not feel they have reached adulthood, in comparison to 3% of 26- to 39-year-olds, 3% of 30- to 39-year-olds, and 2% of 40- to 60-year-olds.

Univariate tests were conducted for the features of emerging adulthood and the other items theoretically related to emerging adult development. These analyses were conducted to evaluate the relation between age-group (18–25, 26–29,

**Table 4.** Features of Emerging Adulthood Across Four Age Groups.

	Age-Group	M	SD	Post Hoc	Cohen's <i>d</i>	
					18–25	26–29
This is a time in my life for finding out who I really am (identity)	18–25	3.17*	.91	1 > 2 > 3, 1, 2 > 4		
	26–29	2.88	.94			
	30–39	2.60	.98			
	40–60	2.53	1.05			
This is a time in my life for focusing on myself (self-focus)	18–25	2.99*	.96	1 > 2 > 3, 1 > 4		
	26–29	2.74	1.01			
	30–39	2.49	1.05			
	40–60	2.61	.99			
My life is full of changes (instability)	18–25	3.32*	.85	1 > 2 > 3, 1 > 4		
	26–29	3.05	.89			
	30–39	2.81	.90			
	40–60	3.02	.88			
It still seems like anything is possible (possibilities/optimism)	18–25	3.20	.90	1, 2 > 3		
	26–29	3.17	.85			
	30–39	3.03	.86			
	40–60	3.08	.88			
I feel I have a great deal of freedom	18–25	3.01	.93	<i>ns</i>		
	26–29	2.99	.90			
	30–39	2.96	.92			
	40–60	2.92	.95			
My life is fun and exciting	18–25	3.21*	.87	1, 2 > 3, 4		
	26–29	3.11	.83			
	30–39	2.93	.85			
	40–60	2.88	.90			
I often feel anxious	18–25	2.58	.98	1, 2 > 3, 4		
	26–29	2.47	.96			
	30–39	2.29	.99			
	40–60	2.15	1.01			
I often feel depressed	18–25	2.08*	1.03	1 > 3, 4		
	26–29	1.95	.98			
	30–39	1.91	.98			
	40–60	1.82	.96			

Note. 18–25 years (1),  $n = 764$ , 26–29 years (2),  $n = 601$ , 30–39 years (3),  $n = 680$ , 40–60 years (4),  $n = 834$ . Strongly disagree = 1, somewhat disagree = 2, somewhat agree = 3, and strongly agree = 4. Post hoc column presents significant differences between groups with respective Cohen's *d* values.

\*Denotes 18- to 25-year-olds were significantly higher than all the other groups at  $p < .001$ .

30–39, and 40–60) as fixed factor and each feature of emerging adulthood as dependent variables. Gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (SES) were included as independent variables in the analyses. SES was represented by mother's educational attainment for ages 18–25 and own education attainment for the older age groups.

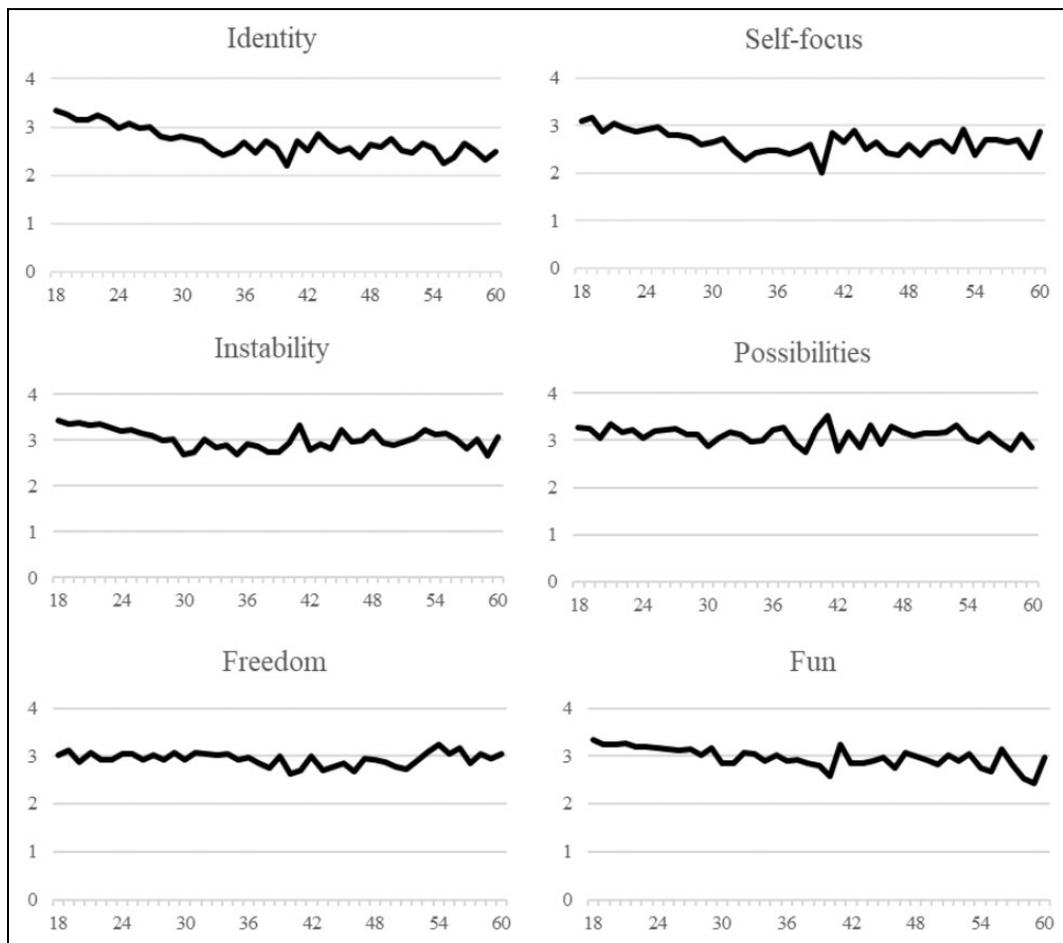
There was a significant univariate effect of age-group on identity,  $F(3, 2,725) = 17.94$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .02$ ; self-focus,  $F(3, 2,733) = 9.79$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ ; instability,  $F(3, 2,736) = 8.24$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .009$ ; and fun and exciting,  $F(3, 2,744) = 8.02$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .009$ , using Bonferroni correction of  $\alpha$  to account for multiple analyses (Huberty & Morris, 1989). There were no significant differences among age groups for freedom,  $F(3, 2,742) = 1.13$ , *ns*, partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ , and time of possibilities,  $F(3, 2,741) = .62$ , *ns*, partial  $\eta^2 = .001$ . Additionally, anxiety,  $F(3, 2,740) = 10.31$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ , was found to have significant age-group differences but not depression,  $F(3, 2,743) = 3.59$ , *ns*, partial  $\eta^2 = .004$ .

The results of Tukey post hoc comparisons (Table 4) show that emerging adults (ages 18–25) had significantly higher ratings on the features of emerging adulthood ( $p < .001$ ) except for the item measuring "freedom." Feelings of anxiety and depression were also reported significantly more often ( $p < .001$ ) by emerging adults. Cohen's *d* for each significant pairwise comparison has been presented in the table to indicate the magnitude of differences in rating. Figure 1 depicts the mean ratings of features across all ages.

Additionally, explorations of ethnicity and SES in relation to all items through univariate analyses within the 18- to 25-year-old group showed that there were no significant main effects of either variable, consistent with previous research (Arnett, 2015b).

## Discussion

The results of this study confirmed that the features proposed in the theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015a) are common features of the 18–25 age period in the United States. A



**Figure 1.** Mean ratings of features of emerging adulthood from age 18–60. x-axis represents age as a continuous variable and y-axis represents mean ratings of the features of emerging adulthood, on a Likert-type scale.

majority of emerging adults agreed that their current time of life is characterized by the features included in the study, including *identity explorations* (“finding out who I really am”), *self-focus* (“focusing on myself”), *instability* (“full of changes”), and *possibilities/optimism* (“anything is possible”). Half the emerging adults also reported *feeling in-between*, responding “in some ways yes, in some ways no” to the question “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?” Other features that have been found in qualitative research to be common in emerging adulthood were also endorsed by a majority of the 18- to 25-year-olds in the study, including viewing this time of life as a period of freedom and as a time that is “fun and exciting.”

These results confirm previous studies and the theoretical proposals that are part of the theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015a; Crocetti et al., 2015; Hill, Lalji, van Rossum, van der Geest, & Blokland, 2015; Reifman et al., 2007). However, what was surprising about the results of the present study was that it was not only a majority of emerging adults who agreed that these features applied to their current time of life, but a majority of adults in the older groups as well, ages 26–29, 30–39, and 40–60. Eighty-one percent of emerging adults ages 18–25 agreed

that “This is a time of my life for finding out who I am,” but so did 69% of 26- to 29-year-olds, 59% of 30- to 39-year-olds, and 55% of 40- to 60-year-olds. Seventy-seven percent of emerging adults agreed that “This is a time of life for focusing on myself,” but so did 62% of 26- to 29-year-olds, 53% of 30- to 39-year-olds, and 56% of 40- to 60-year-olds. Eighty-five percent of emerging adults agreed that “This time of my life is full of changes,” but so did 75% of 26- to 29-year-olds, 63% of 30- to 39-year-olds, and 77% of 40- to 60-year-olds. Eighty-two percent of emerging adults agreed that “At this time of my life, anything is possible,” but so did 80% of 26- to 29-year-olds, 75% of 30- to 39-year-olds, and 77% of 40- to 60-year-olds. Majorities in all three age groups also reported their current time of life as a time of freedom and as fun and exciting. Across the entire sample aged 18–60, the correlation between age and each of these variables was negative, but modest.

These findings raise important questions for further investigation. Given the findings of previous studies and the theoretical foundation of the theory of emerging adulthood, it is easy enough to see why 18- to 25-year-old Americans would agree with these statements. In most respects, this youngest age-group was the most likely to agree with the statements,

especially “strongly agree.” However, the responses of the older groups are more intriguing and puzzling. In what sense are a majority of Americans in their 30s, 40s, and 50s “finding out who I really am,” “focusing on myself,” and feeling that “anything is possible,” given that most of them have stable lives and commitments to family and work that are unlikely to change substantially any time soon? As is often the case, quantitative results provide a skeleton that awaits the flesh of qualitative investigation before it will seem fully human and understandable (Arnett, 2005). Qualitative investigation of these responses in future studies of young and midlife adults would surely be illuminating.

The finding that showed the clearest age difference was in response to the question “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?” Only 44% of the 18- to 25-year-olds responded “yes” to this question, compared to 64% of 26- to 29-year-olds, 76% of 30- to 39-year-olds, and 91% of those ages 40–60. Here, at least, the findings confirm the proposition in emerging adulthood theory that people in the 18–25 age range are more likely to feel in-between adolescence and adulthood than are people in older age groups.

## Conclusion

In sum, the first national study in the United States on the question of the distinctiveness of the features of emerging adulthood yielded mixed results. The study confirmed that most Americans aged 18–25 view themselves as being in a time of life that entails *identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between,* and a broad sense of *possibilities*, as proposed in the theory of emerging adulthood, and they also viewed their current time of life as a time of freedom and as fun and exciting. However, older adults ages 26–60 mostly viewed their lives in these ways as well (except for the question about *feeling in-between*), thus raising doubts about the distinctiveness of the proposed features of emerging adulthood to the 18–25 age period.

The sample in the present study had a lower age boundary of 18, so the results do not indicate whether the features examined here are more prominent in emerging adulthood than in adolescence. This is a worthy question for future research. Future studies are also encouraged in other countries and cultures that would examine differences in views of the features of emerging adulthood across age periods, both before and after the 18–25 age period. Perhaps there will be more surprises in store.

## Author Contributions

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

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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

## Funding

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

## Open Practise

Data and materials for this study have not been made publicly available. The design and analysis plans were not preregistered.

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