

Handbook of Youth and Young Adulthood

New perspectives and agendas

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Andy Furlong

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The emergence of 'emerging adulthood'

The new life stage between adolescence and young adulthood

Jennifer Lynn Tanner and Jeffrey Jensen Arnett

Introduction

Theoretical and empirical understanding of development during the first stage of adulthood has undergone contemporary revision. Arnett (2000; 2004; 2006) introduced the theory of *emerging adulthood* to describe an extended period of development between adolescence and young adulthood, typically extending from ages 18–25. Central to the theory is the tenet that emerging adulthood is a distinct period of development, different from the stage of adolescence that precedes it and the young adult period that follows. The theory of emerging adulthood stresses the psychological and subjective experiences of individuals aged 18–25, characterizing the age period as one of identity explorations, feeling 'in-between', instability, self-focus, and possibilities. The distinctive features of the 18–25 age period call for an apposite term conferring the distinctiveness of the stage. Correspondingly, terms that include the years 18–25 as a non-distinct stage of development – *late adolescence*, *post-adolescence*, *youth*, *young adulthood*, *the transition to adulthood* – are inadequate descriptors of this unique stage of development (Arnett 2000; 2004).

Historical basis of emerging adulthood

Emerging adulthood is historically embedded and culturally constructed (Arnett 1998; 2006). Three primary factors gave rise to emerging adulthood: (1) the change from an industrial to an information-based economy and the corresponding increase in the need for post-secondary education; accordingly, transitions to careers, marriages, and parenthood took place later than ever before; (2) dramatic increases in the educational and occupational opportunities available to women, so that more of them sought to obtain post-secondary education and develop their careers rather than becoming married and having children in their early twenties; and (3) greater tolerance of premarital sex, allowing young people in many societies to begin an active sexual life long before contemplating marriage.

In most OECD countries, prior to the 1950s few people obtained post-secondary education, and most young men became employed by the end of their teens, if not sooner. For example, in 1950, only 25 percent of Americans obtained any higher education, and nearly all of them were young men. Most young women, as well as many young men, remained in their parents' household until they married in their late teens or very early twenties. The median marriage age in the United States as recently as 1960 was just 20.3 for women and 22.8 for men (Arnett 2000). The entry to parenthood came about a year later, on average. Thus most young people went directly from adolescence to a settled young adulthood by their early twenties.

Over the past half-century, the changes related to the age period from the late teens through the twenties have been dramatic. Participation in post-secondary education has risen steeply, especially among young women. Now over 60 percent of young Americans enter higher education the year after graduating from high school, and 57 percent of American undergraduates are women (Arnett 2004). The median age of first marriage has risen steeply as well, to its current record-high of 26.0 among women and 27.5 among men, with a corresponding rise in the median age of entering parenthood. Median marriage ages are even later in European countries (Arnett 2006). Furthermore, changes in attitudes toward premarital sex have taken place in Western societies, and the majority of young people in these societies have sexual intercourse for the first time in their late teens, a decade or more before they enter marriage.

Recentering: a development task of emerging adulthood

Arnett's work provides a portrait of emerging adulthood as a distinct life stage. Tanner's work (2006) complements Arnett's perspective, arguing that distinct population features are reflected in individual pathways of development from adolescence, into emerging adulthood, and beyond to young adulthood. From this developmental perspective, Tanner argues that emerging adulthood is not only a distinct, but also a critical juncture in human life development. Findings from life span research point to emerging adulthood as a critical era in human development when marker life events are most likely to occur (Grob *et al.* 2001). Events experienced in the late teens and twenties are integrated into individuals' identities and memories more so than those events occurring during younger and older life stages.

According to Tanner (2006), from a life span developmental perspective, *recentering* is the primary psychosocial task of emerging adulthood. The concept of recentering assumes the interdependence of development, and considers the individual-in-context with the unit of analysis that is changing over time. Specifically, recentering is achieved in three stages. In stage 1, the adolescent transitions into emerging adulthood proper. During this stage, individuals' relationships and roles which formerly identified them as dependent, as the recipient of guidance, support and resources, undergo a shift in dynamic toward relationships in which power is shared, mutual, and responsibility for care and support gain in reciprocity. In stage 2, the individual engages in the developmental experiences of emerging adulthood proper. During this stage, commitments to roles and relationship are temporary and transitory in nature. Individuals explore a series of commitments to inform themselves of the available opportunities in love and work. Following exploration, and transitory associations with others, careers, and contexts, the emerging adult enters stage 3, making commitments to enduring roles and responsibilities of adulthood (e.g., careers, marriages and partnerships, commitments to the parental role).

Studies that use longitudinal, developmental methods (e.g., growth modeling, trajectory modeling) provide empirical support for the proposition that recentering is the fundamental process underlying development during emerging adulthood. Such studies demonstrate that emerging adults renegotiate relationships with parents by relinquishing residential and financial support and moving toward commitments to others, such as life partners and children. For example, Cohen *et al.* (2003) found increases from age 17 to 27 in financial, romantic, residential independence and family-formation. Evidence for emerging adulthood proper is revealed in findings showing a lack of linearity, but rather both progression and also regression in pathways toward adult roles and responsibilities in emerging adulthood. Furthermore, transitions to residential, financial, relationship independence and family formation were interdependent (Sneed *et al.* 2007).

The concept of recentering extends itself beyond the theoretical into the applied realm of developmental science which seeks to understand how to maintain and optimize healthy human development and adaptation. Implicit to the concept of recentering is the assumption that progress in recentering should predict proximal and distal adaptation and optimal development (Tanner 2006). Emerging adults scaffold recentering by selecting and identifying, as well as prioritizing personal life goals. Life goals change as individuals move from adolescence, through emerging adulthood. Salient tasks of emerging adulthood include friendship, academic, and conduct goals, giving way to occupational and romantic goals as emerging adults move into young adulthood. In a Finnish study, over the course of ten years, university students first interviewed when they were 18–28 year-olds disengaged from goals related to education, friends, and traveling, and engaged in goals related to work, family, and health (Salmela-Aro *et al.* 2007).

Other psychological characteristics of emerging adulthood

In addition to recentering and the five features of emerging adulthood emphasized by Arnett (2004), other cognitive, emotional, and behavioral features distinguish 18–25 year-olds from younger and older individuals. Emerging adult thinking, feeling, and acting reveal underlying physiological and neurological development unique to the age period. The brain's center for reasoning and problem-solving fully develops during the emerging adult age period, accomplished by a pruning of gray matter following adolescence into the twenties and an increase in white matter across this same period through the mid-thirties (Giedd *et al.* 1999). The plasticity of the emerging adult brain, then, indicates that maturation remains sensitive to environmental conditions and experiences during these years and that opportunity to enhance adaptational capacities and to reduce risk of trauma and stress is salient to understanding the role of emerging adulthood in life span human development.

Cognitive capacities, strategies, and organization shift during emerging adulthood. The attainment of wisdom-related knowledge and judgment occurs primarily during emerging adulthood, from ages 15–25 (Baltes and Staudinger 2000). Across multiple measures of aptitude, numerical ability, verbal aptitude, clerical perception, finger dexterity, and general intelligence, maximum levels are achieved in emerging adulthood. Some studies indicate that, after age 25, there is a point of divergence for cognitive performance where crystallized intelligence stabilizes (i.e., intelligence as cultural knowledge), but fluid intelligence begins to decline (i.e., intelligence as basic information processing; Baltes *et al.* 1999).

Emerging adults are different from older adults with regard to their processing of socio-emotional information. This is explained partially as a function of increasing neural stability from young to older adulthood. Emerging adults' responses to emotional stimuli are more sensitive compared to older adults; specifically, selectivity of and reactivity to negative-stimuli are heightened. In cognitive studies, this is demonstrated in differences in activation of the medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC, the brain region that has been implicated in planning complex cognitive behaviors, personality expression and moderating correct social behavior) which reveals that responses to fear stimuli decrease after emerging adulthood and reactions to happiness-stimuli increase. Evidence that emerging adulthood is a period associated with greater sensitivity to fear and negative stimuli is interpreted as a function of brain maturation; with age comes greater control over emotional reactions which gives older adults a greater opportunity to reframe emotional reactions with cognitive interpretations that are more positive (Williams *et al.* 2006).

Personality change from adolescence through emerging adulthood reflects increases in global maturity. Over this period, people's personalities tend to make gains in forcefulness and decisiveness; become more goal-directed in work-related efforts; show increases in self-control, reflecting tendencies to become more reflective, deliberate and planful; and decrease in negative emotionality, including aggressiveness and alienation (Donnellan *et al.* 2007). In regard to the Big Five dimensions of personality, emerging adulthood can be characterized by increases in social vitality (i.e., sociability, positive affect, gregariousness and energy level) during the college years followed by decreases in the 22–30 year-old age period; decreases in social dominance (i.e., dominance, independence, and self-confidence in social contexts) that begin in the adolescent years and continue through young adulthood; and small increases in emotional stability that, again, begin in the teens and continue through the thirties.

Emerging adulthood is an age period during which there is stronger potential for personality change compared to earlier and later decades (Roberts *et al.* 2006). Change in personality is considered an outcome related to emerging adults' experiences establishing careers and committing to interpersonal relationships and family roles: 'as all dominant cultures support if not promote these activities, they may be the catalysts for the widespread pattern of personality trait development found in adulthood and across cultures' (Roberts *et al.*, 2006: 18). Following emerging adulthood proper, stability of personality increases as a function of planful competence, planning for and making commitments to work and family.

Emerging adults are relatively healthy in some respects. During emerging adulthood, fitness peaks, self-reported health is high, and rates of disease and disability are low (Park *et al.* 2006). However, risky behaviors among some emerging adults put them at risk for unintended, sub-optimal health outcomes. Substance use and sexual risk-taking peak in emerging adulthood, including rates of STIs, unintended pregnancy and abortion.

Like physical health, mental health in emerging adulthood is complex and diverse. Psychiatric disorder peaks in prevalence in emerging adulthood (Tanner *et al.* 2007). However, overall, emerging adults are hopeful and optimistic about their futures (Arnett 2004) and non-clinical measures demonstrate increases in well-being and decreases in depressive symptoms from 18 to 25 (Schulenberg and Zarrett 2006). Incomplete brain maturation in emerging adulthood suggests the age period may be a 'sensitive period' or window of opportunity for changing pathways of early, compromised mental health to more salutary trajectories of mental health following intervention or absence of trauma during emerging adulthood.

Cultural themes and variations in emerging adulthood

Emerging adulthood is different from certain other life stages, such as infancy or late adulthood, in that it is historically recent and culturally-based, so that it exists in some cultures and not others, and takes different forms in different cultures. Nevertheless, the historical changes underlying the rise of emerging adulthood have taken place worldwide, across many economically developed countries, and are taking place now in many developing countries. Despite between-country variation in educational systems and school-to-work policies, increasing rates of post-secondary education are evident across countries. Correspondingly, age at first marriage has increased worldwide, as well as age-at-first birth. Similar changes have taken place across countries in the roles and opportunities available to women, and young women now exceed young men in educational attainment in every region of the world. The acceptability of premarital sex varies widely among cultures, but the prevalence of premarital sex has grown worldwide.

The study of cultural themes and variations in emerging adulthood is just beginning, but already some important findings have been presented, in regions including Europe, Latin America, and Asia. With respect to Europe, Douglass and colleagues have examined relationships between prolonged education and delayed fertility in European countries and concluded that 'Europeans seem to [be] postponing childbearing due to the activities of emerging adulthood' (Douglass 2007: 4) which include 'exploration, consumption of experience, and freedom from responsibilities associated with careers, marriage, and parenthood' (ibid.: 13). Important variations also exist within Europe. In southern European countries such as Italy and Spain emerging adults tend to remain at home with their families-of-origin, whereas in northern Europe they are more likely to leave home in their late teens or very early twenties.

With respect to Latin America, emerging adulthood has been observed to exist, but in most countries it is mainly a privilege enjoyed by the middle class rather than a normative stage of development (Galambos and Martinez 2007). The more economically developed a country is, the more widespread emerging adulthood tends to be. For example, in Argentina, one of the most economically developed Latin American countries, a longitudinal study demonstrated that emerging adults' experiences are similar to those identified in US samples: diverse employment situations, multiple intimate relationships, and postponement of marriage and parenthood consistent with continuing education after graduating from high school (Facio *et al.* 2007). However, in contrast to the American pattern, the majority of emerging adults in Argentina who are not married or cohabitating live with their parents or other relatives.

In Asia, a study of young Japanese women concluded that many of them experience a prolonged emerging adulthood into their thirties, as they resist pressure to enter traditional roles of wife and mother now that they have a wide range of career possibilities (Rosenberger 2007). In China, emerging adult college students have been found to resemble American college students in many ways (Nelson and Chen 2007), but about 800 million of China's 1.2 billion people are rural villagers who are unlikely to experience anything resembling emerging adulthood.

Social class variations in emerging adulthood

In addition to between-culture heterogeneity, the question of whether emerging adulthood is a normative stage of development within societies has been raised. Specifically,

there is some question of whether there is a bifurcation of the age period within countries, with emerging adulthood experienced mainly by the middle class and less by the working class. For example, Bynner (2005) emphasizes the structural determinants of adult transitions, including economic and political forces that shape and constrain opportunities of individuals during the first years of adulthood, and contends that the stage of emerging adulthood is experienced mainly by the middle class. Côté (2000) advanced the term *arrested adulthood* to reflect the influence of market forces in delaying adulthood, resulting in great disadvantage, hazard, and vulnerability to individuals who are distanced from the resources available via labor market participation.

While Arnett emphasizes the role of society in structuring and shaping emerging adulthood, and recognizes the key importance of educational attainment in structuring work and income paths in emerging adulthood and beyond, he contends that structural and socialization forces are limited in their determination of emerging adulthood (Arnett 2006). For example, in the United States, few differences exist between middle-class and working-class emerging adults in their conceptions of adulthood or their optimism about their personal possibilities in love and work (Arnett 2004). Further empirical comparisons between middle-class and working-class emerging adults should help to clarify this issue.

Future research directions

The theory of emerging adulthood identifies a distinct stage of life span of human development tied to Westernization and post-industrialization trends. This framework promotes understanding of the distinct, contemporary experiences of individuals in their late teens and twenties. It follows from this conceptualization of the age period that emerging adulthood is predicted as a normative stage of human development in cultures that experience specific trends, including: increasing proportions of emerging adults, in particular, women, completing higher levels of education in their early twenties; delaying transitions to marriage and parenthood; and, weakening of ties between sex, marital unions, and family formation.

These specifications of the theory of emerging adulthood make the theory testable and lead to testable predictions. Specifically, the theory predicts that as developing countries industrialize and urbanize, the proportion of people who experience emerging adulthood should grow, i.e., the proportion who obtain post-secondary education will increase, ages of entering marriage and parenthood will rise, young women will be more likely to enter the workplace rather than become wives and mothers in their early twenties, and premarital sex will become more prevalent.

Accumulated findings suggest that future studies should also explore within-culture heterogeneity in emerging adult experiences. A particularly interesting frontier is the extent to which socio-economic factors including structural inequalities dictated by race, class, ethnicity, and rural vs. urban geography influence the likelihood that emerging adulthood is a normal, expected stage of human development.

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