

# Does Emerging Adulthood Theory Apply Across Social Classes? National Data on a Persistent Question

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## Abstract

The theory of emerging adulthood has been criticized as not applying across social classes. This article presents data from a national survey of 18- to 25-year-olds in order to test this critique. There were consistencies across social classes in the five features proposed in the theory of emerging adulthood: positive and negative perceptions of the time period; views of education and work; and views of love, sex, and marriage. Important social class differences were found in rates of feeling depressed and access to financial support for education. It is concluded that there are many commonalities in the experience of emerging adulthood across social classes in the United States and that emerging adulthood and other life stages can be useful guides to understanding development, provided that they are understood to be grounded in a social, cultural, and historical context.

## Keywords

emerging adulthood, social class, socioeconomic status, life stage, young adulthood

The theory of emerging adulthood has inspired a remarkable amount of research and commentary since it was first proposed in 2000 (Arnett, 2000). By August 2015, it had been cited over 6,000 times (according to googlescholar.com). Nevertheless, like any theory, it has had its critics. The most common critique of the theory is that it does not apply broadly to young people in the age period from the late teens through the 20s (e.g., Heinz, 2009; Hendry & Kloep, 2007; Reitzle, 2006; Schoon, 2006; Silva, 2013; for a book-length debate on this topic, see Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011). Specifically, say these critics, it applies to the middle-class and upper middle-class young people who go to university and have enough financial support from parents to experience personal freedom and leisure during these years but not to the working class and poor who have far fewer options. It is young people in the middle class and upward who are able to experience their late teens and early to mid-20s as self-focused years of identity explorations and who look forward to a future of promising possibilities. In contrast, young people in the lower social classes experience their late teens and 20s as a time of struggling to enter an unpromising and unwelcoming labor market (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Furstenberg, 2010; Silva, 2013). They look at work not as a form of self-expression and identity fulfillment but as a way to make a living and seek only to get a stable job that pays a decent wage. When they look to the future, they see not a wide open expanse of possibilities but only a succession of closed doors.

In part, these criticisms are based on either a misunderstanding or a misrepresentation of the theory of emerging adulthood

and the research on which it was based. I have emphasized from the beginning the importance of taking education and social class background into account in the study of emerging adults. My research on emerging adults has consistently included people with a variety of educational levels, not just college students. The theory was originally based on a sample of three hundred 18- to 29-year-olds from a wide range of social class backgrounds (Arnett, 2004). In the first article sketching the theory of emerging adulthood, I argued that one of the benefits of the theory is that it would draw greater research attention to the “forgotten half” of young people who do not pursue further education after secondary school (Arnett, 2000, pp. 476–477).

The forgotten half remains forgotten by scholars, in the sense that studies of young people who do not attend college in the years following high school remain rare. . . . Emerging adulthood is offered as a new paradigm, a new way of thinking about development from the late teens through the twenties, especially ages 18–25, partly in the hope that a definite conception of this period will lead to an increase in scholarly attention to it.

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Since then, I have often emphasized that obtaining tertiary education—or not—marks a crucial turning point in the occupational and social class destiny of emerging adults (Arnett, 2004, 2011, 2015). In a knowledge economy based mainly on information, technology, and services, tertiary education is more important than ever before in determining the course of a person's adult life. I have also noted the importance of social class background in the likelihood of becoming a single mother or having a successful lifelong marriage (Arnett, 2004, 2015). For all these reasons, it is not accurate to claim that the theory of emerging adulthood is based on middle-class college students and applies only to them.

Nevertheless, there is a serious point of difference here between me and the critics. Both sides acknowledge that educational levels and social class background matter in this age period but how much? Crucially, are the social class differences within the age period from the late teens through the 20s best understood as important variations within a group that still has enough similarities in common to be called “emerging adults”? Or, are the experiences of working-class young people in this age period so radically different from the experiences of those in the middle class that they cannot reasonably be said to belong to the same life stage?

The theory of emerging adulthood was originally proposed for the purpose of drawing greater attention to the fact that similar demographic changes have taken place in the lives of young people across developed countries in the past half century; specifically, longer and more widespread tertiary education, a later entry to stable full-time work, and later ages of entering marriage and parenthood (Arnett, 2000, 2004). These changes opened up a new period of life from the late teens through the 20s that was distinct from either the adolescence that preceded it or the more established young adulthood that followed it. In my view, it did not make sense to call it “late adolescence” or a “prolonged” or “extended” adolescence. It is more conceptually coherent to view adolescence as a life stage bounded by puberty; it begins when the first notable signs of puberty appear and ends when physical and sexual maturity is reached, around age 18. In contrast to adolescents, the (roughly) age 18- to 25-year-olds I proposed to call emerging adults are not going through puberty. Furthermore, they are not in secondary school, not dependents of their parents (in a legal sense), and not minors under the law. Similarly, to me it made no sense to view the entire period from age 18 to age 40 or 45 as “young adulthood,” as had been the tradition in psychology since Erikson (1950). For most people in developed countries today, the period from age 18 through the mid-20s is radically different from the 30s and early 40s. Ages 18–25 are rarely stable, and for most people, the commitments have not yet been made in love and work that constitute the stable structure of an adult life. By around age 30, most people have made those commitments, signifying the entry to a new life stage. Hence, the concept of emerging adulthood, a life stage from the late teens through the 20s, when people are no longer adolescents but not yet adults, on the way to adulthood but not there yet.

In my first book on emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004), I proposed five features that I believed were distinctive to the American emerging adults I had been surveying and interviewing for the past decade: identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities/optimism. I never proposed that those five features would prove to be universal features of emerging adulthood. On the contrary, I emphasized that there would surely be variations in the paths that people would take through emerging adulthood, depending on cultural context and economic circumstances (Arnett, 2000, 2004). However, the five features that I proposed as distinctive to American emerging adults were based on a sample of three hundred 18- to 29-year-olds that was diverse in ethnicity, region, and socioeconomic status (SES) background. The theoretical proposal of the five features represented my conclusions from those 300 interviews, and I believed that they represented common characteristics that applied broadly. Of course there would be variations across cultures and countries, and even within American society there would be diverse paths, as there would be in any life stage. Nevertheless, I proposed that these features would be found to apply to most emerging adults in the United States, that is, they would be normative features of the American version of this new life stage.

### **New Survey Data on Emerging Adulthood and Social Class**

Given the division in points of view on emerging adulthood and social class, it is important to present data that will help to clarify the issue. In the spirit of promoting a constructive exchange, here I offer data from a recent national survey showing similarities and differences among 18- to 25-year-olds with respect to social class background. In my view, the findings show that even though there are clear and sometimes dramatic differences in life prospects depending on social class, there is enough similarity across social classes to merit the application of “emerging adulthood” to the age-group as a whole. The data presented here may help to generate further discussion on the relations between social class and development during ages 18–25. Thus far, critiques of emerging adulthood theory have been based mainly on small-scale, local, qualitative samples (Hendry & Kloep, 2010; Silva, 2013).

I proposed the theory of emerging adulthood to apply mainly to 18- to 25-year-olds in developed countries, and I have sometimes used the age range from 18 to 29. Age 18 works well as an age marking the end of adolescence and the beginning of a new life stage, as it is the age when most people in developed countries finish secondary school, reach physical and sexual maturity, and become adults under the law. However, the end of emerging adulthood and the beginning of an established young adulthood are more difficult to mark precisely, as people “feel adult” at different ages and there is also variation in when they make the role transitions to adulthood, including stable work, a long-term partnership and having their first child (Arnett, 2015). So, either 18–25 or 18–29 can be

used, depending on the issue or question of interest. Here, I focus on ages 18–25, as that is the age range I consider to be the heart of emerging adulthood.

The survey included items on the five features as well as items on a variety of other aspects of functioning, including emotional well-being; school and work attitudes; and views of love, sex, and marriage. It could be that even if emerging adults do not exhibit social class differences in the five features, there may be other important areas of life where these differences are evident.

Mother's educational attainment was used to represent social class, as is common in social science research (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006). Mother's educational attainment is a better representation of emerging adults' social class status than their own educational attainment or income, because many of them are still in the process of obtaining their education and have little or no income during these years. Using parents' income would also be an inaccurate measure of emerging adults' social class background. First, many emerging adults may not know their parents' income and could not report it accurately. Second, using parents' income would introduce the problem of whether to include the income of noncustodial fathers in divorced families, whose income may not contribute to the support of their children (Cherlin, 2009). Third, parents' income may have changed substantially over the two decades or more of their emerging adults' lives, and attempting to use parents' income to represent emerging adults' social class background would beg the question of whether to use parents' current income, which may not represent well their income when their emerging adults were young, or to use some measure of income from 20 years previously, which emerging adults would be even less likely to know. Given these considerations, mother's education was viewed as the best alternative for the present study.

The survey involved a national sample of 710 persons aged 18–25 ( $M = 21.5$ ,  $SD = 2.3$ ) residing in the United States. The data collection for this survey, the Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults, was conducted in 2012 by Purple Strategies, a survey research firm. Three methods were used to obtain participants: 387 interviews were conducted via the Internet, 271 via cell phones, and 52 via landline telephone. The Internet sample consisted of members of a preexisting online panel assembled by the survey research firm. Participants in the present study were selected randomly from this panel. The phone participants were obtained via random-digit dialing. No participants were paid or provided with other compensation in return for their participation.

The three methods were used in order to obtain a diverse sample that would reflect the population of 18- to 25-year-olds in the United States. Using landlines alone is no longer viable for survey research on this population, as 60% of 18- to 29-year-olds use cell phones only (Blumberg & Luke, 2013). Survey sampling of cell phones via random-digit dialing is restricted by federal law in the United States, and rates of participation for those who are reached are low. Consequently, the Internet sample was necessary to reach segments of the

population that would not be accessible via either landlines or cell phones.

Half the sample was male (49%) and half female (51%). In terms of ethnicity, 58% identified themselves as White, 19% Latino/Latina, 13% African American, 5% Asian American, and 5% other. Most were unmarried (85%) and had not yet had a child (80%). Participants were obtained from all regions of the United States: Northeast (19%), Midwest (21%), South (28%), and West (32%). Their social class backgrounds were diverse, as represented by mother's educational attainment: 34% high school diploma or less, 32% some college or vocational school, and 34% 4-year college degree or more. The participants' own educational attainment was similarly diverse: 21% high school diploma or less, 51% some college or vocational school, and 28% 4-year college degree or more. Currently, 43% were full-time students.

The total sample was demographically similar to the U.S. population. With regard to ethnicity, the overall U.S. population of 18- to 29-year-olds is 61% White, 19% Latino, 14% African American, 5% Asian American, and 2% other (Taylor & Keeter, 2010); in the present study, the sample of 18- to 25-year-olds was 58% White, 19% Latino, 13% African American, 5% Asian American, and 5% other. With regard to region, 18% of Americans live in the Northeast, 22% in the Midwest, 37% in the South, and 24% in the West (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012); in the present study, the distribution was 19% Northeast, 21% Midwest, 28% South, and 32% West. With regard to mother's education, in the total U.S. population of persons aged 44–64 (the age range including nearly all mothers in the present study), 31% have a 4-year college degree (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2014); in the present study, 34% of mothers had obtained a 4-year college degree.

The survey covered a wide range of topics: the five features; expectations for adulthood; emotional well-being; school and work attitudes; and views of love, sex, and marriage. All items were answered on a 4-point Likert-type scale, with one exception; for "Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?" the response options were *yes*, *no*, and *in some ways yes*, *in some ways no*.

## How Important Is Social Class? The Clark Poll Results

$\chi^2$  analyses were conducted for each item in relation to social class background. To enhance comprehension, Tables 1–5 show the percentages who responded *strongly agree* or *somewhat agree* on the Likert-type scale used for all but one of the items. However, the  $\chi^2$  analyses were conducted with the entire 4-point Likert-type scale. For the item "Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?" Table 1 presents the percentage in each social class category who responded either *no* or *in some ways yes*, *in some ways no*. However, in the  $\chi^2$  analysis for this item, the entire 3-point scale was used (*yes*, *no*, or *in some ways yes*, *in some ways no*).

The analysis of the data used mother's educational attainment to represent social class background. Mother's education

**Table 1.** The Five Features by Social Class.

Survey Item	% Agree by Social Class			Significant?
	Low	Medium	High	
Identity explorations This is a time of my life for finding out who I really am	82	77	85	<i>ns</i>
Instability This time of my life is full of changes	87	82	87	<i>ns</i>
Self-focus This is a time of my life for focusing on myself	72	73	78	<i>ns</i>
Feeling in-between Do you feel that you have reached adulthood? (% no or yes and no)	59	54	61	<i>ns</i>
Possibilities At this time of my life, it still seems like anything is possible	84	80	81	<i>ns</i>

Note.  $N = 710$ . Except for "feeling in-between," the numbers indicate the combined percentage of those who responded *somewhat agree* or *strongly agree*. *ns* = not significant.

**Table 2.** Views of Adulthood by Social Class.

Survey Item	% Agree by Social Class			Significant?
	Low	Medium	High	
If I could have my way, I would never become an adult	40	32	28	<i>ns</i>
I think adulthood will be boring	26	25	17	<i>ns</i>
I think adulthood will be more enjoyable than my life is now	61	58	58	<i>ns</i>

Note.  $N = 710$ . The numbers indicate the combined percentage of those who responded *somewhat agree* or *strongly agree*. *ns* = not significant.

**Table 3.** Emotional Lives by Social Class.

Survey Item	% Agree by Social Class			Significant?
	Low	Medium	High	
Positive At this time of my life, I feel I have a great deal of freedom	73	74	79	<i>ns</i>
This time of my life is fun and exciting	78	80	90	$p < .001$
I am confident that eventually I will get what I want out of life	92	85	93	<i>ns</i>
Overall, I am satisfied with my life	76	81	85	<i>ns</i>
Negative This time of my life is stressful	75	66	75	<i>ns</i>
I often feel depressed	42	36	28	$p < .01$
I often feel anxious	58	58	56	<i>ns</i>
I often feel that my life is not going well	43	32	26	$p < .01$

Note.  $N = 710$ . The numbers indicate the combined percentage of those who responded *somewhat agree* or *strongly agree*. *ns* = not significant.

**Table 4.** School and Work by Social Class.

Survey Item	% Agree by Social Class			Significant?
	Low	Medium	High	
One of the most important keys to success in life is a college education	79	76	85	<i>ns</i>
It's possible to get a good job even if you don't have a college education	71	61	62	$p < .05$
I have not been able to find enough financial support to get the education I need	48	34	30	$p < .001$
I am in no hurry to get a job that I will have for many years to come	39	40	41	<i>ns</i>
It is important to me to have a career that does some good in the world	88	77	90	$p < .001$
It is more important to me to enjoy my job than to make a lot of money	78	73	83	$p < .05$
I haven't been able to find the kind of job I really want	69	63	59	<i>ns</i>

Note.  $N = 710$ . The numbers indicate the combined percentage of those who responded *somewhat agree* or *strongly agree*. *ns* = not significant.

**Table 5.** Views of Love, Sex, and Marriage by Social Class.

Survey Item	% Agree by Social Class			
	Low	Medium	High	Significant?
Couples should be married before they have a child	69	69	72	ns
I expect to have a marriage that lasts a lifetime	87	83	88	ns
It's OK for two people to have sex even if they are not emotionally involved with each other	40	35	49	$p < .05$
I expect to have to give up some of my career goals in order to have the family life I want	65	57	59	ns

Note.  $N = 710$ . The numbers indicate the combined percentage of those who responded *somewhat agree* or *strongly agree*. ns = not significant.

was divided into three categories: low (high school diploma or less, 34% of the sample), medium (some college or vocational school, 32%), and high (4-year college degree or more, 34%).

### The Five Features and Views of Adulthood

Do the five features proposed in the theory of emerging adulthood apply across social classes in the United States? Responses to the survey items suggest the answer is yes, as Table 1 shows. For all items pertaining to the five features proposed in the theory, the differences between the three social class groups were minimal and were not statistically significant.

With regard to views of adulthood, as shown in Table 2, there were no differences across social classes in preferring never to become an adult, in believing adulthood would be boring, or in beliefs that adulthood would be more enjoyable than life is now.

As noted earlier, the five features were proposed on the basis of my original study of 300 emerging adults, as features that seemed to apply broadly to most of them, across social classes. These survey results appear to confirm that finding. However, the finding of no social class differences in responses to the question “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?” is in some respects surprising. Some qualitative studies (e.g., Hendry & Kloep, 2010; Silva, 2013) and some of my own case studies (Arnett, 2015) have suggested that emerging adults who have experienced an especially difficult childhood often feel adult earlier than their peers, because they must take on serious family responsibilities at a young age. One might expect that experiencing a difficult childhood would be more likely among those from lower class backgrounds, due to family economic stress, and that consequently they would be more likely to feel adult by ages 18–25. The absence of SES differences on this item in the present study could indicate that the kinds of difficulty that provoke an earlier feeling of being adult are distributed across social classes (e.g., marital discord between parents and parental physical or mental health problems) to enough of an extent that there is no overall SES difference. However, this is a finding that would seem to merit further investigation.

### Emotional Lives

How does it feel to be an emerging adult? It has been proposed as an emotionally complex life stage, in which elation and

anxiety are both common (Arnett, 2004, 2015). These complexities apply across social classes, as Table 3 shows. A strong majority of 18- to 29-year-olds agreed that this time of their lives is characterized by freedom and is “fun and exciting.” They were satisfied, overall, with how their lives are going. However, a majority also agreed that this time of life is stressful, and reported frequently experiencing anxiety.

There were some significant differences by social class, and these differences were consistent in revealing that emerging adults from lower social classes experience their emotional lives less positively and more negatively than their higher social class peers. Specifically, those from the lowest social class category were less likely to regard their lives as fun and exciting,  $\chi^2(6) = 16.91, p < .01$ , and more likely to report feeling depressed,  $\chi^2(6) = 26.55, p < .001$ , and to be concerned that their lives are not going well,  $\chi^2(6) = 16.80, p < .01$ . Nevertheless, emerging adulthood was mostly experienced positively across social classes, despite these differences. For example, 78% of emerging adults from lower social classes viewed their lives as fun and exciting—lower than the 90% in the highest social class but still a strong majority.

It is easy to understand why emerging adults from lower social classes might feel less positive about their current lives than emerging adults from higher classes. Those from lower classes are less likely to be employed and more likely to lack the family financial resources to allow them to get the tertiary education that is so crucial to the good life in today’s knowledge economy (Arnett, 2015; Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006). What is perhaps more surprising is that, even with these disadvantages, most of them remain remarkably positive about their lives and feel a sense of freedom, fun, and excitement despite their formidable obstacles.

### School and Work Attitudes

School and work are areas in which we might most expect to find social class differences among emerging adults. Social class background is often defined by mother’s educational attainment, and it strongly predicts emerging adults’ own educational attainment (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006). In turn, educational attainment predicts the kinds of work opportunities people have throughout adulthood (Carnevale et al., 2013).

However, the data from the national Clark poll showed few notable social class differences among emerging adults in their

views of school and work (Table 4). Regardless of social class, a substantial majority of 18- to 25-year-olds believed a college education is “one of the most important keys to success in life,” yet also believed that is possible to find a good job without one. Across social classes, about three fourths of emerging adults endorsed the view that is more important to find enjoyable work than to make a lot of money. Over half of emerging adults reported that they have been unable to find the kind of job they really want, across social classes, and about one third were “in no hurry” to find a long-term job. Emerging adults from the lowest social class category were as likely as emerging adults from the highest social class category to agree that it is important to them to find “a job that does some good in the world.” There was a strong majority on this item, across social classes, reflecting the striking idealism of today’s emerging adults (Arnett, 2013; Arnett, Trzesniewski, & Donnellan, 2013).

Despite these similarities, one social class difference in views of school and work was vitally important. Emerging adults in the lowest social class were substantially more likely than emerging adults in the highest social class to agree that they have not been able to find sufficient financial support to obtain the education they believe they need (48–30%),  $\chi^2(6) = 28.21, p < .001$ . The fact that nearly half of emerging adults from the poorest backgrounds have not had access to the kind of education they need represents an enormous waste of human potential. Even among the emerging adults from the highest social class category, over a quarter reported that they do not have the financial resources to obtain sufficient education. This unfortunate state reflects the enormous rise in higher education costs in recent decades (NCES, 2014). Among developed countries, it is a problem of special concern for the United States. In 1995, the United States led the world in the proportion of college graduates, but by 2012, it had fallen well behind other developed countries such as Japan, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2014). Most developed countries provide access to tertiary education free or for a minimal fee; the United States has the most extensive but also the most expensive tertiary education system in the world (NCES, 2014).

### *Views of Love, Sex, and Marriage*

In the area of love, sex, and marriage, the results indicated that American emerging adults across social classes combine traditional values with the modern ideal of a striking a balance between work and family roles (Table 5). Fewer than half agreed that it is acceptable for two people to have sex if they are not emotionally involved, and about 70% across social classes believed that couples should be married before they have a child. Over 80% across social classes also indicated that they expect to have a lifelong marriage. The modern twist is that most expect to have to sacrifice some of their career goals in order to reach their family goals. Again, these findings applied across social class backgrounds.

The finding that there was no social class difference in the belief that couples should be married before having a child was somewhat surprising. Statistically, emerging adults from the lowest social class category are considerably more likely to have a child outside of marriage (Hymowitz, Carroll, Wilcox, & Kaye, 2013). The fact that they were no less likely than emerging adults from higher social classes to believe that this is unwise calls into question the sociological claim that young low-SES women often decide to have a child because they see no hope for their educational or occupational prospects and no reason to wait for marriage to a potentially unreliable and impecunious man (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Instead, the lack of social class differences on this item in the present study is more in line with research reporting that single motherhood in the 20s usually takes place not as a planful choice but as a consequence of insufficient knowledge of reproductive biology and inconsistent use of reliable contraception (Kaye, Suellentrop, & Sloup, 2009).

The finding that there was no social class difference in the expectation of having a lifelong marriage is poignant, in light of the reality that emerging adults from low-SES families are much more likely to divorce than higher SES emerging adults, with important financial consequences for them and their children (Hymowitz et al., 2013). Despite this hard fact, nearly all emerging adults believe their love will prevail and endure, across social classes.

### **The Variability of Emerging Adulthood: One Stage, Many Paths**

The findings of the national Clark poll indicate that across social classes, there are more similarities than differences among 18- to 25-year-olds in the United States. There were no differences in their responses regarding the five features proposed in the theory of emerging adulthood, and no differences in their expectations of what adulthood would be like. In their emotional lives, across social classes emerging adults were similar in regarding their lives as free, fun, and exciting, although most also reported experiencing stress and anxiety. In their attitudes toward school and work, emerging adults across social classes recognized the importance of a college education and were idealistic in their aspirations for work that is enjoyable and does some good in the world. Regarding love, sex, and marriage, most endorsed traditional values, but they expected to make career sacrifices for the sake of family goals, regardless of their social class background. The social class differences reported here are important, undoubtedly, and need to be taken seriously in public policy, especially in providing more opportunities for lower SES emerging adults to obtain tertiary education. However, I believe the findings clearly show that American emerging adults are far more similar than different across social classes, and there is enough similarity among them to regard them as belonging to a common life stage.

It is important to acknowledge that the data presented here are from the United States only. It remains an open question whether or not the findings would be similar in other developed

countries. However, it seems likely that the features found here to apply across social classes in the United States would be just as likely to apply across social classes in Canada, Europe, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and other developed countries. The United States has the starkest social class differences and the highest level of inequality of any developed country (United Nations Development Programme, 2014). One would reasonably expect that if emerging adults were going to differ by social class on features, such as possibilities/optimism, they would differ in the United States. Social class differences may be less likely in other developed countries, where social welfare systems provide more equality of access to education and training, and there is less poverty. Nevertheless, this is an empirical question, yet to be definitively explored.

Social class is unquestionably an important element in the lives of emerging adults in the United States, as it is in the lives of people of other ages. Specifically, the pursuit of tertiary education structures the lives of some emerging adults but not others, and this difference has repercussions for their lives in emerging adulthood and beyond (Arnett, 2015; Carnevale et al., 2013). For those who pursue tertiary education, their daily lives are structured around going to classes and doing course work. Many of them work at least part-time as well, to support themselves and to pay educational expenses, which can make for a very busy life. Those who do not enter tertiary education following secondary school but seek full-time employment face the formidable challenge of finding a well-paying, enjoyable job without tertiary education credentials, at a time when such jobs are becoming scarce. Furthermore, future prospects vary greatly for these two groups, with those pursuing tertiary education having a higher likely social class destination than those who do not, in terms of income and occupational status (Carnevale et al., 2013; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006).

Although social class is important to how the years from the late teens through the 20s are experienced, people in this age range can be understood as emerging adults across social classes. At its core, the rise of emerging adulthood over the past half century is a demographic phenomenon, arising from the substantial increase in median ages of entering stable work, marriage, and parenthood in every developed country. A half century ago most people entered these roles at ages 20–22, placing them in “young adulthood” right after adolescence, with adult responsibilities of coordinating work and family life, including maintaining a marriage or other partnership, running a household, managing their own income and expenses, and caring for children. Now that the median ages of entering stable work, marriage, and parenthood have moved into the late 20s or even the early 30s, a stage of emerging adulthood has opened up between adolescence and young adulthood, during which people are more independent of their parents than they were as adolescents but have not yet entered the roles that structure adult life for most people. Young people in lower social classes may enter these roles a year or two earlier than their peers in the middle and upper classes, but for most that still leaves a period of several years between the end of secondary school and the

entrance to adult roles, certainly long enough to be called a distinct life stage (Arnett et al., 2011; Yates, 2005).

My original research (Arnett, 2004), as well as the national Clark poll presented here and many studies by other researchers (see Arnett, 2016), has indicated other common features among American emerging adults across social classes, beyond the demographic similarities. For emerging adults in both the lower/working class and the middle/upper middle class, the years from the late teens through the 20s are a time of trying out different identity possibilities in love and work, and gradually making their way toward more stable commitments. For both groups, instability is common during these years, as frequent changes are made in love and work. For both groups, their hopes for the future are high, even though the actual prospects for those with relatively low educational levels are not as promising. However, other features of the age period may be found to vary, between social classes within the same country as well as between cultures and countries. Emerging adulthood is growing as a worldwide phenomenon, in demographic terms, and there is sure to be a great deal of variation worldwide in how it is experienced (Arnett, 2011). For example, a study of young women factory workers in China reported that they viewed the most important criteria for adulthood as *learn to care for parents*, *settled into long-term career*, and *become capable of caring for children* (Zhong & Arnett, 2014); these findings are in contrast to the “Big Three” of accepting responsibility for one’s self, making independent decisions, and financial independence, reported across Western countries (Arnett, 2015; Nelson & Luster, 2016). Other differences are sure to be found, as the cultural scope of research on emerging adulthood expands.

An analogy can be made here to the life stage of adolescence. Cross-cultural studies, most notably Schlegel and Barry’s (1991) analysis of 186 cultures in the anthropological literature, have found that adolescence exists in nearly all human cultures, as a period between the time puberty begins and the time adult roles are taken on. However, the length of adolescence and the nature of adolescents’ experiences vary vastly among cultures. Some adolescents attend secondary school, and some drop out or never go. Most live in the same household as their parents, but some become “street children” and live among other adolescents in urban areas. Some marry by their mid-teens, especially girls in rural areas of developing countries, whereas others will not marry until after adolescence and a long emerging adulthood. Consequently, it makes sense to speak not of one adolescent experience but of *adolescences* worldwide (Larson, Wilson, & Rickman, 2010). Yet it remains conceptually valuable to recognize adolescence as a life stage that exists in nearly all cultures, in some form.

In the same way, we can state that there are likely to be many emerging adulthoods, that is, many forms the experience of this life stage can take depending on social class, culture, and perhaps other characteristics such as gender or religious group (Arnett, 2011). Some emerging adults obtain tertiary education and some do not. Some live with their parents and some do not. Some experience a series of love relationships, whereas others

live in cultures where virginity at marriage is prized and love relationships before marriage are discouraged. Yet they have enough in common so that it is a useful heuristic to understand them as experiencing a common life stage of emerging adulthood. *Emerging adulthood can be considered to exist wherever there is a period of at least several years between the end of adolescence—meaning the attainment of physical and sexual maturity and the completion of secondary school—and the entry into stable adult roles in love and work.*

The key conclusion is *one stage, many paths*. That is, for emerging adulthood, as for other life stages, it can be helpful to use life stage terminology in order to draw attention to some of the common experiences of a given time of life. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that *all human life stage concepts are socially, culturally, and historically grounded*, rather than being biologically based and universal. There are many possible paths through any life stage, with variations not only by social class but also by gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and cultural context. As long as this is understood, life stages, including emerging adulthood, can be conceptually useful and can help inspire and guide new research.

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### Author's Note

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### Author Contributions

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

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