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The SAGE Encyclopedia of Lifespan Human Development

Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood is a term coined by psychologist Jeffrey Arnett to refer to a life stage from the late teens through the 20s during which the foundation is laid for assuming adult responsibilities. This entry first provides a brief rationale for why a new developmental stage was thought to be necessary and outlines Arnett's conception of this stage. It concludes by documenting growth in research on emerging adulthood and describing some challenges to this construct.

Rationale for Emerging Adulthood as a Life Stage

The dominant life-course developmental theory proposed by Erik Erikson postulates that adolescence ends in the late teens and ushers in young adulthood, which lasts until approximately age 40. As recently as 1960, this framework was appropriate, given that marriage in the United States occurred at about 20 years of age (median ages were 20.3 for women and 22.8 for men). Following the sharp increase in the age of marriage beginning in the 1960s (in 2013, median ages of marriage were 27.5 for women and 29.2 for men), young U.S. Americans' view of the transition to adulthood evolved to de-emphasize marriage as a marker of adulthood and instead focus on taking responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, and financial independence. With the emergence of a much longer period between the end of adolescence and young adulthood, a new stage of development was conceived.

Emerging adulthood differs from adolescence, as individuals in this stage are physically and sexually mature and are no longer minors, but they have not yet taken on the long-term commitments (e.g., marriage, parenthood) that tend to define young adulthood. Young people between 18 and 29 years of age in developed countries postpone the assumption of adult roles (in love, work, and habitation) and instead explore various possibilities before making commitments. This circumstance provided a strong case for a new life stage that spanned the period between adolescence and young adulthood. During this stage, individuals move toward stable adult roles, but Arnett rejected the term *transition to adulthood* because of its focus on what individuals are becoming rather than what they are and because its use in sociology tends to be limited to the timing of transitional events such as marriage.

Arnett's Conception of Emerging Adulthood

The theoretical framework that gave rise to emerging adulthood as a stage in human development was initially based on 300 in-depth interviews conducted in the 1990s with U.S. Americans between ages 18 and 29 from various ethnic groups, social classes, and geographical regions. Arnett argues that emerging adulthood is subjectively distinct from adolescence although individuals do not yet see themselves as fully adult. He identified five features of emerging adulthood. They are identity exploration (*who am I?*), instability (in love work, work, and place of residence), self-focus (few obligations to others), feeling in-between (neither adolescent nor adult), and a sense of possibilities/optimism.

The experience of each feature is entered or exited gradually, not discretely, and the three markers central to the experience of reaching adult status (responsibility for oneself, decisional independence, and financial independence) are attained gradually in emerging adulthood. Thus, it can be seen that central to Arnett's theory is a view of adulthood that is not defined by demographic status but rather individualistic qualities of character. Indeed, Arnett argues that emerging adulthood is distinct demographically in that it is the only life

stage where nothing is normative demographically; rather, variability is the norm. Not surprisingly, Arnett views this period as one of uncertainties, challenges, and possibilities and has built on his theory using a national survey of emerging adults in 2012, his survey of parents of emerging adults in 2013, and the findings of numerous studies to chart in detail the nature of the core features of emerging adulthood. In this context, he has explored such topics as changing relationships with parents, love and sex, resilience, whether emerging adulthood is predominantly experienced negatively or positively by most people, the implications of emerging adulthood for mental health, and the importance of social class and culture in the experience of emerging adulthood.

Growth and Controversy

After emerging adulthood was proposed as a life stage at the turn of the 21st century, it quickly attracted the attention of scholars from numerous disciplines. In 2003, the Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood was established and the first conference devoted exclusively to this topic was held. The conference has since occurred biannually. The first issue of a new journal, *Emerging Adulthood*, appeared in 2013 and a *Handbook of Emerging Adulthood* emerged 2 years later. Thus, within 15 years, the infrastructure for a new research field had been established, and thus it is not surprising that Social Science Citation Index documented that 473 publications on this topic appeared in 2015 alone.

However, emerging adulthood as a developmental stage has not gone unchallenged. Some scholars question whether behavior during emerging adulthood is as exploratory as Arnett suggested and that it could vary dramatically by social class, ethnicity, and other factors. Indeed, Arnett often used college students when illustrating the concept of emerging adulthood, which is understandable in light of the fact that a majority of high school graduates in the United States enroll in college after graduation. But this focus overlooks the sizable minority of young people who may not experience such opportunities for exploration.

Does emerging adulthood only apply to a certain group of young people, in a certain culture, and at a certain historical time? The response to this question is that emerging adulthood occurs in cultures wherever there is a protracted period between the teens and the assumption of adult responsibilities. This protracted period is particularly evident in developed countries such as those in Western Europe, the United States, Canada, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. However, with increased globalization, Arnett now argues that emerging adulthood also exists in developing countries but only among the wealthy.

A third critique centers on the need for new terminology for what is seen as the response to structural changes that have extended the transition from high school graduation to work. Such extended transitions are not new. For example, the servant class often postponed marriage until their 30s in the 19th century. Is a new life stage required every time structural forces extend the time needed for a life transition? From this perspective, it can be argued that emerging adulthood confuses young people's reactions to structural change with psychological development.

Perhaps the most important question that can be asked about emerging adulthood concerns its explanatory power. If some people experience this stage and others do not, do the latter experience a developmental deficit? Moreover, it can be argued that a developmental stage should add something more to development than an amorphous change over time to be considered developmental and that emerging adulthood does not meet this criterion.

It is doubtful whether emerging adulthood is a developmental stage in the structural developmental sense found in some theories of human development, such as those put forth by Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg. Emerging adulthood does not meet critical stage criteria such as universality and fixed ordering. In fact, Arnett admits that some people do not experience emerging adulthood. As a consequence, emerging adulthood may be conceptualized more accurately as a phase of life, a useful synonym for the protracted transition to adulthood in some cultures, or even as an individual difference. But even if emerging adulthood is specific to a particular cultural/historical context or is best conceived as a metaphor for the transition to the assumption of an adult role, it provides a useful term to denote the growing body of research focused on samples composed of people in the 18-to-29-year age range.

See also Adolescence; Adult Development; Dating; Developmental Timetables; Love; Marriage; Sexual Behavior; Work/Family Conflict

- emerging adulthood
- young adults
- developmental stages
- transition in adulthood
- marriage
- adolescence
- age at marriage

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http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781506307633.n270

10.4135/9781506307633.n270

Further Readings

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