



Emerging Adulthood: The Dawning of a New Age

A Review of

Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21st Century

by Jeffrey Jensen Arnett and Jennifer Lynn Tanner (Eds.)

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006. 341 pp. ISBN

1-59147-329-2. \$79.95

doi: 10.1037/a0003504

Reviewed by

Judith L. Gibbons, Brien K. Ashdown

What do laboratory rats, men, and college students have in common? They have often been studied by psychologists as representatives of a larger group, such as nonhuman animals or people in general. More recently, psychologists have turned to studying the species-typical behavior of rats and the roles and behavior of men and boys with respect to their masculine gender. Likewise, college students have served psychologists as representatives of humanity in studies of cognition and social and emotional behavior, but they have been studied infrequently as occupying a distinct developmental period.

With some notable exceptions (e.g., Perry, 1970/1999), studies of the development of college-age persons in their own right were scarce until 2000, when Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (2000) proposed a new developmental period. Arnett posited that in modern industrial societies there is a distinct interim between adolescence and adulthood (roughly ages 18 through 25). The term he coined for this period was *emerging adulthood*. Arnett proposed five defining characteristics of emerging adulthood—identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and experiencing a range of possibilities. The introduction of the concept of emerging adulthood is arguably the most important theoretical contribution to developmental psychology in the past 10 years and has spawned a great deal of research. Before 2000, there were few references to emerging adulthood in the psychological literature. Since 2000, the term *emerging adulthood* has been featured in 140 articles abstracted in PsycINFO. Arnett's (2000) article has been cited 237 times, according to the Web of Science database. The concept of a developmental period of emerging adulthood will certainly evoke more discussion and critique in the literature and will undoubtedly be refined with additional studies.

Now, in a new collection, Arnett and coeditor Jennifer Lynn Tanner have compiled chapters that cover the current state of research on issues of emerging adulthood, including cognitive development, identity formation, ethnic identity, psychological disorders, resilience, family relationships, friendships and romance, sexuality, education and employment, and media use. The reviews are extremely high in quality, well written, and timely. They will be very useful for faculty who want up-to-date summaries for preparing lectures and for researchers looking for general overviews of a particular field. They would also make an excellent starting point for a graduate-level seminar in emerging adulthood.

In addition to providing summaries of the current knowledge about emerging adulthood, the book also addresses conceptual and theoretical issues of human development in general; many authors focus on issues of continuity and change during the life span. Schulenberg and Zarrett, in their chapter on mental health, provide a cogent analysis of continuity and discontinuity in development. In her chapter, Tanner introduces the

developmental task of recentering, which involves changing one's relationship with society. Continuity and adaptation in resiliency in a longitudinal perspective are discussed by Masten, Obradović, and Burt. A longitudinal study of self and emotions in persons ages 10 through 80 is the focus of a chapter by Labouvie-Vief.

The chapters also provide, both explicitly and by their omissions, clues as to what is missing in the literature on emerging adulthood. For example, in the chapter by Brown, on media use, the majority of the literature cited concerns adolescents rather than emerging adults, and it is likely that the media use of emerging adults is significantly different from that of younger persons. A second topic, mentioned on the cover flap but addressed only briefly in the collection, is that of religious or faith development during emerging adulthood. A third topic that might have been explored further is the effect of globalization, not only communication through the media but also the opportunity for travel, on this age group.

Like most studies of this age group, the majority of studies cited in this collection are of college and university students. Although Arnett states that the delay in marrying is one of the demographic origins of the period of emerging adulthood, some emerging adults do get married. In fact, 41 percent of the emerging adults in the sample studied by Côté were married. In their chapter on sexuality, Lefkowitz and Gillen write that 15 percent of college students have experienced their own or their partner's pregnancy. Only 59 percent of 20- to 24-year-olds said their pregnancy was unwanted. That means 41 percent of pregnancies in this age group were planned. To what extent does the theory of emerging adulthood apply to young people who have chosen to become parents or who are married? Tanner thoroughly discusses the limitation in studying mostly college students, and she also provides evidence that, in some ways, college and noncollege emerging adults are similar. However, the question deserves further attention.

The heterogeneity of emerging adults is one of the themes that surfaces throughout the book. Not only are emerging adults heterogeneous with respect to education, they also vary with respect to the personal qualities and social support that they bring to their developmental tasks. Côté, using the term *identity capital*, and Masten, Obradović, and Burt, using the term *emerging adulthood adaptive resources*, make this important point about individual differences. Schulenberg and Zarrett attribute the great diversity in emerging adulthood, in part, to the freedom that emerging adults have to make choices about their life.

One of the questions that will undoubtedly be addressed in future studies is whether emerging adulthood is truly distinct from adolescence. How different are the issues that distinguish these developmental periods? In the chapters, authors often note that the thinking and motivation of emerging adults are similar to those of adolescents. For example, Lefkowitz and Gillen write that the reasons for having sex (particularly love and exploration) are similar for both ages. Brown reviews evidence that both adolescents and emerging adults have unrealistic occupational expectations, such as becoming athletes or fashion models. Collins and van Dulmen conclude from their studies that identity explorations in friendship and romance are similar in adolescents and emerging adults. However, Arnett points out in his summary chapter that interviews with both adolescents and emerging adults show enormous differences in insightfulness and self-reflection. Further research is needed to clarify and elucidate the differences.

Arnett ends the collection with a call for additional qualitative research as well as quantitative research. He points out that blind use of questionnaires developed for other age groups may not adequately tap the issues of emerging adults. In addition, we urge more research on at least some of the following issues in emerging adulthood: religion; marriage and parenthood; globalization; formal education versus skill training; aggression, violence, and bullying; volunteer service; prejudice and discrimination (racism, sexism, classism, ageism); and gender identity.

One of the most fruitful areas for further research may be the experiences and consequences of turning points during emerging adulthood. In their chapter on resilience, Masten et al. review literature that shows that

experiences such as military service, education, marriage, and romance may provide opportunities for turning points in the life of emerging adults. There may be other opportunities for turning points that typically occur during emerging adulthood. For example, Starr (1994) found in interviews with Peace Corps volunteers that the experience of serving in the Peace Corps had been a turning point for almost all of them. The two years of mission work engaged in by most Mormon young men at age 19 may also serve as a turning point.

The theory of emerging adulthood was a necessary addition to the science of human development. It appears to be growing in importance as more societies become industrialized and marriage and entry into the workforce are postponed. The theory allows developmentalists to study the concepts of a unique period that that was previously considered to be covered by other developmental stages. How many other unique stages are currently “covered” and awaiting discovery?

The theory of emerging adulthood not only allows us the chance to consider the uniqueness of this age group but also sheds light on other stages of development. It allows us to differentiate among adolescence, emerging adulthood, and young adulthood, and to more closely study the constructs and issues that are unique to those periods. The recent book edited by Arnett and Tanner represents a significant advance in describing the issues of emerging adults, reviewing the literature, and evaluating the theory of emerging adulthood.

References

- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist, 55*, 469–480.
- Perry, W. G. (1999). *Forms of ethical and intellectual development in the college years: A scheme* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. (Original work published 1970)
- Starr, J. M. (1994). Peace Corps service as a turning point. *International Journal of Aging & Human Development, 39*, 137–161.