Emerging Adulthood

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Emerging Adulthood is defined as the period of life from about age 18 through age 25, during which young people are exploring the possibilities of their lives and beginning to define themselves as adults, rather than teenagers. This article defines Emerging Adulthood, and explains why it is a relevant concept in educational psychology. It cites authors using emerging adulthood as a framework to study mental and physical health, drug and alcohol use, and identity and personality formation. It also cites references assessing emerging adulthood in a range of cultures.

Educational Psychology > Emerging Adulthood Keywords Adolescence; Adulthood; Autonomy; Emerging Adulthood; Exploration; Identity Exploration; Personality Formation; Prolonged Adolescence; Psychosocial Moratorium; Risk-taking Behavior; Self-Focused; Transition

Overview

What is Emerging Adulthood?

Emerging Adulthood is defined as the period of life from about age 18 through age 25, during which young people are exploring the possibilities of their lives and beginning to define themselves as adults, rather than teenagers. Recently, due to the onset of industrialization, increased education across groups, and changing ideas about life possibilities for women, this period of increasing autonomy has grown longer and come to be more clearly defined. First jobs have been delayed by education; first marriages by the career-goals of men and women, and by changing acceptance of sexual behavior outside marriage; and first childbearing has been delayed by all of those factors, as well as by progress in medical science increasing the chance of success of later-life childbearing.

Whitehead (2007) explains that

Just as the teen years began taking on their own identity a half century ago, emerging adulthood has, in the past few decades, become a distinct period of development, according to psychologist

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, who first identified it. Arnett, a research associate professor of human development at the University of Maryland and editor of *The Journal of Adolescent Research,* says emerging adulthood is a period of exploration, instability, possibility, self-focus and a sustained sense of being in limbo (par. 5).

According to Arnett (2004), in interviews and surveys throughout the U.S., people consistently cite the following criteria for reaching adulthood:

• Accept responsibility for self.

• Make independent decisions.

• Become financially independent (p. 15).

These goals are not reached suddenly, however. They are gained incrementally and possibly separately from each other. Therefore, says Arnett, "although emerging adults begin to feel adult by the time they reach age 18 or 19, they do not feel completely adult until years later, some time in their mid- to late twenties" (2004, p. 15). This period in between is emerging adulthood.

This extension of the maturing process that precedes "settling down" is how Arnett (2004) describes emerging adulthood. He explains that although extended time for education, changes in sexual behavior (such as increasing acceptance of premarital sex) and the broadening of options for women outside the home have contributed greatly to the development of this phenomenon, it may be something else as well:

There has been a profound change in how young people view the meaning and value of becoming an adult and entering the adult roles of

spouse and parent. Adulthood and its obligations offer security and stability, but they also represent a closing of doors-the end of independence, the end of spontaneity, the end of a sense of wide-open possibilities" (2004, p. 7).

Arnett identifies five very specific elements of the period of emerging adulthood:

• It is the age of *identity explorations,* of trying out various possibilities, especially in love and work.

• It is the age of *instability*.

• It is the most *self-focused* age of life.

• It is the age of *feeling in-between,* in transition, neither adolescent nor adult.

• It is the age of *possibilities,* when hopes flourish, when people have an unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives (2004, p. 8).

A New Idea?

The phenomenon may be relatively new in the U.S., arising from cultural changes in recent decades. Arnett (2004) explains that,

As recently as 1970, the typical 21-year-old was married or about to be married, caring for a newborn child or expecting one soon, done with education or about to be done, and settled into a long-term job or the role of full-time mother. Young people of that time grew up quickly and made serious enduring choices about their lives at a relatively early age. Today, the life of a typical 21-year-old could hardly be more different. Marriage is at least five years off, often more. Ditto parenthood.

Education may last several more years, through an extended undergraduate program-the "four-year degree" in five, six, or more-and perhaps graduate or professional school. Job changes are frequent, as young people look for work that will not only pay well but will also be personally fulfilling (p. 3).

Emerging adulthood must also be considered within the context in which it occurs. For example, urban youth are likely to experience more extended periods of emerging adulthood than rural youth; likewise, youth who are economically comfortable and come from relatively stable backgrounds can afford longer transition periods.

Again, according to Arnett (2004)

Economic development makes possible the period of independent identity exploration that is at the heart of emerging adulthood. As societies become more affluent, they are more likely to grant young people the opportunity for the extended moratorium of emerging adulthood, because their need for young people's labor is less urgent (p. 24).

Various studies (Arias & Hernandez, 2007; Buhl & Lanz, 2007; Macek et al, 2007) have been done to compare emerging adulthood in different countries or areas. The process may also vary by location (urban or rural) and by country.

A Phenomenon Across Cultures

Buhl and Lanz (2007) examined studies across five countries in Europe to support the hypothesis that emerging adulthood is a viable concept in Europe as well as North America. They report that traditional symbols or markers of adulthood have changed over time in those countries, and that there are different pathways to adulthood, but that starting work, and engaging in romantic partnerships influence the timing of 'emergence.' They also examine the impact of this timing on

identity formation. For example, they suggest that the timing of emerging adulthood may vary across European countries, and vary from American schedules:

There is some evidence to suggest that a different time frame should be applied in Europe because biographical transitions such as parenthood or the entrance into work life tend to occur at a later age there than in the United States. Because of a large heterogeneity within Europe, we also expect differences within European countries regarding how emerging adults perceive themselves and how emerging adults experience the several domains (education, work, and family) within which they make their life choices (p. 441).

Buhl and Lanz (2007) determined that although adults had agreed that reaching adulthood seemed to be delayed, and that emerging adults acknowledged they were not quite *in* adulthood, there were variations across countries and across Europe. However, there were commonalities as well, and identity development seemed tied to elements of emerging adulthood. For example, Finnish researchers Fadjukoff, Kokko and Pulkkinen (2007) reviewed longitudinal studies and found that:

Five external markers of adulthood as well as self-perceived adulthood at age 27 explained identity achievement at ages 27, 36, and 42 … Earlier transition to adulthood in family life anticipated higher identity achievement in adulthood. However, later transition to adulthood in working life … was associated with higher identity achievement. Both components correlated with the higher level and thus the length of education. Self-perceived adulthood was positively associated with identity achievement in women but was unrelated to the age of achieving external markers of adulthood (Abstract).

Identity Achievement is a developmental stage described by Erik Erikson during which teens or adults determine who they are and what they are going to do with their lives.

Engaging in romantic relationships (or cohabiting or marrying) played different roles in defining and accelerating emerging adulthood, depending on the culture. For example, in Italy, marriage often initiated a move from a parents home, while in Scandinavian countries, youth had tended to experiment with a range of living arrangements outside the home before leaving permanently and/or marrying (Fadjukoff, Kokko & Pulkkinen, 2007).

Arias and Hernandez (2007) compared 720 young adults (ages 16 to 34) from Mexico and Spain, across a range of educational levels, to determine whether emerging adulthood might apply as a concept in those countries. They review various terms that have been used to describe this period of development, including late adolescence, youth, young adulthood, and transition to adulthood, and discuss why those may not be as apt as emerging adulthood. They also explain that policies affecting youth tend to standardize programs and stages by age, while an individual's actual developmental progress may be less linear-and more autonomous and individual than can be reflected in any one concept. They favor the term emerging adulthood since it focuses on the transitional nature of the phase, and the examination of the individual's role within a greater context.

Further, Arias and Hernandez (2007) suggest that the developmental period will vary by culture, and note that different cultures emphasize different aspects of adulthood (p. 479): "whereas an American sample gave more importance to financial, legal, and chronological criteria for the transition, Spaniards underlined psychological aspects-emotional and sexual criteria" (p. 479).

They describe a "*Mediterranean pattern of transition*: longer stay in parental home, increasing rate of enrollment in higher education, delayed entrance into workforce, and older marriage age" (2007, p.480).

In their study, Arias and Hernandez (2007) found that students generally found this to be a period of "freedom, independence, and possibilities," and that "Mexicans tend to be more resolute in their expectations and view of the future [than Spaniards]" (p. 500). They discuss at length the question of generalizing results, and the variance in culture and economic and other contexts that must be considered when assessing emerging adulthood. They also note that not all students in this age range have access to education, although education (or access to education) is an essential factor to consider in studying emerging adulthood.

The Value of Understanding Emerging Adulthood

Whitehead (2007) reports that "not surprisingly," other researchers question the value of this life stage. Arnett characterizes it as a period of freedom and exploration, but Whitehead describes the perspective of James Côté, author of *Arrested Development,* who claims youth are forced into this extended transitional stage by stagnating economic and social factors-they *can't* leave their parents and become economically independent as early in life. Further, he suggests, they may be mired in this stage because they have had limited examples of how to establish stable, productive lives, since their own parents have often been relatively absent-at work outside the home.

Whitehead (2007) also cites Levine (2005) who says today's adolescent lacks:

• An inner sense of direction,

• The ability to interpret the world around them,

• Organizational and decision-making skills, and

• Communication and alliance-building skills.

Reifman (2007) cites evidence that binge drinking, risky behavior, and other substance abuse may peak during this period, but cites Arnett, who suggests that risk-taking is part of the exploratory element of development inherent in this life phase. Several researchers have studied risk-taking behavior in this life stage, as noted below.

Applications

Identity & Personality Formation

Researchers seem generally to agree that some intensive development of identity and personality can occur during this time period. Several authors have examined more detailed elements of this process (Arnett, 2007; Fadjukoff et al, 2007; Luycx et al, 2007; McLean & Pratt, 2006; Salmelo-Aro, et al., 2007; Seider, 2007).

Salmela-Aro et al. (2007) surveyed a group of almost 300 university students over a 10 year period; once every two years, to study how their goals changed over time as they grew into adulthood. The surveys revealed that as students grew older, they tended to move away from goals related to their peers or friends, education, and traveling, and began to focus more on work, their health, and their families. If they found work early, they moved more quickly away from education goals; and if they had more family-related goals, they tended to marry or cohabit earlier, and begin childbearing earlier.

The Role of Parents in Emerging Adulthood

Luyckx et al. (2007.) examined longitudinal data on 565 students (mostly women) to assess the impact of parental control on identity formation during emerging adulthood. They assessed the following five dimensions of identity formation 5 times in a college-attending sample:

• Commitment making,

• Exploration in breadth,

• Identification with commitment,

• Exploration in depth, and

• Assessed perceived psychological control.

They explain that parents who are psychologically controlling will attempt to control a child's needs and activities to suit their own needs, rather than the child's, which can inhibit development of autonomy in the child (or teen). This can result in indecisiveness and hesitancy in terms of commitment dimensions, and the researchers expected to find decreased levels of commitment related to increased psychological control, along with increased exploration in breadth (meaning, roughly, trying different identities) with less commitment or exploration in depth (reflecting a commitment to an identity).

Luyckx et al. (2007) did find that the more students perceived their parents as controlling, the more difficult it was for them to commit to identity choices themselves, and to feel good about

commitments they had made. They also reported a link between exploratory behavior on the child's part, and increased (perceived) parental control. Luyckx et al conclude that:

Psychological and developmental problems experienced by college students may be related to ongoing relationships with their parents. Parental psychological control, which intrudes on the college student's search for autonomy, may impact how the college student feels about himself or herself and how he or she approaches the identity formation task (2007, p. 549).

For parents, they suggest,

Parents may best view their emerging adult children as equals, showing respect for their children's inner wishes, standards, and needs if the parents want to stimulate the identity formation process in the college context (p. 549).

Sneed et al. (2007) suggest that it is essential to consider all development across domains in order to understand emerging adulthood in depth. To assess whether changes in life domains such as finance, relationships and living arrangements were connected, and if so, how, they assessed data gleaned from narrative interviews with 200 young adults from ages 17 to 27. They found that generally, if responsibility increased in one area, it was shown to increase in others as well. However, they also found that imbalances could occur, in which an individual might assume great responsibility in one area, to the detriment of other areas of development. This could have a negative impact for the individual overall, and the researchers recommend that analysis of emerging adulthood include analysis of the relationship between and among domains.

Growth & Decline in Development

Gottlieb et al. (2007) describe emerging adulthood as "a period in the life course when young people not only explore the options that are open to them but also actively attempt to assimilate and derive greater self-understanding from their encounters with new events, transitions, and settings" (p.132).

They engaged in an interesting study of 97 university students ranging from 17 to 26 years old to identify the kinds of growth experienced during emerging adulthood, and determine whether those experiences were viewed as positive or negative. Participants were encouraged to identify life events leading to growth, not necessarily those that were stressful or negative. They did, however, also ask participants to comment on events that led to declines in personal development, as well as growth.

Gottlieb et al. (2007) found that students reported more growth than decline, and that they reported growth in all domains except the spiritual. They also found that students labeled a wide range of both positive and negative events responsible for growth, and a much smaller set of events responsible for decline. They also note that although specific events were considered instrumental in promoting growth, that less significant events were critical as well:

Other non-eventful experiences were perceived to bring about growth, including introspection, personal maturation, self-initiated changes in priorities, and recognition of personal achievements. For example, personal changes in the "appreciation of life" domain of growth were perceived to have originated as often from these other experiences as from specific events (p. 151).

This, they suggest, is encouraging, because it indicates that:

In the absence of external, catalyzing events, emerging adults nevertheless appear to have the cognitive and perspective taking skills, as well as the motivation, to gain greater self-understanding. In fact, it is likely that many of these other experiences were initiated by the participants or by their peers and family (e.g., the discussions) or reflect the participants' heightened self-awareness and growing maturity (2007, p.151).

Gottlieb et al. report that their findings support the self-focused nature of emerging adulthood overall, and indicate that growth relating to others, personal strength, and new possibilities are three areas highlighted by their study results as essential to emerging adulthood, and suggest that this supports other findings that social ties and feelings of perceived support tend to increase over this period. They note however, that the greatest decline indicated reflected the concept that people may not be as wonderful as they appear, and theorize that this reflects experiences in relationships that reveal vulnerability.

Finally, Gottlieb et al. (2007) found that many respondents emphasized increased self-confidence and belief in their capacity to overcome adversity, possibly reflecting their experiences trying new things within a college experience, but away from the traditional supports of home.

Health & Welfare

Because it is a time of transition, emerging adulthood has also become a framework which researchers have used to analyze a diverse range subjects including risk-taking activities, such as use of drugs and alcohol (Agrawal et al, 2007; Auerbach & Collins, 2006; Delucci et al, 2008; Goudriaan et al, 2007; Horton, 2007; White et al, 2006); and smoking (Bell and Lee, 2006; Riggs et al, 2007); along with developmental issues such as romantic relationships (Kaestle et al, 2007; Lanz & Tagliabue, 2007; Zimmer-Gembeck and Petherick, 2006); and physical and mental health (Boyatzis et al, 2007; Jordan & McDonagh, 2007; Kuwabara et al, 2007; Miller-Lewis et al, 2007).

Conclusion

Emerging adulthood has been broadly accepted as a term to describe the period of development from about age 18 through age 25. It is more likely to occur in urban and industrialized areas, reflecting a more educated population, and a reduced need to enter the workforce early for survival.

The terms and ages included in the developmental phase may vary by country and/or culture, but include the following elements in some form or another: It is a time in development in which young

adults explore various lifestyle options, including relationships, work life, risk-taking behavior and health activities.

This exploration may enhance long-term life decisions, especially for adults emerging from dysfunctional family situations, although it can be difficult for those who have been involved in foster care systems or other social service programs that have not adapted to recent social changes (Smith, 2007).

Terms & Concepts

Autonomy: Autonomy is the right to govern oneself. In this context it includes the idea of taking on responsibility for the self.

Emerging Adulthood: Emerging adulthood is used to describe the transitional, exploratory nature of the early adult stage of life development; the period of roughly ages 18-25.

Identity Exploration: Identity explorations describe the work of young adults discovering who they are through a trial-and-error (or sometimes risk-taking) process.

Prolonged Adolescence: A prolonged adolescence is considered somewhat typical of industrialized societies in which young adults do not need to begin as early in the labor market, and thus have time to experiment with various jobs and lifestyle.

Psychosocial Moratorium: A psychosocial moratorium is used by Arnett (2004, p.8) to describe a process "during which the young adult through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society."

Risk-Taking Behavior: Risk-taking behavior means voluntarily engaging in risky behavior, which can include a range of activities, from rock-climbing, through gambling, fast driving and substance abuse.

Self-focused: Self-focused describes the process of identity and personality creation occurring during emerging adulthood: Arnett suggest this is the optimal time for self-focused living to occur, prior to the onset of children, full-time work and other family responsibilities.

Transition: Transition is the process of change, and in this context, describes the period of emerging adulthood.

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