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# Emerging Adulthood

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## *A Theory of Development From the Late Teens Through the Twenties*

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*Emerging adulthood is proposed as a new conception of development for the period from the late teens through the twenties, with a focus on ages 18–25. A theoretical background is presented. Then evidence is provided to support the idea that emerging adulthood is a distinct period demographically, subjectively, and in terms of identity explorations. How emerging adulthood differs from adolescence and young adulthood is explained. Finally, a cultural context for the idea of emerging adulthood is outlined, and it is specified that emerging adulthood exists only in cultures that allow young people a prolonged period of independent role exploration during the late teens and twenties.*

When our mothers were our age, they were engaged. . . . They at least had some idea what they were going to do with their lives. . . . I, on the other hand, will have a dual degree in majors that are ambiguous at best and impractical at worst (English and political science), no ring on my finger and no idea who I am, much less what I want to do. . . . Under duress, I will admit that this is a pretty exciting time. Sometimes, when I look out across the wide expanse that is my future, I can see beyond the void. I realize that having nothing ahead to count on means I now have to count on myself; that having no direction means forging one of my own. (Kristen, age 22; Page, 1999, pp. 18, 20)

**F**or most young people in industrialized countries, the years from the late teens through the twenties are years of profound change and importance. During this time, many young people obtain the level of education and training that will provide the foundation for their incomes and occupational achievements for the remainder of their adult work lives (Chisholm & Hurrelmann, 1995; William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship, 1988). It is for many people a time of frequent change as various possibilities in love, work, and worldviews are explored (Erikson, 1968; Rindfuss, 1991). By the end of this period, the late twenties, most people have made life choices that have enduring ramifications. When adults later consider the most important events in their lives, they most often name events that took place during this period (Martin & Smyer, 1990).

Sweeping demographic shifts have taken place over the past half century that have made the late teens and early twenties not simply a brief period of transition into adult roles but a distinct period of the life course, characterized by change and exploration of possible life directions. As recently as 1970, the median age of marriage in the United States was about 21 for women and 23 for men; by 1996,

it had risen to 25 for women and 27 for men (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997). Age of first childbirth followed a similar pattern. Also, since midcentury the proportion of young Americans obtaining higher education after high school has risen steeply from 14% in 1940 to over 60% by the mid-1990s (Arnett & Taber, 1994; Bianchi & Spain, 1996). Similar changes have taken place in other industrialized countries (Chisholm & Hurrelmann, 1995; Noble, Cover, & Yanagishita, 1996).

These changes over the past half century have altered the nature of development in the late teens and early twenties for young people in industrialized societies. Because marriage and parenthood are delayed until the mid-twenties or late twenties for most people, it is no longer normative for the late teens and early twenties to be a time of entering and settling into long-term adult roles. On the contrary, these years are more typically a period of frequent change and exploration (Arnett, 1998; Rindfuss, 1991).

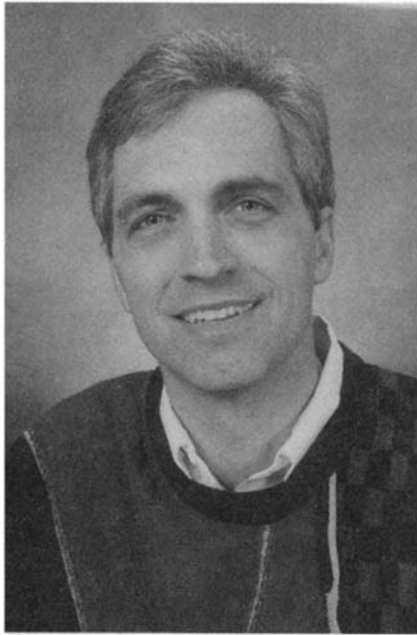
In this article, I propose a new theory of development from the late teens through the twenties, with a focus on ages 18–25. I argue that this period, *emerging adulthood*, is neither adolescence nor young adulthood but is theoretically and empirically distinct from them both. Emerging adulthood is distinguished by relative independence from social roles and from normative expectations. Having left the dependency of childhood and adolescence, and having not yet entered the enduring responsibilities that are normative in adulthood, emerging adults often explore a variety of possible life directions in love, work, and worldviews. Emerging adulthood is a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course.

For most people, the late teens through the mid-twenties are the most *volitional* years of life. However, cultural influences structure and sometimes limit the extent to

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which emerging adults are able to use their late teens and twenties in this way, and not all young people in this age period are able to use these years for independent exploration. Like adolescence, emerging adulthood is a period of the life course that is culturally constructed, not universal and immutable.

I lay out the theoretical background first and then present evidence to illustrate how emerging adulthood is a distinct period demographically, subjectively, and in terms of identity explorations. Next, I explain how emerging adulthood can be distinguished from adolescence and young adulthood. Finally, I discuss the economic and cultural conditions under which emerging adulthood is most likely to exist as a distinct period of the life course.

## **The Theoretical Background**

There have been a number of important theoretical contributions to the understanding of development from the late teens through the twenties. One early contribution was made by Erik Erikson (1950, 1968). Erikson rarely discussed specific ages in his writings, and in his theory of human development across the life course he did not include a separate stage that could be considered analogous to emerging adulthood as proposed here. Rather, he wrote of development in adolescence and of development in young adulthood. However, he also commented on the *prolonged adolescence* typical of industrialized societies and on the *psychosocial moratorium* granted to young people in such societies “during which the young adult through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society” (Erikson, 1968, p. 156). Thus, Erikson seems to have distinguished—without naming—a period that is in some ways adolescence and in some ways young adulthood yet not strictly either one, a period in

which adult commitments and responsibilities are delayed while the role experimentation that began in adolescence continues and in fact intensifies.

Another theoretical contribution can be found in the work of Daniel Levinson (1978). Levinson interviewed men at midlife, but he had them describe their earlier years as well, and on the basis of their accounts he developed a theory that included development in the late teens and the twenties. He called ages 17–33 the *novice phase* of development and argued that the overriding task of this phase is to move into the adult world and build a stable life structure. During this process, according to Levinson, the young person experiences a considerable amount of change and instability while sorting through various possibilities in love and work in the course of establishing a life structure. Levinson acknowledged that his conception of the novice phase was similar to Erikson’s ideas about the role experimentation that takes place during the psychosocial moratorium (Levinson, 1978, pp. 322–323).

Perhaps the best-known theory of development in the late teens and the twenties is Kenneth Keniston’s theory of youth. Like Erikson and Levinson, Keniston (1971) conceptualized youth as a period of continued role experimentation between adolescence and young adulthood. However, Keniston wrote at a time when American society and some Western European societies were convulsed with highly visible youth movements protesting the involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War (among other things). His description of youth as a time of “tension between self and society” (Keniston, 1971, p. 8) and “refusal of socialization” (p. 9) reflects that historical moment rather than any enduring characteristics of the period.

More importantly, Keniston’s (1971) application of the term *youth* to this period is problematic. *Youth* has a long history in the English language as a term for childhood generally and for what later became called adolescence (e.g., Ben-Amos, 1994), and it continues to be used popularly and by many social scientists for these purposes (as reflected in terms such as *youth organizations*). Keniston’s choice of the ambiguous and confusing term *youth* may explain in part why the idea of the late teens and twenties as a separate period of life never became widely accepted by developmental scientists after his articulation of it. However, as I argue in the following sections, there is good empirical support for conceiving this period—proposed here as emerging adulthood—as a distinct period of life.

## **Emerging Adulthood Is Distinct Demographically**

Although Erikson (1968), Levinson (1978), and Keniston (1971) all contributed to the theoretical groundwork for emerging adulthood, the nature of the period has changed considerably since the time of their writings more than 20 years ago. As noted at the outset of this article, demographic changes in the timing of marriage and parenthood in recent decades have made a period of emerging adulthood typical for young people in industrialized societies. Postponing these transitions until at least the late twenties

leaves the late teens and early twenties available for exploring various possible life directions.

An important demographic characteristic of emerging adulthood is that there is a great deal of demographic variability, reflecting the wide scope of individual volition during these years. Emerging adulthood is the only period of life in which nothing is normative demographically (Rindfuss, 1991; Wallace, 1995). During adolescence, up to age 18, a variety of key demographic areas show little variation. Over 95% of American adolescents aged 12–17 live at home with one or more parents, over 98% are unmarried, fewer than 10% have had a child, and over 95% are enrolled in school (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997). By age 30, new demographic norms have been established: About 75% of 30-year-olds have married, about 75% have become parents, and fewer than 10% are enrolled in school (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997).

In between these two periods, however, and especially from ages 18 to 25, a person's demographic status in these areas is very difficult to predict on the basis of age alone. The demographic diversity and unpredictability of emerging adulthood is a reflection of the experimental and exploratory quality of the period. Talcott Parsons (1942) called adolescence the *roleless role*, but this term applies much better to emerging adulthood. Emerging adults tend to have a wider scope of possible activities than persons in other age periods because they are less likely to be constrained by role requirements, and this makes their demographic status unpredictable.

One demographic area that especially reflects the exploratory quality of emerging adulthood is residential status. Most young Americans leave home by age 18 or 19 (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1994). In the years that follow, emerging adults' living situations are diverse. About one third of emerging adults go off to college after high school and spend the next several years in some combination of independent living and continued reliance on adults, for example, in a college dormitory or a fraternity or sorority house (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1994). For them, this is a period of semiautonomy (Goldscheider & Davanzo, 1986) as they take on some of the responsibilities of independent living but leave others to their parents, college authorities, or other adults. About 40% move out of their parental home not for college but for independent living and full-time work (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1994). About two thirds experience a period of cohabitation with a romantic partner (Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, & Kolata, 1995). Some remain at home while attending college or working or some combination of the two. Only about 10% of men and 30% of women remain at home until marriage (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1994).

Amidst this diversity, perhaps the unifying feature of the residential status of emerging adults is the instability of it. Emerging adults have the highest rates of residential change of any age group. Using data from several cohorts of the National Longitudinal Study, Rindfuss (1991) described how rates of residential mobility peak in the mid-twenties (see Figure 1). For about 40% of the current generation of emerging adults, residential changes include

moving back into their parents' home and then out again at least once in the course of their late teens and twenties (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1994). Frequent residential changes during emerging adulthood reflect its exploratory quality, because these changes often take place at the end of one period of exploration or the beginning of another (e.g., the end of a period of cohabitation, entering or leaving college, or the beginning of a new job in a new place).

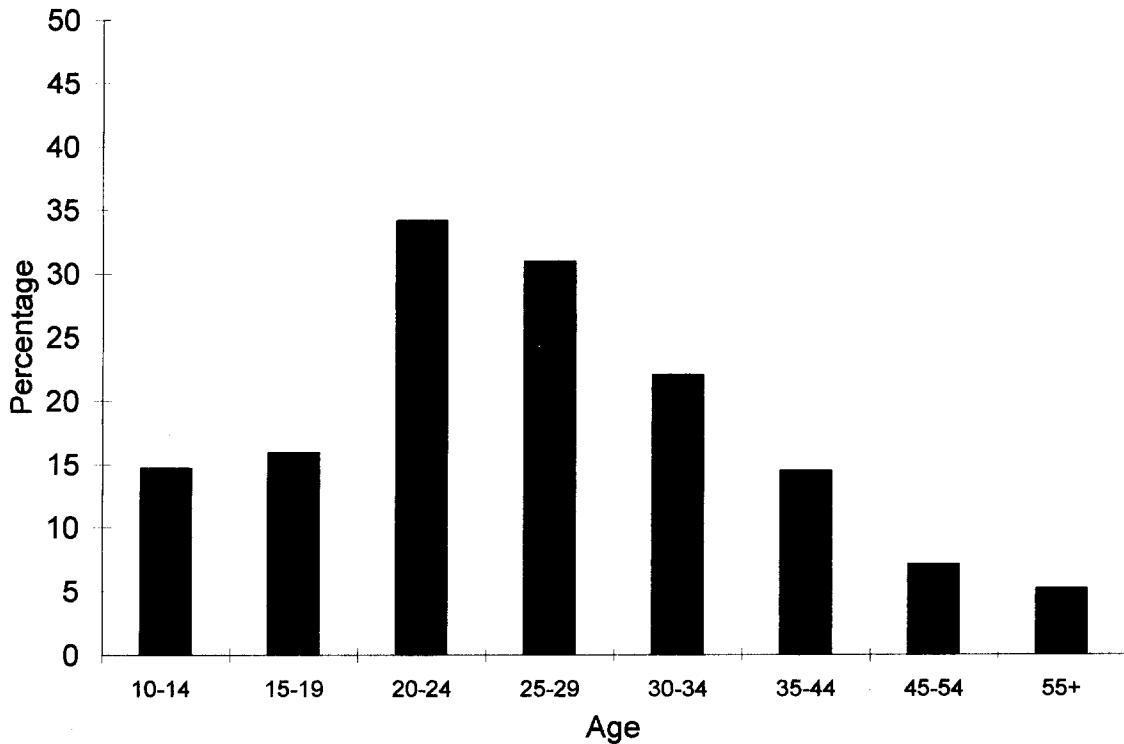
School attendance is another area in which there is substantial change and diversity among emerging adults. The proportion of American emerging adults who enter higher education in the year following high school is at its highest level ever, over 60% (Bianchi & Spain, 1996). However, this figure masks the expanding diversity in the years that follow. Only 32% of young people ages 25–29 have completed four years or more of college (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997). For emerging adults, college education is often pursued in a nonlinear way, frequently combined with work, and punctuated by periods of nonattendance. For those who do eventually graduate with a four-year degree, college is increasingly likely to be followed by graduate school. About one third of those who graduate with a bachelor's degree are enrolled in postgraduate education the following year (Mogelonsky, 1996). In European countries too, the length of education has become extended in recent decades (Chisholm & Hurrelmann, 1995).

Overall, then, the years of emerging adulthood are characterized by a high degree of demographic diversity and instability, reflecting the emphasis on change and exploration. It is only in the transition from emerging adulthood to young adulthood in the late twenties that the diversity narrows and the instability eases, as young people make more enduring choices in love and work. Rindfuss (1991) called the period from ages 18 to 30 "demographically dense" (p. 496) because of the many demographic transitions that take place during that time, especially in the late twenties.

### **Emerging Adulthood Is Distinct Subjectively**

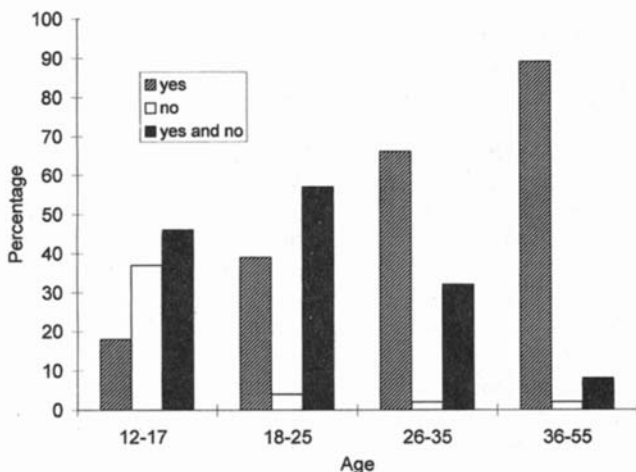
Emerging adults do not see themselves as adolescents, but many of them also do not see themselves entirely as adults. Figure 2 shows that when they are asked whether they feel they have reached adulthood, the majority of Americans in their late teens and early twenties answer neither *no* nor *yes* but the ambiguous *in some respects yes, in some respects no* (Arnett, in press). This reflects a subjective sense on the part of most emerging adults that they have left adolescence but have not yet completely entered young adulthood (Arnett, 1994a, 1997, 1998). They have no name for the period they are in—because the society they live in has no name for it—so they regard themselves as being neither adolescents nor adults, in between the two but not really one or the other. As Figure 2 shows, only in their late twenties and early thirties do a clear majority of people indicate that they feel they have reached adulthood. However, age is only the roughest marker of the subjective transition from emerging adulthood to young adulthood. As

**Figure 1**  
Residential Change by Age, 1998



Note. Data are from "Geographic Mobility: March 1997 to March 1998," by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000, *Current Population Reports* (Series P-20, No. 520), Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

**Figure 2**  
Subjective Conceptions of Adult Status in Response to the Question, Do You Feel That You Have Reached Adulthood?



Note. N = 519. Data are from Arnett (in press).

illustrated in Figure 2, even in their late twenties and early thirties, nearly one third did not feel their transition to adulthood was complete.

One might expect emerging adults' subjective sense of ambiguity in attaining full adulthood to arise from the demographic diversity and instability described above. Perhaps it is difficult for young people to feel they have reached adulthood before they have established a stable residence, finished school, settled into a career, and married (or at least committed themselves to a long-term love relationship). However, perhaps surprisingly, the research evidence indicates strongly that these demographic transitions have little to do with emerging adults' conceptions of what it means to reach adulthood. Consistently, in a variety of studies with young people in their teens and twenties, demographic transitions such as finishing education, settling into a career, marriage, and parenthood rank at the *bottom* in importance among possible criteria considered necessary for the attainment of adulthood (Arnett, 1997, 1998, in press; Greene, Wheatley, & Aldava, 1992; Scheer, Unger, & Brown, 1994).

The characteristics that matter most to emerging adults in their subjective sense of attaining adulthood are not demographic transitions but individualistic *qualities of*

*character* (Arnett, 1998). Specifically, the two top criteria for the transition to adulthood in a variety of studies have been *accepting responsibility for one's self* and *making independent decisions* (Arnett, 1997, 1998; Greene et al., 1992; Scheer et al., 1994). A third criterion, also individualistic but more tangible, *becoming financially independent*, also ranks consistently near the top.

The prominence of these criteria for the transition to adulthood reflects an emphasis in emerging adulthood on becoming a self-sufficient person (Arnett, 1998). During these years, the character qualities most important to becoming successfully self-sufficient—accepting responsibility for one's self and making independent decisions—are being developed. Financial independence is also crucial to self-sufficiency, so it is also important in emerging adults' conceptions of what is necessary to become an adult. Only after these character qualities have reached fruition and financial independence has been attained do emerging adults experience a subjective change in their developmental status, as they move out of emerging adulthood and into young adulthood. For most young people in American society, this occurs some time during the twenties and is usually accomplished by the late twenties (Arnett, in press).

Although emerging adults do not view demographic transitions as necessary for attaining adulthood, it should be noted that parenthood in particular is often sufficient for marking a subjective sense of adult status. Parenthood ranks low in young people's views of the essential criteria for adulthood for people in general, but those who have had a child tend to view becoming a parent as the most important marker of the transition to adulthood for themselves (Arnett, 1998). The explorations that occur in emerging adulthood become sharply restricted with parenthood, because it requires taking on the responsibilities of protecting and providing for a young child. With parenthood, the focus of concern shifts inexorably from responsibility for one's self to responsibility for others.

## **Emerging Adulthood Is Distinct for Identity Explorations**

A key feature of emerging adulthood is that it is the period of life that offers the most opportunity for identity explorations in the areas of love, work, and worldviews. Of course, it is adolescence rather than emerging adulthood that has typically been associated with identity formation. Erikson (1950) designated identity versus role confusion as the central crisis of the adolescent stage of life, and in the decades since he articulated this idea the focus of research on identity has been on adolescence (Adams, 1999). However, as noted, Erikson (1950, 1968) clearly believed that industrialized societies allow a prolonged adolescence for extended identity explorations. If adolescence is the period from ages 10 to 18 and emerging adulthood is the period from (roughly) ages 18 to 25, most identity exploration takes place in emerging adulthood rather than adolescence. Although research on identity formation has focused mainly on adolescence, this research has shown that identity achievement has rarely been reached by the end of high

school (Montemayor, Brown, & Adams, 1985; Waterman, 1982) and that identity development continues through the late teens and the twenties (Valde, 1996; Whitbourne & Tesch, 1985).

The focus on identity issues in emerging adulthood can be seen in the three main areas of identity exploration: love, work, and worldviews. Identity formation involves trying out various life possibilities and gradually moving toward making enduring decisions. In all three of these areas, this process begins in adolescence but takes place mainly in emerging adulthood. With regard to love, American adolescents typically begin dating around ages 12 to 14 (Padgham & Blyth, 1991). However, because any serious consideration of marriage is a decade or more away for most 12- to 14-year-olds, young people view the early years of dating as primarily recreational (Roscoe, Dian, & Brooks, 1987). For adolescents, dating provides companionship, the first experiences of romantic love, and sexual experimentation; however, their dating relationships typically last only a few weeks or months (Feiring, 1996), and few adolescents expect to remain with their "high school sweetheart" much beyond high school.

In emerging adulthood, explorations in love become more intimate and serious. Dating in adolescence often takes place in groups, as adolescents pursue shared recreation such as parties, dances, and hanging out (Padgham & Blyth, 1991). By emerging adulthood, dating is more likely to take place in couples, and the focus is less on recreation and more on exploring the potential for emotional and physical intimacy. Romantic relationships in emerging adulthood last longer than in adolescence, are more likely to include sexual intercourse, and may include cohabitation (Michael et al., 1995). Thus, in adolescence, explorations in love tend to be tentative and transient; the implicit question is, *Who would I enjoy being with, here and now?* In contrast, explorations in love in emerging adulthood tend to involve a deeper level of intimacy, and the implicit question is more identity focused: *Given the kind of person I am, what kind of person do I wish to have as a partner through life?*

With regard to work, a similar contrast exists between the transient and tentative explorations of adolescence and the more serious and focused explorations of emerging adulthood. In the United States, the majority of high school students are employed part-time (Barling & Kelloway, 1999). Although adolescents often report that their work experiences enhance their abilities in areas such as managing their time and money (Mortimer, Harley, & Aronson, 1999), for the most part their jobs do not provide them with knowledge or experience that will be related to their future occupations (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986; Steinberg & Cauffman, 1995). Most adolescents are employed in service jobs—at restaurants, retail stores, and so forth—in which the cognitive challenges are minimal and the skills learned are few. Adolescents tend to view their jobs not as occupational preparation but as a way to obtain the money that will support an active leisure life—paying for compact discs, concerts, restaurant meals, clothes, cars, travel, and

so forth (Bachman & Schulenberg, 1993; Shanahan, Elder, Burchinal, & Conger, 1996; Steinberg & Cauffman, 1995).

In emerging adulthood, work experiences become more focused on preparation for adult work roles. Emerging adults begin to consider how their work experiences will lay the groundwork for the jobs they may have through adulthood. In exploring various work possibilities, they explore identity issues as well: What kind of work am I good at? What kind of work would I find satisfying for the long term? What are my chances of getting a job in the field that seems to suit me best?

Emerging adults' educational choices and experiences explore similar questions. In their educational paths, they try out various possibilities that would prepare them for different kinds of future work. College students often change majors more than once, especially in their first two years, as they try on possible occupational futures, discard them, and pursue others. With graduate school becoming an increasingly common choice after an undergraduate degree is obtained, emerging adults' educational explorations often continue through their early twenties and mid-twenties. Graduate school allows emerging adults to switch directions again from the path of occupational preparation they had chosen as undergraduates.

For both love and work, the goals of identity explorations in emerging adulthood are not limited to direct preparation for adult roles. On the contrary, the explorations of emerging adulthood are in part explorations for their own sake, part of obtaining a broad range of life experiences before taking on enduring—and limiting—adult responsibilities. The absence of enduring role commitments in emerging adulthood makes possible a degree of experimentation and exploration that is not likely to be possible during the thirties and beyond. For people who wish to have a variety of romantic and sexual experiences, emerging adulthood is the time for it, because parental surveillance has diminished and there is as yet little normative pressure to enter marriage. Similarly, emerging adulthood is the time for trying out unusual work and educational possibilities. For this reason, short-term volunteer jobs in programs such as Americorps and the Peace Corps are more popular with emerging adults than with persons in any other age period. Emerging adults may also travel to a different part of the country or the world on their own for a limited period, often in the context of a limited-term work or educational experience. This too can be part of their identity explorations, part of expanding their range of personal experiences prior to making the more enduring choices of adulthood.

With regard to worldviews, the work of William Perry (1970/1999) has shown that changes in worldviews are often a central part of cognitive development during emerging adulthood. According to Perry, emerging adults often enter college with a worldview they have learned in the course of childhood and adolescence. However, a college education leads to exposure to a variety of different worldviews, and in the course of this exposure college students often find themselves questioning the worldviews they brought in. Over the course of their college years, emerging

adults examine and consider a variety of possible worldviews. By the end of their college years they have often committed themselves to a worldview different from the one they brought in, while remaining open to further modifications of it.

Most of the research on changes in worldviews during emerging adulthood has involved college students and graduate students, and there is evidence that higher education promotes explorations and reconsiderations of worldviews (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). However, it is notable that emerging adults who do not attend college are as likely as college students to indicate that deciding on their own beliefs and values is an essential criterion for attaining adult status (Arnett, 1997). Also, research on emerging adults' religious beliefs suggests that regardless of educational background, they consider it important during emerging adulthood to reexamine the beliefs they have learned in their families and to form a set of beliefs that is the product of their own independent reflections (Arnett & Jensen, 1999; Hoge, Johnson, & Luidens, 1993).

Although the identity explorations of emerging adulthood make it an especially full and intense time of life for many people, these explorations are not always experienced as enjoyable. Explorations in love sometimes result in disappointment, disillusionment, or rejection. Explorations in work sometimes result in a failure to achieve the occupation most desired or in an inability to find work that is satisfying and fulfilling. Explorations in worldviews sometimes lead to rejection of childhood beliefs without the construction of anything more compelling in their place (Arnett & Jensen, 1999). Also, to a large extent, emerging adults pursue their identity explorations on their own, without the daily companionship of either their family of origin or their family to be (Jonsson, 1994; Morch, 1995). Young Americans ages 19–29 spend more of their leisure time alone than any persons except the elderly and spend more of their time in productive activities (school and work) alone than any other age group under 40 (Larson, 1990). Many of them see the condition of the world as grim and are pessimistic about the future of their society (Arnett, 2000b). Nevertheless, for themselves personally, emerging adults are highly optimistic about ultimately achieving their goals. In one national poll of 18- to 24-year-olds in the United States (Hornblower, 1997), nearly all—96%—agreed with the statement, "I am very sure that someday I will get to where I want to be in life."

### **Other Notable Findings on Emerging Adulthood**

The three areas outlined above—demographics, subjective perceptions, and identity explorations—provide the most abundant information on the distinctiveness of emerging adulthood. However, evidence is available from other areas that suggests possible lines of inquiry for future research on emerging adulthood. One of these areas is risk behavior. Although there is a voluminous literature on adolescent risk behavior and relatively little research on risk behavior in emerging adulthood (Jessor, Donovan, & Costa, 1991), the prevalence of several types of risk behavior peaks not

during adolescence but during emerging adulthood (ages 18–25). These risk behaviors include unprotected sex, most types of substance use, and risky driving behaviors such as driving at high speeds or while intoxicated (Arnett, 1992; Bachman, Johnston, O'Malley, & Schulenberg, 1996). Figure 3 shows an example for binge drinking.

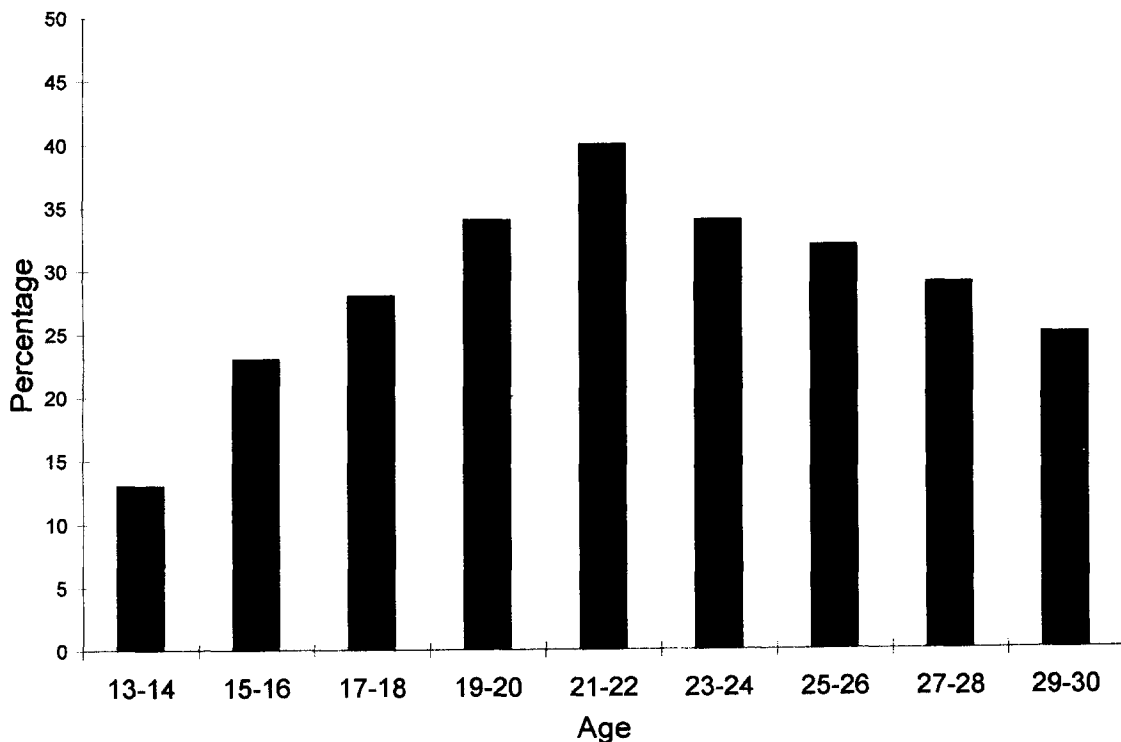
What is it about emerging adulthood that lends itself to such high rates of risk behavior? To some degree, emerging adults' risk behaviors can be understood as part of their identity explorations, that is, as one reflection of the desire to obtain a wide range of experiences before settling down into the roles and responsibilities of adult life. One of the motivations consistently found to be related to participation in a variety of types of risk behavior is sensation seeking, which is the desire for novel and intense experiences (Arnett, 1994b). Emerging adults can pursue novel and intense experiences more freely than adolescents because they are less likely to be monitored by parents and can pursue them more freely than adults because they are less constrained by roles. After marriage, adults are constrained from taking part in risk behavior by the responsibilities of the marriage role, and once they have a child, they are constrained by the responsibilities of the parenting role. In one example of this, Bachman et al. (1996) used longitudinal data to show how substance use rises to a peak

in the early twenties during the role hiatus of emerging adulthood, declines steeply and sharply following marriage, and declines further following the entry to parenthood. The responsibilities of these roles lead to lower rates of risk behavior as emerging adulthood is succeeded by young adulthood.

Research on family relationships among emerging adults has also been conducted. For American emerging adults in their early twenties, physical proximity to parents has been found to be *inversely* related to the quality of relationships with them. Emerging adults with the most frequent contact with parents, especially emerging adults still living at home, tend to be the least close to their parents and to have the poorest psychological adjustment (Dubas & Petersen, 1996; O'Connor, Allen, Bell, & Hauser, 1996). In European studies, emerging adults who remain at home tend to be happier with their living situations than those who have left home; they continue to rely on their parents as a source of support and comfort, but they also tend to have a great deal of autonomy within their parents' households (Chisholm & Hurrelmann, 1995). Thus, for emerging adults in both the United States and Europe, *autonomy* and *relatedness* are complementary rather than opposing dimensions of their relationships with their parents (O'Connor et al., 1996).

**Figure 3**

Rates of Binge Drinking (Five or More Alcoholic Drinks in a Row) in the Past Two Weeks at Various Ages



Note. Data are from "Transitions in Drug Use During Late Adolescence and Young Adulthood," by J. G. Bachman, L. D. Johnston, P. O'Malley, and J. Schulenberg, in *Transitions Through Adolescence: Interpersonal Domains and Context* (p. 118), by J. A. Graber, J. Brooks-Gunn, and A. C. Petersen (Eds.), 1996, Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. Copyright 1996 by Erlbaum. Used with permission. Data also available at <http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/data/99data/pr99i1c.pdf>.

These findings provide a foundation for research into development during emerging adulthood. Of course, much more work remains to be done on virtually every aspect of development during this period. To what extent do emerging adults rely on friends for support and companionship, given that this is a period when most young people have left their families of origin but have not yet entered marriage? To what extent are the explorations of emerging adulthood different for men and women? Do emerging adults have especially high rates of media use, given that they spend so much time alone? These and many other questions about the period await investigation. Establishing emerging adulthood as a distinct developmental period may help to promote this research.

## Why Emerging Adulthood Is Not Adolescence

It is widely known that the scientific study of adolescence began with the publication of G. Stanley Hall's two-volume magnum opus nearly a century ago (Hall, 1904). What is less widely known, however, is that in Hall's view adolescence extended from age 14 to age 24 (Hall, 1904, p. xix). In contrast, contemporary scholars generally consider adolescence to begin at age 10 or 11 and to end by age 18 or 19. The cover of every issue of the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, the flagship journal of the Society for Research on Adolescence, proclaims that adolescence is defined as "the second decade of life." What happened between Hall's time and our own to move scholars' conceptions of adolescence earlier in the life course?

Two changes stand out as possible explanations. One is the decline that has taken place during the 20th century in the typical age of the initiation of puberty. At the beginning of the 20th century, the median age of menarche in Western countries was about 15 (Eveleth & Tanner, 1976). Because menarche takes place relatively late in the typical sequence of pubertal changes, this means that the initial changes of puberty would have begun at about ages 13–15 for most people, which is just where Hall designated the beginning of adolescence. However, the median age of menarche (and by implication other pubertal changes) declined steadily between 1900 and 1970 before leveling out, so that now the typical age of menarche in the United States is 12.5 (Brooks-Gunn & Paikoff, 1997). The initial changes of puberty usually begin about 2 years earlier, thus the designation of adolescence as beginning with the entry into the second decade of life.

As for the age when adolescence ends, the change in this age may have been inspired not by a biological change but by a social change: the growth of high school attendance that made high school a normative experience for adolescents in the United States. In 1900, only 10% of persons ages 14–17 were enrolled in high school. However, this proportion rose steeply and steadily over the course of the 20th century to reach 95% by 1985 (Arnett & Taber, 1994). This makes it easy to understand why Hall would not have chosen age 18 as the end of adolescence, because for most adolescents of his time no significant

transition took place at that age. Education ended earlier, work began earlier, and leaving home took place later. Marriage and parenthood did not take place for most people until their early twenties or midtwenties (Arnett & Taber, 1994), which may have been why Hall designated age 24 as the end of adolescence. (Hall himself did not explain why he chose this age.)

In our time, it makes sense to define adolescence as ages 10–18. Young people in this age group have in common that they live with their parents, are experiencing the physical changes of puberty, are attending secondary school, and are part of a school-based peer culture. None of this remains normative after age 18, which is why it is not adequate simply to call the late teens and early twenties *late adolescence*. Age 18 also marks a variety of legal transitions, such as being allowed to vote and sign legal documents.

Although some scholars have suggested that the late teens and early twenties should be considered late adolescence (e.g., Elliott & Feldman, 1990), for the most part scholars on adolescence focus on ages 10–18 as the years of adolescent development. Studies published in the major journals on adolescence rarely include samples with ages higher than 18. For example, in 1997, 90% of the studies published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence* and the *Journal of Youth & Adolescence* were on samples of high school age or younger. College students have been the focus of many research studies, but most often as "adults" in social psychology studies. Sociologists have studied the late teens and the twenties for patterns of demographic events viewed as part of the transition to adulthood (e.g., Hogan & Astone, 1986; Rindfuss, 1991). However, few studies have recognized the late teens through the twenties as a distinct developmental period.

## Why the Forgotten Half Remains Forgotten

In 1987, a distinguished panel of scholars and public policy officials was assembled by the William T. Grant Foundation and asked to address the life situations of young people who do not attend college after high school, especially with respect to their economic prospects. They produced an influential and widely read report entitled *The Forgotten Half: Non-College-Bound Youth in America* (William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship, 1988), which contained an analysis of the circumstances of the "forgotten half" and a set of policy suggestions for promoting a successful transition from high school to work.

Over a decade later, 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. Why did the Grant commission's widely acclaimed report not inspire more enduring scholarly attention to young people not attending college in this age period? One reason is practical. Studies of college students are ubiquitous because college students are so easy to find—most scholars who teach at colleges or universities



have ready access to them. Studying young people who are not in college is more difficult because they are not readily accessible in any institutional setting. Other ways of obtaining research participants in this age period must be used, such as contacting community organizations or taking out newspaper ads, and these samples often have the liability of being nonrepresentative. The same conditions apply to research on college students after they leave college. Few studies exist of young people in their midtwenties to late twenties, in part because they are not available in any institutional setting. Notable exceptions to this rule include some excellent longitudinal studies (the National Longitudinal Studies, e.g., Rindfuss, 1991; the Monitoring the Future studies, e.g., Bachman et al., 1996; O'Connor et al., 1996; Offer & Offer, 1975).

However, the dearth of studies on young people in their late teens and twenties is not due only to the difficulty of finding samples in this age group. It also arises from the lack of a clear developmental conception of this age group. Scholars have no clearly articulated way of thinking about development from the late teens through the twenties, no paradigm for this age period, so they may not think about young people at these ages as a focus for developmental research. 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.

## Why Emerging Adulthood Is Not Young Adulthood

But (some might object) is there not already a paradigm for the years of the late teens and the twenties? Is that not what young adulthood is? The answer is *no*. There are a number of reasons why *young adulthood* is unsatisfactory as a designation for this developmental period.

One reason is that the use of *young adulthood* implies that adulthood has been reached at this point. As we have seen, most young people in this age period would disagree that they have reached adulthood. They see themselves as gradually making their way into adulthood, so *emerging adulthood* seems a better term for their subjective experience. More generally, the term *emerging* captures the dynamic, changeable, fluid quality of the period.

Also, if ages 18–25 are young adulthood, what would that make the thirties? Young adulthood is a term better applied to the thirties, which are still young but are definitely adult in a way that the years 18–25 are not. It makes little sense to lump the late teens, twenties, and thirties together and call the entire period *young adulthood*. The period from ages 18 to 25 could hardly be more distinct from the thirties. The majority of young people ages 18–25 do not believe they have reached full adulthood, whereas the majority of people in their thirties believe that they have (Arnett, in press). The majority of people ages 18–25 are still in the process of obtaining education and training for a long-term adult occupation, whereas the majority of people in their thirties have settled into a more stable

occupational path. The majority of people ages 18–25 are unmarried, whereas the majority of people in their thirties are married. The majority of people ages 18–25 are childless, whereas the majority of people in their thirties have had at least one child. The list could go on. The point should be clear. Emerging adulthood and young adulthood should be distinguished as separate developmental periods.

It should be emphasized, however, that age is only a rough indicator of the transition from emerging adulthood to young adulthood. Eighteen is a good age marker for the end of adolescence and the beginning of emerging adulthood, because it is the age at which most young people finish secondary school, leave their parents' home, and reach the legal age of adult status in a variety of respects. However, the transition from emerging adulthood to young adulthood is much less definite with respect to age. There are 19-year-olds who have reached adulthood—demographically, subjectively, and in terms of identity formation—and 29-year-olds who have not. Nevertheless, for most people, the transition from emerging adulthood to young adulthood intensifies in the late twenties and is reached by age 30 in all of these respects.

Emerging adulthood differs both from adolescence and from young adulthood in that it is, to some extent, defined by its heterogeneity. As noted, in emerging adulthood, there is little that is normative. Emerging adulthood is very much a transitional period leading to adulthood, and different emerging adults reach adulthood at different points. Also, the possibility of devoting the late teens and early twenties to explorations of various kinds is not equally available to all young people, and in any case, people vary in the degree of exploration they choose to pursue.

The heterogeneity of emerging adulthood represents both a warning and an opportunity for those who wish to study this age period. The warning is to be cautious in making sweeping statements about emerging adults. Almost always, such statements need to be qualified by mentioning the heterogeneity of emerging adulthood. The opportunity is that this heterogeneity makes emerging adulthood an especially rich, complex, dynamic period of life to study.

## Emerging Adulthood Across Cultures

Thus far, the focus of this article has been on emerging adulthood among young people in the West, especially in the United States. Is emerging adulthood a period of life that is restricted to certain cultures and certain times? The answer to this question appears to be *yes*. For example, Schlegel and Barry (1991), in their comprehensive integration of information on adolescence in 186 traditional non-Western cultures, concluded that adolescence as a life stage is virtually universal, but that a further period between adolescence and adulthood (*youth*, in the terminology they used) existed in only 20% of the cultures they studied. In the cultures in their sample, adulthood was typically signified by entry into marriage, and marriage usually took place at about ages 16 to 18 for girls and at about ages 18 to 20

for boys. This early timing of marriage allowed for a period of adolescence but not for a period of emerging adulthood.

Emerging adulthood, then, is not a universal period but a period that exists only in cultures that postpone the entry into adult roles and responsibilities until well past the late teens. Thus, emerging adulthood would be most likely to be found in countries that are highly industrialized or postindustrial. Such countries require a high level of education and training for entry into the information-based professions that are the most prestigious and lucrative, so many of their young people remain in school into their early twenties and midtwenties. Marriage and parenthood are typically postponed until well after schooling has ended, which allows for a period of exploration of various relationships before marriage and for exploration of various jobs before taking on the responsibility of supporting a child financially. Table 1 shows the median ages of marriage in a range of highly industrialized countries, contrasted with the median ages of marriage in selected developing countries.

Although median marriage ages are typically calculated on a countrywide basis, it should be noted that emerging adulthood is best understood as a characteristic of cultures rather than countries. Within some highly industrialized countries, members of minority cultures may have cultural practices that lead to a shortened period of emerging adulthood or no emerging adulthood at all. For example, in the United States, members of the Mormon church tend to have a shortened and highly structured emerging adulthood. Because of cultural beliefs prohibiting premarital sex and emphasizing the desirability of large families, considerable social pressure is placed on young Mormons to marry early and begin having children. Consequently, the median ages of marriage and first childbirth are much lower among Mormons than in the American population as a whole (Heaton, 1992), and young Mormons are likely to have a much briefer period of exploration before taking on adult roles.

Limitations in educational and occupational opportunities also influence the extent to which young people can

experience their late teens and twenties as a volitional period. The young woman who has a child outside of marriage at age 16 and spends her late teens and early twenties alternating between welfare and low-paying jobs has little chance for exploration of possible life directions, nor does the young man who drops out of school and spends most of his late teens and early twenties unemployed and looking unsuccessfully for a job (Cote & Allahaar, 1996). Because opportunities tend to be less widely available in minority cultures than in the majority culture in most industrialized countries, members of minority groups may be less likely to experience ages 18–25 as a period of independent exploration of possible life directions (Morch, 1995). However, social class may be more important than ethnicity, with young people in the middle class or above having more opportunities for the explorations of emerging adulthood than young people who are working class or below. Alternatively, it may be that explorations are not fewer in the working class but different, with more emphasis on work explorations and less emphasis on education. These are possibilities to be investigated.

In economically developing countries, there tends to be a distinct cultural split between urban and rural areas. Young people in urban areas of countries such as China and India are more likely to experience emerging adulthood, because they marry later, have children later, obtain more education, and have a greater range of occupational and recreational opportunities than young people in rural areas. In contrast, young people in rural areas of developing countries often receive minimal schooling, marry early, and have little choice of occupations except agricultural work. Thus in developing countries emerging adulthood is often experienced in urban areas but rarely in rural areas.

However, it should also be noted that emerging adulthood is likely to become more pervasive worldwide in the decades to come, with the increasing globalization of the world economy. Between 1980 and 1995, the proportion of young people in developing countries who attended secondary school rose sharply, and the median ages of marriage and first childbirth rose in these countries as well (Noble et al., 1996). As developing countries are becoming more integrated into a global economy, there is an increasing number of higher-paying jobs in these countries, jobs that require young people to obtain higher education. At the same time, as technology becomes increasingly available in these countries, particularly in agriculture, the labor of young people is becoming less and less necessary for family survival, making it possible for many of them to attend school instead.

These changes open up the possibility for the spread of emerging adulthood in developing countries. Economic development makes possible a period of the independent role 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 they have no urgent need for young people's labor. Similarly, economic development is usually accompanied by increased life expectancy, and devoting years to the explorations of emerg-

**Table 1**  
*Median Marriage Age of Women in Selected Countries*

Industrialized countries	Age	Developing countries	Age
United States	25.2	Egypt	21.9
Canada	26.0	Morocco	22.3
Germany	26.2	Ghana	21.1
France	26.1	Nigeria	18.7
Italy	25.8	India	20.0
Japan	26.9	Indonesia	21.1
Australia	26.0	Brazil	22.6

Note. Data are from *The World's Youth*, by J. Noble, J. Cover, and M. Yanagishita, 1996, Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau. Copyright 1996 by the Population Reference Bureau. Reprinted with permission.

ing adulthood becomes more feasible and attractive when people can expect to live to be at least 70 or 80 rather than 40 or 50. Thus it seems possible that by the end of the 21st century emerging adulthood will be a normative period for young people worldwide, although it is likely to vary in length and content both within and between countries (Arnett, 2000a). The growth and variability of emerging adulthood in countries and cultures around the world would make an important and fascinating topic for a nascent scholarly field of emerging adulthood.

## Conclusion

Emerging adulthood has become a distinct period of the life course for young people in industrialized societies. It is a period characterized by change and exploration for most people, as they examine the life possibilities open to them and gradually arrive at more enduring choices in love, work, and worldviews. Not all young people experience their late teens and twenties as years of change and exploration, even in industrialized societies. Some lack the opportunities to use those years as a volitional period; others may be inclined by personality or circumstances to limit their explorations or to seek a relatively early resolution to them. Nevertheless, as scholars we can characterize emerging adulthood as a period when change and exploration are common, even as we recognize the heterogeneity of the period and investigate this heterogeneity as one of emerging adulthood's distinguishing characteristics.

Emerging adulthood merits scholarly attention as a distinct period of the life course in industrialized societies. It is in many respects the age of possibilities, a period in which many different potential futures remain possible and personal freedom and exploration are higher for most people than at any other time. It is also a period of life that is likely to grow in importance in the coming century, as countries around the world reach a point in their economic development where they may allow the prolonged period of exploration and freedom from roles that constitutes emerging adulthood.

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