Chapter 15
New Horizons in Research on Emerging and Young Adulthood

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Abstract In this chapter I present some ideas about the future of the field of emerging adulthood. First, I explain my reasons for coining "emerging adulthood," focusing on the vast changes that have taken place in the nature of the 18–24 age period over the past century. Next, I propose some new areas of inquiry for the years to come. These include exploring the next developmental stage beyond emerging adulthood – young adulthood – which I suggest is distinguished by *role immersion*. I also advocate greater exploration of the many paths through emerging adulthood. Within countries, variations by social class and ethnicity are notable. Between countries, there are many potential variations in the experience of emerging adulthood in Europe and Asia. Perhaps most compelling of all in the decades to come will be to examine the birth of emerging adulthood in developing countries, as those countries move increasingly toward the demographic patterns that have led to a new life stage of emerging adulthood in economically developed countries: longer and more widespread education and later ages of entering marriage and parenthood.

Introduction

This is an exciting time to be involved in the study of the 18- to 24-year-olds who are the focus of this book. Vast changes have taken place in the past half-century in how ages 18–24 are experienced, as participation in postsecondary education has become longer and more widespread and as ages of entering marriage and parenthood have risen into the late 20s and beyond across industrialized countries. Consequently, there is a rich range of new research questions to be addressed on attitudes and experiences regarding work (as it takes longer to settle into a stable job), on romantic and

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sexual experiences (as age 18–24 has become a time of exploration rather than commitment for most people), and many other areas.

In this chapter I will propose some ideas about where the field of emerging adulthood is headed, especially with regard to the family issues that are the focus of the book. First, I present my reasons for conceptualizing the field as emerging adulthood, rather than young adulthood, early adulthood, or other terms that have been used to characterize the age period from the late teens through the 20s. Then I propose two areas of focus that may be especially fruitful for exploration in the years to come: the contrast between emerging adulthood in the 20s and young adulthood in the 30s and early 40s, and cultural and international variations in the experiences of emerging and young adulthood. Finally, I defend the usefulness of stages in helping us understand the course of human development, especially with respect to emerging adulthood.

Why Emerging Adulthood?

Many different terms have been used in reference to the life stage that includes ages 18–24. "Young adulthood" is the term primarily used in this book, mixed occasionally with "early adulthood" or "emerging adulthood." Other terms include "youth," "late adolescence," and "the transition to adulthood."

It will surprise no one to hear that I prefer the term "emerging adulthood," given that I coined it and have been seeking to build up a field of study under that term over the past decade (Arnett, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2011; Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011; Arnett & Taber, 1994; Arnett & Tanner, 2006). Many other scholars have adopted the term in recent years and are using it in their own work, mainly in psychology but also in fields such as sociology, anthropology, education, and medicine. The article that originally sketched the theory (Arnett, 2000) has been cited over 2,300 times (as of October, 2011), according to Google Scholar.

Of course everyone should use whatever term they believe best suits their purposes in describing and researching this life stage. Here, I would like to explain my reasons for coining and using "emerging adulthood," especially contrasting it with "young adulthood."

A New Term for a New Life Stage

My primary reason for proposing "emerging adulthood" was my sense that a new term was required to describe a new life stage. By the turn of the twenty-first century the age period from the late teens through mid-20s was different in industrialized societies than it had ever been before, in any previous era of human history (Arnett, 2004). Education had never lasted so long for such a broad proportion of the population. The age of entering marriage had never been so high. The age of entering parenthood had never been so late, and the birth rate had never been so low. Premarital sex and cohabitation had never been acceptable. Women had never been

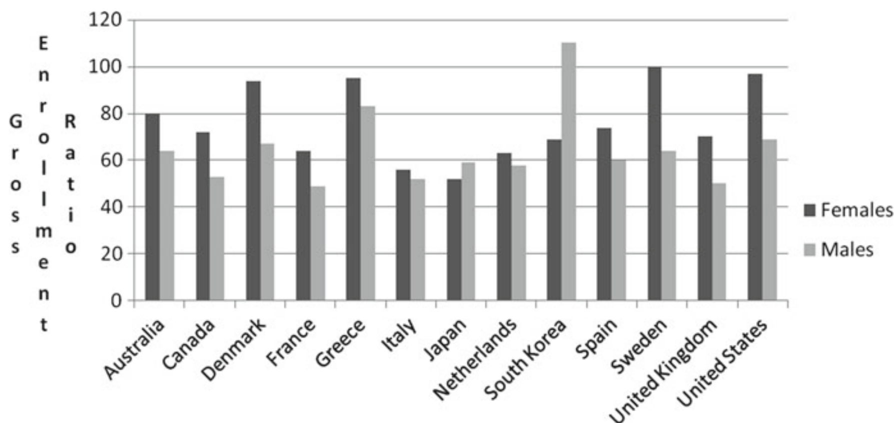

Fig. 15.1 Gross enrollment ratio in tertiary education, selected OECD countries. *Note.* Gross enrollment ratio is the number of persons enrolled in tertiary education divided by the number of persons aged 18–22 in the population

allowed so many educational and occupational opportunities, and they had never exceeded men in educational attainment – as they do now in every Western country (Fig. 15.1; UNdata, 2010).

Another distinctive change that makes the years 18–24 different today than in the past is the change in how young people view adulthood. This observation is necessarily more speculative, as we do not have survey or interview data from 100 or more years ago about how young people viewed adulthood, the way we have demographic data on the age they entered marriage and how much education they obtained. Still, it appears from the historical record that until quite recently adulthood was a status young people looked forward to and strived toward (Modell, 1989). However, today there is a great deal of ambivalence about reaching adulthood among 18- to 24-year olds. They look at the lives of their parents and other adults, and they see comfort and stability but also stagnation and a narrow range of possibilities (Arnett, 2004). Consequently, at age 18–24 most are in no hurry to enter adulthood, although most will take on adult responsibilities of marriage, parenthood, and stable work by age 30.

All together, the changes in the length and breadth of education; the rising ages of entering marriage and parenthood; more tolerant views of premarital sex and cohabitation; the opportunities open to women; and how people think about adulthood have made the years from age 18–24 different today than they have ever been before, and consequently in need of a new term and a new conceptualization.

New Horizons: From Emerging Adulthood to Young Adulthood

Part of the value of a new term for a new life stage is that it has the potential to draw the attention of researchers interested in human development and looking for something new to study. Over the past decade the study of development during the

20s has burgeoned, and one of the contributors may be that this new conception of emerging adulthood has inspired many researchers to think about all the possibilities of uncharted territory for research. Attendance at the five conferences on emerging adulthood has risen steadily each time, indicating an expanding community of scholars. Currently, plans are in progress to form a Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood (see http://www.ssea.org), including an *Emerging Adulthood* journal.

The burgeoning of interest in emerging adulthood is part of a long trend in developmental psychology toward steadily expanding the proportion of the lifespan receiving research attention. Early developmental psychologists working a century ago, such as Arnold Gesell and Jean Piaget, focused mainly on infancy and childhood. Infancy and early childhood still dominate in developmental psychology today – just pick up any issue of the journal *Developmental Psychology* if you doubt it – but beginning in the 1970s and 1980s there was a surge of interest in adolescence, inspired by pioneers such as Erik Erikson (1968) and Daniel Offer (1969) and given a boost by the formation of the Society for Research on Adolescence in 1984. Now, the age span of interest to developmentalists has expanded still further to include the life stage from the late teens through the mid-20s.

One important new horizon for research in the years to come will be to expand the age span of interest yet again, to include the 30s and early 40s. What happens developmentally during the 30s and early 40s? This question hardly appears to have been asked before, and it certainly has received little to no research or theoretical attention. Here I would like to initiate the theoretical conversation in the hope of inspiring research as well.

I propose that the term "young adulthood" would be best applied to the life stage of the 30s and early 40s (roughly 30–45). For the most part, the chapters in this book have used "young adulthood" for the age period 18–24 that is the focus of the book, but in my view this is problematic in several ways. First, as noted, what occurs today in the 18–24 age period is in many ways unprecedented, but "young adulthood" is not a new term and provides no sense that what occurs in the years 18–24 today is different than in the past. Second, "young adulthood" implies that the entry to adulthood is complete, but for most 18- to 24-year olds this is not the case. In terms of transition events, few have entered marriage, parenthood, and a stable occupational path, all events traditionally associated with adult status. In terms of their own subjective perceptions, most feel neither adolescent nor adult but somewhere in-between, on the way to adulthood but not there yet, which is partly what inspired me to coin the term "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 1998, 2004). Third, using "young adulthood" to refer to 18- to 24-year olds raises the problem of what to call the 30s and early 40s. It is unfeasible to refer to the entire span of 18–40 as "young adulthood." Whatever the differences in views about the best term for the age period 18–24, I think we could all agree that 18–24 is vastly different than the 30s and early 40s for most people and that these two periods should be understood as two separate life stages or phases of the life span. But if 18–24 is already young adulthood, what then is the life stage of the 30s and early 40s? Not-so-young-adulthood?

Young adulthood makes more sense as the term for the life stage that follows emerging adulthood. The term "young adulthood" has been around for a long time, and it makes sense to apply it to the life stage that entails settling into the adult roles that have also been around for a long time: a stable occupational path, marriage (or other long-term partnership), and parenthood.

Indeed, the outstanding developmental feature of "young adulthood" in the 30s and early 40s is that it is a life stage of what I propose to call *role immersion.* The requirements and demands of roles in these years are greater than in any other stage of life, for most people. This is true for both love and work, the two primary areas of human functioning (Erikson, 1950). In love, the great majority of young adults take on marriage or another long-term romantic partnership by their 30s. Seventy-four percent of Americans are married by their early 30s and 88% by their 40s (US Bureau of the Census, 2001). Similarly, 75% of Americans have had at least one child by age 30, rising to nearly 90% by the end of the 30s. These new family roles entail daily requirements and obligations. Marriage involves coordinating your daily activities with another person and making joint decisions about everything from what to have for dinner to whether to buy a house. Parenting, especially parenting of young children, requires relentless attention to children's many needs for food, clothing, love, and protection.

The role requirements of work, too, become more demanding in the 30s. The jobs emerging adults take are often temporary or part-time. According to the US Department of Labor, the average number of job changes from age 20–29 is *seven.* It is not until about age 30 that most people find a job that they will stay with for at least 5 years (Yates, 2005). Once people find a job they will stay in for many years the role requirements increase, because it is likely to be a job the young adult wants to keep and develop into a long-term occupational path.

The role immersion of young adulthood provides a sharp contrast to the emerging adulthood that preceded it. Role demands are often greatest in young adulthood of the entire life span, whereas in emerging adulthood role demands reach their nadir for most people. In love, romantic relationships in emerging adulthood tend to be temporary and unstable, as shown by Edin and Tach (Chap. 12) and by Giordano and colleagues (Chap. 9). Even relatively long-term romantic relationships in emerging adulthood are unlikely to involve the daily role requirements and joint decisions that marriage entails. Role demands in relation to family of origin are also low in emerging adulthood, compared to childhood or adolescence. With regard to work, jobs taken in emerging adulthood are often temporary, as noted. Emerging adults tend to regard the jobs they acquire during age 18–24 as a means to an end, a way to make it by while they keep an eye out for a better job or while they pursue education or training that will prepare them for something more enjoyable, remunerative, and enduring. Consequently, they tend not to be personally invested in the jobs they have during the 18–24 age period the way they will be in the job they have during their 30s.

What about people who do not marry or have children, or people who leave the work force in their 30s to devote themselves full-time to the care of young children? Role immersion may nevertheless apply to them. Young adults who do not marry or

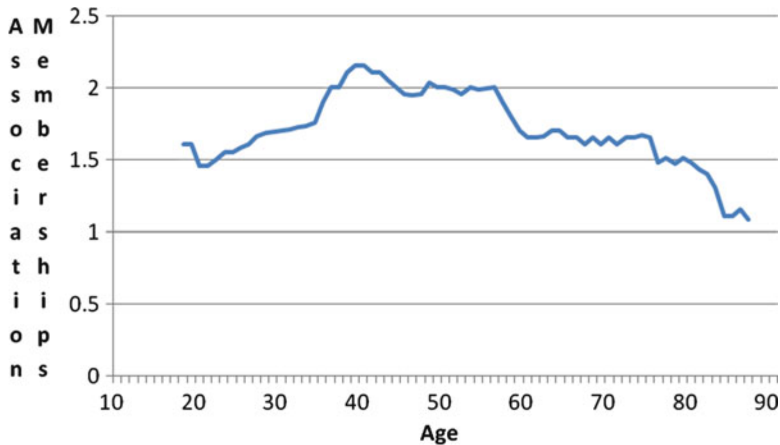

Fig. 15.2 Age and association membership, the USA

have children in their 30s may be all the more immersed in their work role. For example, in Hewlett's (2003) study of high-achievers, 33% of women and 25% of men had no children by age 40, primarily because they had been too devoted to developing their careers to make time for the responsibilities of parenthood. Similarly, young adults who leave the workforce to care for young children will no longer have the role obligations of a job but will be all the more immersed in the role obligations of parenting and running a household.

Role immersion during young adulthood may be evident not only in love and work but also in terms of community involvement. In Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen's (2001) analysis, membership in community associations rose steeply during the 30s and peaked around age 40, then declined through the rest of the lifespan (Fig. 15.2; Putnam et al., 2001, p. 249). Young adults are often driven toward community roles by parenting. The 30s and early 40s are the period that is most likely to include coaching a child's sports team, joining the parents' association at a child's school, or serving as a Boy Scout or Girl Scout leader in the child's troop. Again, the contrast with emerging adulthood is stark. Not only do 18- to 24-year olds have the lowest rates of voting participation of any adult age group, but as Fig. 15.2 shows, a low point in involvement in community associations occurs in the early 20s, not reached again until nearly age 80.

If the age period 18–24 is emerging adulthood and the 30s and early 40s are young adulthood, where does that leave the late 20s? The period 25–29 is not easy to characterize. For many people it is the time when the role immersion of young adulthood begins. Currently the median age of marriage in the USA is 26 for women and 28 for men (US Bureau of the Census, 2010), and as noted 75% of Americans have at least one child by age 30. By the late 20s most people also have entered a job they will have for at least 5 years, although this is more likely for persons who have obtained a college degree than for those who have only a high school education or less (Day & Newburger, 2002). Subjectively, too, most 18- to 24-year olds do not

feel they have reached adulthood, whereas most 25- to 29-year olds feel they have (Arnett, 2001, 2003).

For all these reasons, I have mainly used the age period 18–25 when describing emerging adulthood. However, there are many people for whom emerging adulthood extends through the end of the 20s, in all of the ways just described. Furthermore, the USA is unusual among industrialized countries in having relatively low median ages of entering marriage and parenthood. In Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, and all over Europe, the median ages of entering marriage and parenthood are closer to 30 than to 25 (Arnett, 2011; Douglass, 2007). Consequently, when it is necessary to specify at least rough age ranges for emerging adulthood and young adulthood, 18–25 and 25–45 may be more fitting in the USA, and 18–29 and 30–45 more fitting in the rest of the industrialized world.

What about young people who become parents relatively early, such as those vividly described in Edin's and Tach's chapter (Chap. 12)? Do they have a different kind of emerging adulthood, or a shorter emerging adulthood, or no emerging adulthood at all? Certainly, their age period 18–24 is different than for emerging adults who do not have child during this period, as having a child greatly restricts the range of possibilities young people have for pursuing their own goals in education and work. Young persons who have children relatively early also tend to feel adult earlier than their peers due to the sudden relentless responsibilities of parenting (Arnett, 1998). Yet, in the accounts of the lives of young parents presented by Edin and Tach, there is much that looks like the lives of other emerging adults, particularly the instability of their lives and frequent changes in education, work, and (for most) love, similar in many ways to the identity explorations that I have proposed as a common part of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004). Alternatively, young parents could be seen as having a shortened emerging adulthood that ends when the first child is born, especially the young mothers who are most likely to end up with the long-term responsibility for child care. Or in some cases people may make the transition from emerging adulthood to young adulthood at different times in different aspects of their lives – parent at 22, stable romantic relationship at 27, stable work at 32 – one aspect of the in-between character of emerging adulthood. And some may be considered to have no emerging adulthood at all, particularly those who become parents while still in their teens. These are questions that merit further contemplation and investigation.

New Horizons: The Many Forms of Emerging Adulthood

One of the fascinating aspects of the rise of emerging adulthood over the past half century is how the same demographic changes have taken place across the world: longer and more widespread education, lower birth rates, and later ages of marriage and parenthood. These changes have occurred in English-speaking countries – the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand; all over Europe, and in the Asian industrialized countries of Japan and South Korea. Figure 15.3 provides an illustration,

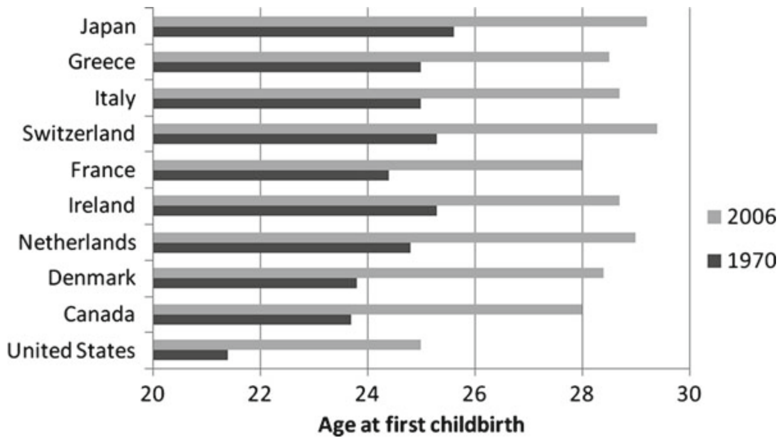

Fig. 15.3 Median marriage age, selected OECD countries

showing the rise in the median age of entering parenthood (for women) that has taken place since 1970 (Mathews & Hamilton, 2009). Similar demographic changes have also taken place in developing countries around the world, although at present postsecondary education is less common in these countries than in economically developed countries and ages of entering marriage and parenthood are not yet as high. Some social changes contributing to the rise of emerging adulthood have also been worldwide. Most notably, 50 years ago all over the world young women were substantially less likely than young men to obtain higher education; today, young women obtain more education than young men in nearly every country in the world (UNdata, 2010).

Yet along with these similarities, there are also vast differences in how emerging adulthood is experienced worldwide. This is perhaps the richest and most promising horizon of all for future research on emerging adulthood. Beneath the similarities, there are differences both within countries and between countries that offer virtually limitless opportunities for curious researchers.

Within Countries: Social Class and Ethnicity

Within countries, there are differences to be explored with regard to characteristics such as social class and ethnicity. Social class has a substantial influence on the path through emerging adulthood, especially as it influences education (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006). Although participation in postsecondary education has expanded greatly over the past half century, across industrialized countries 5–50% do not receive education beyond secondary school (UNdata, 2010). Obviously, it is a quite different experience of emerging adulthood to spend one's late teens and early 20s in university than to spend those years working or looking for work. Also, it is well established that educational attainment is the strongest predictor of future earnings

throughout adult life (Day & Newburger, 2002). However, we know much less about possible social class differences during emerging adulthood in family relations, romantic relationships, friendships, and plans for the future, among many other areas (Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011).

Ethnicity is another area of great potential research in emerging adulthood. We know there are, in all countries, substantial ethnic group differences in opportunities and in educational and occupational achievements in emerging adulthood. However, much less is known about the personal experience of ethnic group membership during the years 18–24. For example, a literature has accumulated in recent decades on ethnic identity in adolescence. However, very little is known about ethnic identity development in emerging adulthood (Phinney, 2006). Given the prominence of other identity issues during emerging adulthood, it might be expected that ethnic identity would also change in important ways during these years. Another promising area of inquiry is how emerging adults in ethnic minority groups reconcile the often collectivistic values of their culture of origin with the often individualistic value of the majority cultures they live in, particularly as they reach emerging adulthood and enter a wider and more diverse ethnic milieu in their education, workplace, and personal lives (Phinney, 2006).

Between Countries: Europe and Asia

The focus of the previous chapters in this book is exclusively on the USA, but emerging adulthood is an international phenomenon. Yet, even though there are cross-national consistencies in demographic trends such as rising ages of marriage and parenthood and in social trends such as greater educational and occupational opportunities for women, there is also immense variation in the paths taken through emerging adulthood in different world regions.

Across Europe, the median age of entering marriage is now around 30. The age of entering parenthood is also near 30, as shown in Fig. 15.3. However, there is also considerable regional variation among Northern, Southern, and Eastern Europe (Douglass, 2005, 2007). In Northern Europe, emerging adults leave home early, right after the completion of secondary school, due to a cultural tradition of establishing independence and state support for housing and education. Many emerging adults have a “gap year” between the end of secondary school and further pursuit of education and training, during which they enjoy leisure with friends and decide what path to follow next. Nearly all emerging adults in Northern Europe cohabit before marriage. By contrast, Southern European emerging adults typically remain in their parents’ household until marriage, and cohabitation is still taboo. Unemployment is much higher in Southern than in Northern Europe, and many emerging adults struggle for years before finding a stable job. In Eastern Europe, emerging adults today have grown up in a period of astounding and sometimes difficult social and economic changes since the fall of communist governments in 1989–1990, but increasingly their lives in emerging adulthood resemble the lives of

their counterparts in Western Europe, in terms of education, leisure, and the timing of marriage and parenthood (Macek et al., 2007).

Two of the most intriguing and under-researched countries in the world with respect to emerging adulthood are the two Asian industrialized countries, Japan and South Korea. Like the other industrialized countries, Japan and South Korea now have high ages of entering marriage and parenthood, around age 30. However, several other factors make these two countries distinctive (Rosenberger, 2007). First, premarital sex remains strongly proscribed. Second, roles for women have changed but not as much as in the West. In every Western country young women now exceed young men in educational attainment, but in Japan and South Korea young men are still highest, and there is still preferential treatment for young men over young women in universities and in the workplace (Rosenberger, 2007). Third, there is strong pressure on emerging adults, especially women, to marry by about age 30 in order to be considered fully adult by others.

In all these regions, the demographic patterns indicating emerging adulthood are clear, but relatively little is known about how emerging adulthood is experienced in terms of educational experiences, work experiences, romantic relationships, and hopes for the future, among many other areas of life. There is much to be learned, and a virtually limitless horizon of research opportunities.

The Birth of Emerging Adulthood in Developing Countries

Emerging adulthood is primarily a phenomenon of industrialized countries. It is these countries that have the demographic hallmarks of emerging adulthood: education and training into the twenties and timing of marriage and parenthood around age 30. However, developing countries all over the world appear to be headed in the same direction. Although their median levels of education and their median ages of entering marriage and parenthood are still nowhere near as high as in developed countries, virtually all developing countries have a small but growing urban middle class whose lives from the late teens through the 20s look similar to the lives of emerging adults in developed countries.

Two examples of this trend can be found in China and India, the two most populous countries in the world. Both countries have experienced rapid economic growth in recent years and both countries have a rapidly growing urban middle class. Both countries are also experiencing a massive migration from rural to urban areas, especially among young people seeking new opportunities for education and work.

China has a relatively low marriage age – 23 for women, 25 for men – and only 20% of young Chinese obtain a college education after high school, much lower than in any developed country (Nelson & Chen, 2007). However, among urban middle-class Chinese, the median marriage age is much higher, as is the likelihood of obtaining postsecondary education. Little is known thus far about emerging adulthood in the Chinese urban middle class, but there are some intriguing clues. In two

studies of Chinese college students, Nelson and colleagues examined their views of adulthood (Badger, Nelson, & Barry, 2006; Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004). In some of their top criteria they were similar to American and European emerging adults, specifically *accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions, make independent decisions,* and *become financially independent*. However, they also valued highly *learn to have good control over your emotions* and *become capable of taking care of parents,* two criteria that reflect traditional Chinese values and that have ranked very low in American and European samples (e.g., Arnett, 2001, 2003; Macek et al., 2007). In a global survey, young Chinese aged 18–29 were highly optimistic about their personal futures, even more than American emerging adults or older Chinese adults, perhaps reflecting their historical circumstances of entering adult life in an economically rising country (Pew Research Center, 2005).

Like China, India has a booming economy and a rapidly expanding urban middle class. India has become a world leader in technological development, and young people have migrated to India's urban areas in search of education, training, and jobs in the new economy. However, even less is known about India's nascent emerging adults than about China's. In a recent study, Nelson (2011) examined views of adulthood among college and non-college 18- to 26-year olds in India. Only 10% of the students were married, compared to 47% of the nonstudents. The results showed that, contrary to studies in many other countries, the majority of young Indians believed they had reached adulthood, both students (61%) and nonstudents (59%), and only 26% gave the ambiguous "in some ways yes, in some ways no" response, far lower than in other countries. The top criteria for adulthood also differed from other studies. *Accept responsibility for your actions* ranked high, as in other studies, and *Learn always to have good control of your emotions,* as in studies of Chinese college students (Nelson et al., 2004), but also near the top were *Become capable of keeping a family physically safe* (for both men and women) and *Drive an automobile safely and close to the speed limit*. Furthermore, the young Indians were optimistic, with 80% of students and 53% of nonstudents believing their quality of life would be higher than their parents' quality of life. These initial results offer the promise that there would be much to be gained from further investigations of emerging adulthood in India and other countries.

One Stage, Many Paths

Given all this diversity in paths through emerging adulthood, by SES, ethnicity, nationality, and more, does it make sense to call emerging adulthood a life stage? I think it does, as long as we recognize the diversity within it. Stage theories earned a well-deserved stigma in the twentieth century, as theorists such as Freud, Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg proposed one-size-fits-all programs that all persons were supposed to follow or be deemed unhealthy or inadequately developed. They made the mistake of conceptualizing stages as *universal* and *uniform* – universal in that all humans were supposed to experience them, and uniform in that all persons following

a course of healthy development were supposed to experience them in the same way. By the end of the twentieth century developmental theorists were rejecting stages all together in favor of processes of development that apply at all ages (e.g., Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006; Lerner, 2006).

Now that we have turned the page to a new century, perhaps it is also time to turn a page both on the old way of thinking about stages as well as on the understandable but also rather extreme rejection of all stage theories. Stages can be useful frameworks for understanding human development, as long as we recognize they are neither universal nor uniform but always shaped by contexts of social class, ethnicity, culture, nationality, and other influences. I know I have found many, many times, that the concept of emerging adulthood is helpful not only to researchers but to emerging adults and their parents for understanding what occurs during the age period from the late teens through the 20s. People find great relief and consolation in learning that uncertainty and identity struggles in the twenties are common and that the road to a stable adulthood is longer than in the past for most people. For researchers, it is necessary to have some way of talking about different periods of the life span, otherwise discussions solely in terms of "processes" soon become amorphous and opaque (Arnett et al., 2011). Since we need stage terms in order to talk about human development, let us think carefully about what terms we use and why rather than simply picking randomly and interchangeably from the available terms.

It is not just emerging adulthood but all life stages that should be recognized as having multiple paths. There is not just one emerging adulthood but many emerging adulthoods within and between countries, just as there are many adolescences, infancies, and late adulthoods (Arnett, 2011). Yet for each life stage there are common features across contexts that justify conceptualizing it as a life stage. For infancy it is heightened dependency and inability to walk or talk; for adolescence it is puberty; for emerging adulthood it is the state of being beyond adolescence but not yet fully adult, trying out adult roles but not yet immersed in them, on the way to adulthood but not there yet. What else may be common features of emerging adulthood across cultures and other contexts – perhaps instability, perhaps identity struggles, perhaps a resilient optimism – remains to be established and promises many new research adventures in the years ahead.

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