

Presidential Address: The Emergence of Emerging Adulthood: A Personal History

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Abstract

This article presents a brief history of the field of emerging adulthood, from the author's early studies in the 1990s through the recent establishment of the Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood (SSEA). Also included is an overview of the results of a recent national study, the Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults, which included items pertaining to the five features proposed in the theory of emerging adulthood. The results show that all five features are supported by a majority of 18- to 29-year-olds. The final part of the essay proposes that the SSEA will be international, open to a wide range of methods, and an organization where the leadership contributions of young scholars are encouraged and welcomed.

Keywords

cultural context, emerging adulthood, transitions to adulthood, well-being, identity

This is a remarkable moment for all of us who have been part of the growth of the emerging adulthood field over many years. Thirteen years ago, when I first published a paper proposing the theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), I never imagined that it would grow into a distinct field of study involving hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people around the world. Ten years ago, when Jennifer Tanner and I organized the first conference on emerging adulthood, we did not realize that it was the beginning of a series of biennial conferences that would expand every year and eventually be sponsored by a Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood (SSEA). Here, rather than providing a summary of my own research, as is typical in the Presidential Addresses in other organizations, I would like to present a personal history of the idea of emerging adulthood and how it eventually became a field of academic study. It may be of some interest for scholars on emerging adulthood to hear where it came from and how it developed the way it did.

The Origins of Emerging Adulthood

This is the 10th anniversary of the first conference on emerging adulthood, but for me it is a different kind of anniversary. It was 20 years ago when I first became interested in the age period from the late teens through the 20s that I eventually came to call emerging adulthood. At first, I did not have anything in mind nearly as ambitious as proposing a theory of a new life stage. In 1993, I was in my first year as a junior professor at the University of Missouri, and I was looking for an area of research to focus on, something new, something I had not done before, and something *no one* had done before. Seven years before, I had completed my dissertation on preschool child care quality, but I soon lost interest in that area because it seemed to

me it was already crowded with many excellent researchers, and it was not really in need of my efforts as well. Then, as a postdoc, I became interested in adolescent risk behavior but that area, too, seemed already crowded with other researchers, already well staked out. I wanted to find something that had not really been done before, an unexplored continent that would hold something new and previously unknown.

But what would that new topic be? I was in my 30s by then, and for the first time, I felt I had reached adulthood. I had many different jobs during my 20s, but this seemed like my first real academic position, and the first time I felt committed to a long-term job. I had just bought my first house. And I was in my first-ever long-term relationship with Lene Jensen and headed toward our marriage the following year. That felt like adulthood to me, so I wondered, what does it feel like to other people, and when? What makes a person an adult?

"All philosophy is a biography of the philosopher," said Nietzsche, and that is often true for psychologists as well. We often choose our areas of research because they have some personal resonance. This is not always true. Before my research on emerging adulthood, I did a study of heavy metal fans, and even wrote a book about them (Arnett, 1996), although it is most definitely not my kind of music. But this question of what makes a person an adult definitely was inspired by my own

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experience and by applying the question of what it means to become adult to myself, then to others.

From the beginning, though, the question was attractive to me for more than just its personal relevance. I realized immediately that this was just the kind of question I had been looking for. I had long been interested in the cultural and historical context of human development, and this was a question that every culture addressed in some way and that had been answered in changing ways throughout history (Arnett, 1998). It also seemed to be a question that no one else had really asked in the social sciences. I soon discovered that there was a large body of research in sociology on the transition to adulthood (e.g., Hogan & Astone, 1986), but all of this research was based on the assumption that reaching adulthood could be defined by specific events, mainly leaving home, finishing education, marriage, and parenthood. But neither sociologists nor psychologists had asked people how they think about adulthood or what it means to them to make the transition to adulthood. So I set out to do so.

I began by interviewing people in their 30s, assuming that they would have first felt fully adult in their 30s, as I did. However, it took only a few interviews for me to learn that for them, feeling adult had first occurred sometime during their 20s. I had been a little slow! So, I turned my attention to the 20s.

It was important to me from the beginning to base this research on people who were diverse in socioeconomic background. Although I did a quick early study on my college students (Arnett, 1994), as I pursued research in this area I did not want to interview only college students because they do not represent their age-group well, especially the ones who are students at large residential universities like the University of Missouri. Also, I wanted to include people throughout the 20s, not just the 18- to 23-year-olds who mainly populate residential college campuses. Instead, I obtained graduation rolls from local high schools and had research assistants look through the phone book to find people who might still be around from 3 to 10 years later (this was the pre-Facebook era). Eventually, in this first study, I interviewed 140 young people aged 20–28 in mid-Missouri who were highly diverse in socioeconomic background and educational attainment (see Arnett, 1998, for sample details).

The first surprise in the results of this research was in the criteria they viewed as most important for reaching adulthood. I had put together a questionnaire of about 30 possible criteria, based on the existing literature in psychology, sociology, and anthropology about the different ways that adulthood could be defined. But I could tell after just a few interviews that although I thought I had covered everything, I had missed the criterion that was of the utmost importance to most people: accepting responsibility for your actions. I added this to the questionnaire, and ever since it has been consistently on top as the criterion that people are most likely to regard as important for adulthood, in studies by me and many others, across ethnic groups, and socioeconomic status (SES) groups, in countries all over the world (Nelson & Luster, 2014).

It was exciting to discover something I had not expected and that was nowhere to be found in the literature on the transition

to adulthood. This experience was also a lesson to me about the crucial importance of using interviews as well as questionnaires. If I had based my findings only on the questionnaire I originally developed on the basis of the literature, I would never have discovered the one criterion for adulthood that turned out to be the most important.

I began my research in this area by being interested in conceptions of adulthood, but one question led to another, and soon I was interviewing my participants about topics ranging from family relationships to love and sex to religious beliefs to hopes for the future. After interviewing that initial sample of 140 in mid-Missouri, I had a research fellowship year in San Francisco in 1996–1997, where I interviewed mainly Asian Americans and African Americans aged 18–29, to add a greater range of cultural perspectives on how people experience their 20s. Research assistants in Los Angeles and New Orleans interviewed Latinos in their 20s, using my interview. By the end of the 1990s, I had obtained interviews and questionnaire data from a sample of about 300 persons aged 18–29, highly diverse in region, SES background, educational attainment, and ethnicity (sample details can be found in Arnett, 2004).

However, I had published very little of it, for two reasons. One was that this was a new area for me, and it was a new area all together, that no one had really entered before. I wanted to have confidence that I knew what I was talking about, based on a large and diverse sample, before I said anything about them. The second reason I hesitated was that I was not sure how to write about them developmentally or what to call them. Were they “late adolescents”? That did not seem to make sense. I had studied adolescents previously, in my research on adolescent risk behavior and my heavy metal research, and people in their 20s were a lot different. They were not going through puberty, they were not distracted by the peer whirlwind of secondary school, and most were not living with their parents, to name three examples.

Were they “young adults” then? That did not seem to fit, either. In developmental psychology, we have traditionally divided the adult years into young, middle, and late adulthood, and the people I interviewed did not seem to have reached a stable young adulthood that would last until midlife. On the contrary, their lives were often unstable and highly changeable. Especially from age 18 to 25, they were still considering their options, still in the process of moving toward making enduring choices, still in the process of setting up the structure of an adult life.

Thinking about them in historical context, and comparing them to young people of the same age 40 or 50 years previously, it seemed to me that the period from age 18 to 25 had changed so much in how it was experienced that the old developmental model of adolescence, then young adulthood, and then middle adulthood did not fit any more. Longer and more widespread education, the Sexual Revolution, broader opportunities for women, and later ages of entering marriage and parenthood—all of this combined to make the age period from 18 to 25 different than it had ever been before (Arnett, 2014). I concluded that what I was really witnessing was the birth of

a new life stage. People used to go directly from adolescence to a more or less settled young adulthood by their early 20s. Now there was adolescence, then this new life stage, and then a more settled young adulthood, beginning in the late 20s or early 30s. I decided to call the new life stage “emerging adulthood” to reflect the widespread feeling among people in this age period that they were still in the process of becoming adults, on their way to adulthood but not there yet.

Of course, there were, and are, many people in developmental psychology who argued influentially that stages are obsolete and that it would be more fruitful to focus on processes instead of stages (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006; Lerner, 2006). I see the point of their arguments, and I understand the limitation of stages. I agree that, during the 20th century, many stage theories of development were proposed, from Freud to Piaget to Erikson to Kohlberg to Levinson, that claimed to be universal and were soon shown not to be. But, to me, stages are useful heuristics. They can give us a helpful framework for understanding development as long we acknowledge that they are not *universal* (they depend on cultural and historical context) and they are not *uniform* (they do not occur in the same way for everyone, everywhere). Overreaching by previous stage theorists should not mean that we can never use life stages again as a way of conceptualizing human development.

I submitted a paper to *American Psychologist* outlining the theory of emerging adulthood, and it zipped through the review process in short order, perhaps because it had been incubating in my head for 6 years by then. The paper was published in 2000, and almost immediately it was widely embraced. I think one of the reasons the idea was taken up so quickly in psychology and other fields is that many people had an intuitive sense, from doing research on 18- to 25-year-olds or teaching college students or experiencing it themselves, that this age period had changed dramatically, and they were looking for a new term and a new theory to articulate what they already knew, and to give it a name.

Ultimately the worth of a theory must be judged by its capacity to generate research, and by that measure, the theory of emerging adulthood has validated the usefulness of thinking of development in terms of life stages and of thinking of the period from the late teens through the 20s as a new life stage (Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011). As of May 2014, that first article sketching the theory in *American Psychologist* (Arnett, 2000) has been cited over 4,500 times, according to googlescholar.com, and it continues to be cited at a rate of 50–100 times per month. The idea of a distinct life stage from the late teens through the 20s and the term emerging adulthood have inspired numerous research projects and the development of a community of scholars represented by the SSEA (www.ssea.org).

The Development of a Field of Emerging Adulthood

One of the people who read and was inspired by that 2000 *American Psychologist* paper was Jennifer Tanner, who at that

time was a graduate student at Penn State. She had been studying people in their 20s and looking for a theory that would help her make sense of her findings. When she read the *American Psychologist* paper, she believed she had found what she was looking for. She immediately contacted me, and we soon began a long-term collaboration to build a field of emerging adulthood.

Jenn spotted a program through the American Psychological Association (APA), which sponsored small conferences on innovative research topics. We applied for it and got the grant and that allowed us to hold a conference on emerging adulthood in 2003. We invited 10 people to come and give talks who were well known in their areas. Eventually, an edited book was published by APA with a chapter by each of the speakers (Arnett & Tanner, 2006). Instead of inviting only the speakers to the conference, we decided to open it up to anyone else who wanted to come. We did not make much of an effort to publicize it, but nevertheless, 75 people came.

Buoyed by the success of this first conference, we decided soon afterward to hold a second conference on emerging adulthood, this time allowing submissions instead of limiting the program to invited speakers. We held it in Miami in 2005, and 150 people came. Once again, we felt encouraged by the response so afterward we planned a third biennial conference, then a fourth, then a fifth, and it grew each time. By the end of the fifth conference, Jenn and I thought that there was enough of a community of scholars studying emerging adulthood to establish an SSEA. I had already been in touch with several publishers in recent years about starting an emerging adulthood journal. Now it seemed like it was time to start the new journal as part of establishing the SSEA. We signed a contract with Sage Publications, recruited Manfred van Dulmen as the first editor of the journal, and opened up membership in 2013 in the SSEA. Already there are over 400 members (www.ssea.org).

Most of the work in creating the SSEA was done by Jennifer Tanner. Jenn is the person who has been the driving force and main organizer of all six emerging adulthood conferences. Jenn designed and created the SSEA website assisted by her talented husband, Terrence Morash. Jenn also created the administrative and technological structure for the SSEA, which allowed us to begin membership. I may have provided the inspiration for the SSEA, but Jenn provided the perspiration.

Theory and Research, 20 Years Later

In the 10 years since the first conference, emerging adulthood has grown into a full-fledged field, with an SSEA (www.ssea.org), a journal (*Emerging Adulthood* [EA]; <http://eax.sagepub.com/>), and a forthcoming handbook published by Oxford University Press (Arnett, 2015). Summaries of research on emerging adulthood are available in the handbook and the early issues of the journal. Here, I will describe some of my own recent research.

In 2012, I had the opportunity to direct a national survey, the Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults. The sample of 1,009 18- to 29-year-olds was nationally representative of the United

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics, 2012 Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults (Ages 18–29).

Social Class Background (Mother's Educational Attainment)				
High School or Less 29%	Some College or Vocational School 34%	4-Year Degree or More 37%		
Ethnicity				
White 61%	Latino/Latina 17%	African American 12%	Asian American 5%	Other 5%
Geographical region				
West 36%	Midwest 20%	South 25%	Northeast 18%	

States and diverse in region, ethnicity, and social class background as represented by mother's education (Table 1). Diversity of social class background was especially important, as the issue of social class has been a contentious one in discussions of the theory of emerging adulthood. Several scholars have issued critiques of emerging adulthood theory that focus on social class, claiming the theory applies only to the college-educated middle class, and not to the working class (e.g., Bynner, 2005; Côté & Bynner, 2008; Hendry & Kloep, 2007). The Clark Poll made it possible to address some of these questions empirically, with a national sample, for the first time.

In this section, I will present an outline of the results from the Clark Poll, for each of the five features proposed in the theory of emerging adulthood: identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in between, and possibilities/optimism. For each feature, I will also present a qualitative illustration from my initial 300 interviews (Arnett, 2004, 2014).

Identity Explorations

Although identity development has been traditionally associated with adolescence, as proposed in Erikson's (1950) theory, today it may be more prominent in emerging adulthood than in adolescence. Although identity explorations may begin in adolescence, it is during the emerging adult years that identity issues reach peak intensity because it is during this time that people move toward making enduring choices in love, work, and ideology (Arnett, 2004, 2014). In the Clark Poll, 77% of 18- to 29-year-olds agreed (somewhat or strongly) that "This is a time of life for finding out who I really am."

My initial interview did not contain any questions about identity issues. Like most people in psychology at the time, I associated identity issues with adolescence, following Erikson's (1950) theory. However, I found that identity-related statements were frequently made in response to other questions, such as this young woman's answer to the question of how she expected her life to be 10 years from now (Arnett, 2014):

Every day that I wake up, I learn something new about myself. Learning about yourself is a really emotional thing because it's like you wake up one day and you think you're living the way you want to live, and then the next day you get up and it's like, "Wait a minute, I'm doing everything wrong. I don't know who I am." And you have to be willing to take that step forward and

say, okay, I'm going to get to know myself no matter if it's painful or if it's going to make me happy. I have to dig deep within myself and figure out who I am. And this is a learning process every day.

—Nicole, 25-year-old African American, receptionist and medical assistant

Although it has been claimed by critics of emerging adulthood theory that only young people in the middle class and above have the luxury of pondering identity choices (Hendry & Kloep, 2007), in the Clark Poll there were no social class differences in agreement with the statement above (for a full statistical analysis of this and other poll items presented here, see Arnett & Walker, 2014). Nicole herself was the eldest daughter of a poor single mother and grew up in what she called "the ghetto" in Oakland, California.

Instability

The emerging adulthood years are a time of great instability; it may be the most unstable stage of the life span. In the Clark Poll, 83% of 18- to 29-year-olds agreed with the statement, "This time of my life is full of changes."

The instability of emerging adulthood is driven partly by identity explorations. As emerging adults explore different possibilities in love, education, and work, they make frequent changes. Love during the years 18–29 usually means making and breaking relationships with a series of partners. Education also commonly involves changes. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), only 59% of the persons who enter a 4-year college have graduated 6 years later (NCES, 2013). Dropout rates for 2-year colleges are even higher. As for work, according to the U.S. Department of Labor (2012), the average American holds 8 different jobs during the years 18–29.

The life of Steve, age 23, illustrates emerging adult instability and its connection to identity explorations in love, work, and ideology (Arnett, 2014). He entered college after high school but dropped out after a few semesters, feeling "kind of burnt out on it." Now, he waits on tables at a local restaurant, and his work future is unclear. One moment he says, "I'll probably end up being an engineer. My dad's an engineer, so I'll probably end up doing that. I'm really good at math and I know I could pick up on it real easy." Yet when I ask him a few minutes later

what he sees himself doing 10 years from now, engineering has nothing to do with it. “I’ll probably be owning a restaurant, or in some kind of management position, because I’ve been in the restaurant business for eight years so I know a lot about it.” But right now he is doing little to bring this dream to fruition, unless you count the job as a waiter. “I’m just kind of ‘treading water,’ as my mom says.”

With regard to love, Steve has been involved for about 2 months with a waitress at the restaurant where he works, but he is in no hurry to get married. In his view, there is a lot less pressure to get married by a certain age today than in the past. “Any more nowadays, it’s not even really an issue. If it happens it happens and if not, not. It’s not as big of an issue as it was like in the ‘50s.” He’s still not sure what qualities he would like to find in the person he marries. “I haven’t really narrowed it down yet. I guess when I find her I’ll know.”

Steve is as uncertain and unsettled in his beliefs as he is in love and work. As he was growing up, his parents made little attempt to teach him a set of religious beliefs, and he seems to have reached few conclusions. Reincarnation seems plausible to him. “I always thought that there was obviously reincarnation.” But as he talks further, it turns out that none of his beliefs are really so “obvious” after all. “I mean, none of us really know. There’s no proof positive to any of it. You have to have the facts and really I have none so I can’t really make an educated guess yet.” Thus, in love, work, and ideology his life is unstable, but in ways that seem likely to be resolved once his identity is clarified.

Self-Focus

Emerging adulthood is a self-focused age, in the sense that it is a time of life when people have relatively few obligations to others. Children and adolescents must respond to the daily demands of parents, siblings, and school authorities. Most adults have a network of obligations in family and work roles that structure their daily lives. Emerging adults have obligations, too, to family, friends, and perhaps educational authorities and employers, but less so than at other life stages. In the Clark Poll, 71% agreed with the statement, “This is a time of my life for focusing on myself.”

For example, this was one young woman’s response to a question about whether she expected to get married in the years to come (Arnett, 2014):

I think I want to get more in touch with myself. I want to be a little selfish for a while, and selfishness and marriage don’t seem to go hand in hand. I’d like to be able to experience as much as I can before I get married, just so I can be well-rounded.

—Rosa, 24-year-old Mexican-Chinese American

Although Rosa calls herself “selfish,” and some scholars have agreed that this term accurately describes today’s emerging adults (Twenge, 2013), she is not, and they are not (Arnett, 2013). It is not “selfish” to devote the years of emerging

adulthood to self-exploration and independent decision making, it is wise. The chance for this opportunity is unlikely to return in later life stages. Being self-focused is temporary for nearly all emerging adults. By age 30, the majority of them enter stable commitments of marriage (or a long-term partnership), parenthood, and work (Arnett, 2014).

Furthermore, most emerging adults place a high value on an ethic of community (Arnett, Ramos, & Jensen 2001). In the Clark Poll, 86% agreed with the statement, “It is important to me to have a job that does some good in the world.” Today’s emerging adults are also more likely than in the past to take part in community service. In the annual survey of college freshmen conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute, over 80% report involvement in volunteer work during the past year, the highest rate ever (HERI, 2013). So, most emerging adults are self-focused without being selfish.

Feeling In Between

Emerging adulthood has been proposed as a stage in-between adolescence and a stable adulthood, and it feels that way to many emerging adults, too, like a time of being on the way to adulthood but not there yet. This topic has received considerable research attention since the theory of emerging adulthood was proposed (see Nelson & Luster, 2014, for a review). Consistently, across many countries, when emerging adults are asked “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?” the most common response is neither yes nor no, but “in some ways yes, in some ways no.” In the Clark Poll, 45% of 18- to 29-year-olds chose the “yes and no” response, and another 5% responded “no.” Unlike the items in the Clark Poll pertaining to the other features, this one was strongly skewed by age, with 61% of 18- to 21-year-olds choosing “in some ways yes, in some ways no,” declining to 39% among 26- to 29-year-olds (Arnett & Walker, 2014).

Because for most people today the journey to adulthood is long and winding, emerging adulthood tends to be experienced as a period of being in between adolescence and adulthood. As 20-year-old Leslie puts it, “There’s not a break and then you become an adult. It’s just a long, gradual process. I’m more of an adult than I was when I was 15 or 17, but in 5 years I’ll probably be more of an adult than I am now” (Arnett, 2014).

Often, the sense of being in between occurs when emerging adults continue to rely on their parents in some ways so that their attainment of self-sufficiency is incomplete. For example, Malinda, 21, says she feels she has “somewhat” reached adulthood (Arnett, 2014). On one hand, she takes responsibility for herself. “I think I behave responsibly. Now it’s only me that I account to. No one’s checking up on me and anything I do has got to be up to me.” But on the other hand, she does not yet make her decisions independently. “My parents are nearby and I still depend on them for some things. I don’t have them do things for me, but I ask for their advice.”

For other emerging adults, they have become entirely self-sufficient to all appearances, yet there is still some part of them

that just does not feel adult. Terrell, 23, gives a definite impression of adult maturity (Arnett, 2014). He has a promising career with a computer software company, he is entirely independent of his parents, and he seems to have a clear idea of who he is and what he wants out of life. Yet when I asked him whether he had reached adulthood, he replied “Not absolutely, because I still sometimes get up in the morning and say, ‘Good Lord! I’m actually a grown up!’ ‘Cause I still feel like a kid. I’ve done things like just got up one morning and said, you know, ‘I’m going to Mexico’ and just get up and go. And I should have been doing other things.” For Terrell, it is his self-focused freedom that makes him feel incompletely adult, and this is something that is likely to change once he takes on the full range of adult responsibilities.

Possibilities/Optimism

Emerging adulthood is a time of struggle, for most people, across social classes. In the Clark Poll, 72% agreed that “this time of my life is stressful,” and 56% agreed that “I often feel anxious.” There was no difference in responses to these items by social class background (Arnett & Walker, 2014).

Yet emerging adulthood is also a time of remarkable optimism. Nearly 9 of 10, 18- to 29-year-olds in the Clark Poll (89%) agreed with the statement, “I am confident that someday I will get what I want out of life.” Similarly, 83% agreed that “At this time of my life, anything is possible.” They also compared their prospects favorably to their parents’ lives. Seventy-seven percent affirmed that “I believe that, overall, my life will be better than my parents’ lives have been.” For the most part, these responses were consistent across social class backgrounds (Arnett & Walker, 2014). The only exception was that, for the latter item, in which they compared their futures to their parents’ lives, emerging adults from lower social class backgrounds were *more likely* than their peers from higher social class backgrounds to agree that their lives would be better than their parents’ lives had been.

Even many emerging adults whose current lives seem unpromising believe that things will work out well for them in the long run. Bob, 24, has no current love partner and says “I hate my job!” yet he expects that his life will surpass his parents’ lives (Arnett, 2014).

Better economically. Better personally. I just think by the time my parents reached my age, they’d already run into some barricades that prevented them from getting what they wanted, personally and family-wise. And so far, I’ve avoided those things, and I don’t really see those things in my life. I don’t like my job. I’m frustrated about the lack of relationships with females. But in general, I think I’m headed in the right direction.

An important reason for their optimism about the future is that many of them have received more education than their parents did (Arnett, 2014). They believe their extended education will lead in turn to a better life, occupationally and financially. They perceive, correctly, the strong relation that exists between education and future income as well as occupational success (Pew

Research Center, 2014). Emerging adults may not know the statistics, but they have a strong sense of the relation between education and future success in life. Gary, 23, who is working on a degree in business advertising, said “My father, the only thing he had was a high school education. He never went to college. And he worked his way up from the bottom. I mean, completely got his hands dirty and worked his way all the way up—took him 30 years to do it. Me, I don’t see myself being where he’s at in 30 years. I’m going to do a lot better than my parents, ‘cause I’m only going upwards” (Arnett, 2014).

The rise in participation in higher education has been especially striking for young women, and many of them are aware of how their opportunities are much greater compared to women of the past. Amelia, 24, a marine scientist, reflected “I think for me, being a woman, I’ve definitely grown up with a lot more opportunities than my mom ever did” (Arnett, 2014).

Even many emerging adults with parents who have had considerable financial and career success believe their lives will be better because they will have healthier personal relationships. For example, Mason, 26, in talking about how he expects his life to be better than his parents’ lives, said “I don’t think about it so much financially, I think about it more from a personal standpoint. The fact that they got divorced, I consider that as not being successful and therefore I obviously hope that does not happen to me. So in that respect, I expect it to be better” (Arnett, 2014).

Where to Now? The International and Multimethod Future of the SSEA

Now that the SSEA has been formed, where do we go from here? That question will be answered by the elected leadership, and by all SSEA members, in the years to come. But let me offer three ideas about where I would like to see the field go.

First, I would like to see the SSEA continue to expand its international scope. Emerging adulthood is an international phenomenon. All over the world, similar demographic changes have taken place over the past half-century that have contributed to the rise of emerging adulthood, specifically, more people obtaining more postsecondary education and training for longer than ever before and steadily later ages of entering marriage and parenthood (Arnett, 2011). At the same time, the forms emerging adulthood takes are likely to vary across countries and cultures. In Europe, for example, the economic crisis of the past decade has led to youth unemployment rates of over 50% in some southern European countries, which is likely to shape the experience of young people during emerging adulthood and beyond. In China and India, the forms emerging adulthood takes are likely to be considerably less individualistic than in the West, given the strong traditions of collectivism and family obligation in those countries (Nelson & Chen, 2007; Seiter & Nelson, 2011; Zhong & Arnett, 2014). One of the most exciting horizons for emerging adulthood research in the decades to come will be to explore the culture diversity of experiences, both across and within countries.

The SSEA can lead the way in promoting emerging adulthood as an international field. First, it is important to have international diversity in the leadership of the society, including elected offices as well as committees. Second, the SSEA should promote programs that help scholars from around the world to participate in the society. Thanks to the support of the Jacobs Foundation, we have Travel Awards to the SSEA conferences that are reserved for scholars from outside North America. We also have a special membership rate for people from developing countries (see www.ssea.org).

Another theme that I hope we can continue to promote as we develop the SSEA is that it should be open to a wide range of methods: quantitative, qualitative, experimental, and narrative methods are all legitimate ways of learning about emerging adults, and we should value all these methods and more, in the EA journal and in our conferences. For me, personally, I have used many methods in my investigations of emerging adulthood, and each method has taught me something different about them. I hope we can see these diverse methods as complementary rather than competing ways of knowing.

Third, I hope the SSEA will be open to the contributions that can be made by young scholars. The field of emerging adulthood has attracted a wealth of talented, energetic young scholars from all over the world, and it is important to give them key responsibilities in the building of the organization. Toward this end, each of the committees being formed in the SSEA has an emerging scholar co-chair (current graduate student or within 5 years of PhD) working alongside a more senior committee chair. This year we are forming Topic Networks to connect scholars with common interests in specific areas of emerging adulthood, and these, too, will have both a chair and an emerging scholar co-chair (see www.ssea.org).

Conclusion: One Stage, Many Paths

The field of emerging adulthood is off to a promising start, but there is still much to be learned about development during the years 18 to 29. In particular, there is likely to be immense cultural diversity in how people experience these years. For example, in a sample of college and noncollege 18- to 26-year-olds in India, “accept responsibility for your actions” was found to rank high as a criterion for adulthood, as it has in Western studies but equally high was “learn always to have good control over your emotions” and family responsibilities such as “capable of keeping a family physically safe” (Seiter & Nelson, 2011). In Europe, substantial differences between north, south, east, and west have been found, in areas such as living with parents, unemployment rates, and having a “gap year” between secondary school and tertiary education (Douglass, 2005, 2007).

The five features I have proposed for emerging adulthood are intended to be not the end of the conversation about what occurs developmentally during ages 18–29 but the beginning. Emerging adulthood can be said to exist wherever there is a gap of at least a few years between the end of puberty and the entry into stable adult roles in love and work. Thus, it exists today

across developed countries and is growing in developing countries all over the world (Arnett, 2011). However, the forms it takes are likely to vary across cultural and economic contexts. Delineating these forms is the exciting prospect that awaits researchers on emerging adulthood in the 21st century.

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