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Emerging adulthood: Defining the life stage and its developmental tasks

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Emerging Adulthood:

Defining the Life Stage and its Developmental Tasks

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to my Mom, Sarah Pierson. You are my strongest ally, my greatest

admirer, and the head of my parade. You believe in me when I don't believe in myself.

Seeing my image reflected in your loving regard is the most powerful gift I have ever been

given. I am profoundly grateful for the energy you have devoted to learning who I am.

Daily, you inspire me to become the person I am meant to be.

Acknowledgments

I feel that I have been changed permanently and for the better by my experience in the

Clinical Mental Health Counseling program at JMU. In the light of my professors, whom I

deeply respect and admire, I have grown personally and professionally. In the nurturing soil

of my relationships, I have put down roots of enduring love and trust. I have been watered by

Spirit as I have learned to trust the Process. I am grateful to all of the people in my life who

have loved and supported me, from near and afar, through this time of transformation. I am

grateful to everyone who has co-created The Something Potluck. I am grateful to the teachers

who taught me profoundly challenging lessons that I could not have learned any other way. I

am grateful to my parents, my first and most powerful teachers, and to those who have

become my parents. I am grateful beyond words.

Table of Contents

Abstract

Emerging adulthood, as first proposed by Jeffrey Arnett, is the developmental period spanning ages 18-29. Culturally, it is a time of institutionalized role moratorium, especially in post-industrial societies. Emerging adults share the five characteristics of self-focus, instability, identity explorations, feeling in-between, and a sense of possibilities. Emerging adulthood takes place across racial, cultural, and socioeconomic groups, although the experience of emerging adulthood varies among groups. The present paper provides an overview of the theory of emerging adulthood and its expressions in American society. An original program called "The Something Potluck" is outlined in the Appendix. The Something Potluck is designed to facilitate the developmental growth of emerging adult participants by providing psychoeducation and community support.

So now I am older
than my mother and father
when they had their daughter
now, what does that say about me?

Oh, how could I dream of
such a selfless and true love?
Could I wash my hands of
just looking out for me?

Oh man, what I used to be
Oh man, oh my, oh me…

-Helplessness Blues (Pecknold, 2011)

Introduction

Oh man, what I used to be. Emerging adulthood is a time for looking back and looking forward, from the liminal vantage point of dwelling in-between defined life roles. No longer a child, not yet fully adult, the emerging adult inhabits a range of emotions and experiences. Freedom, fear, choice, possibility, independence, loneliness, relationship, exploration, groundlessness, identity formation, change. Emerging adulthood has been proposed as the most heterogeneous life stage by the researcher who first introduced emerging adults into the psychological literature as a developmental cohort to be studied, supported, and understood (Arnett, 2007a).

Jeffrey Arnett published the foundational article "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens Through the Twenties" in *American Psychologist* (2000). In the intervening years, Arnett has published widely on the topic of emerging adulthood. Many other professionals across disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, education, health sciences, geography, philosophy, journalism, law, and others, have joined the discussion (Arnett, 2007a). A google scholar search for "emerging adulthood" in March 2015 yields 315,000 articles, a Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood (ssea.org) has been formed, and the journal *Emerging Adulthood* has been in publication since March 2013. Arnett notes that his hope has been met for the formation of a new paradigm for understanding development from the late teens through the twenties (Arnett, 2015).

This paper discusses the essential components of emerging adulthood as described in the psychological literature and as portrayed and experienced in popular American culture. The first section is an overview of Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood, and

for that reason, it primarily references Arnett's work. The subsequent nine sections explore topics and themes that frequently arise in the literature on emerging adulthood. Taken together, the ten sections offer an overview of the developmental stage of emerging adulthood. This paper makes an argument for both the existence and the importance of emerging adulthood as a developmental stage. The reader will notice that some sections are written in a partly autobiographical style. I, the author of this paper, am an emerging adult myself, and throughout the paper I contribute my own experiences and perspectives to help bring the topics to life.

Below is a description of each of the ten sections of the present paper. Section one, "Playing Grown Up," introduces Arnett's five characteristics of emerging adulthood, which describe the subjective experiences of emerging adults. Section one also discusses the historical and cultural changes responsible for the rise of emerging adulthood as a commonly experienced life stage, and examines the cross-cultural applicability of emerging adulthood. Section two, "What is it about Twentysomethings?" challenges negative portrayals of emerging adults in the media and current culture and offers alternative perspectives. Section three, "Brain Changes," provides an overview of the neuroscience of emerging adulthood. Section four, "The Urban Tribe," explores the importance of friendships and social connections during emerging adulthood. Section five, "Family Matters," investigates the role that emerging adults' families of origin play during this developmental stage. Section six, "What do you do?" addresses the large topics of work and education during emerging adulthood. Section seven, "Love, etc." outlines patterns of romantic relationship (or lack thereof) in emerging adulthood, and discusses emerging adult conceptions of marriage. Section eight, "Digital Natives,"

explores media usage in emerging adulthood. Section nine, "Head Trips," provides an overview of risk and resilience factors in emerging adulthood. Section ten, "Learning to Meditate on a Volcano," sums up the developmental tasks that emerging adults are called upon to complete and conceptualizes "successful" emerging adult development.

The appendix to this paper is a handbook for "The Something Potluck," which is an original program I designed to support emerging adult development. This program is the applied portion of my EdS project. The Something Potluck, for twenty and thirty-something emerging adults, is a group-based program held once per month. Each of its ten sessions are focused on a theme relevant to emerging adult development. The ten sections in this paper provide the theme and title for each of The Something Potluck meetings, offering relevant theory and research for each meeting. The Something Potluck will be described in greater detail in the conclusion of this paper.

The present paper and The Something Potluck handbook provide the reader with both an overview of the important themes and topics of emerging adulthood and an experiential way to support emerging adults in their development.

Playing Grown Up

The theory of emerging adulthood, as first proposed by Jeffrey Arnett, covers the age range from 18-29, with a focus on ages 18-25. Arnett developed a theory of emerging adulthood centering around five characteristic features shared by the majority of people in this age group. Arnett derived these categories from his initial research, conducted in the 1990s: 300 interviews with young Americans ages 18-29 from a variety of ethnic, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds (Arnett, 2015). More recently, Arnett's research has included three national surveys of over 1,000 persons each: The Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults (2012), The Clark University Poll of Parents of Emerging Adults (2013), and the Clark University Poll of Established Adults (2014). More information about the specifics of these polls can be found on the Clark University website (Arnett, 2015). In the Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults (2012), a majority of emerging adults endorsed the five features (Arnett & Schwab). Arnett characterizes emerging adulthood as "The Age of": Identity explorations; Instability; Self-focus; Feeling in-between; and Possibilities (Arnett, 2015). I created the acronym SIIIP to assist with remembering the five characteristic features of emerging adulthood: Self-focus; Instability; In-between; Identity; Possibilities. One might think of an emerging adult taking a long "siiip" of life before making final commitments. These five characteristics are discussed in greater detail later in this section.

This paper discusses the experience of emerging adulthood in the American population. In the broader field of emerging adulthood, Arnett and other researchers have asserted the importance of conducting research that will allow for culturally specific

understanding of emerging adults around the world (Arnett, 2011; Arnett, 2014; Arnett, 2015). Arnett gives this blanket definition: "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" (2015, p. 26). This statement also applies across social contexts in the United States. Arnett intentionally focused his research on a cross-section of 18-29 year old participants, not just college students, in order to learn about the experience of emerging adulthood as fully as possible (2015).

In the descriptions of emerging adulthood found in this paper, the similarities and differences among emerging adults across socioeconomic and cultural lines are addressed at various points. The ways that emerging adulthood can vary according to privilege and culture is an intricate and important topic, and although it is a major focus of Arnett's research on emerging adulthood, addressing it sufficiently is beyond the scope of the present paper. Consequently, many of the vignettes about emerging adulthood presented in this paper generally fall within the experience of the American white middle class, except where noted otherwise.

Historical Contexts

"Coming of age" has changed in American society, dramatically and over a short time period. The most obvious change is in the age of marriage: from 1970 to 2010, the average age of marriage rose approximately 6 years for both men and women, going from 20 to 26 for women, and 22 (almost 23) to 28 for men (Arnett, 2015). Participation in higher education also increased, from 25% of the population to over 60% between 1950 and 2000. Women have come to outnumber men in higher education, where they were formerly in the minority (Arnett et al., 2011). Exploration and instability have become

normal from age 18 through the twenties, for both men and women. This exploratory

time often includes travel, education, experiments in work and love, and delayed entry

into what have historically been the markers of adulthood: marriage, children, and a

steady job (Arnett, 2006a; Arnett, 2015). This phenomenon of a wandering period does

have a precedent: in 19th century Europe, in the age of Romanticism, young men in

Germany were in the habit of taking a *Wanderschaft* (period of travel), and young British

men who could afford it would go on a "grand tour" or "continental tour" before settling

down. Young women, if they travelled, were trailed by a chaperone, (The movie *A Room

with a View* depicts this well) and only upper class young people were afforded such

luxuries as time to travel (Arnett, 2006a).

Today, many young people, both men and women, take it for granted that their

twenties are a time for trying out what they're interested in, and exploring life and

themselves before becoming responsible to a family or long-term boss. Arnett describes

an article on the internet called "Top Ten Things to do Before You Turn 30" (Brodrick,

2004), which include: "See the world. It's much easier to do when you're 22 and

footloose than 35 with two bawling babies in your backpack" and "Do volunteer

work. You may be broke, but you can give your sweat and earnestness to a cause in

which you believe." The article ends with an encouragement to emerging adults: "My

point is to take advantage of what you have: energy, idealism, enthusiasm, a willingness

to experiment, a lack of encumbrances, a desire to learn and grow" (Arnett, 2006a,

p.3). This is an impressive list of traits, suggesting that emerging adults have something

powerful going for them, and something important to offer the world. These growth-

oriented and idealistic traits define in large part what the period of emerging adulthood is all about. Emerging adults may not have much money, but they have a lot of heart.

The Four Revolutions. Young people today are doing something new and strange. How did we get here? Arnett proposes that there were four significant revolutions in American society which laid the groundwork for the emergence of a period of emerging adulthood. These are: the Technology Revolution, the Sexual Revolution, the Women's Movement, and the Youth Movement (Arnett, 2015).

The technology revolution took place long before the rise of the Internet: this revolution refers to the shift from an economy based in manufacturing to one based in providing services and information. The labor market changed as machines began to do the work that was formerly done by well-paid workers in factories. As a result, "using information" has become a more marketable job skill in the current economy than "making things," and it takes tertiary education to gain these necessary skills. Looking at the 6-year increase in average age of marriage, we can accurately assume that many young people are spending some of those years obtaining education. Additionally, many emerging adults choose to finish their education before making subsequent commitments (Arnett, 2015).

The sexual revolution, catalyzed in 1964 by the invention of "the Pill," began a change in sexual mores in the United States which is still underway. In practical terms, widespread access to birth control made premarital sex an option in a way it hadn't been when the risk of conceiving a child outside of marriage was higher. At the same time, morality around sexuality in young people began to shift. This change was pronounced in some sectors of the population and less impactful in others. Overall, the drift was

toward greater acceptance that sex outside of marriage is likely to happen for most people between the teenage years and the twenties. The pressure to marry early may be diminished when sex is an option outside of marriage (Arnett, 2015).

The women's movement in the 1960s opened up new opportunities for women to picture their lives separately from the identity a husband would bring. With a suddenly expanded range of job options, and ready access to higher education, women could now achieve success and autonomy in work and life on their own. Marriage is certainly still a goal for most emerging adult women, but marrying early and having children as quickly as possible is no longer as attractive to many women as obtaining an education, starting a career, and spending time pursuing emerging adult dreams (Arnett, 2015).

Finally, the youth movement in the 1960s and 70s changed conceptions about adulthood and youth. Prior to that time, there was value and prestige placed on entering adulthood soon after adolescence. Marrying, having children, and working to support a family were all markers of successful adulthood. Emerging adults today place value on freedom and exploration, and especially on "figuring themselves out" before committing to a lifetime with one partner and a couple of small people to care for. Many emerging adults are also aware of the sacrifices that tend to accompany family life, although they also look forward to the happiness and stability that a family can provide. Regardless of the pros and cons of marriage, making choices closes some of the doors of seemingly unlimited possibility (Arnett, 2015). Emerging adults sometimes prefer to keep doors open, just in case (Henig & Henig, 2012).

Who experiences emerging adulthood?

As previously discussed, emerging adulthood can be considered to be the period of time between 18-25, conservatively, or 18-29 (and even into the 30s.) "Nothing magical happens at age 25 to end it," writes Arnett. Instead, the shift toward making enduring lifelong decisions tends to happen over time, on a continuum of increasing adulthood (Arnett, 2015, p. 7). The end of emerging adulthood comes with making most or all of these major decisions, and a self-conception of feeling like an adult in a number of key ways. The conclusion of the emerging adulthood period is discussed in greater detail in the last section of this paper.

Another important question about emerging adulthood which has been the topic of debate, and has drawn some criticism of Arnett's theory, is whether emerging adulthood can truly be considered a developmental stage when it doesn't seem to apply universally to all young people. In a book called *Debating Emerging Adulthood,* Arnett and Tanner write back and forth with two other scholars, Kloep and Hendry, about this question (2011). The key objection raised is that emerging adulthood seems to be experienced in its fullest iteration, including identity exploration and role moratorium, only by young people whose social supports are strong enough to allow them an extended period of self-focus. There is truth to the claims Kloep and Hendry make that certain racial and ethnic groups participate more extensively in emerging adulthood explorations than others. Low socioeconomic status is also a predictor for whether someone will seemingly "skip" emerging adulthood and move directly into adult roles like parenting and household-supporting income generation. Also, certain life events, like an unexpected pregnancy, alter emerging adulthood regardless of socioeconomic class (Arnett et al., 2011).

Arnett's response to these points is several fold. First, he points out that there are no significant differences in the subjective experiences of emerging adults, as measured by the five features, even when circumstances may require them to take on adult roles. Therefore, although the *experiences* of emerging adults often vary by SES, "there were no significant differences in any of the five features by SES" in the Clark poll (Arnett, 2015, p. 19). Secondly, Arnett points out that he sees the five characteristics of emerging adulthood to be cultural, not universal. He expects that different cultures, including various cultures in the United States, will have emerging adult periods that are shaped by different values (Arnett et al., 2011; Arnett, 2014; Arnett, 2015). His five characteristics are distilled from interviews with Americans aged 18-29 over the last 20 years, which suggest that they are generally representative of American emerging adults. Additionally, Arnett points out that the features of emerging adulthood are distinctive, but not unique. This means that while each of the five characteristics might not apply equally as fully to every emerging adult, those characteristics are more likely to be found during emerging adulthood, in more individuals, than in other periods of the lifespan. Correspondingly, the five characteristics are not unique to emerging adulthood, and can certainly be experienced during other times of the life span. They are just not as likely to be experienced with the same intensity and pervasiveness (Arnett et al., 2011). Finally, Arnett makes a plea for developmental stages as useful heuristics, stating that "[o]vereaching by previous stage theorists should not mean that we can never use life stages again as a way of conceptualizing human development" (Arnett, 2014, p. 157). Arnett asserts that conceptualizing emerging adulthood as a developmental stage has usefulness that outweighs its limitations.

The Five Characteristics of Emerging Adulthood

      The age of identity exploration. Erikson's theory of human development across

the lifespan proposes that the adolescent years are for identity exploration, with the

central tasks being to move from role confusion to a sense of identity. However, Erikson

also allows an exception to his theory. He wrote that *prolonged adolescence* is a

possibility, and that industrialized societies often allow young people a *psychosocial*

moratorium during which they are free to experiment with roles in order to find where

they fit into society (1950; 1968). Arnett argues that this psychosocial moratorium now

applies to many more young people than Erikson first described (2015). Furthermore, the

next stage after adolescence in Erikson's theory is "young adulthood," which spans ages

20-45, and posits "isolation vs. intimacy" as the central psychological task. In forming

his theory, Arnett observed that identity formation and intimacy are both tasks of a cohort

that is neither adolescent nor adult. Arnett sought to define this middle group, and the

theory of emerging adulthood came into being (Henig, 2010). The identity explorations

of emerging adulthood are conceptualized as spanning love, work, and worldviews, as

well as general notions of how to construct a life (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, 2015).

      Arnett distinguishes the identity explorations that take place in adolescence from

those in emerging adulthood by pointing out the differing degree of seriousness. Work in

adolescence is mostly focused on beginning to learn responsibility, and on earning money

for recreational expenses. Love in adolescence can also be more temporary and

exploratory: who do I like right now? By contrast, work in emerging adulthood gains a

degree of seriousness and identity-relevance as the emerging adult begins to envision the

remainder of life, and how work might fit into that larger picture. Similarly, romantic

relationships in emerging adulthood become identity-defining, as partners begin to choose each other for enduring reasons like values, goals, and potential for long term satisfaction (Arnett, 2015). At the same time, this move from the transient and tentative explorations of adolescence to the serious and identity-focused commitments of late emerging adulthood tend to take place over the course of emerging adulthood. As a result, many of emerging adults' early explorations are often mainly for fun and experience. Arnett cites a phrase common among present day emerging adults: YOLO, meaning You Only Live Once. Try things now, before it's too late (Arnett, 2015). A phrase my friends and I used to say was: "for real-skis or for fun-skis? (the second part of the word is pronounced like the downhill snowsport). This meant, am I serious about the thing I'm doing (this job, this possible crush, this outfit), or am I just messing around, trying to see what fits?

The Age of Instability. Looking at a few demographic features of emerging adulthood quickly paints a picture of the amount of change inherent in this life stage. How often emerging adults move, how many jobs they hold, and changes in romantic partnership are all core identity components that are often in flux. There is a saying, "If you can learn to meditate on a volcano, you can meditate anywhere." I have come to believe that one of the central tasks of emerging adulthood is learning how to become comfortable with being uncomfortable. The flexibility, humor, patience, faith, and courage that it takes to master this skill is significant. I believe in the hard work that emerging adults are doing, and in the concept of emerging adulthood, because the ability to be adaptable in the face of change indicates psychological resilience and maturity. Theories of ego development and the maturation process of cognitive

structures over the course of emerging adulthood support this concept (Cote, 2006; Tanner, 2006). Emerging adults are gaining competence at important lifelong skills as they learn to take what each day brings and do something with it, with as much optimism as they can muster.

Arnett speaks about the "Plan with a capital P" that emerging adults must make and then constantly adapt as circumstances or desires change (2015). Change my major, change the plan. Quit the job I thought I would love but actually hate, change the plan. Break up with the partner I moved across the country to be with, change the plan. Discover that my closest friendships have become stale and uninspiring, change the plan. This plan-changing strengthens the muscle of flexibility and resilience. Each change also helps the emerging adult to define both what he or she wants and does not want. Changes in the plan relate to changes to identity, which makes emerging adulthood both an exciting and terrifying time of life (Arnett, 2015).

The Age of Self-Focus. Some of the most common complaints levied against emerging adults are that they are self-centered, primarily concerned with their own happiness, and not responsible enough to commit to doing something they don't want to do. Addressing these concerns is one of the key reasons why defining emerging adulthood as a life stage is an important exercise. This question, from the New York Time article "What is it about Twentysomethings," gets to the heart of the issue: "Is emerging adulthood a rich and varied period for self-discovery, as Arnett says it is? Or is it just another term for self-indulgence?" (Henig, 2010). Another cohort that has been accused of self-indulgence are adolescents, who were seen as lazy and rebellious until society's conception of them changed. Now, adolescents are recognized as undergoing

important developmental growth and their needs are addressed by the systems surrounding them. Correspondingly, Arnett argues that "Twenty-somethings are engaged in work, too, even if it looks as if they are aimless or failing to pull their weight" (Henig, 2010, p. 14). The self-focus in emerging adulthood, then, could be viewed as "normal, healthy, and temporary" (Arnett, 2015, p. 14), and even, perhaps, wise and well-timed.

Emerging adulthood is likely to be the only time during the lifespan when an individual's main responsibility is to him or herself. Sequentially over the lifespan, responsibility is to: parents, school, spouse, children, aging parents. In between "school" and "spouse" is the period of emerging adulthood, where commitments to tertiary education are voluntary and flexible, and emerging adults have the time and energy to form the kinds of lives they might want to inhabit. Arnett also points out that making decisions about changes to "the Plan" necessitates self-focus, because these decisions shape identity, and nobody else can make them for the emerging adult. Arnett (2015) describes the self-focus of emerging adulthood eloquently [italics added]:

> By focusing on themselves, emerging adults *develop skills at daily living*, gain a better understanding of *who they are and what they want from life,* and begin to *build a foundation* for their adult lives. The goal of their self-focusing is to *learn to stand alone as a self-sufficient person,* but they do not see self-sufficiency as a permanent state. Rather, they view it as a *necessary step before committing themselves* to enduring relationships with others, in love and work. (p. 14)

This quote suggests that self-focus during emerging adulthood is planful rather than selfish. Emerging adults want to learn how to live well, who they are, what they want from life, and how to take care of themselves. They want to learn this so that the

foundation they build for adult life will be strong and tested by experience. Ideally, only when this foundation and exploration feels sturdy and complete will the emerging adult commit to others in work, lifelong partnership, and family (Arnett, 2015).

   The Age of Feeling In-Between. The quality of feeling in-between can be summed up by the question Arnett has asked hundreds of emerging adults: "Do feel that you have reached adulthood?" 45% of emerging adults endorse the "in-between" answer: "In some ways yes, in some ways no." One reason this number might not be higher is that the survey was administered to emerging adults from age 18-29, so more of the younger emerging adults are likely to feel in-between than those who are a bit older, and feel closer to adulthood (Arnett, 2015). Emerging adults occupy an in-between, liminal space, often defying labels and categories. Emerging adults have left their families of origin but have not yet started families of their own; they move frequently, and may not feel geographical identity with their current place of residence; many of them are in dating relationships and even cohabiting, but fewer have made the commitment of marriage; many have started college, but have not yet finished; and most obviously, they are neither teenagers nor "real adults" (Arnett, 2015). In anthropology, liminal space is understood to be one of the characteristics of rites of passage. It is a time when the old identity is shed and a new one is being formed, but for the duration of the rite of passage, the individual is in limbo: "betwixt and between" (Turner, 1995, p. 95). This is a sacred, sensitive, challenging time. Perhaps the emerging adults in our midst would appreciate the support of elders as they undergo their rites of passage, becoming who they are meant to become to the best of their abilities.

The Age of Possibilities. Many emerging adults were raised with the belief that they could be whatever they wanted to be when they grew up, if they tried hard enough. Some emerging adults feel the disappointment of realizing that this might not be completely accurate - that they would have needed to study science, for instance, if they wanted to become an astronaut (Henig & Henig, 2012). At the same time, many emerging adults still feel a real sense of possibility when they look ahead to their lives, and on many levels, this sense is accurate. Having not yet chosen a career or partner, the explorations of emerging adulthood can open doors to new, possible lives. Until a choice is made, the possibilities still remain open (Arnett, 2015). On the other hand, this sense of possibility can be intoxicating, and some emerging adults may become addicted to the high and unwilling to close doors.

In a study done at MIT, undergraduates played a computer game involving "shrinking doors." The setup is that there are three rooms with doors in between them; participants have a limited number of "clicks," and can either click on doors (which lead to other rooms but do not pay) or rooms themselves (which pay per click, from three to fourteen cents.) Participants tend to find the room which pays the best, and begin clicking there. As this continues, however, the doors to the room begin to shrink, and clicking on them is the only way to keep them open. Participants will click a door to keep it open even when there is no payoff, and the rooms the doors lead to are less valuable in terms of potential gain. In a different version of the study, participants would click to keep doors from shrinking even when they had to pay to do so. This study suggests that there is something appealing to emerging adults about keeping options

open, even when what they already have is better than the alternative (Henig & Henig, 2012).

Another very real impact of the possibilities inherent in emerging adulthood is for those emerging adults who grew up in adverse circumstances. Emerging adulthood offers these young people the chance to leave home and build a different future for their adult lives. Arnett has interviewed many young people who describe exactly this opportunity, and who have taken advantage of it. Section nine discusses this topic in greater detail (Arnett, 2015).

What is it About Twentysomethings?

The title of this section comes from the New York Times article by the same name (Henig, 2010). The tone of this title is both perplexed and disapproving, reflecting the sentiments of many adults in this country as they observe the emerging adult generation. In her article, Henig describes a *New Yorker* cover that depicts the meme of faltering twentysomethings: a young man hangs his framed PhD diploma on the wall in his childhood bedroom, obviously moving back home, as his concerned parents look in from the doorway (2010). Recently published book titles are harsh enough to make an emerging adult wince: *Generation Me*, *The Dumbest Generation*, *Slouching Toward Adulthood*. From the perspective of a twentysomething, these unsupportive depictions feel like being heckled from the sidelines of a marathon: "You have the wrong shoes! You didn't train hard enough! You're never going to make it!" These books seem to unfairly undercut the efforts of many emerging adults who are trying hard, most days, to make choices that will lead to success in love, work, and overall well being.

A few of the primary complaints against emerging adults, as are reflected in the titles above, are that they are self-centered, media saturated, and unwilling to accept adult responsibilities. Jeffrey Arnett not only introduced emerging adulthood as a developmental stage, he is also one of the most vocal defenders of emerging adults. He writes, "I have devoted part of my work to refuting the false portrayals of emerging adulthood and seeking to present a more research-based and more valid view of their lives" (Arnett, 2007, p. 24). One of the points he makes, directly addressing fears that emerging adults refuse to grow up, is that by age 30 most emerging adults have entered adult roles. Three fourths of them are married with children, very few live with their

parents, and almost all of them have solid employment and are financially independent. So, viewing the situation objectively, most emerging adults do grow up eventually (Arnett, 2007). Arnett also suggests that emerging adults may be choosing not to hurry toward adulthood because they view the freedoms of youth as valuable and fleeting. He posits that emerging adults have a "shrewd grasp of the realities of adult life," and an awareness that it "involves constraints and limitations that their lives...do not have" (Arnett, 2007, p. 27).

Responding to the assertion emerging adults are narcissistic, as was claimed in *Generation Me*, Arnett points to problems with the author's interpretation and presentation of data, seriously calling her conclusions into question. For example, he points out that four of five data sets are taken from residential college students, who are not representative of all emerging adults, and that the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) is an ineffective measure of narcissism (Arnett et al., 2013). Also, Arnett points out a number of ways in which the current generation is the opposite of narcissistic, including increased participation in community service (84% of college freshmen surveyed in 2008) and a desire to have a career that does good in the world (86% in 2013, Clark University Poll) (2015). Arnett also points out that the five primary characteristics of emerging adulthood seem to be the aspects of this cohort that are most criticised and misunderstood (2010). Arnett notes that many people seem to interpret emerging adults' delayed adoption of adult roles as selfishness, mistake their identity explorations as psychological suffering, view their desire for identity-based work as disinterest in "real" work, and label their optimism as overblown grandiosity (Arnett, 2010, p. 90). If most criticisms of emerging adults are indeed the result of misinterpreting their developmental

work, it is important for the conversation about the life stage of emerging adulthood to continue.

One final idea about the tension between the older generation and emerging adults may simply be that this cultural change has happened so quickly. A mere 30 years ago, the forces that catalyzed emerging adulthood were just underway, so the drastic differences in young people now may seem to have happened overnight, especially from the perspective of those whose adult lives have been settled for a while (Arnett, 2007). I am reminded of the refrain my Mom would tell me in middle school, paraphrasing Emerson: "Meanness is bred from fear." Emerging adults are doing things differently, and the outcome for our society is admittedly uncertain. Nevertheless, Arnett argues, emerging adulthood is probably here to stay, given the increasing necessity of obtaining higher education to meet the demands of the workforce, as well as the other substantial cultural changes which have taken place (2015). What we may be seeing now is an adjustment to these changes, and while criticizing the younger generation's different way of growing up is apparently tempting, Arnett warns against it. He says that society must:

> [S]top promoting negative stereotypes about [emerging adults], that they are selfish, lazy, and worse than ever. These false claims are harmful, not only because they are false and therefore unfair but because they discourage adult society from supporting the programs that would give emerging adults a broader range of opportunities for education, work, and service. It is time to retire the damaging and false stereotypes and instead celebrate today's emerging adults for the extraordinary generation they are." (2013, p. 9)

This paper will continue to explore emerging adulthood with Arnett's charge in mind. How can we celebrate emerging adults for the significant developmental work they are doing, and support their efforts? Also, what might the rest of society have to learn from the optimism, determination, and flexibility that sustains emerging adults during their exciting and challenging explorations?

Part 3: Brain Changes

Neuroscience is continually making advances increase understanding of human development and behavior. At the same time, the field has not yet reached the point where scientists can definitively assert the ways in which brain structures or changes directly influence human behavior (NIMH, 2011; McAnarney, 2008). Looking toward a neuroscientifically informed future, we anticipate that neuroscience will give us the capability to shape social practices, like education, counseling, and parenting, to optimize development at critical times (Fine & Sung, 2014; Frontline, 2002). For the time being, neuroscience has yielded factual information that can lend itself to educated hypotheses about psychosocial development, and how we can best support it. Given what we know and can infer, which areas of neuroscience are most relevant to emerging adulthood, and how can we attempt to optimize this period in the lifespan?

Many people with a basic knowledge of development, especially in the field of counseling, will be familiar with facts about the teenage brain. The accepted theory is that ongoing development of the prefrontal cortex during the adolescent years may explain some of the emotional and risk-taking behaviors observed in adolescents. The prefrontal cortex, often known as the "CEO" or executive of the brain, is in charge of decision making, planning and organizing, focusing attention, using judgment and caution, and regulating appropriate behavior (Frontline, 2002; McAnarney, 2008). The limbic system is active in teenagers before the prefrontal cortex is fully developed, creating a "'perfect storm' for asynchrony" between the drive for novelty and sensation seeking and the part of the brain that regulates impulses (McAnarney, 2008, p. 322). Additionally, it is believed that the experience and intensity of emotional response

is different during adolescence than in adulthood or earlier childhood, (NIMH, 2011) which can help to explain why teenagers seem to place more emphasis on emotional reactions to situations than observing adults may view as appropriate.

As these neurological theories have become incorporated into the way that society views teenagers, the result had been increased understanding and acceptance of teenaged "angst." Teenagers are also placed into structures designed to keep them safe because they are not considered to be adults. As one neuroscientist puts it,

> If one conceptualizes these elements of societal guidance as the "brake" for reckless adolescent behavior before the inhibitory prefrontal cortex is fully developed, then one can understand that our forefathers were correct in providing structure and guidance for developing adolescents through close family, school, and community relationships. What one hopes is that the adolescent will incorporate lessons learned from these institutions into their own repertoire, and that youth ultimately will be guided by a mature prefrontal cortex. (McAnarney, 2008, p. 322)

Given the way adolescents are now regarded developmentally, providing scaffolds of safety for continued development has become a cultural response to the needs of teenagers.

The critical questions for this paper are: when do teenagers enter the stage of emerging adulthood, what is happening on a neurological level, and what developmental supports might benefit emerging adults? When adulthood was understood to begin at age 18, the adoption of adult roles followed shortly thereafter, whether or not the brain was fully developed and ready to commit to the decisions of adulthood. Jay Giedd, leading

NIMH neuroscientist in the area of the adolescent brain, believes that delayed entry into adulthood is a positive social change:

> Until very recently, we had to make some pretty important life decisions about education and career paths, who to marry and whether to go into the military at a time when parts of our brain weren't optimal yet...It's a good thing that the 20s are becoming a time for self-discovery. (Beck, 2012)

At the same time as this cultural shift is taking place to allow for a period of emerging adulthood, neuroscientific research is also suggesting that brain changes are taking place later in the lifespan than was once assumed (Giedd, 2008). The prefrontal cortex is understood to be one of the last areas of the brain to mature, and other parts of the brain are thought to mature in the early 20s (NIMH, 2011).

There is also gray matter which increases in the front part of the brain during early adolescence (age 11/12), and doesn't prune down to its stable adult size until the early 20s (Frontline, 2002; NIMH, 2011). The first period of neural overproduction takes place in early childhood, and this second period of growth during adolescence can be understood as a preparation for adulthood, and a time of great potential. Giedd describes it a process of specializing, "This is what I'm going to be good at," which is not completed in the brain until partway through emerging adulthood (Frontline, 2002). Another part of the brain, the cerebellum, is believed to be highly susceptible to environmental factors, as suggested by twin studies. This part of the brain has to do with coordination, not just physically, but also cognitively and socially. In this elegant description, Giedd explains,

Just like one can be physically clumsy, one can be kind of mentally clumsy. And

this ability to smooth out all the different intellectual processes to navigate the

complicated social life of a teen and to get through these things smoothly and

gracefully instead of lurching...seems to be a function of the cerebellum."

(Frontline, 2002)

The cerebellum changes significantly during adolescence, and continues its growth into

the 20s.

To understand these neurological changes, it can be helpful to view them along a

spectrum, and to compare the behaviors and perspectives of adolescents who are still

undergoing growth with those who seem to have completed the process. A psychologist

at Temple University describes how, "By the late 20s, 'there's better communication

between parts of the brain that process emotions and social information--like what people

think of you--and the parts that are important for planning ahead and balancing risk and

reward'" (Beck, 2012, para. 12). This process of development, which can be thought of

as integration or smoothing out, continues into emerging adulthood.

Therefore, neurological development may be an important consideration when

forming expectations for emerging adults. It can serve as both a justification for the

importance of their explorations, and a validation for why supporting them in some areas

may still be developmentally appropriate even past age 18. Furthermore, continuing

neuroscientific research could be used to foster optimal environments for brain

development, and could also guide therapeutic interventions during critical

neurodevelopmental periods (Fine & Sung, 2014). The NIMH sums up its pamphlet on

the teenage brain with these words: "The capacity for learning at this age, an expanding

social life, and a taste for exploration and limit testing may all, to some extent, be

reflections of age-related biology," and, "Research findings on the brain may also serve

to help adults understand the importance of creating an environment in which teens can

explore and experiment while helping them to avoid behavior that is destructive to

themselves and others" (2011). Brain development beginning in adolescence carries on

into emerging adulthood. Seen on a spectrum, perhaps the supports provided to emerging

adults should be less extensive than those provided to teenagers, but should still serve to

assist emerging adults as their brains develop fully.

The Urban Tribe

Emerging adulthood is described as the time between leaving one's family of origin and creating a new family to inhabit and nurture (Arnett, 2015). During that in-between time, emerging adults critically need a sense of family and belonging. They often get these needs met by their friends, who are the families they create (Henig & Henig, 2012). Several years after the sitcom Seinfeld came off the air, the concept of the urban tribe was coined by a New York journalist to describe his own set of friends. These friends provide support, companionship, and something to do on a Friday night. They fill a lot of the roles of a spouse, minus the sexual relationship (Henig & Henig, 2012). During the holidays, the urban tribe might get together for "Friendsgiving," playing at family life by making a turkey, and skipping the travel days and complex family dynamics.

These friend groups are central to some emerging adults, especially those who are not in a committed relationship. Close friends provide emerging adults with the feeling and experience of intimacy, which Erikson describes as the central developmental crisis of young adulthood (Henig & Henig, 2012). A developmental scholar from the University Chicago asserted that the period between ages 22-28 represents the time when most of the friends are chosen who will stick with a person throughout the rest of adulthood. This makes sense, because emerging adulthood is usually the first time when individuals choose their friends for their own reasons, and not based on environmental contexts influenced by parents, like neighborhood, elementary class, or church group (Henig & Henig, 2012).

Studies have also shown that emerging adults pick some of their friends for reasons beyond basic affinity. The theory of socioemotional selectivity describes that at different periods in life span development, friendships serve different purposes (Henig & Henig, 2012). By the time an individual enters old age, relationship needs center around comfort and familiarity, and a few close people can fill those needs. During emerging adulthood, however, when adult life is just beginning, there is a need for information about other people, the world, and oneself. Having a diverse social network helps with this information gathering. A study done at Stanford illustrates how this kind of friend gathering might take place (Henig & Henig, 2012).

Subjects ages 18-88 were given a stack of cards with different descriptions, like, "neighbor, old friend, brother," and the open-ended instruction, "Sort the cards into as many piles as you need in order to categorize them according to the feelings they spark in you" (Henig & Henig, 2012, p. 185). Older people in the study tended to sort them into two piles, like and dislike. Younger participants, however, had more categories, which ran along lines of like/dislike, and also potential for emotional connection, information gathering, and future connection. These results demonstrate how emerging adulthood is a time when going out into the world away from family means gathering connections that might be helpful for creating new networks of support (Henig & Henig, 2012).

This phenomenon can be described in another way: through the metaphor of strong and weak ties. In her book *The Defining Decade* (2012), Meg Jay champions the benefits of weak ties over strong ties. If strong ties are envisioned as the relationships between core members of an urban tribe, weak ties would be friends of those friends, or any other relationships formed for purposes other than close, supportive intimacy. In her

book, Jay argues that strong ties can be inhibitory (the ties that blind, if you will), because like-minded friends can get into ruts, having the same conversations and complaining about the same topics without doing anything to change. She argues that weak ties are useful in part because they are unfamiliar: we might be more successful when we are outside our comfort zones, striving and learning, than when we are in our pajamas watching *Gilmore Girls* together (Jay, 2012).

An emerging adult myself, I felt somewhat offended by Meg Jay's tone when I first read her book. "It's a tough world out there," I thought, "I'm not allowed to spend time with people who love me because they won't cause me to grow?" I disagree with the idea that strong ties are necessarily stagnating, and at the same time, I can see the benefit of weak ties. I might propose a middle ground in which strong ties are cherished, and weak ties are also sought. Didn't I learn this in kindergarten? "Make new friends, but keep the old, one is silver and the other is gold." I always wondered which one was better, silver or gold? Maybe they are just different, each valuable in their own ways. The Urban Tribe is family, a group of friends with which we can be completely ourselves, and fall apart when we need to, knowing that we are already loved and accepted. The new friends, and friends of friends, and weak-tie connections are people who are good to know, because it *is* a big world out there. Someone can be a helpful connection without being a close friend, and sometimes weak ties end up leading to strong connections.

Family Matters

The way I wrote my draft of this paper reminds me of the research on the relationships between emerging adults and their parents. It is a balancing act between the search for autonomy and the comfort of interdependence. I asked my parents if I could come home to write my paper over Spring Break, knowing that they would say yes and be very happy to have me. But I took time to really consider two things: is this too great a burden on them, and am I being too dependent? I knew that I would likely be stressed and self-centered for most of the time, and that fun/relaxation time would mostly be on my schedule, during breaks from writing. I also know how much my parents enjoy it when we are part of each other's lives, and how much I love being at the center of their world when I am home. It is a special relationship, where I can ask for what I really need and it will be joyfully offered. I thought, "Who else besides my parents would want to take care of me for an entire week, keep me fed, encourage me, and play with me when I am ready to play?" That sounds like the kind of thing that one can only ask from family, and during my last year of graduate school, my family and I have been in the special position where I would love their support, and they would love to give it. So, I came home to write my paper, and it was a lovely experience. I can genuinely tell how glad they were to have me home, and to be helpful to me when I really needed it. I was also incredibly grateful to be home with them, and the whole plan went really well.

This speaks to a change in emerging adult relationships with parents: they are closer than young people have been with their parents in the past (Henig & Henig, 2012). One reason for this is that keeping in touch is easier and less expensive than long distance calling; it seems foreign to me, but I understand that using weekend rates to call

long distance was a part of the lives of young people and their parents, in the 1970s for instance. Now that we have cell phones, texting, and skype, not to mention other forms of social media, keeping in touch with parents is a daily practice for some emerging adults (Henig & Henig, 2012). One set of interviews in 2005 at Middlebury College asked college freshman how often they planned to communicate with their parents, and the average answer was once per week. When follow-up interviews were conducted at the end of the semester, it turned out that students had been in contact with their parents far more than they had expected: an average of 10.4 times per week. Why this increased contact? The researchers found that college students found themselves overwhelmed by all their free time and choice, so calling home to parents who actually want to hear about every little detail was a good way to spend some time (Henig and Henig, 2012, p. 202). I remember this phenomenon well from my first year of college: as I was still making friends, I knew that my Mom would always want to hear from me, and I could tell her what had happened to me that day and what I was thinking about everything. I didn't have any friends at college yet who were on that level.

This is the kind of intimate interaction that emerging adults need. Research has indicated that as emerging adults make the transition toward finding their "soul mate" during emerging adulthood, in the meantime they rely on their parents for emotional support and conversation (Arnett, 2015). One study even found evidence of reduced cortisol levels over the course of a day for emerging adults with warm maternal relationships (Lucas-Thompson, 2014). This relationship of support between parents and emerging adults is also more common than in the past. In 2008, a survey about the "social support" provided to emerging adults by their parents showed that in the past

month, 70 percent of parents had provided practical assistance to their children, and 90 percent had given advice. "Social support" includes all practical assistance, money, logistical help, companionship, advice, emotional support, or just listening. In 1988, only 31 percent had given practical assistance, and 46 percent shared advice (Henig & Henig, 2012, p. 206). Most parents want this close relationship: in the Clark poll of parents of emerging adults, 86% of parents said their relationship with their 18-29 year old children was a source of enjoyment in their lives (Arnett, 2015). The psychologist who ran the study about social support pointed out that this closeness makes sense: "Families become stronger in a world that's more complicated," she said. Also, she noted that it makes sense for parents to want their children to succeed, after having taken care of them for their whole lives. When parents help out, it's partially because it makes them feel better, too (Henig & Henig, 2012, p. 206).

At the same time, finances are the area of highest contention between emerging adults and their parents. In the Clark parents poll, the top four topics of conflict that the parents of emerging adults had with their children were: Money (42%); Not always taking responsibility for his/her actions (37%); His/her educational progress (34%); and His/her occupational progress (33%) (Arnett & Schwab, 2013). And how much money is being given to emerging adults? In the same poll, 44% of parents reported that they offered their children aged 18-29 either "regular support for living expenses" or "frequent support when needed." This rate is higher for children ages 18-21 than 26-29, but even among parents of this older group, 56% report providing occasional financial support. This occasional support may take the form of an emerging adult staying on the family cell phone or health care plan, or asking for help with a car repair or down

payment (Arnett, 2015 p. 65). It is important to note that while parental support is not available to the same degree for every emerging adult, financial support of emerging adults is a factor in many families.

The push and pull between receiving support and intimacy from parents and feeling autonomous from them is one of the major tasks of emerging adulthood. While many emerging adults and their parents have close relationships, 30% of emerging adults report that they would prefer that their parents were less involved in their lives (Arnett & Schwab, 2012). Arnett points out that all three of emerging adults' criteria for achieving adulthood have to do with independence, which could be viewed as independence from parents. The criteria are: "*accepting responsibility for yourself, making independent decisions,* and *becoming financially independent"* (Arnett, 2015, p. 49-50). These could be reframed as: 1) not needing your parents to rescue you 2) not letting your parents make decisions for you 3) not taking money from parents.

It follows that money would be the source of so much worry and contention, because the central tasks of emerging adulthood are "moving toward independence and self-sufficiency, and money is a tangible representation of progress--or lack of progress-- toward that goal" (Arnett, 2015, p. 69). Some Phd candidates remain in the limbo of ABD status for years. I imagine it takes a toll on self-image to have done so much work but not yet to have made the final push toward successful completion. Similarly, some emerging adults seem to linger in the status of ABFI (All but Financially Independent) when it comes to graduation into full adult status. They may make autonomous decisions and feel responsible and able to fix their mistakes, except when it comes to money. Making the final push to financial independence is a difficult and identity-

threatening task for some emerging adults. For those emerging adults who do not receive financial support from their parents, the pathway toward financial independence is likely to pose different and more immediate challenges.

What do you do?

"What do you do?" When I was in my early twenties, during the years between college and graduate school, I might have responded to this question with, "How interested are you, really? Because my answer is a paragraph." There was the answer about what I did for money, which varied depending on the year: working at a restaurant, for a church, or at a random job I'd found on Craigslist and that I would be leaving soon. There was also the answer about what I was doing with my time, which was, as I saw it, "learning how to live well:" learning how to cook, how to keep my house clean, and how to spend my free time in nourishing and productive ways. Then there was the answer that referred to my larger life plan, which was navigating a path toward graduate school in mental health counseling.

My work during this time was generally composed of "gigs" that served my needs for money, flexibility, and some sense of enjoyment. If the job stopped fitting well, I found a different one. This continued until I entered graduate school at JMU, which represented a wave of intense learning, academic and personal. This was also my entry point into the realm of student loans, which I had been lucky enough to avoid for my undergraduate education, thanks to my parents. Looking ahead to graduation from this program, I plan to be entering full-time employment for the first time, and I will begin to pay the loans back. All of the women I shared a house with before graduate school are now married, and I live on my own.

This portrait of my twenties is fairly representative of a middle class emerging adult's journey through education and work. Between ages 18 and 29, an average American will have held eight different jobs. Seventy percent of Americans enter a form

of tertiary education, half attending two-year schools and half attending four year schools. College attendance for women is notably higher than in my parent' generation: in 1960 there were twice as many men in college than women, but as of 2015, 57% of college students are women, 43% are men. My entrance into college after high school could have been predicted by my race: 71% of white Americans begin tertiary education. This is lower than the 90% of Asian Americans who matriculate, and higher than the 60% of Latinos and African Americans who begin college after high school. Also, I finished college in four years, which is less common than a 5-or-6-year course through college. Of all students entering a 4-year college, only 59% will have graduated six years later, and just 30% of all 25-29 year olds in the United States have graduated with a bachelor's degree (Arnett, 2015). Perhaps the most prominent feature of my story, which is also one of the most important part of education and work explorations in emerging adulthood, is how my sense of identity was formed and influenced during this period. This section of the paper explores the emerging adult experience of school and work, in turn.

School

When I was in college, there was a kind of joke phrase we would say a lot, whether we were eating nachos for dinner, or staying up late, or driving to another town to see a music show: "Yeah college, no parents!" It was a joke because we knew that we still needed to be responsible for our decisions even without our parents' presence, and also because my friends and I had all been pretty responsible in high school and remained so in college. At the same time, what made it not a joke was that it felt thrillingly true:

whether we chose to use our freedom wisely or not, it felt pretty good to know that we could do pretty much whatever we wanted to do, most of the time.

Arnett describes the college experience as being, in many ways, "the emerging adult environment par excellence" (Arnett, 2015; p. 166). Many students spend their first two years choosing among majors, trying on and discarding identities and worldviews as they move toward what they want to be and believe. They are also in the company of a lot of other young people having similar experiences, which sets the stage for romantic explorations and the blossoming of deep friendships. Furthermore, alcohol is flowing freely, and college culture is thriving and inviting participation. The main work of many emerging adults in college is to balance all of this exploration, manage to learn something in class, and graduate with a growing sense of identity and at least a vague plan about what to do next (Arnett, 2015).

In the pathway through college, emerging adults make choices based on what they hope to gain from the overall experience. A sociological theory from the 1960s describes four student subcultures that researchers tend to agree with today as well. The subcultures are: the collegiate, vocational, academic, and rebel (Clark & Trow, 1966, as cited in Arnett, 2015, p. 156). The collegiate group is at college to have the "college experience" of fun: parties, greek and social life, dating, alcohol, sports games, and other activities that rank higher in importance than class itself. Community enjoyment and participation is paramount, and this subculture is common at large universities. The vocational group has one main mission in college: to gain the skills and credentials needed to be attractive in the workforce. This group is likely to hold a job throughout college, and often found in community college. This group may be less interested in

learning for the sake of learning. The academic subculture embraces the intellectual

climate and experience of college life, diving into classes and relationships with peers

and professors that center around learning and intellectual growth. Arnett notes that these

are some of professors' favorite students. The rebel subculture also embraces the

intellectual charge of the university, but primarily for the purpose of self-exploration and

rejecting those ideas that don't fit with personal identity. This group is rebellious and

selectively engaged in academics. Taken as archetypes, these subcultures can represent

different goals that students have in college, and many students will strive towards all

four goals to some degree: fun (collegiate), job preparation (vocational), knowledge

(academic), and identity (rebel) (Arnett, 2015).

These four subcultures among college students suggest that students are looking

for a variety of outcomes from college and may or may not graduate having found what

they were looking for. A response from one student Arnett interviewed shows that for

some emerging adults, the overall process of being a college student yields the most

beneficial results, rather than specific facts learned in classes. This student, Linda, said,

"most of my classes have been relatively enlightening and beneficial," though she also

said that most of what she learned is "useless, easily forgotten knowledge." She goes on

to describe the benefits: "college had forced me to think, to question, and and sometimes

just to accept. All of these qualities I either didn't possess prior to college or had very

little control over." She said that college has been, "full of revelations and

growth. Because of college, I am closer to possessing the knowledge I need to be who

and what I want to be" (Arnett, 2015, p. 160). Research supports this student's

experience: college students have been shown to become socially and politically less

dogmatic, authoritarian, and ethnocentric by the end of college; they also gain confidence and identity development, and psychological well-being improves. All of this is added to intellectual growth in areas such as communication and critical thinking (Arnett, 2015).

These are some of the benefits of college for emerging adults. What are the drawbacks? The likelihood for emerging adults of not graduating on time from college, or at all, has already been mentioned. An additional liability that is a cause for concern from parents, public officials, and emerging adults themselves is the trend of major debt accrued in the pursuit of academic credentials. From 1997 to 2007, the average amount of undergraduate debt grew by almost 60% (Henig & Henig, 2012). In the last 30 years, college costs have risen four times more than other costs, and 70% of full-time college students hold employment, with 59% working at least 20 hours/week (Arnett, 2015). In the Clark poll of emerging adults, students from a lower SES background, represented by their mother's education, endorsed "I have not been able to find enough financial support to get the education I need" most often. This question was endorsed by 45% from the group whose mother had a high school education or less, 34% from the group whose mother finished some college, and 28% from the group whose mother finished a 4-year degree (Arnett & Schwab, 2012). These high proportions of struggling students point to a problem with the system.

On the other hand, what is the cost of not attending college? Due to changes in the economy and type of industry in this country, jobs for those with high school degrees or less are declining (14% fewer in the past 25 years), and pay for those jobs is not increasing with inflation as much as pay for college graduates. The unemployment rate is three times higher for people with a high school degree or less (Arnett, 2015). This

picture is grim, with those who did not attend college, or finish, seeming to fall behind in an already competitive job market. Arnett's solution is that tertiary education of some kind must be available to every emerging adult, in the way that primary and secondary school are currently available (Arnett, 2015).

Work

Work can feel like a mysterious mistress, to those emerging adults who are seeking it or who have never really had it. Especially for Millennials, the generation of emerging adults who graduated into the economic downturn in this country, opportunities for work can seem capricious, like a gift that can be bestowed and then taken away at a moment's notice. This is certainly the sense I feel, when I see older and more experienced adults losing their jobs or being demoted. It seems impossible that I could get a job that the "real adults" are having a hard time securing. My sense of starting out in the workforce in the past, say in the 80s, is that employers were willing to take new workers under their wings and show them what work is all about, allowing them time to get the hang of it.

Arnett describes young workers this way: "No matter how cheap it is to employ them, it will not be worth it if they cannot do anything useful, and nearly always it will be a while before they can be useful" (p. 189, 2015). In a poor economy, employers may be less willing or able to take these risks. The numbers from a 2011 poll of 872 Americans, aged 18-34, support this hypothesis. In 2010, unemployment rose compared with pre-recession rates: 4.4 percent for workers over 35, 5.4 percent for workers 25 to 34, and 7.7 percent for workers under 24. As of 2011, only 53% of workers in the 25-34 age range

had higher earnings than they had 4 years earlier. Also, only 47% of workers in this age

range, 25-34, were making more than $30,000 annually as of 2011 (Arnett, 2015).

All mixed in with work is the search for identity. Robin and Samantha Henig, a

mother-daughter pair who wrote a book called Twentysomething (2012), describe this

phenomenon well:

> A recitation of job hopping is a quick way to convey the fitful feelings of one's
>
> twenties. The job-hopping itself is, in many ways, the *reason* for those feelings,
>
> turning people in their mid-twenties into "emerging adults" in the same way grad
>
> school does. If you don't know yet what you want to do, or if you don't yet do
>
> the thing you know you want, it's harder to have an accurate picture of who you
>
> are." (p. 57)

Henig & Henig go on to say that considerations about money, how much we make and

what we spend it on, go a long way to defining the kind of lives we have.

Some emerging adults deal with this incongruence between income, type of work,

and identity by separating their identity from their work. Two examples: "Gabriella helps

her father manage his apartment building while she attends college in fashion

merchandising...Tony has a part-time job with a package delivery service...but he only

took it to support himself while he pursues a degree in travel administration" (Arnett,

2015, p. 183). A writer for *Slate* had a "crap job" with a catering company, where "Her

co-workers were creative types (painters, writers, actors) whose identities were not

wrapped up in their day jobs" (Henig & Henig, 2012, p. 61). For these emerging adults,

the right question to ask at a cocktail party might be: "What do you do for money, but

also, what do you *really* do, who are you trying to be?" Although this kind of separated

identity may meet emerging adults' needs for a while, Arnett notes that most emerging adults are not satisfied in the long term with a job that is not identity-based (2015, p. 183).

What kinds of things are emerging adults saying that they want from work? Above all, most emerging adults are seeking work that has personal meaning and makes a positive impact on the world. 79% of emerging adults ages 18-29 from the national Clark poll endorsed the statement, "[i]t is more important to enjoy my job than to make a lot of money," and even more of them, 86%, agreed that "[i]t is important to me to have a career that does some good in the world" (Arnett, 2015, p. 169). Men and women's approaches toward work and family balance have also changed with the arrival of emerging adulthood. When the average age of marriage was the early twenties, many women worked only until they had children, and many men felt pressure to choose a job that could support the family, and stick with it. In the Clark poll of emerging adults in 2012, 60% of 18-29 year olds, both men and women, agreed with the statement, "I expect to have to give up some of my career goals in order to have the family life I want" (Arnett, 2015, p. 176).

Work-life balance is important to many emerging adults, especially when some of them have watched their parents struggle under the weight of stressful, high powered jobs. An emerging adult from Arnett's interviews, named Ian, would rather not follow his father's footsteps into medicine, where his father "has so much stress it's amazing." Ian goes on to say, "if I'm a journalist making $20,000 a year, my dad makes vastly more than that…If I enjoy thoroughly what I'm doing in life, then I would be better off than my dad" (Arnett, 2015, p. 185). One wonders if Ian knows what it would

be like to live on $20,000 annually, and how different it would be from his household of origin. This example demonstrates how emerging adults can gain the reputation of being too idealistic, or unrealistic about what life will require.

A story from Arnett's book *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties* (2015) offers this question for consideration: are emerging adults unrealistic in their expectations about work? The story, from an employer at a publicity firm, goes like this: a new assistant, an emerging adult, had been working for a few weeks when she asked to schedule a meeting with her boss. The assistant said that she wasn't finding the work stimulating, and that to remain in the job she was requesting higher pay or the same pay with fewer hours. Her boss was shocked, and told the assistant a story about her own early days of work, and how when she and her coworkers complained to their boss about the conditions, he opened the door and replied, "There are a hundred people out there who can't wait to take your place." The assistant's reply was simply, "I would never work at a place that treats employees like that" (p. 177). Her boss was shocked a second time - and then realized that maybe her young assistant had a point. The employer reflects,

> Boomers like me, raised by the so-called Greatest Generation and their Depression-era ethos, let the workplace become the cold, harsh place it is. I think perhaps this new generation will truly build a better place for themselves and everyone if they can hold fast to their confidence, optimism and fearless approach to accepting their gifts without guilt! Maybe they'll bend the world to a less driven state. (p. 177)

In Arnett's analysis of this story, he notes that the flexibility of this emerging adult to leave a job that doesn't suit her might be helpful in avoiding exploitation.

I am encouraged by the statement of the boss, that perhaps the workplace doesn't actually have to be a cold, harsh place. If emerging adults continue to use their power, which is their inherent flexibility, and vote with their feet, perhaps there will be real changes in the way work is done. Another way that emerging adults might be changing the nature of work has to do with their constant connection to media and each other. Henig & Henig point out that some bosses criticize their emerging adult employees for listening to music at work, using gchat, twitter, and facebook, and generally having a need for constant media usage and communication with their peers. To the quiet, unplugged boss, this behavior may seem immature and entitled. Viewed another way, however, it may be that emerging adults are simply bringing the approaches they know best into their working lives. Constant checking in and media consumption is part of how emerging adults think creatively and bring perspective to the tasks at hand. Furthermore, because emerging adults tend to check emails even when they are not at work, they are often the ones to respond to after-hours emergencies (2012). Yes, the way that emerging adults approach work is somewhat different than the older generation, and they may have fresh and helpful perspectives to contribute.

Love, Etc.

Emerging adulthood is defined by explorations in love and work, and later age of marriage is one of the social changes that has accompanied emerging adulthood. This section will take time to explore what is new about the way emerging adults love, and commit to love long-term. One new approach is the importance to emerging adults of dating a number of people, learning what you like and don't like, and having experience in love and sex before picking a lifelong partner (Henig & Henig, 2012). Rather than representing the romantic ideal, a couple who starts dating in high school, stays together all through college, and then gets married is likely to be seen by most emerging adults as a bit misguided. This couple might hear the advice: "Of course you *think* you love each other, but you have nothing to compare your partner to!"

Also new is the widespread acceptance of premarital sex, though sexual behavior exists on a spectrum for emerging adults. On one end are conservative young people who believe it is important to wait for marriage to have sex. This value is almost always correlated with religious ideology. The group of emerging adults who tend to marry young also fit this conservative set: 14% of Americans aged 20-24 are married, and this demographic is most likely to be white, southern, lower social-class, rural, highly religious, and from families where the parents married young (Arnett, 2015).

In the middle of the spectrum are the "serial monogamists," a term used by sociologists and by emerging adults themselves: these sexually active partners tend to be in exclusive sexual relationships, and when one relationship ends, it might not be long before the next will begin. Based on their behavior, it seems that sex is most acceptable

to this group within in the context of a love relationship, though having sexual partners in-between exclusive relationships also happens (Arnett, 2015).

At the liberal end of the spectrum are the emerging adults who participate in the much-discussed "hook-up culture:" casual sex between non-committed (or committed only to hooking up) partners, which often happens in the context of a night of drinking. It is not as common as alarmists make it seem, but it certainly happens: a national study of 18-23 year olds revealed that close to half of them had one partner in the past year; about one fourth had no sex at all in the past year; and one third had two or more partners. In a national survey of 20-29 year olds, a fairly substantial number of people agreed that there are people they would have sex with, without any intention of marriage: 41% of women, and 65% of men. Although this spectrum of sexual behavior exists, sex in the context of a committed relationship is still the most common choice among emerging adults (Arnett, 2015).

However normal this sexual behavior has become for emerging adults, Arnett points out that it is an entirely new human phenomenon for sex to be decoupled from marriage in such a widely accepted way. How might this change affect our society? Long-term, the effects are yet unknown. Currently, the change seems to be already taking place in the form of emerging adulthood, as young people explore romantic relationships and commitments are not made immediately. At the same time, about 90% of emerging adults plan to commit to marriage eventually, according to various studies (Arnett, 2015). One theory about why they are so intent on exploring before committing is that they have experienced the path of destruction caused by divorce, either in their own lives or close by. The quote, "[r]emarriage is the triumph of

hope over experience" speaks to the risks that emerging adults may feel when they marry even for the first time, especially when their own parents' marriage ended in divorce (Arnett, 2015, p. 138). Many emerging adults address this concern by trying to be as sure as they can before they commit.

Taking time to explore oneself is also a step that many emerging adults take toward becoming "sure" about their choice of a partner. Arnett points out that Erikson's life stage tasks go in order: first identity, then intimacy. Many young people seem to feel the need to solidify their identity before committing to lifelong intimacy, even if they don't always know exactly what this identity search entails (Arnett, 2015). A quote from an emerging adult explains this feeling well. She is talking about whether or not she is ready for marriage to her boyfriend, with whom she is currently living:

> I don't know...I'm not sure. There's a part of me, I think, that still needs to find
> some things. Not that I couldn't if I was married, but I don't know if this is it, and
> if I'm ready. Because there's times I guess I just feel it would be too soon, right
> now. There's things I don't want to lose, and I'm not sure what they are. (Arnett,
> 2015, p. 119)

When she talks about these things she doesn't want to lose, but that she can't quite grasp yet, her hesitation to commit makes sense. Feeling a vague sense of something important but unformed inside that needs time to emerge seems like a valid reason to wait. It may be that these important but elusive internal pieces are the kinds of insights that sometimes fully solidify only after years of marriage, and can cause divorce. Many emerging adults think it is important to pay attention to those quiet tugs and questions now, when their choices are still completely our own. To say, "I need some time to work

on this thing and figure it out" in a marriage could mean a painful separation, confusing the children and causing a stir in the community. Or, there may simply not be space to attend to that inner need within the demands of marriage. In emerging adulthood, there is still time and space to be self-focused, in the hope that doing this work now may help avert future rupture.

Digital Natives

Emerging adults spend an average of 12 hours consuming media every day, which is more than they spend doing any other activity, including sleeping, school, and being with friends (Coyne et al., 2013). This statistic is a bit misleading, of course, because much of the media time is spent while doing other activities, like working, studying, or getting together with friends. The most ubiquitous type of media, used most often, is music, clocking in at about 3.5 hours per day (Arnett, 2015). I can attest to this fact, because I have been writing this paper for the last few days, and the streaming music on my phone has been playing consistently, I would guess about 95% of the time. There were two lapses: 1) the handful of times when the album ended and I was so engaged in writing that I didn't stop to turn more music on; 2) an experiment I did a few minutes ago when I decided to turn off the music, because I was reading about how "the adults" find it strange that emerging adults are almost always listening to something. The silence was fine, enjoyable even. However, when I decided it was time to write, I instinctively turned my music back on, picking something that I thought would be good for focusing. My Mom came in, and mentioned (unprompted) how she didn't understand how I could listen to music like that without going crazy. I tuned in and realized that I agreed, it was a little cloying. So instead, I started playing an album that I found on Spotify last week and shared with my boyfriend Sam. We both liked it, and listening to it reminds me of him while I am writing, which is comforting.

I tell this story because it illustrates a handful of very common uses of media by emerging adults. First, I pay $5/month for an unlimited Spotify subscription, which means I have access to just about any music I can think of as long as I have an internet

connection (and I can download albums to my phone for the unfortunate times I may want to listen to music and there is no internet.) These choices, to have Spotify, and to pick the music I want to listen to, and when I want to listen, and to change it at will, are all examples of my demonstration of autonomy in my media consumption (Coyne et al., 2013). My media use also gratified certain need, which can be understood using "The Media Practice Model," proposed by Jeanne Steele and Jane Brown (Arnett, 2015).

According to this model, first I made a *Selection* of music that fits with my identity in some way: in this case, my identity as a creative, folk-music type who places value in remaining inspired and engaged while writing her EdS paper. It also has to do with my identity as part of a partnership with Sam. Next, I had an *Interaction* with the music: I checked in with myself, and noted that the music seemed to fit well with my mood, and was helping me to feel focused and calm rather than jangly and distracted (as the first music was doing). This evaluation of the music as a good choice that fits with my identity caused me to make my *Application* of the media: I decided to incorporate it into my paper writing session, and into my identity, instead of rejecting it (Arnett, 2015). The more I listen, the more positive I feel, in part because I made this choice, and it seems to be doing what I hoped it would do. I am now someone who likes the album *The Weatherman* by Gregory Alan Isakov, and it will carry fond memories for me of being music that helped me to write my EdS paper.

Also, over the course of the previous paragraph, my phone chimed twice, and I stopped to look at it: the first chime was alerting me to an email about someone who wanted a house sitter for his cats, both imminently and again in the future; the future engagement might include another cat, which has a crazy name but I've forgotten

it. (The phone just chimed again but I haven't looked at it yet.) The second chime was a friend from the program who I am trying to reconnect with, texting me back to let me know that she's not sure if she can do dinner Monday night, but she would like to try and she hopes to see me soon. I just now checked the third chime: an announcement from a music venue called Starr Hill that I actually didn't think existed anymore - I always delete those.

Arnett points out that texting, while it doesn't take as much time as other forms of media (about 45 minutes per day) seems in some way to be the most ubiquitous because it is always happening (2015). This exposition of how many lines of thought I have had over the last 10 minutes or so, about the music I am listening to and the paper I am writing and the good feeling I have about possibly reconnecting with my JMU friend, makes me more mindful about how truly plugged in I am. And I don't consider myself to be a particularly "techy" emerging adult. The title of this section, digital natives, refers to the fact that emerging adults have incorporated technology into their daily lives fairly completely, becoming natives to this language and practice (Arnett, 2015).

The question that always seems to be asked is whether this closeness with technology is harmful to emerging adults. Studies tend to suggest two answers. One is that technology can be correlated with negative outcomes, especially for those with other risk factors like depression or anxiety. For the rest of emerging adults, technology often has a "rich getting richer" effect: technology increases and strengthens existing social supports and a sense of connectedness (Coyne et al., 2013, p. 127). Another example illustrates this point. Earlier today, when I was reading about the benefits of technological connectedness, a friend called me from Wisconsin. I haven't seen Kitt in

several years, and she is engaged to be married now. Our calls are quite meaningful to me, and I feel like I already know and love her fiancé even though I haven't met him yet. When I told her the pleasing synchronicity of her call while I was researching this topic, she pointed out that being able to stay connected this way seems to give us more freedom (not that we need more freedom, she said) to move far away. She also noted that feeling isolated seems to be almost a decision, because the opportunity to reach out is always there. I agree, and when I first moved to Harrisonburg, Kitt was one of the people I reached out to for long conversations. On those evenings, without my talks with Kitt I believe I would have felt alone and far away from anyone who knew me well and loved me. As it happened, I have warm memories of hearing her voice, and looking around my new room thinking that it was all probably going to work out fine. By "it," I mean everything - both of our lives, and our hopes about the way the world could be.

Head Trips

I believe in the wisdom that sometimes our greatest strength can also be our greatest weakness. Anything powerful has two sides, and can be channeled for great usefulness or for destruction. This is the way that risk and resilience seem to operate in emerging adulthood. The same circumstances that allow some emerging adults to succeed in gaining personal power can lead others down paths that are dangerous. These powerful factors are the familiar five characteristics of emerging adulthood: self-focus, instability, being in-between, identity formation, and possibilities. On the one hand, emerging adulthood is the time of greatest substance use and high risk behavior across the lifespan (Sussman & Arnett, 2014). On the other hand, most emerging adults report an increase in feelings of well-being and emotional stability as emerging adulthood progresses (Arnett & Schwab, 2012).

In dealing with adverse experiences and stress, a person can either behave in a way that leads to healthy or unhealthy outcomes. Following the unhealthy track, a person can internalize or externalize. Internalizing takes the form of anxiety, depression, or other mental health disruptions. Externalizing takes the form of high risk behavior, personality disruptions like anger, or crime. Arnett speculated about how the five circumstances of emerging adulthood may contribute to both internalizing and externalizing behaviors (2015).

With internalizing problems, the uncertainty of emerging adulthood across several areas can increase feelings of anxiety and depression. Identity explorations, instability, and feeling in-between are all examples of high uncertainty, which is especially likely to create anxiety. Even the sense of possibilities, which is exciting in many ways, can also

be difficult. With so many options to choose from, emerging adults can feel paralyzed (Arnett, 2015). Comparing oneself to others, as in, "am I as adult as I should be" can lead to a negative self-regard, which is related to depression. Also, the self-focus of adulthood usually indicates that outer social structures are less strong than during other times in the life span, and decreased social control has been correlated with suicide. Furthermore, negative feelings of anxiety and depression can be isolating, and without the support of at least one close person, distress is likely to increase (Arnett, 2015).

Externalizing behaviors represent a different reaction to the same challenging circumstances. In terms of identity explorations, behaviors that challenge social norms may be more attractive, like trying illicit drugs, getting involved in crime, and driving unsafely. Through the lens of self-focus, the lack of social structures to control behavior is correlated with externalizing behaviors. It's easier and more attractive to break the rules when nobody is around to enforce them, and the consequences are not as high when they only involve the self (Arnett, 2015). One good example of this comes from my boyfriend Sam: he bought a motorcycle recently, but he's pretty sure he'll get rid of it once he has kids, because that's the trajectory other men have described to him. Once he has children, taking the kinds of risks associated with riding a motorcycle has much higher consequences. Similarly, the marker of feeling in-between may encourage emerging adults to engage in high risk behavior now, before they are adults. They recognize that behaviors like binge drinking on the weekends are accepted (if not acceptable) in college, but not when one becomes a parent. Finally, the sense of possibilities felt by emerging adults can translate to a sense of grandeur, or "optimistic

bias," that bad things don't happen to me even though they happen to other people. This thinking also encourages risky behavior (Arnett, 2015. p. 283).

Whether internalizing or externalizing, emerging adults sometimes react to their newfound freedoms in ways that are harmful to themselves and others. At the same time, for other emerging adults, freedom is exactly what they need to improve their lives for the better. Arnett presents four case studies of emerging adults whose lives were difficult during childhood, and the theme of freedom and autonomy is important in all of the stories. One young woman said, "I needed to experience freedom. I needed to experience living outside of my mother's home in order to study" (2015, p. 299). Another young woman, reflecting on the ways it was helpful to leave her family's home and habits of relating to her, said "Now I answer to myself" (2015, p. 303). There are factors that are known to promote resilience, and these emerging adults had many of those factors: intelligence, persistence, determination, optimism, faith, and a close, supportive relationship with at least one person: a parent or other adult, a friend, a teacher, a sibling, a romantic partner, etc. Studies have shown that the most important resilience factors are intelligence and "at least one healthy relationship with someone who cares" (2015, p. 294). In addition to these factors, Arnett proposes that emerging adulthood itself poses a positive opportunity for these young people to improve their lives (Arnett, 2015).

The three aspects of emerging adulthood that can most contribute to resilience are: leaving home, achieving a more adult level of cognitive development, and telling the story of the past in a way that contributes to positive identity. Cognitive development during emerging adulthood leads to a sense of self-knowledge and self-understanding

followed by self-acceptance, all of which help emerging adults feel agency in their own choices. One young man said, "As I get older, I have learned not to sell myself to short. That's one thing about growing older, take more pride in who you are and don't feel that you're not valuable" (Arnett, 2015, p. 307). An example of rewriting a positive story of adversity is demonstrated in this young woman's reflections, "There's been a lot of pain and a lot of hurt, but I've really grown from it… It's made me the person I am today. It all happens for a reason." (Arnett, 2015, p. 303). The benefits of leaving home are that getting out of a toxic situation can be the beginning of new, healthier lives for emerging adults. For younger teenagers, prematurely leaving home is likely to be a risk factor. However, emerging adults can handle taking care of themselves, and it is developmentally normal to leave home at that time (Arnett, 2015).

Perhaps the period of increased optimism and well-being in emerging adulthood is adaptive during a developmental stage that is both challenging and full of potential. Without feeling great optimism, emerging adults might not be able to muster the energy it takes to put their lives on a good track. Fortunately, optimism is high for most of them: 98% of emerging adults ages 18-24 endorsed the item, "I am very sure that someday I will get to where I want to be in life" (Arnett & Schwab, 2012). Following the way their optimism leads, it becomes possible for emerging adults to turn their high hopes into a satisfying reality, even when the past has been difficult.

Learning to Meditate on a Volcano

Emerging adulthood is a process and each young person traverses his or her own individual path through this life stage. The five characteristics of emerging adulthood endeavor to describe the way this period is experienced, though not every individual feels all five of the characteristics, at least not all at once. Arnett emphasizes that it should be seen as one stage with many paths, and this means that the conclusion of emerging adulthood is likely to come at different times for different people (2015). How does the emerging adult know when the journey has ended? Is there a felt sense of becoming an adult? The answer is: it depends on the individual's conception of adulthood. Because the external markers of adulthood are more flexible and variable than they have ever been in the past, becoming an adult is now more of an internal shift than an observable quality. Arnett summarizes this shift in one phrase: self-sufficiency (2015).

The three qualities of adulthood most endorsed in the research, from surveys taken of a variety of populations, are: "taking responsibility for yourself, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent" (Arnett, 2015, p. 313). These descriptions indicate an ability to take care of oneself in three important ways, two of which are more psychological than outwardly observable. Becoming financially independent is a fairly objective measure, and making decisions and accepting responsibility for them are more subjective markers of an autonomous self-regard. Comparing these three criteria with the five characteristics of emerging adulthood is another way to look at the progression toward becoming an adult.

Each of the five criteria are liminal states in flux, so there exist completed states for each liminal state. Self-focus becomes other-focus, instability becomes stability,

feeling in-between becomes feeling adult, identity explorations become chosen identity, and possibilities become lived experiences. Picture a person who feels adult, has chosen an identity through lived experiences, is stable in love and work, and who focuses on the well-being of others. Having achieved such goals, this person also seems likely to make autonomous decisions, accept responsibility for them, and have financial independence. If this is the idealized picture of a successful and balanced adult, then perhaps pursuing this vision of adulthood is really a lifelong process. If that is the case, becoming an adult could simply mean crossing the threshold into being more adult-like than not.

For some emerging adults, this process orientation may fit better than a goal orientation while moving toward adulthood. These are the people who fear that adulthood represents an end to growth and curiosity, and associate it with becoming stagnant and losing a sense of fun and adventure. 35% of 18-29 year olds who participated in the national Clark poll endorsed the item, "If I could have it my way, I would never become an adult" (Arnett, 2015). Interpreting these results, perhaps the joy of the journey is important to some emerging adults, and simply reaching the destination of adulthood is not necessarily the highest goal. I hypothesize that these emerging adults may value something they have gained from the process of growing up that they don't want to forget when they become adults. I further hypothesize that this knowledge can be described as increased existential awareness.

For the sake of exploring this hypothesis, I will present a brief overview of the elements of existential theory, highlighting its relevance to emerging adulthood. Irvin Yalom, the eminent living scholar on existential psychotherapy, categorizes the four ultimate concerns of life as death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness (Yalom,

1980). Each of these words describes a major existential concern, each of which could be explored in a paper of its own, so the discussion here will necessarily be limited. Nevertheless, the parallels between the four ultimate concerns in existential theory and the five characteristics of emerging adulthood are too suggestive not to explore a bit further. This paper has thoroughly explored the five characteristics of emerging adulthood: Self-focus, Instability, Feeling In-Between, Identity, and Possibilities. Outlining the four ultimate concerns allows for comparisons between emerging adulthood and existential theory.

Death refers to our awareness that at some point, we will cease to exist. Smaller deaths include all varieties of change. *Freedom* is related to the lack of objective truth or structure in the world, and the human responsibility of creating it. Yalom (1980) writes,

Contrary to everyday experience, the human being does not enter (and leave) a well-structured universe that has an inherent design. Rather, the individual is entirely responsible for--that is, is the author of--his or her own world, life design choices, and actions. (p. 9)

This responsibility can feel like a terrible weight, inspiring fear. *Isolation* indicates existential isolation, meaning that underneath our relationships and connections we are fundamentally isolated, and must enter and leave existence on our own. This sense of isolation is balanced against "our wish for contact, for protection, our wish to be part of a larger whole" (Yalom, 1980, p. 9). *Meaninglessness*, the fourth and final ultimate concern, speaks to the idea that there is no objective meaning in the world. This is described eloquently: "If there is no pre-ordained design for us, then each of us must construct our own meanings in life. Yet can a meaning of one's own creation be sturdy

enough to bear one's life?" (Yalom, 1980, p. 9). The task of making meaning is necessary, challenging, and potentially frightening.

Major themes reverberate between the five characteristics of emerging adulthood and these four ultimate concerns. Death may seem like the most elusive concern to emerging adults with young, healthy, bodies. Change, however, death's half-sibling, is a constant companion during emerging adulthood. Freedom is experienced through a sense of possibilities, and the responsibility of making choices on which to build a life is evident during emerging adulthood. A sense of isolation and longing for connection during emerging adulthood may result from frequent moves between jobs, partners, and life directions. The question of meaning is at the heart of most emerging adult decisions and explorations, as they strive to create a structure of belief that is "sturdy enough" to inhabit.

In addition to describing these four ultimate concerns, Yalom's descriptions of the types of situations which tend to catalyze existential awareness of these concerns, called "boundary" or "border" experiences, also have strong parallels with emerging adulthood. These boundary examples are: "such experiences as a confrontation with one's own death, some major irreversible decision, or the collapse of some fundamental meaning-providing schema" (Yalom, 1980, p. 8). Of these three possible boundary experiences, emerging adults are *likely* to encounter at least two of them. Making decisions about love, work, and worldviews that impact the rest of adulthood is a necessary task of emerging adulthood. Additionally, it is nearly inevitable that emerging adults will experience the collapse of some belief or structure that formerly provided a sense of safety and belonging. A bad breakup could provide such an experience, or a

change of religious faith, or an especially provocative college professor. One of the

developmental tasks of emerging adulthood seems to be testing worldviews against

experiences, and seeing what breaks and what fits. As they piece their identities back

together, emerging adults eventually gain a better sense of who they want to be in the

world and what they want to believe. I argue that this process of breaking and

reconstructing also builds existential awareness, which remains useful across the

lifespan.

The title of this section refers to the psychological work that I believe is central to

emerging adulthood: the task of learning to become comfortable with

uncertainty. Emerging adults, by the very nature of their experiences, are likely to run up

against the ultimate concerns of existence. "[C]onfrontation with one's existential

situation," Yalom writes, "reminds one that paradigms are self-created, wafer-thin

barriers against the pain of uncertainty." Yalom's advice to the "mature therapist" is that

he or she must be able to "tolerate this fundamental uncertainty," and I argue that the

maturing emerging faces a similar challenge (1980, p. 26). Learning to cope with

uncertainty while at the same time working to build a more solid foundation is one of the

critically important tasks of emerging adulthood, and indeed of human existence.

Conclusion

This paper has presented and explored the developmental stage of emerging adulthood. Each of the ten sections gave an overview on a topic that is important to understanding the experience of emerging adulthood. Throughout these sections, emerging adulthood was presented and defended as a life stage, although this is not a universally accepted idea. The contention some people have raises an interesting question: is emerging adulthood a non-necessary stage of development? One way to respond to this question is that while a full experience of emerging adulthood is not necessary for a baseline level of human existence, as is learning to speak or walk, it may still serve an important function.

Emerging adulthood may enrich and support human development in those circumstances where it can be freely explored. One might go so far as to say that with increasing development of nations, the world may experience greater opportunities to provide time for emerging adulthood to young people when it is most developmentally useful, producing more balanced and effective adults. Or is emerging adulthood a time of unnecessary "navel gazing," which is detrimental because it keeps emerging adults from getting started on the work of contributing to adult society? Critics might endorse the latter statement, but this paper leans toward the former: emerging adulthood is an important human developmental period with potential benefits extending through the rest of adult life.

Furthermore, emerging adulthood seems to be here to stay. The changes that catalyzed the rise of emerging adulthood are not likely to reverse, and emerging adulthood is predicted to become a more prevalent experience as worldwide affluence

and industrialization increases (Arnett, 2015). The challenge that this paper poses to emerging adults, their parents, and society at large is to learn about the life stage, accept it, and find ways to make the experience of emerging adulthood even more beneficial to individuals and society.

To promote understanding of the life stage, this paper has explained the four social contexts for the rise of emerging adulthood: the Technology Revolution, the Sexual Revolution, the Women's Movement, and the Youth Movement (Arnett, 2015). These changes happened quickly enough that many parents of emerging adults were still guided by the expectations of the previous era when they were in their twenties. This means that the parents of emerging adults must work to understand the new contexts their children inhabit. Also, emerging adults may need to realize that relying too heavily on their parents for advice could be anxiety producing. Some of parents' advice may not make sense or be possible to follow today, and this disconnect may add worry and a sense of "doing it wrong" to the already uncertain journey of emerging adulthood. Ideally, emerging adults and their parents will come to understand and accept that the road to adulthood has changed in important ways. This acceptance will reduce anxiety for all involved and open new perspectives for how to support of emerging adults.

Some of these new ways of becoming an adult include later age of marriage, more reliance on friends and family for emotional support during the gap before marriage, and more identity exploration taking place before any ultimate commitments are made. This includes explorations in love, work, and worldviews (Arnett, 2015). Some emerging adult priorities may also differ from their parents. Many emerging adults value meaning

and personal fulfillment highly, as well as making a positive impact on the world, and these values are often more important than making large amounts of money. Furthermore, emerging adults tend to believe that searching for what they want is more valuable than making enduring decisions quickly or limited information. They see their twenties as a time for enjoying being young, figuring out who they are, and having experiences that may be more difficult to come by later in life. As they explore, they are learning all the time, and there is neuroscientific research to support the usefulness of this period of exploration. The research suggests that the brain is still developing in critical ways during emerging adulthood. Postponing ultimate decisions until the brain is fully mature, and using the years while it is maturing for refining interests, having experiences, and learning skills, may be an incredibly wise and beneficial course of action.

Finally, as emerging adults journey through work, love, and worldviews, navigating the complexities of modern society and forming relationships, they are learning how to handle uncertainty. Change is one of the most prevalent states of emerging adulthood, and dealing with continuous change requires emotional strength and flexibility. The optimism that most emerging adults feel about their lives is another major factor in their resilience. As society comes to understand and accept the life stage of emerging adulthood, and build structures to help support emerging adult development, the payback may be even more immediate than the eventual creation of a resilient and self-aware cohort of adults. As society learns to support emerging adults in appropriate ways, encouraging their autonomy and providing safety nets for their explorations, emerging adults will continue to infuse their optimism and courage into the systems they

inhabit. Emerging adults have energy and passion to share, and they are searching for meaningful ways to do it. Give them support and encouragement, and they will work to leave our world better than they found it.

Description of the Appendix: The Something Potluck

The appendix to this paper is a handbook for "The Something Potluck," which is an original program that I, the author of this paper, designed. The Something Potluck, for twenty and thirty-something emerging adults, is a group-based program held once per month. Each of its ten sessions are focused on a theme relevant to emerging adulthood. The goal of The Something Potluck is to support emerging adults in their development, and there are two main approaches to this goal: building community through a shared meal, and increasing awareness of the developmental stage of emerging adulthood through themed discussions. Using these two simple objectives, The Something Potluck program provides a way for emerging adults to gather together, learn about themselves and each other, and share their stories. This approach normalizes and validates emerging adult experience, which leads to the overall goal of The Something Potluck: that its members will gain an increased sense of both competency and self-compassion. Feeling successful in life when everything is in flux can be difficult, and The Something Potluck is designed to help emerging adults cultivate some firm ground to stand on while simultaneously feeling proud of their abilities to handle change and uncertainty.

During the 2014-2015 academic year, while researching and writing this paper, I conducted a trial run of The Something Potluck program. I received funding from Grace Church, Red Hill for this project. Participants offered suggestions and feedback, and

together we co-created the model for The Something Potluck program that is described in the appendix. At the time this paper was written, seven of the eight scheduled meetings have taken place. Over the course of these seven meetings held monthly from September - April (we skipped November), thirty four emerging adults attended and participated in The Something Potluck, and the majority of them returned for more than one session. A half-day retreat in May is scheduled as the culminating event of this year's trial run of The Something Potluck. I did not submit an IRB proposal for researching this program, so I will not be reporting specific data from participants. However, the response was generally very positive, and I believe that we accomplished what we set out to create. My hope for the future of The Something Potluck is that it could serve emerging adults in a variety of contexts. The program could be delivered to graduating college students, older emerging adults seeking community and direction, or young professionals in the workplace, to name a few ideas. I plan to continue working to improve The Something Potluck and to seek ways to deliver it to groups of emerging adults.

The Something Potluck
Handbook

by Hannah Trible
May 2015

Contents

Introduction

The idea for The Something Potluck came out of my research on emerging adulthood, and my own experience of this life stage. In the six years since my graduation from college, I spent the first three working part time, exploring my identity, and living with friends in Charlottesville, Virginia, my college town. The next three years were spent exploring and expanding my identity, personal and professional, in graduate school: the counseling masters program at James Madison University. When I returned to Charlottesville for the final internship year of my masters program, I realized how much had changed in my life and in my friends' lives. All of the people I had lived with after college were married. Most of them had full time jobs, some of them were finishing school like me. I became interested in our varied journeys, so I decided to gather a group of us together periodically to discuss our experiences of emerging adulthood. With help from another set of friends to brainstorm a name for this gathering, The Something Potluck was born. During the 2014-2015 school year, I ran a pilot program of The Something Potluck which was funded by Grace Church, Red Hill.

Design

The Something Potluck is a program to support and encourage 20 and 30-something emerging adults. It is a group-based program with permeable boundaries: attendance is not required at every meeting, participants come when they can. Participants are also encouraged to bring friends, causing the group to grow and offering everyone an opportunity to meet new people. The group is open to anyone who feels they could benefit from it, and new members are either brought by existing members or informally screened by the leader. The Something Potluck is designed to serve emerging adults who are not already part of a supportive community like a four year college. Its purpose is to offer a place for conversation, encouragement, and collaboration during the extended rite of passage to adulthood. It offers stability and meaning to a cohort in transition.

Goals and Objectives

The goals of The Something Potluck are 1) to increase understanding of emerging adulthood among participants 2) to increase sense of competency among participants 3) to increase self-compassion among participants.

This is accomplished by providing psychoeducation about the developmental period of emerging adulthood and by forming a community in which emerging adults can journey together during this life stage.

In sum, the co-creation of potluck meals and participation in thoughtful discussions about the experience of emerging adulthood leads to increased empowerment, self-awareness, and self-acceptance for participants in The Something Potluck.

Hosting a Potluck

During the pilot season of The Something Potluck, over time we came up with a structure for meetings that worked well. We meet at my house on Thursday evenings once per month, usually the third or fourth Thursday of the month. I believe that the continuity of keeping the meeting in the same place each month has been important for our group, but hosting a Something Potluck that rotates from house to house might also work.

From 6:30-7:30, participants are invited to a potluck dinner. I communicate with the group using email, though using more sophisticated virtual groups would be interesting to try. Everyone is encouraged to bring Something to share, and I always make a large salad, in keeping with The Something Potluck logo. Sharing a meal together is central to the community feeling of the gatherings. It is a co-created experience, and everyone has Something to offer the group. The potluck part of the meeting serves a major function of helping participants to feel welcomed and part of a collective.

Around 7:30, we informally conclude dinner and begin putting dirty dishes in the kitchen, in preparation for the discussion portion of the evening. As close to 7:45 as possible, we gather, and I introduce the concept of The Something Potluck to any newcomers. I emphasize the importance of keeping the conversation a safe space, and ask participants to refrain from repeating outside of the group what individuals have said. I also have participants sign in each week so that I can keep track of numbers, and each new participant is asked to sign a release form agreeing to be part of a pilot program for my masters research.

Each session has a predetermined theme that participants know ahead of time. To begin the conversation, I ask participants an open-ended question relating to the topic, and each person writes his or her response on a notecard and tosses it into a large bowl. When everyone is finished, we pass the bowl

around and participants each draw out someone else's card. We take turns reading the answers aloud, filling the room with our collective, anonymous voices. There is an element of acceptance and shared understanding in hearing your own words read by someone else.

From this point, we begin the conversation. I jump in with a few facts and ideas about the topic from the literature. Breaking into smaller discussion groups is one approach to try. Themes and questions emerge throughout the conversation. At the end, we repeat the notecard exercise from the beginning, but the question is always the same regardless of the topic: "What are you taking away from this conversation, and/or, what from this conversation do you plan to apply to your life over the next month?" This culminating exercise draws the meeting to a natural close, and it is amazing to hear the threads and themes that participants have picked out from the conversation. This process, too, is validating for participants, because one person writes that they are "taking away" an idea that someone else shared. Because it is all anonymous, there is an overall sense of understanding and acceptance in the group.

In the descriptions of each session, I include relevant readings for the leader and precocious participants. I recommend two books: Jeffrey Arnett's definitive text, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties*, 2nd ed (Arnett, 2015) and *Twentysomething: Why do Young Adults Seem Stuck?* (Henig & Henig, 2012) All other readings can be easily found online.

Contributing to Research

In the appendix I have attached a sample release form, granting me permission to gather anonymous data from The Something Potluck sessions. During this pilot program, however, I did not obtain IRB approval for research with human subjects, so I will not be publishing any specific data from The Something Potluck. I would encourage future gatherings of The Something Potluck to obtain whatever permission is necessary for collecting demographic and qualitative data that could be published. The study of emerging adulthood is still a young endeavor, and any contribution of research would be helpful for continuing the efforts of understanding and supporting emerging adults in our society.

August: "Playing Grown Up"
Discussion question: Do you feel like a pretend grown up?

Suggested Reading: *Chapter 1: A Longer Road to Adulthood* (Arnett, 2015)

September: "What is it about Twentysomethings?"
Discussion question: Are you a twentysomething stereotype?

Suggested Reading: *What is it about Twentysomethings* (NYT, 2010)

October: "Brain Changes"
Discussion question: Do you feel your brain changing?

Suggested Reading:
Interview with Jay Giedd (Frontline, 2002)
Delayed Development: 20-Somethings Blame the Brain (WSJ, 2012)

November: "The Urban Tribe"
Discussion question: Describe your tribe.

Suggested Reading:
Chapter 7: Friendship in Real Life (Henig & Henig, 2012)

December: "Family Matters"
Discussion question: How do you fit into your family now?

Suggested Reading:
Chapter 3: From Conflict to Companionship (Arnett, 2015)
Chapter 8: Parents as Co-Adults (Henig & Henig, 2012)

January: "What do you do?"
Discussion question: What do you do?

Suggested Reading:
Chapter 7: Work: More than a Job (Arnett, 2015)
Chapter 3: Career Choices (Henig & Henig, 2012)

February: "Love, etc."
Discussion question: What is love, etc.?

Suggested Reading:
Chapter 4: Love and Sex: New Freedoms, New Problems (Arnett, 2015)
Chapter 5: Meandering Toward Marriage (Arnett, 2015)
Chapter 4: Love and Marriage (Henig & Henig, 2012)

March: "Digital Natives"
Discussion question: How do you feel about your phone?

Suggested Reading:
Chapter 8: Digital Natives: Emerging Adults' Many Media Uses (Arnett, 2015)

April: "Head Trips"
Discussion question: What holds you back?

Suggested Reading:
Chapter 11: Wrong Turns and Dead Ends (Arnett, 2015)
Chapter 6: Brain and Body (Henig & Henig, 2012)

May: "Learning to Meditate on a Volcano"
Discussion question:
How comfortable are you with being uncomfortable?

Suggested Reading:
Chapter 13: Beyond Emerging Adulthood:
What Does it Mean to Become an Adult? (Arnett, 2015)

The Something Potluck Final Retreat:
Finding Yourself Along the Journey

This meeting of The Something Potluck is designed to be a culminating experience for group members. They will have the opportunity to reflect on their almost year-long journey attending the program, as well as the entire span of their emerging adulthood up to the present.
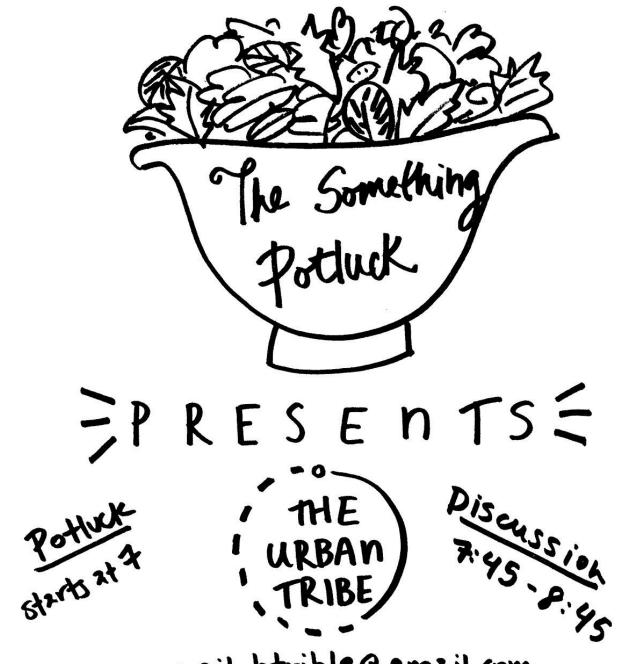
It will be held in a space with access to the outdoors, from 9-12 on a Saturday morning. The theme of the journey, from family of origin to the families we create, will be central to the retreat. The day will begin with introductions, 10 minutes of silent meditation, and the card writing and sharing exercise.

Participants will then be guided in drawing a timeline of their emerging adult years, highlighting important points of change or growth. These will become maps for a walk along a path in the woods, with places for participants to stop and reflect on each of the stages that have passed in their emerging adult journeys.

At the end of this walk, the group will be together in the forest, but each person will occupy an individual space. I will lead them in a guided imagery to discover what part or parts of their emerging adult journeys they feel they are ready to leave behind. There will be clay that they can use to make symbols of these parts, or they can find something in the forest, or pick something from their person. They will then be asked to find a way to discard the symbol: they may give it away, or bury it, or hide it, or destroy it.

Individuals will then return to the group, this time forming a circle. Each member will be welcomed to the circle upon his or her return, symbolizing a shift from independence to community. A closing ritual will end the retreat.

THURSDAY OCT 30

The Something Potluck

≳ P R E S E N T S ≲

THE URBAN TRIBE

Potluck starts at 7

Discussion 7:45 - 8:45

email htrible@gmail.com

The Something Potluck
Participant Permission Form

The Something Potluck is a pilot program I am designing as part of my graduate coursework at James Madison University, in the Clinical Mental Health Counseling MA/EdS program. The Something Potluck is receiving funding in 2014 by a grant from Grace Church, Red Hill.

For the purposes of my research on Emerging Adulthood, as well as for future grant applications, I would like to collect a small amount of data from our gatherings. I am requesting your permission to use (anonymously) your writings from the Something Potluck, as well as your basic demographic information, for qualitative research and grant seeking purposes. Written data is gathered from your answers to the questions at the beginning and end of each potluck, demographic information is gathered from your responses to the questions below. I may quote directly from written data and/or summarize themes from the group discussion. Your name will never be associated with any data, unless you grant me special permission on a case-by-case basis.

Thank you!

I accept the terms outlined above for the use of data by Hannah Trible:

Name: _____ Date: _____

Demographic Information:

I identify as: M / F / Transgender (circle one)

I identify my race/ethnicity as: _____

Age: _____

Current Occupation: _____

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