Unanswered Questions about Emerging Adulthood: An Agenda for Moving the Field Forward

SSEA Presidential Address
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EMERGING ADULTHOOD AS A “GAP” IN THE LIFESPAN

In Western countries, emerging adulthood represents a “gap” between:

**ADOLESCENCE**
- Compulsory Education
- Family of Origin

**EMERGING ADULTHOOD (EA)**

**ADULTHOOD**
- Family of Choice
- Work/Career
IS EMERGING ADULTHOOD ...

A time of opportunities, exploration, fun, and optimism?

OR

A time of confusion and risk?

JEFF ARNETT

JIM CÔTÉ
MAYBE BOTH???
THE TWO FACES OF EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Emerging adults generally report greater well-being and optimism than adolescents do (Galambos et al., 2006)

At the same time, emerging adulthood is the time of highest risks for:

• Binge drinking (CDC, 2014)
• Hard drug use (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2014)
• Drunk driving (CDC, 2015a)
• HIV infection (CDC, 2015b)
ROADMAP FOR THIS TALK

Today I will cover three primary issues regarding emerging adulthood theory and research:

1. EA as a Turning Point in the Lifespan

2. Differences between College Students and Non-Student EA’s

3. EA in International Context
EMERGING ADULTHOOD AS A TURNING POINT

EA is a *turning point* in the lifespan because it is often:

- The beginning of independent decision making;
- The first chance to develop serious relationships;
- The initial opportunity for unsupervised time.
EMERGING ADULTHOOD AS A TURNING POINT

EA is also a time when:

AN EASY LIFE CAN BECOME DIFFICULT

OR

A DIFFICULT LIFE CAN BE REDEEMED

OR
EMERGING ADULTHOOD AS A TURNING POINT

So we might say that EA is the time when life often either
goes good  OR  goes bad
For example, diet and exercise choices in EA predict health outcomes later in life; and

Because EA’s generally make their own food choices for the first time, EA is a good time for diet/exercise interventions (Nelson et al., 2008).
EMERGING ADULTHOOD AS A TURNING POINT

What other kinds of outcomes can be prevented or promoted in EA?
SO WHO GOES GOOD AND WHO GOES BAD?

Many factors predict outcomes in EA – but we will consider 3 of these here:

- FAMILY
- PEERS/PARTNERS
- IDENTITY
Broadly, a number of family processes are important in EA:

- Open Communication
- Autonomy Granting
- Mentorship/Guidance
- Leaving Home (works best when parents are supportive)
Family influences may be stronger or weaker, or more vs. less positive, depending on several factors:

- Genetics
- Cultural Context
- Community Conditions
- Family Structure
- Psychiatric/Substance Abuse Problems
- Personality
Peers and partners can be risk-enhancing or protective, depending on who the peers and partners are.

For example, being in a relationship predicts less risk taking behavior (Braithwaite et al., 2010) - BUT

Having a substance using partner increases one’s own substance use risk (Fleming et al., 2010).
Of course, social media provides access to both online and offline peers.

These two types of peers provide different types of support and influences (Manago et al., 2012).
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

EA is the primary time when identity work occurs.

Emerging adults have more chances to explore and experiment than adolescents do.

Risky behaviors as forms of identity exploration – but not without potential dangers.
Ability to integrate multiple identities often predicts better EA adjustment (Meca et al., 2015).
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Emerging adults often experience identity confusion – but there are at least 2 types of identity confusion:

TEMPORARY (MORATORIUM)
- Linked with identity exploration
- Moderate well-being
- Somewhat elevated risk-taking

CHARACTEROLOGICAL (DIFFUSION)
- Enduring personality “trait”
- Low well-being
- Highly elevated risk-taking

Sources: Luyckx et al., 2008; Schwartz et al., 2011
COLLEGE STUDENTS VERSUS OTHER EMERGING ADULTS

One major criticism of EA research is that much of it focuses on students at 4-year universities (Hendry & Kloep, 2007).

But how much of a problem is this?

That depends on the extent of differences between college students and non-college EA’s.

Here we will look at differences in 2 domains: identity and risky behavior.
Studies in Italy, Japan, and Belgium have found key differences between EA students and non-students:

Sources: Crocetti et al., in press; Luyckx et al., 2008
IDENTITY IN STUDENTS VERSUS NONSTUDENTS

So students might most closely “fit the profile” of emerging adults.

This might help explain why some critics have dismissed EA as a theory of middle-class people.
Popular literature often portrays college campuses as hotbeds of risky behavior (e.g., Bogle, 2008; Neighmond, 2014).

However, aside from alcohol use, non-students actually take more risks than students do.
RISK BEHAVIOR IN STUDENTS VERSUS NONSTUDENTS

Specifically, non-students are more likely than students to

• Smoke marijuana (Bingham et al., 2005)
• Use methamphetamine (Herman-Stahl et al., 2007)
• Engage in casual sex (Bailey et al., 2011)
• Have intercourse without a condom (Bailey et al.)
• Drive drunk (for women) (Bingham et al.)
Further, Bingham et al. found important differences between college completers and non-completers. Specifically, non-completers were more likely to drink heavily and to drive drunk.
So if we survey a bunch of college students and use them to generalize to the EA population, we have no idea how accurate our inferences are!!!!
WHAT ELSE DIFFERS BETWEEN STUDENTS AND NONSTUDENTS?

Peer affiliations?

Romantic relationships?

Family closeness and support?

Religiosity and spirituality?

Well-being/flourishing?
EA THEORY IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

WESTERN SOCIETIES

TECHNICAL/SOCIAL ADVANCES

INDIVIDUALIZED LIFE COURSE
LOOSE VERSUS TIGHT CULTURES

LOOSE (WESTERN)

Individual Freedom
Gender Equality
“Hands Off” Government
Abundant Resources
Relatively Safe

TIGHT (NON-WESTERN)

Conformity
Male Dominance
Authoritarian/Corrupt
Scarce Resources
More Dangerous

Source: Gelfand et al. (2011)
Can EA Exist in a Tight Culture?

That is, in a tight culture:

• Is there room for individualized identity exploration?
• Are people allowed to focus on themselves?
• Can people make and implement choices that go against the group?
• Is deviant behavior tolerated?
Most importantly, in tight cultures, is there a gap between adolescence and adulthood that EA can fill?
WHAT ABOUT CULTURES IN TRANSITION?

Some cultures are in transition between tightness and looseness.

EA might apply more and more to these cultures as time goes on.
WHAT ABOUT CULTURES IN TRANSITION?

Two examples:

JAPAN
(Matsumoto, 2002)

“Individualistic collectivism”

Technological economy

Increase in women in labor force

REPUBLIC OF GEORGIA
(Pelkmans, 2006)

Post-Soviet transition

Relatively poor

Changing priority placed on family closeness
THE NEGLECTED 95%

Most what we know about EA comes from
THE NEGLECTED 95%

But what about
UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

• Is globalization increasing the relevance of EA in the non-Western world? If so, how?

• Is EA “two-faced” in other parts of the world?

• How can EA fit with sectarian violence, natural disasters, corrupt/authoritarian governments, and traditional cultures?

• What specific social/cultural/economic factors are needed to support EA?
SUMMING UP – EA IS:

Created by a social/economic gap between adolescence and adulthood.

Two-faced – highest well-being but also highest risky behavior.

A turning point and sets up the rest of the life course.

Predicted by family, peers/partners, and identity (among other influences).
Most EA research uses college samples, but there are key differences between students and non-students. There are also key differences between college completers and non-completers. So “introductory psychology” samples likely do not generalize to EA’s in general.
SUMMING UP – INTERNATIONAL DIVERSITY IN EA

Most EA research is done in North America and Western Europe.

We do not know whether EA is even possible in “tight” cultures.

What social/cultural factors promote and inhibit EA?

How does globalization promote EA?

More EA research needed in the rest of the world!!
THANK YOU!!!
DANKE
DANK U
TUSEN TAKK
MERCI
GRACIAS
KIITOS
DANK U
GRAZIE
MULȚUMESC