The Cultural Psychology of Emerging Adulthood

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett

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Abstract

The cultural themes and variations of emerging adulthood worldwide are explored and considered. First, an outline of the theory is presented, based on the author's American research. Then, similarities and differences among developed countries are described, with variations including the European form that emphasizes the freedom and leisure of the life stage, and the Asian form in which the desire for identity explorations is tempered by values of family obligation. Social class differences within developed countries are also considered, with an emphasis on the importance of tertiary education in shaping experiences during emerging adulthood and beyond. It is noted that emerging adulthood does not yet exist in developing countries as a normative life stage, but is likely to expand along with economic development in the course of the 21st century. The chapter also considers the cultural beliefs that may underlie emerging adulthood, including the importance of establishing independence and self-sufficiency before entering into adult commitments; that romantic love should be the basis of marriage; that work should be identity-based; and that the emerging adult years should be devoted to self-focused leisure and enjoyment. However, the question of whether these cultural beliefs apply broadly to emerging adults worldwide is among the many questions that remain to be investigated in this new and growing field.

It is now 20 years since I first began studying 18-29-year-olds, and over a decade since I proposed emerging adulthood as a new life stage in between adolescence and young adulthood, lasting from the late teens through the mid-to-late twenties (Arnett, 2000). Although most of my research has taken place on Americans, from the beginning I thought of emerging adulthood as taking place in a historical and cultural context.

Three personal experiences have been important in shaping my view of the cultural basis of emerging adulthood.

- I was a postodoctoral fellow for three years at the Committee on Human Development at the University of Chicago during 1989-92. The Committee combined psychology and anthropology, and gave me my first exposure to anthropology. I read ethnographies there, particularly Gilbert Herdt's (1987) ethnography of the Sambia of New Guinea, that made me a cultural psychologist and permanently grounded my understanding of human development in a cultural context.
- I am married to a Dane—the Editor of this volume—and I have spent a lot of time in Denmark over the past 25 years, including a Fulbright Fellowship year in 2005-06. Our regular trips to Denmark, and my interviews with Danish emerging adults, have served to underscore for me that the experience of emerging adulthood can vary widely depending on where you live. For example, young Danes frequently take a gap year (or two or three) in between secondary school and further education or training, something that is rare among American emerging adults.
- In the past decade, I have traveled to China and India at the invitation of scholars there. On my visits I have met and observed many young people in the age range 18-29, and this experience has provoked reflections on how their lives are similar to and different

from the lives of emerging adults in developed countries. For example, I have noted how their identity explorations in both love and work are restricted by the strong value on family obligations in both societies.

From the beginning, emerging adulthood was proposed as a cultural theory. I emphasized that it exists only under certain cultural-demographic conditions, specifically widespread education and training beyond secondary school, and entry to marriage and parenthood in the late twenties or beyond. In a book on emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004), I proposed five features of emerging adulthood based on my research on hundreds of Americans ages 18-29 from diverse ethnic groups and social classes. However, I emphasized that these features applied specifically to Americans and would not necessarily be found to apply to emerging adults in other cultures.

Since 2000, research on emerging adulthood has taken place in a wide range of cultures in many regions of the world, including Asia, North and South America, and Europe (e.g., Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Douglass, 2007; Facio & Micocci, 2007; Macek, Bejček, & Vaníčková, 2007; Nelson & Chen, 2007). This research has added a great deal to our understanding of the cultural variations in development during emerging adulthood. However, it is important to delineate the underlying cultural basis of emerging adulthood as well. As cultural psychologists have emphasized, understanding the cultural basis of development requires more than simply comparisons across different cultures (Shweder et al., 2006). It requires an illumination of the cultural beliefs that underlie normative patterns of behavior.

In this chapter I will begin by giving a brief overview of the theory of emerging adulthood. Then I will summarize the demographic and cultural changes that have taken place in many regions worldwide to lay the groundwork for the emerging adulthood life stage. Next, I will describe the demographic and cultural variability that exists in emerging adulthood worldwide. Finally, I will

propose some ideas on the cultural beliefs that may be at the heart of emerging adulthood, worldwide.

Emerging Adulthood: An Overview

The theory of emerging adulthood proposes that a new life stage has arisen between adolescence and young adulthood over the past half century in developed countries. Fifty years ago, most young people in these countries had entered stable adult roles in love and work by their late teens or early twenties. Relatively few people pursued education or training beyond secondary school, and consequently most young men were full-time workers by the end of their teens. Relatively few women worked in occupations outside the home, and the median age of marriage in 1960 was around 20 years old for women in the U.S. and most other developed countries (Arnett & Taber, 1994; Douglass, 2005). The median marriage age for men was around 22, and married couples usually had their first child about one year after their wedding day. All told, for most young people half a century ago their adolescence led quickly and directly to stable adult roles in love and work by their late teens or early twenties. These roles would form the structure of their adult lives for decades to come.

Now all this has changed. A higher proportion of young people than ever before—over 60% in the U.S.--pursue education and training beyond secondary school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). The early twenties are not a time of entering stable adult work but a time of immense job instability; the average American changes jobs 7-8 times from age 18-29 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2012). The median age of entering marriage in the U.S. is now 27 for women and 29 for men (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2013). Similar demographic changes have taken place in other developed countries (Douglass, 2007). Consequently, a new period of the life course, emerging adulthood, has been created, lasting from the late teens through the mid-twenties.

I have proposed 5 features that distinguish emerging adulthood from the adolescence that precedes it or the young adulthood that follows it (Arnett, 2004). Emerging adulthood is the *age of identity explorations,* that is, the period of life when people are moving toward making crucial choices in love and work, based on their judgment of their interests and preferences and how these fit into the possibilities available to them. It is the *age of instability,* because in the course of pursuing their identity explorations emerging adults frequently change love partners, jobs, educational directions, and living arrangements. It is the *self-focused age,* because it is the period of life when people have the fewest daily role obligations and thus the greatest scope for independent decision-making. It is the *age of feeling in-between,* because emerging adulthood is when people are most likely to feel they are neither adolescents nor adults but somewhere in-between, on the way to adulthood but not there yet. Finally, it is the *age of possibilities,* because no matter what their lives are like now, nearly everyone believes in emerging adulthood that eventually life will smile on them and they will achieve the adult life they envision.

These features distinguish emerging adulthood from adolescence or young adulthood but are not unique to it. All of them begin in adolescence and continue into young adulthood, but emerging adulthood is when they reach their peak.

International patterns: What applies across societies?

The theory of emerging adulthood was based originally on my research involving about 300 Americans ages 20-29 from various ethnic groups, social classes, and geographical regions. To what extent does the theory of emerging adulthood apply internationally? The short answer to this question is that, demographically, similar patterns indicating the rise of a life stage of emerging adulthood have taken place across developed countries, in longer and more widespread tertiary education and later ages of entering marriage and parenthood. However, the five features proposed

for American emerging adults have not yet been investigated in other countries, and whether or not they would apply broadly is an open question.

As a demographic phenomenon, the evidence for emerging adulthood depends greatly on what part of the world is considered. Demographers make a useful distinction between the "developing countries" that comprise the majority of the world's population and the "developed countries" that are part of the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), including the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. The current population of OECD countries is 1.2 billion, about 17% of the total world population (UNDP, 2013). The rest of the human population resides in developing countries, which have much lower median incomes, much lower median educational attainment, higher birth rates, and earlier ages of entering marriage and parenthood. First let us consider emerging adulthood in OECD countries, then in developing countries.

EA in OECD Countries: The Advantages of Affluence

The same demographic changes as described above for the United States have taken place in other OECD countries as well. This is true of participation in tertiary education as well as median ages of entering marriage and parenthood (Douglass, 2007; Dubois-Reymond & Chisholm, 2006).

Participation in tertiary education is driven primarily by changes in the global economy. Over the past half century, economies in OECD countries have shifted from a manufacturing base to a base in information, technology, and services. Many manufacturing jobs have been eliminated by the increased use of machines to do jobs once performed by employees. For example, it takes far fewer workers to staff an automobile factory today than it did 50 years ago because many of the previous jobs are now mechanized. Other manufacturing jobs have been moved from OECD

countries to developing countries, as companies have sought to lower their production costs by hiring cheaper workers.

Meanwhile, jobs in information, technology, and services have surged in OECD countries. Fewer automobile workers may be needed, but people are needed to design the new machines making production more efficient and less labor-intensive. An entire industry has grown up around computer services that did not exist 50 years ago. The health services area has burgeoned as people in OECD countries live longer and need health care during their later years. As a consequence of such changes, an expanding proportion of young people have obtained tertiary education. Table 1 shows rates in a range of OECD countries (UNESCO, 2013).

Insert Table 1 about here

The change over recent decades is especially striking for women. At the same time as the shift from a manufacturing economy to an information/technology/services economy has taken place, a revolution in women's roles and rights has taken place, and the combination has brought young women into higher education in vast numbers. Fifty years ago, women across OECD countries were much less likely than men to obtain tertiary education. Now, in every single OECD country women exceed men in educational achievement, as Table 1 shows.

Similarly revolutionary changes have taken place in median ages of entering marriage and parenthood. As opportunities expanded for women in the workplace and in higher education, there was less pressure on them to marry at a young age in order to avoid the dreaded fate of becoming an "old maid" with a marginal role in their society, and more incentive for them to wait until they had finished a period of tertiary education and established themselves in the workplace before entering

marriage and parenthood (Cherlin, 2009). For both young women and young men, the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s transformed premarital sex in many OECD countries from a rare and forbidden pleasure to a normative experience. Cohabitation, too, changed from taboo to tolerated in many countries. The combination of premarital sex and cohabitation meant that it was no longer necessary to get married in order to have a regular sex life.

The demographic changes of broader participation in tertiary education and higher ages of entering marriage and parenthood have taken place in OECD countries worldwide, and these changes laid the foundation for the rise of the new life stage of emerging adulthood. The age period from the late teens through most of the twenties is no longer a period of entering and settling into stable adult roles, for most people. On the contrary, it has been transformed utterly, into a stage not of commitment but of exploration, not of stability but of exceptional instability, not of making enduring commitments to others but of self-development. In short, instead of making the transition from adolescence to young adulthood at around age 20, as young people did for most of the 20th century, today young people in OECD countries experience adolescence through most of the second decade of life, then emerging adulthood during their twenties, then young adulthood beginning only by the time they approach age 30. In OECD countries, the same demographic changes have taken place in all of them and a common life stage of emerging adulthood is now normative in across countries. However, there is also substantial variability in how emerging adulthood is experienced, as we will see in the following section.

<u>Variations Among OECD Countries</u>

In every OECD country, young people now participate in tertiary education at higher rates than ever before, marry later than ever before, and have their first child later than ever before. However, this pattern of demographic changes is only the *structure* of emerging adulthood. The

content of emerging adulthood is how the years from the late teens through the mid-twenties are experienced, and this varies widely among OECD countries.

Europe is the region where emerging adulthood is longest and most leisurely. The median ages of entering marriage and parenthood are near 30 in most European countries (Douglass, 2007). Europe today is the location of the most affluent, generous, egalitarian societies in the world—in fact, in human history (Arnett, 2007). Governments pay for tertiary education, assist young people in finding jobs, and provide generous unemployment benefits for those who cannot find one. In northern Europe, many governments also provide housing support. Emerging adults in European societies make the most of these advantages.

Abundant insights on emerging adulthood in Europe can be found in the ethnographic work of Carrie Douglass and her colleagues (Douglass, 2005, 2007). Douglass and her colleagues are anthropologists who set out to investigate the human experience behind the European trend of lower fertility rates. In the course of exploring the basis of lower fertility rates they inevitably explored the larger question of how the nature of young people's lives have changed now that they no longer devote their twenties mainly to marriage and caring for young children. Consequently, they unearthed a great deal of fascinating and important information on emerging adulthood.

Douglass and her colleagues described the diversity that exists across Europe, but the consistent theme across countries was that young people all over Europe want to enjoy a period of emerging adult freedom and independence beyond adolescence before they commit themselves to the enduring responsibilities of adulthood. In Norway, for example, most young people want to have children eventually, but there are many prerequisites that must first be attained: to live independently for some years, to finish education, to be settled in a job, and to have lived with a partner for some time (Ravn, 2005). There is also the expectation that the twenties will include a

period devoted to travel or some other self-focused, self-developing activity. There is a clear social norm that emerging adulthood "should" be enjoyed for some years before parenthood is entered.

Douglass's own ethnographic research in Spain provides a complementary example from southern Europe (Douglass, 2005). In recent decades the median marriage age in Spain has risen to nearly 30 and the fertility rate has plunged to among the lowest in the world despite a strong cultural tradition of large extended families. There are a variety of reasons for this change, including new opportunities for women and high youth unemployment, but the largest reason appears to be that young Spaniards prefer to focus in their twenties on enjoying the freedom and fun of emerging adulthood. Young people in their twenties repeatedly told Douglass that marriage (and especially children) would put a damper on their freedom to go out, to travel, to go skiing, to "enjoy life." This comfortable lifestyle is made possible by remaining at home with their parents' care and support until marriage. Asked why they remained home well into their twenties, emerging adults in Spain often retorted along the lines of, "Why should we leave? We're fine here. We live in a 5-star hotel!"

Eastern Europe, after decades of oppression under communism, is rapidly headed toward the Western European model of emerging adulthood. For example, in the Czech Republic the freedom to "work, travel, and study" during the 20s is now highly prized (Nash, 2005). Unlike in much of the rest of Europe, low birthrates are viewed by Czechs young and old not as a crisis but as a happy manifestation of the new freedoms young Czechs gained with the fall of communism.

The lives of emerging adult "singles" are romanticized in Czech popular culture. "Singles" are young men and women of marriageable age who choose not to marry but to enjoy an active self-focused leisure life. They are depicted as part of a global youth culture, with lifestyles that have more in common with those of young professionals in New York and Paris than with their own

parents. Rather than resenting the enjoyments of the young, parents generally support and encourage their children to enjoy the emerging adult freedoms they never had.

The lives of Asian emerging adults in OECD countries such as Japan and South Korea provide a striking contrast to the self-focused leisure lives of emerging adults in Europe. Like European emerging adults, Asian emerging adults in these countries tend to enter marriage and parenthood quite later, usually around age 30 (Rosenberger, 2007). Like European emerging adults, Asian emerging adults in these countries enjoy the benefits of living in affluent societies with generous social welfare systems that provide support for them in making the transition to adulthood, for example free university education and substantial unemployment benefits.

However, in other ways the experience of emerging adulthood in Asian OECD countries is markedly different than in Europe. Europe has a long history of individualism, dating back at least to the Reformation, and today's emerging adults carry with them that legacy in their focus on self-development and leisure during emerging adulthood. In contrast, Asian cultures have a shared cultural history emphasizing collectivism and family obligations. Although Asian cultures have become more individualistic in recent decades as a consequence of globalization, the legacy of collectivism persists in the lives of emerging adults. They pursue identity explorations and self-development during emerging adulthood, like their American and European counterparts, but within narrower boundaries set by their sense of obligations to others, especially their parents. For example, in their views of the most important criteria for becoming an adult, emerging adults in the U.S. and Europe consistently rank *financial independence* among the most important markers of adulthood. In contrast, emerging adults with an Asian cultural background especially emphasize becoming *capable of supporting parents financially* as among the most important criteria (Arnett, 2003; Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004). This sense of family obligation may curtail their identity

explorations in emerging adulthood to some extent, as they pay more heed to their parents' wishes about what they should study and what job they should take and where they should live than emerging adults do in the West. In Japan, the derisive term *parasite singles* has become a popular epithet for emerging adults who extend their individualistic identity explorations past the age of 30, and this is one way of warning emerging adults of the risk of social sanctions if they carry their individualism too far (Rosenberger, 2007).

Another notable contrast between Western and Asian emerging adults is in their sexuality. In the West, premarital sex in normative by the late teens, over a decade before most people enter marriage. In the U.S. and Canada, and in Northern and Eastern Europe, cohabitation is also normative; most people have at least one cohabiting partnership before marriage. In Southern Europe, cohabiting is still taboo, but premarital sex is tolerated in emerging adulthood.

In contrast, both premarital sex and cohabitation remain rare and forbidden throughout Asia. Even dating is discouraged until the late twenties, when it is seen as a prelude to a serious relationship leading to marriage. Parents often provide an educational rationale for why their adolescents and emerging adults should avoid dating (Lau et al., 2009). You should be focusing on your education during these years, they tell their children, and dating would be a distraction from this focus (Saraswathi, Mistry & Dutta, 2011). This rationale fits well with the Asian cultural tradition of extolling education and learning. However, there is also a long-standing cultural tradition of sexual conservatism and female virginity at marriage in Asian cultures. It seems likely that the ban on dating, premarital sex, and cohabitation that exists today in Asian cultures is in part a legacy of this tradition. In cross-cultural comparisons, about ¾ of emerging adults in the U.S. and Europe report having had premarital sexual relations by age 20, versus less than 20% in Japan and South Korea (Hatfield and Rapson, 2006). Consequently, the identity explorations that are typical

among young Americans may not apply to young Asians, at least with regard to love and sex. More generally, the Asian form of emerging adulthood may have distinctive features, different than the West, that remain to be delineated.

Variation Within OECD Countries: Social Class

In addition to variations across OECD countries in the content of emerging adulthood, there is also variation within countries. One important aspect of variation within countries is social class. Social class is unquestionably an important element in the lives of emerging adults, as it is in the lives of people of other ages. Specifically, the pursuit of tertiary education structures the lives of some emerging adults but not others, and this difference has repercussions for their lives in emerging adulthood and beyond.

For those who pursue tertiary education, their lives are structured around going to classes and doing course work. Many of them work at least part-time as well, to support themselves and to pay educational expenses, which can make for a very busy life. Those who are not in school but working or seeking a job face the formidable challenge of finding a well-paying, enjoyable job without educational credentials, at a time when such jobs are increasingly elusive. Furthermore, future prospects vary greatly for these two groups, with those pursuing post-secondary education having a higher likely social class destination than those who do not, in terms of income and occupational status.

Although social class is crucial to how the years from the late teens through the twenties are experienced, people in this age range can be designated as emerging adults across social classes. At its core the birth of emerging adulthood over the past half century is a demographic phenomenon, arising from the substantial increase in median ages of marriage and parenthood in every OECD country. A half century ago most people entered these roles at age 20-22, placing them in “young

adulthood" right after adolescence, with adult responsibilities of coordinating family life with a spouse, including running the household, paying the bills, and caring for children. Now that the median ages of entering marriage and parenthood have moved into the late twenties or even the early thirties, a stage of emerging adulthood has opened up between adolescence and young adulthood, during which people are more independent of their parents than they were as adolescents but have not yet entered the roles that structure adult life for most people. Young people in lower social classes may enter these roles a year or two earlier than their peers in the middle and upper classes, but for most that still leaves a period of at least 5 years between the end of secondary school and the entrance to adult roles, certainly long enough to be called a distinct life stage (Arnett, Hendry, Tanner, & Kloep, 2010).

My research has indicated that there are other similarities among American emerging adults across social classes, beyond the demographic similarities (Arnett, 2004; Arnett & Schwab, 2012). For both the lower/working class and the middle class, the years from the late teens through the twenties are a time of trying out different possibilities in love and work, and gradually making their way toward more stable commitments. For both groups, instability is common during these years as frequent changes are made in love and work. For both groups, their hopes for the future are high, even though the real prospects for those with relatively low education are not favorable.

EA in Developing Countries: Low But Rising

Emerging adulthood is well-established as a normative life stage in the countries described thus far, but it is spreading in developing countries. Demographically, in developing countries as in OECD countries, the median ages of entering marriage and parenthood have been rising in recent decades, and an increasing proportion of young people have obtained tertiary education. Nevertheless, currently it is only a minority of young people in developing countries who experience anything

resembling emerging adulthood. The majority of the population still marries around age 20 and has long finished education by the late teens or sooner, as illustrated in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

For young people in developing countries emerging adulthood exists only for the wealthier segment of society, mainly the urban middle-class, whereas the rural poor have no emerging adulthood and may even have little adolescence because they enter adult-like work at an early age and also begin marriage and parenthood relatively early. As Saraswathi and Larson (2002) observed about adolescence, “In many ways, the lives of middle-class youth in India, South East Asia, and Europe have more in common with each other than they do with those of poor youth in their own countries.” However, as globalization proceeds, and economic development along with it, the proportion of young people who experience emerging adulthood is likely to increase as the middle-class expands.

For young people in developing countries who do experience emerging adulthood, there are complex identity challenges. It has been proposed that many of them develop a bicultural or hybrid identity, with one aspect of themselves for participating in their local culture and a different aspect of themselves for participating in the global economy (Arnett, 2002; Jensen, Arnett, & McKenzie, 2010). One example of retaining a local identity even as a global identity is developed can be found among young people in India. India has a growing, vigorous high-tech economic sector, led largely by young people. However, even the better-educated young people, who have become full-fledged members of the global economy, still mostly prefer to have an arranged marriage, in accordance with Indian tradition (Chaudhary & Sharma, 2007). They also generally expect to care for their parents in old age,

again in accord with Indian tradition. Thus they have one identity for participating in the global economy and succeeding in the fast-paced world of high technology, and another identity, rooted in Indian tradition, that they maintain with respect to their families and their personal lives.

Although the demographic patterns point to the rise of emerging adulthood in developing countries, so far there is little research to shed light on who experiences emerging adulthood in these countries or how it is experienced. Here as in other areas of psychological research, the vast majority of research is on people in OECD countries, especially the United States, and research on the developing countries that comprise over 80% (and growing) of the world's population is relatively scarce (Arnett,2008). This can be seen as a great challenge and a great opportunity, to study the phenomenon of emerging adulthood as it spreads around the world in the course of the decades to come (Arnett, 2006).

Many Emerging Adulthoods

In sum, emerging adulthood is growing as a worldwide phenomenon, in demographic terms, yet there is a great deal of variation worldwide in how it is experienced, both across and within countries. A useful analogy can be made here to the life stage of adolescence. Cross-cultural studies, most notably Schlegel and Barry's (1991) study of 186 traditional cultures, have found that adolescence exists in nearly all human cultures, as a period between the time puberty begins and the time adult roles are taken on. However, the length of adolescence, and the nature of adolescents' experiences, vary vastly among cultures. Some adolescents attend secondary school, and some drop out or never go (Lloyd, 2005). Most live in the same household as their parents, but some become "street children" and live among other adolescents in urban areas (UNICEF, 2003). Some marry by their mid-teens, especially girls in rural areas of developing countries, whereas others will not marry until after adolescence and a long emerging adulthood. Consequently, it makes sense to speak not of

one adolescent experience but of *adolescences* worldwide (Larson, Wilson, & Rickman, 2010). Yet we still recognize adolescence as a life stage that exists in nearly all cultures, in some form.

In the same way, we can expect that there are likely to be many emerging adulthoods, i.e., many forms the experience of this life stage can take depending on social class, culture, and perhaps other characteristics such as gender and religious group. Some emerging adults obtain tertiary education and some do not. Some live with their parents during these years and some do not. Some experience a series of love relationships, whereas others live in cultures where virginity at marriage is prized and love relationships before marriage are discouraged. Yet emerging adulthood can be considered to exist wherever there is a period of at least several years between the end of adolescence—meaning the attainment of physical and sexual maturity and the completion of secondary school—and the entry into stable adult roles in marriage or love and work. The structure of emerging adulthood may be consistent in OECD countries, in the demographic patterns of widespread tertiary education and entering marriage and parenthood in the late twenties or early thirties, whereas the content—how it is experienced, what the real range of educational and occupational opportunities is, how much premarital sex is or is not tolerated—varies greatly and may continue to do so.

At this point, emerging adulthood is not nearly as widespread as adolescence. It exists as a normative life stage only in OECD countries. In contrast, it exists in developing countries only among the small but growing urban middle class, and not in the more populous rural areas, where even adolescence is often brief and adult roles and responsibilities are entered by the mid-teens for many people. Nevertheless, in developing countries around the world the urban middle class is likely to continue to grow in the decades to come. It may be that a century from now emerging adulthood will

be a normative life stage worldwide, although it will continue to show variations within and between cultures, as adolescence does today.

The Cultural Beliefs Underlying Emerging Adulthood

The variations in emerging adulthood across and within countries are of great interest in understanding this new life stage. However, there is more to understanding the cultural psychology of emerging adulthood than merely charting national and cultural variations. Cultural psychology is fundamentally about exploring the belief systems that underlie cultural patterns of thought and behavior. What, then, are the beliefs that underlie and sustain the new life stage of emerging adulthood? I propose that there are four such beliefs, interconnected: the belief that independence and self-sufficiency should be attained before entering into adult commitments; the belief that romantic love should be the basis of marriage; the belief that work should be an expression of one's identity; and the belief that the years from the late teens through at least the mid-twenties should be a time of self-focused leisure and fun.

These beliefs may not prevail in every culture where emerging adulthood is prevalent. All four are individualistic, based on what Jensen (2008, 2011) calls an *Ethic of Autonomy,* and they are most prominent in Europe and the English-speaking OECD countries (the U.S., the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand). In the Asian OECD countries of Japan and South Korea, these beliefs wrestle with more traditional collectivistic beliefs that promote the well-being and interests of the group, especially the family, over the preferences of the individual. It is an open question which beliefs will ultimately prevail in this contest, not just in Japan and South Korea but in the many developing countries that have similar traditions of collectivistic values and where emerging adulthood is expanding.

<u>Becoming self-sufficient: Learning to stand alone</u>

In many cultures, becoming independent and self-sufficient is seen as the central task of the emerging adulthood life stage. Emerging adulthood is viewed by young people in these cultures as a time when they need to move away from dependence on their parents and show that they can manage their lives on their own. It is important to them to demonstrate, to themselves and others, that they have learned to stand alone as self-sufficient persons (Arnett, 1998). Only after this is accomplished do they feel they are ready to enter binding long-term commitments to others, such as marriage, parenthood, and a stable occupational path.

The social and institutional structure of emerging adulthood—or rather, the lack of structure—enhance this emphasis on independence and self-sufficiency. Emerging adulthood is unique in the lifespan as the nadir of social and institutional control. Children and adolescents live with their parents, and their lives are structured by the rules and requirements set down by their parents and by the daily obligation to attend school. Adults (beyond emerging adulthood) mostly live with a spouse or other long-term partner, and most have children. Their lives are structured by their obligations in those relationships and by the daily responsibility to perform work specified by an employer. However, for emerging adults, social and institutional structures are at their weakest. Most still have regular contact with their parents, but they are not bound to follow their parents' rules and wishes as they were when they were younger, even if they still live at home. Most have an employer, but they change jobs so often that they may disregard any employers' demands they consider onerous and simply move on to the next job. Many of them attend college or university, but if they occasionally decide not to attend class or do the required reading, there are few repercussions.

But the centrality of independence and self-sufficiency in the lives of emerging adults is more than just the consequence of their lack of social and institutional structure, it is a *belief* they

hold among their highest values. This can be seen in the criteria they value most for becoming an adult. For over a decade, I and many others around the world have been asking young people about the criteria they consider to be important in marking when a person has become an adult. This research has taken place among a variety of American ethnic groups (Arnett, 2003), and in countries including Argentina (Facio & Micocci, 2003), Austria (Sirsch, Dreher, Mayr, & Willinger, 2009), China (Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004), Czech Republic (Macek, Bejček, & Vaníčková, 2007)), Israel (Mayseless & Scharf, 2003), and the United Kingdom (Horowitz & Bromnick, 2007). With remarkable consistency across countries and cultures, three criteria have stood out as crucial for marking the attainment of adulthood: accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent.

All three of these criteria reflect a belief in the value of becoming independent and self-sufficient. Accepting responsibility for one's self means learning to handle life's problems and the consequences of one's actions alone, without relying on others for assistance. Making independent decisions means deciding for yourself about matters large and small, from what to have for dinner to whether to move in with your love partner. Becoming financially independent means reaching the point where you do not rely on others to provide for you. For all three criteria, interviews with emerging adults show that the independence they seek is primarily independence from parents (Arnett, 1998; 2004). Although most continue to love their parents, and in fact often they get along with them far better in emerging adulthood than they did in adolescence (Arnett & Schwab, 2012), by emerging adulthood they may not want their parents to be involved in their lives to a degree that would compromise or obstruct their pursuit of independence and self-sufficiency.

It is important to add that emerging adults see this emphasis on independence and self-sufficiency as unique to their current life stage (Arnett, 1998, 2004). Almost none of them want to

remain unfettered indefinitely, and very few of them will remain so beyond the age of 30. They see the attainment of independence and self-sufficiency as the primary challenge of their life stage. Once they have established that they have learned to stand alone—and only then—they will be ready to commit themselves to enduring roles and long-term commitments to others in love and work.

Although I originally proposed these ideas about the importance of independence and self-sufficiency in emerging adulthood based on my interviews with Americans (Arnett, 1998; 2004), there is evidence that this is important in a variety of cultural contexts. As noted, the emphasis on criteria for adulthood that have connotations of independence and self-sufficiency has been found in many countries around the world. Also worth mentioning is an investigation by Leslie Chang on "factory girls" in China, young women in their late teens and early twenties who leave their rural villages to seek work in China's booming industrial cities (Chang, 2008). In the cities, away from their families, they quickly adopt a lifestyle that emphasizes self-focused identity development and the pursuit of independence and self-sufficiency. Yet there are also differences from the Western pattern of emerging adulthood. For example, they send money home to their families, and they often live in factory dormitories where there are many rules and restrictions on their activities that few emerging adults in the West would tolerate. Further culturally-based and culturally-diverse work will shed more light on the different forms that the pursuit of independence and self-sufficiency may take in different cultures.

Studies of Chinese university students (Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004) and Asian American emerging adults (Arnett, 2003) have found a similar balance of individualistic and collectivistic values in their views of the most important criteria for adulthood. They prize the three individualistic criteria mentioned, but they also rank highly the capability to support their parents

financially, a criterion never mentioned in American interview studies (Arnett, 1998; 2004). They strive for autonomy even as they also maintain a strong sense of obligation to their parents.

Looking for love: Finding a soul mate

Emerging adulthood is a life stage in which young people move gradually toward making enduring commitments in love and work. With respect to both love and work, cultural beliefs of individualism often underlie emerging adults' explorations.

With regard to love, the individualism of emerging adults is evident in their descriptions of what they seek in a marriage partner. The modern ideal for marriage in Western countries is to find one's "soul mate." According to a national U.S. survey by the National Marriage Project, 94% of single 20-29 year old Americans agree with the statement, "There is a special person, a soul mate, waiting for you somewhere out there" (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2001). Young Europeans share this romantic ideal in seeking a marriage partner (Douglass, 2005).

The soul mate ideal is highly individualistic. A soul mate is someone who complements your identity perfectly. This does not mean that a soul mate is a perfect person; a soul mate is a person who is perfect *for you*. All your needs, wants, and distinctive personal qualities fit snugly into the receptors your soul mate provides. You feel completely at ease with your soul mate because your soul mate views life just as you do. There is no need for conflict, because you and your soul mates want the same things out of life.

Like most ideals, the soul mate ideal is elusive. One reason for the later marriage age today than in previous decades may be that it takes a long time to find someone who resembles the soul mate ideal—or to give up this ideal and settle for a flesh and blood human being (Arnett, 2004). Until recently, finding a marriage partner may have been relatively simple (Cherlin, 2009). A woman looked for a man who would be a good provider, a decent father, and hopefully reasonably

nice and attractive. A man looked for a woman who would run the household, take care of the children, and hopefully be reasonably nice and attractive. Many people within the average person's social circle would fit within these broad guidelines. However, once the expectation for a marital partner is a "special person" who is ideally and uniquely suited to you, there may be very few persons, perhaps only one, "somewhere out there," who will be deemed worthy, and finding that person is likely to take awhile.

But what about cultures in which personal choice in marriage is circumscribed, and parents do much of the choosing? In most of the world there is a long tradition of arranged marriages, in which young people barely knew their prospective spouse prior to the wedding (Hsu, 1985; Prakasa & Rao, 1979). Marriage was mainly a transaction between families, not individuals. Love was expected to grow after marriage, not to be the basis for entering marriage, and intimacy expectations were low (Hatfield et al., this volume). Married couples spent little time alone with each other, and often did not even sleep in the same room.

However, today the tradition of arranged marriage is dead or waning everywhere, and the soul mate ideal is ascending. India is one place where arranged marriage remains the norm, but even there, nearly 40% of young Indians now say they intend to choose their own mates (Chaudhary & Sharma, 2007). Furthermore, many arranged marriages today are in fact "semi-arranged" marriages, in which parents influence the mate selection of their children but do not simply decide it without the children's consent (Naito & Geilen, 2002). Parents may introduce a potential mate to their child. If the young person has a favorable impression of the potential mate, they date a few times. If they agree that they are compatible, they marry. Another variation of semi-arranged marriage is that young people meet a potential mate on their own but seek their parents' approval before proceeding

to date the person or consider marriage. This suggests a movement toward a balance between individual choice and family considerations, i.e., between individualistic and collectivistic values.

Still, there remains little research on how emerging adults in the middle class in developing countries such as India and China view marriage, and it is a question that merits investigation. Do emerging adults in developing countries now have a soul mate ideal of marriage, much like their counterparts in the West? Or do they have less lofty expectations for marriage, seeing it in the more traditional sense as a practical arrangement for distributing responsibilities of child care, providing for and running a household, and the other requirements of daily life?

Looking for identity-based work

Like love, the nature of work has changed in recent decades. Work has been traditionally regarded as an unpleasant but necessary requirement of life. In the Bible story some 3,000 years old, work is a punishment from God, the penalty inflicted on Adam and Eve for their disobedience in the Garden of Eden. Most work in the past of 10,000 years of human history has been agricultural work, which is strenuous, boring, and subject to random catastrophe. When industrialization arose, the tedium of factory work became a dubious alternative to the tedium of field work.

In the modern post-industrial economy, all this has changed. Few people in OECD countries (1-2%) work in agriculture. More work in manufacturing, but the number is decreasing daily as manufacturing jobs are replaced by automation and companies relocate to developing countries with lower wages and weaker labor laws. Instead, there is a vast range of jobs in information, technology, and services. This economic change, along with growing individualism, has spawned a cultural belief that work should be enjoyable, not boring, and self-fulfilling, not deadening to the body or soul.

Consequently, as they enter the job market emerging adults have high expectations for the rewards of work. Unlike generations past, they do not believe that work is inherently and irremediably arduous and dreary. On the contrary, they believe that work should be enjoyable and fulfilling, a form of self-expression (Arnett, 2004). In the same way that they believe they can find a soul mate who provides an ideal complement to their identity, they are hopeful they can find work that is an expression of their identity, an activity that allows them to use their abilities to do something they find engaging, gratifying, and self-fulfilling.

This attitude toward work can be frustrating to employers, who do not typically get up in the morning and ask themselves, "Whom can I fulfill today?" On the contrary, most ask themselves how they can get their employees to do the most work for the least amount of money, in order to maximize company profits. This disconnect between the expectations of employers and the expectations of their young employees can lead to conflict in the workplace, and to high turnover. Surely one reason emerging adults change jobs so often during the decade of the twenties is that finding identity-based work is elusive, and they are quick to drop a job that does not seem to promise this possibility in favor of another job that might.

Their high expectations for work are also likely to be frustrating to emerging adults themselves, ultimately. Just as the search for a soul mate must end in a partnership with a real person, warts and all, the search for identity-based work is likely to end in a job that is not everything one would have liked it to be. Yet I have found that by the end of their twenties most American emerging adults have made peace with their dreams, in both love and work (Arnett, 2004). They may not have quite found their soul mate ideal, but they have found someone they love and who loves them back. They may not have found self-fulfilling work that they look forward to

going to every day, but they have found a job they can live with for now, as they continue to strive toward the ideal of finding a job they truly love.

Glory days: Emerging adulthood as a time of unparalleled fun

Finally, one other key cultural belief that underlies the new life stage of emerging adulthood is that it should be a time of unparalleled enjoyment of life. This is when you have the most freedom for self-focused fun. This is when you have the chance to do things you never could have done when younger and will never be able to do when older: stay out until all hours partying with friends, try unusual mind-altering substances, travel far and wide on a slender budget, or take a low-paying but adventurous job for awhile.

Europe is the cultural area where this cultural belief in emerging adulthood as a time of *joie de vivre* is most pronounced, as shown in ethnographic work by Carrie Douglass (2005) and her colleagues. As mentioned earlier, most European emerging adults prefer to spend the decade of their twenties enjoying travel, time with friends, and other self-focused fun.

In my research on American emerging adults I have observed similar views of emerging adulthood as a peak time of freedom to enjoy life. In a recent national survey I directed, 83% of 18-29-year-olds agreed with the statement, "This time of my life is fun and exciting" (Arnett & Schwab, 2012). American emerging adults value the freedom and independence of the life stage and seek to make the most of it, realizing that once they enter adult commitments their "glory days" will be over. They plan marriage, parenthood, and a long-term job commitment for after those days are over. Because they enjoy their emerging adulthood freedom and leisure, they view adulthood with ambivalence. All of them realize they will enter it eventually; virtually none of them vow to remain in their glory days forever. But, like Augustine contemplating the virtuous life—"Make me chaste, Lord, but not yet"—most are in no hurry to take on the onerous responsibilities of adult life.

Do emerging adults outside the West have a similar view of the emerging adult years as a time of peak freedom and leisure? Or are they more focused on fulfilling their duties and family obligations? There is little research yet to answer these questions, but some interesting clues come from research in Japan. Japanese secondary schools are notoriously demanding and competitive, leaving little room for leisure in adolescence (Rohlen, 1983; Stevenson & Zusho, 2002). However, once they enter college, grades matter little and standards for performance are relaxed. Instead, they have “four years of university-sanctioned leisure to think and explore” (Rohlen, 1983, p. 168). Japanese college students spend a great deal of time socializing with friends, walking around the city and hanging out together (Fackler, 2007). Average homework time for Japanese college students is half the homework time of secondary school students (Takahashi & Takeuchi, 2006). For most Japanese, their emerging adulthood is the only time in their lives, from childhood until retirement, that will be relatively free of pressure. Until they enter college the exam pressures are intense, and once they leave college they enter a work environment in which the hours are notoriously long. Only during their college years are they relatively free from responsibilities and able to enjoy extensive hours of leisure.

Future Directions

Although a great deal of research has taken place on emerging adulthood over the past decade, it is still a new field, and there is much to be learned. As in many fields in psychology, most research so far has taken place in the United States (Arnett, 2008). Research in other developed countries has begun, in areas such as identity (Luyckx, 2008) and relations with parents (Kins & Beyer, 200x), but is in its early stages. Research in developing countries is promising but is limited so far (Badger et al., Nelson 2011).

One important question to be investigated is, what are the distinctive features of emerging adulthood in various cultures? The five features described in this chapter were proposed for American emerging adults, but they may or may not apply to other societies and to the various cultures within American society. Rather than investigating if the five features apply to other cultures as well, it would be advisable to start fresh each time, in these early years of emerging adulthood research, and ask what features are distinctive to emerging adulthood in each cultural group where it is studied. This will require the use of qualitative methods, as quantitative methods tend to be laden with assumptions about what the findings will be, especially in questionnaires that have predetermined responses. Because little so far is known, it is important to ask open-ended questions that allow emerging adults to articulate their views, and learn to develop our theories and ideas from what they have to say about their lives.

In developing countries, emerging adulthood exists demographically only among the relatively small urban middle class, who have longer education and later ages of entering marriage and parenthood than most of the other young people in their society. This represents a great opportunity for researchers on emerging adulthood. Research can be done now in developing countries, before emerging adulthood has become normative, and continue through the 21st century as the new life stage grows and spreads. It would be fascinating to see how young people's cultural beliefs may change as their economies change and as globalization brings them into increasing contact with the lives of emerging adults in developed countries (Arnett, 2002). To what extent will they embrace the cultural beliefs described in this chapter as underlying emerging adulthood in developed countries, and to what extent will they retain their traditional culture beliefs and create new forms of emerging adulthood that are distinctively their own?

Conclusion

The rise of emerging adulthood stems fundamentally from the demographic changes that have opened up a distinct new period between adolescence and young adulthood, most notably greater participation in tertiary education and later ages of entering marriage and parenthood. However, changes in cultural beliefs also, crucially, accompanied these demographic changes. Premarital sex became more widely acceptable in many cultures, decoupling sex from marriage and making it possible to have an active sexual life without entering marriage. The roles and opportunities available to women vastly expanded, removing the social pressure for them to marry and have children in order to have a legitimate place in their societies. Marriage became transformed from a practical arrangement for raising children and running a household to an arena for romantic ideals of soul mate couplehood—at least in aspiration. Work became transformed from a dreary duty to an arena for self-expression—again, at least in aspiration.

Emerging adulthood is a cultural theory, and how emerging adulthood is experienced is shaped by cultural beliefs. In many cultures these beliefs include the desirability of striving for self-sufficiency before adult responsibilities are taken on in love and work; the importance of finding a marriage partner who ideally complements your identity; the importance of finding identity-based work; and the desirability of using the freedom of the emerging adulthood life stage to pursue self-focused fun. Yet these beliefs are by no means universal, and the individualism that runs across these beliefs is tempered in cultures that emphasize obligations to others. The field of emerging adulthood is barely a decade old, and one of its chief challenges in the years ahead will be to chart the cultural themes and variations of this new life stage.

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Table 1

Gross tertiary enrollment, selected OECD countries, 2010

Country	Total	Female	Male
South Korea	103	86	119
United States	95	111	79
Finland	94	103	85
Australia	80	92	68
Spain	70	86	70
Chile	66	68	64
Italy	65	76	54
Canada	62	72	53
Israel	62	71	55
Hungary	61	70	52
United Kingdom	60	70	50
Japan	60	56	63
Czech Republic	64	75	53
France	57	64	50

Source: UNESCO (2013).

Note. Gross enrollment ratio is the total enrollment in a specific level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the eligible official school-age population corresponding to the same level of education in a given school year. For the tertiary level, the population used is that of the five-year age group following on from the secondary school leaving. Consequently, a country

can have a gross enrollment ratio of over 100 if some of the participants in tertiary education are more than 5 years past leaving secondary school.

Table 2

Gross tertiary enrollment, selected developing countries, 2010

Country	Total	Female	Male
Iran	49	49	48
Saudi Arabia	41	42	40
Philippines	28	31	25
Mexico	28	28	28
China	27	28	25
Brazil	26	29	22
Indonesia	23	22	24
India	18	15	21
Pakistan	8	8	9
Ethiopia	8	5	11
Kenya	4	3	5

Source: UNESCO (2013).

Note. Gross enrollment ratio is the total enrollment in a specific level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the eligible official school-age population corresponding to the same level of education in a given school year. For the tertiary level, the population used is that of the five-year age group following on from the secondary school leaving.