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College Student Development and Emerging Adulthood

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Abstract

College student development theories focus on the experiences and growth that individuals and groups encounter throughout their time attending colleges and universities. During this time, many traditionally aged college students are in the period of emerging adulthood. In industrialized societies, this age range is characterized by a prolonged period of adolescence and a lack of taking on adult responsibilities. This exploration highlights the emerging adult college student population in the United States and the development these individuals may undergo.

KEYWORDS—*emerging adulthood; college student development*

Topic for Exploration

This paper will explore the parallels between emerging adulthood and college student development. While not all college students are at the age of emerging adulthood, most of the research geared towards college student development focuses on this particular age range. The overlapping concepts of prolonged periods of refraining from accepting adult responsibilities may still be applied to those outside this unofficial life stage. The concept of emerging adulthood is accentuated by the works of Chickering, a college student development theorist, when applying his seven vectors to college students of today. The overall comparison will focus on identity development during this time period.

Background and College Student Demographics

In the year 2016, post-secondary education has become the norm in many industrialized societies. In the United States alone, approximately 65.9% of students go onto further education after graduating from high school (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). In comparison, in the year 1940 only 14% of high school graduates went on to attend colleges and universities (Arnett &

Taber, 1994; Bianchi & Spain 1996). Looking back even further, one can better understand the changes that have occurred in the education system in the United States. In 1890 only 5% of 14 to 17 year olds attended what we now refer to as high school; this figure then rose to 30% by the year 1920 (Arnett & Taber, 1994) and has since grown to 95% where it remains steady. The number of 18-24 year olds attending college rose by over 4 million between 2000 and 2013 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015). With more and more students pursuing degrees, they must find institutions that can meet their needs.

The current U.S. college student population consists of more than 20 million people enrolled in institutions of higher education, an increase of 4.9 million students since 2000 (National Center of Educational Statistics, 2015). The student body has also become increasingly diverse. Although the United States will have a non-White majority by the year 2050, currently the proportion of enrolled students is: 55% White, 13% African American, 12.8% Hispanic, 5.4% Asian, 1.9% bi- or multiracial, 0.8% Native American, and 0.3% Pacific Islander. The majority of these students (85%), are attending college full time (Fry & Taylor, 2013) and are spread out between four-year public institutions (37%), two-year colleges (36%), four-year private institutions (18%), and less than 1% attending four-year, for-profit institutions.

The just over 20% of remaining students are attending minority serving intuitions such as 18% at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI), 1.5% at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), 0.4% at women's colleges, and 0.09 % at tribally controlled Native American institutions (DeVoe, Darling-Churchill, & Snyder, 2008). Out of all these students attending universities, 57% of them are women and one third have transferred colleges at least once. Of those transfer students, 25% did so more than once (Hossler, Shapiro, and Dundar, 2012a). Within this transfer student population, 14% of them are what are known as “reverse transfers,”

or students who transfer from a four-year institution to a two-year institution (Hossler, Shapiro, and Dundar, 2012b). Typical transfer students perform the opposite, and start off at two-year institutions before moving to four-year institutions or from one four-year institution to another. There are many reasons for students becoming reverse transfers, but the two primary reasons are academic and financial hardships.

An increasingly diverse student body requires administrators across campus to analyze the needs of the current student population. Issues such as first-year and transfer student retention extend beyond the responsibility of admissions and academic affairs, and have become the responsibility of everyone at an institution. In addition to making adjustments for the sheer volume of students attending colleges and universities, student affairs practitioners must respond to the needs of this changing demographic. These professionals are constantly striving to predict the problems that each generation of students will encounter so they can effectively and efficiently provide resources and support to help students overcome them. Every college and university environment shapes the students enrolled at their particular institution, and the environment in turn, is shaped by the students attending said institution.

Personal Nature of the Research

As an undergraduate student interested in the field of higher education and student affairs, I took it upon myself to gain more information and experience within the field while attending Western Michigan University. My area of focus connected me with many opportunities to work with both undergraduate and graduate level students in various capacities. It is through these interactions that I decided to pursue a master's degree in College Student Personnel at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. The impact of the student affairs professionals at WMU

has helped to shape my time in college and inspired me to act as a similar mentor and resource for future generations of students.

In order to gain insight about the field of post-secondary education and student populations I may be working with, I was fortunate enough to take EDLD 5890, an Introduction to U.S. Higher Education and Student Affairs as a 3rd year student. This master's level course, as well as other courses I have taken, educated me on the history of the field and its relationship to fields such as anthropology, psychology, and sociology. This particular course introduced me to many concepts including some college student development theories which I combined with concepts from FCS 2150 Adolescent Development. The commonalities I found between the two fields and lack of acknowledgement of said overlapping ideals became the inspiration for this topic and prompted further study.

Emerging Adulthood

My research began with the author that developed the concept of emerging adulthood. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (2000) published *Emerging Adulthood: The Theory of Development From the Late Teens Through the Twenties* which first appeared in *American Psychologist*. He defined emerging adulthood as the period between ages 18-25 when individuals have moved out of adolescence, but have not entered young adulthood. During these volitional years of life, or period of many choices, they spend their time deciding and committing to particular courses of action. Arnett's research was the first of the late 20th Century to focus exclusively on this period of time and how it deserves recognition as its own unique stage of life.

Arnett developed the concept of emerging adulthood using the work of many influential adolescent development theorists that came before him. In 1904 G. Stanley Hall became the pioneering researcher to focus on adolescence with his theory of Storm and Stress. Hall believed

development was related to genetically predetermined physiological factors and individuals experience mood disruptions because of antisocial behavior and conflict with parents (Arnett 2006). Storm and Stress analyzed the emotions that come with the experiences and challenges adolescents encounter and the reactions they have to these feelings. While a lot of his theory has been disproved, Hall is still known as the “father of adolescence.”

Another major contributor to Arnett’s concept of emerging adulthood was Erik Erikson (1950, 1968). Erikson’s Psychosocial Theory evaluated identity formation throughout one’s life as they come to realize they don’t know who they are or who they are trying to be. He analyzed a person’s inner drives and social concerns, realizing that identity is based on experiences. For the most part, people strive to fit in with groups, and in order to do so undergo identity versus role confusion. Erikson did not quantify the navigation of these stages indicating that one does not move through them at a specific age or in a universal order. One substantial takeaway from Erikson’s stages is psychosocial moratorium, or the period when adult responsibilities are postponed as young people try on various possible selves.

Another researcher who drew ideas from Arnett to build his theoretical framework was Kenneth Keniston (1971) who deemed adolescence as a time of refusal of socialization. The tension he describes between self and society draws from the conflict and opposition of Americans, especially young adults, at this time to the Vietnam War. Daniel Levinson’s study (1978) on men at midlife found participants alluded to a novice phase taking place as they built a stable life structure and moved into the adult world between the ages of 17-33. Lastly, Talcott Parsons (1942) referred to the period of adolescence and beyond as drifting through a roleless role.

As impactful as these researchers were to adolescent development, a lot has changed in the demographics of the United States' adolescent and young adult population which helps to shape the range of emerging adulthood. Arnett, whose research is more current, recognizes that this phenomenon is not a universal or immutable experience; however, he believes that it is relevant to industrialized countries where a prolonged period of independent role exploration is allowed. He also recognizes that emerging adulthood is culturally constructed. Similar to Arnett, most of my focus for this thesis will be on individuals in their late teens and early twenties within the United States.

Student Development Theory

Student development theories are the overarching theoretical concepts that explain how college students gain knowledge and make sense of their experiences during post-secondary education. These theories combine psychological and sociological concepts to further understand how student experiences are shaped by both the institutional environment and the students' genetic makeup. Colleges and universities no longer ascribe to the ideals of *in loco parentis* or in place of parents where they were responsible for the development of moral reasoning in their students. Student services currently use student development theories to emphasize that each student is different and has their own unique needs. In particular I will focus on one student development theory that shares similarities to the role confusion and exploration that takes place during emerging adulthood.

In 1969 Arthur Chickering released his Theory of Identity Development focused on college students and involving seven vectors. Since publishing this initial study, Chickering returned to his research and released an updated version with the help of Linda Reisser in 1993. The update of Chickering's theory emphasized that each student is unique in how they move

through the vectors of development and they may experience multiple vectors concurrently. There may also be different rates, or lengths of time, each individual spends in one particular vector based on their own personal development.

Chickering and Reisser's first vector consists of *Developing Competence* which is performed by striving to achieve intellectual and interpersonal competence, and physical and manual skills. Examples of these include critical thinking, reasoning, wellness and recreation, and communication and leadership. College students are best able to meet the needs of this particular vector by involvement in co-curricular activities that will challenge them both physically and mentally. These experiences may help them to feel more independent and require them to take on more responsibility that may reflect adulthood. Individuals are challenged emotionally through the second vector of *Managing Emotions* as they learn to recognize, accept, and act on emotions in a responsible and appropriate way. Prior to the revised version of Chickering's theory, he originally focused on the emotional aspects of sexual desire and aggression that college students encounter in relationships (1969). One of the goals of emerging adulthood is finding long-term romantic relationships which require a healthy recognition of emotional competency or emotional intelligence.

In the third vector, an individual is *Moving Through Autonomy toward Interdependence* by improving their sense of self-direction and becoming aware of their interconnectedness to others. College students that are involved in student organizations such as fraternities and sororities often learn their actions have a direct impact on their chapter and fellow members. While an emerging adult has independence, they are part of the larger society in which they live and work, and should contribute to it in a positive way. The fourth vector is linked to the previous as college students strive to *Develop Mature Interpersonal Relationships*. Colleges and

universities bring together people from diverse backgrounds, encouraging students to improve their intercultural and interpersonal competency. This is important because it teaches them to appreciate and respect both similarities and differences in order to form deeper bonds with others. These interpersonal relationships may be characterized as friendships or romantic relationship and can lead to long-term investment.

Establishing Identity is Chickering's fifth vector and requires creating a sense of comfort with oneself and the various aspects of one's identity including one's role, lifestyle, self-esteem, and self-acceptance. Throughout college and emerging adulthood, one deals with the intersectionality of their identity that ranges from social and cultural heritage, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religious/spiritual beliefs, and body appearance. This period in one's life is often thought of as the age of exploration as one navigates these aspects of their identity in a new environment especially without the impacting of one's family.

The next vector involves *Developing Purpose* or establishing vocational goals consisting of work or volunteering in their career or what one believes to be their life calling. It also encompasses making meaningful decisions and commitments to personal and interpersonal interests. As a college student and emerging adult, this is often seen through what major one chooses to study while attending school, as well as the student's co-curricular interests. The last vector is *Developing Integrity* in which one creates a humanizing system of values that balance personal interests with the interests of others. The individual discovers a personalized set of core values that also acknowledges and respects the beliefs of others, and one's actions and values become congruent and authentic through a balance of social responsibility and self-interest. Throughout college, students are exposed to a vast array of worldviews which may lead to a

reaffirming of viewpoints or may prompt further exploration and lead to questioning those and reevaluating them (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

How college students navigate these vectors and emerging adulthood is impacted by institutional environmental factors such as their objectives or values, programs, practices, and policies (Ortiz & Waterman, 2016). The institutional size determines the ratio between the number of students and the potential for opportunities for significant participation. Students at large institutions may feel lost in the crowd of people and refer to this phenomenon as being just another number. The relationship between students and faculty and their ability to communicate with each other, as well as their authenticity and accessibility to one another is an additional factor. Faculty members and the institution itself determine the curriculum of the courses. This curriculum should be made relevant to the students and account for each student's past experiences and individual differences in order to further enhance or question their pre-existing views. Teaching is another component of the student-faculty interaction and should encourage active thinking and learning, as well as provide expectations and feedback to better integrate new ideas and differences in student learning styles.

An individual's direction within the vectors is also largely impacted by friendships and student communities. "A student's most important teacher is often another student" (Chickering Reisser, 1993) whether it is in the form of formal or informal groups. Some of these groups may include student organizations, fraternity and sorority life, intramurals, work, and other regular, meaningful, or significant interactions. The last substantial component of an institutional environment's impact on the vectors is at what level they offer student development programs and services. The authors recommended that student affairs professionals think of themselves as

educators in order to better serve as advocates and to educate the whole student (Ortiz & Waterman, 2016).

Discussion and Findings

As identified earlier, emerging adults do not consider themselves to be adults, and research has shown that neither do their parents (Nelson, et al., 2007). Various forms of parenting styles and involvement may determine the significance parents play in their children's role exploration and experimentation. A number of studies have focused on the effect of living arrangements such as living at home, staying in a residence hall, or residing in an apartment while attend college and a student's relationship to their parents. A contributing factor to the relationship of living arrangements and independence is the level of economic support one receives (Aquilino, 2006). It seems that the best relationships are between those parties that agree that independent identities are formed outside of the family dynamic.

A common cause of conflict between parents and their emerging adult children is when parents attempt to maintain control as their children go off to college and strive for independence. It seems that parents must learn to adapt their parenting during emerging adulthood, just as they should shift their parenting during the transition from childhood to adolescence. This balance parents must achieve is determined based on the expectations, control, and responsiveness in the parent-child interaction. Implications of parent-child relationships begin long before one reaches emerging adulthood and are shaped throughout the child's entire life. Positive parenting during childhood and adolescence has tended to lead to positive functioning by emerging adults (Berzonsky, 2004; Smits et al., 2008)

Parents may also struggle with adaptive adolescent behavior that take place as their children progress towards emerging adulthood. The brain development taking place at this time

COLLEGE STUDENT DEVELOPMENT AND EMERGING ADULTHOOD

incorporates emotional reactivity as a way to make adolescents more aware of potential threats and vigilant towards them. The congruent behaviors include risk-taking which leads to leaving home in order to find a mate (Spear, 2000). While learning impulse control and beginning to understand stimuli that produce messages of safety vs. danger is essential, like other aspects of development, adaptive adolescents may be prolonged as well. Parental concern becomes even more justified when risk-taking behaviors are maintained throughout emerging adulthood (Casey, Jones, Hare, 2008).

Comparison

Similarities	Differences
Age 18-25	Development theories focus on college students only
Period of identity development	Non-industrialized societies have colleges and universities but not emerging adulthood
Period of role establishment	Development theories recognize individual differences
Varying levels of support from parents	Emerging adulthood is culturally constructed

Limitations

As my topic suggests, most of the research on emerging adulthood surrounds students enrolled in colleges and universities. This comparison in particular does not focus on students who are not and will not enroll in institutions of higher learning during emerging adulthood due to lack of analysis on this group. The disparity in my findings has not gone unnoticed by other researchers as well. In 1988, the William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship compiled *The Forgotten Half: Non-College-Bound Youth in America*. This report collected data and created policy suggestions for how to promote a successful transition from high school to full-time work. Even after this widely read publication was released, there

are still few studies on young people that choose not to attend college after the completion of high school and how that may affect their development.

There are many reasons why these individuals have been dubbed the forgotten half, and what contributes to its continuation, but the most prominent is practicality. Since many researchers on this topic and in general are involved in colleges and universities, they have easy access to populations of college students. Scholars must look for other forms of contact with the non-college-going population such as through newspaper advertisements and community organizations. The problem with these avenues is that the populations they will draw are not representative samples, and only limited to those who have access to these modes of communication.

In addition to the lack of evidence in the relationship of emerging adults and those that do not attend colleges and universities, more research must be conducted on individuals who are attending college outside of the 18-25 age range. What happens to non-traditional students who enter higher education? If they have already achieved demographic transitions such as marriage, parenthood, and possibly had a long-term career will they still experience the role confusion that is common of their fellow students? While these non-traditional students more than likely have also achieved the adult criteria of making independent decisions and accepting responsibility, they may have yet to achieve financial independence due to the high costs of post-secondary education.

Another area of development my research did not highlight was the impact of study abroad experiences and how they affect college student development and emerging adulthood. Living independently in a non-English speaking country could have very significant impacts on one's development. Even if previous studies have been enacted by scholars, they do not

necessarily focus on non-traditional students who take advantage of the aforementioned experiences or how they impact their worldviews. Not intending to forget the forgotten population once more, it would also be beneficial to research travel experiences of those who do not attend college, but choose to travel domestically or internationally either independently, in a small group, or for business.

The final populations that have been overlooked as they relate to college student development and emerging adulthood are those who have aged out of the foster care system. Due to the nature of foster care, students may lack the financial and social support to attend college, and may surpass emerging adulthood quickly because of the independence foster care tends to establish within individuals. Institutions across the country are now attempting to create scholarship and other incentive programs to assist these students with transition to college and its financial burden. Other emerging adults that have not been emphasized are those that have or are currently spending time in the juvenile and criminal justice system. It would be interesting to see how this population takes on emerging adulthood and finding purpose. Lastly individuals with disabilities did not receive any attention. Particularly does this population still achieve adulthood if they are not able to live their lives fully independent?

Future Directions

In terms of what must be done for the future, there is a disparity taking place between what students are being taught in college and what they are expected to know upon graduation. The current educational system does not allow for obtaining a broad range of adult experiences unless the students seek them out. Many older adults rely on the education system and previous work experience to teach emerging adults the life and job skills for future occupations (Barling

& Kelloway, 1999). Instead the only jobs students typically have prior to graduation are ones in the service industry that teach them minimal skills and involve limited cognitive challenges.

Other future directions for study should include the impacts of technology. Even since 2000 when Arnett first released his theory of emerging adulthood, technology has vastly improved. It would be beneficial to begin a longitudinal study that analyzes the relationship between technology and adolescence views of adulthood as they progress through emerging adulthood. It would also be beneficial to highlight how social media can affect Chickering's seven vectors and what meaningful relationships look like involving such platforms. Media in general has already begun to highlight the prolonged stage of life through which people hold off on taking responsibility in movies such as "Failure to Launch" (2006). A beneficial insight would introduce whether movies such as this encourage people to stay in this period of transition longer or help them to understand and move past it.

National Policies

While many people may not see these findings as significant, changes are already being put in place to accommodate to the shift in the population of the United States. An extremely relevant example for many college students is the new legislation included in the Affordable Care Act or "Obamacare" that allows college students to be included on their parent's health care insurance longer than ever before. While it does not extend all coverage such as optical and dental insurance, if a dependent is enrolled in college, they can be provided health care coverage until the age of 26 years old.

Legislation such as this is particularly meaningful because it contests that age 18 makes individuals independent adults. The majority of people ages 18-26 are still in the process of obtaining training and education for long-term adult occupations, so they may still be relying on

their families for support. Findings suggest that emerging adults view adulthood as the end of a sense that anything is possible and life becomes dull and stagnant due to an end in spontaneity. They are hesitant to do the onerous things their parents have always done for them such as paying bills for cell phones, car insurance, rent, and gas. The median age of marriage has also been put off until later in people's lives as it shifted from 21 in women and 23 in men in 1970 to 27 in women and 29 in men in 2015 (U.S. Bureau of Census 2015).

Implication for Practice

Student Affairs practitioners may question what can be done to help college students transition out of emerging adulthood and reach adulthood either prior to graduation, upon graduation, or shortly thereafter. While more and more schools are beginning to offer first-year experience courses to because they recognize the need for assistance when students transition from high school into college, very few offer the opportunity for assistance transitioning out of college. The University of Connecticut has pioneered a Senior Year Experience course designed to provide their students with the knowledge and skills necessary for life after college. This course includes content on resumes, job searching, interviewing, money management, insurance, buying a car, and much more.

In addition to offering classes for students that can teach them the basics of adulthood, programs should also encourage field experience. Since most programs do not require formal internships, students continue the cycle of working in fields such as the service industry where they are not exposed to more prominent life skills. Requiring students to find opportunities within their future career is an excellent way for them to establish connections and build networks prior to graduation. In addition to the financial aspects of adulthood that it can

introduce students to, having a serious work commitment may prompt emerging adults to think of themselves more independently.

Conclusion

The concept of emerging adulthood has come a long way since Arnett (2000) first introduced it. While scholars are slowly beginning to relate it to college student development, there is still much research to be done on the topic. In general there are many disparities in the research of identity development and the acknowledgement of adulthood by populations other than college students. In particular, those in the stage of emerging adulthood must find their purpose as they navigate love, work, and changing worldviews. The overall connection between emerging adulthood and college student development theories is striving for identity development and role establishment.

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