

## DEBATE

# Emerging Adulthood in Europe: A Response to Bynner

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It is a great honor to have my theory of emerging adulthood addressed by John Bynner, a scholar whose work I have long admired, and an even greater honor that he finds merit in my ideas and endorses the theory to a large extent. Bynner agrees with my argument that social, economic, and demographic changes over the past half-century have resulted in dramatic changes in what occurs during the late teens and early-to-mid-twenties for most people in industrialized countries. Because most people now finish their education, obtain stable employment, marry, and have their first child much later than in the past, it no longer makes sense to refer to the age period from the beginning of puberty to the full attainment of adulthood—from age 10 to age 25, roughly—as ‘youth.’ That age period is simply too long and too much changes in the course of it for one term to describe it adequately. Instead, it makes more sense to describe it as two periods, adolescence (roughly age 10–17) and emerging adulthood (roughly age 18–25). Bynner provides a compelling portrait of the changes that led to this division by presenting data on three British cohorts, born in 1946, 1958, and 1970.

Thus Bynner and I agree on the most important issues, namely the profound nature of the changes in young people’s lives over the past half-century and the usefulness of the theory of emerging adulthood as a framework for describing, analyzing, and investigating those changes. My focus in this paper will be on the areas in which our perspective is somewhat different, especially with respect to the degree of importance of structural factors in determining what takes place during emerging adulthood. First, I will provide a brief sketch of emerging adulthood in Europe. Then I will discuss the role I believe is played by structural factors. Finally, I will explain further why I believe the theory of emerging adulthood may be valuable to scholars.

### Emerging Adulthood in Europe: An Overview

In the past half-century, a demographic shift has taken place across industrialized countries with remarkable consistency. In every country, the median age at first

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marriage has risen steeply from the early twenties into the late twenties, even surpassing age 30 in northern Europe. Young people have waited longer for marriage but not necessarily for sex: premarital sex has become widespread, and sexual initiation and marriage are no longer closely linked. Participation in higher education has become more widespread, and young women now surpass young men in participation in and graduation from university. The birth rate has fallen, as women have their first child later, often have just one, and more often than in the past have none at all. It is this set of interconnected demographic changes, and the psychological phenomena accompanying them, that has led an increasing number of scholars to conclude that there is now a new stage of the life course, emerging adulthood, between adolescence and young adulthood (for example, Cohen *et al.* 2003; Eccles *et al.* 2003; Nelson *et al.* 2004; Arnett & Tanner 2006)

Bynner describes some of these changes as they have taken place in successive cohorts in Great Britain. However, the most recent British cohort he includes was born in 1970, and most of the data he presented from the rest of Europe were from the late 1980s (published in 1990). A great deal of change has occurred in the past two decades. For illustration, Table 1 presents the most recent data with respect to the median marriage age in a variety of European countries. With respect to Britain specifically, the median marriage age has risen by over 5 years since 1980.

Similar changes have taken place in other countries. Eastern European countries have median marriages that are lower than in Western Europe but are clearly heading up. The median marriage age in the USA, presented in Table 1 for comparison, is actually substantially lower than in other Western European countries.

Of course, it is not only the demographic changes that are important. The rise in the median marriage age is emblematic of the profound change in how young people

**Table 1** Median marriage ages (years) in selected European countries, 1980 and 2000

Country	Men		Women	
	1980	2000	1980	2000
Austria	25.7	30.5	23.1	28.1
Belgium	24.6	29.1	22.2	26.8
Bulgaria	24.5	28.1	21.4	24.7
France	25.2	30.7	23.0	28.6
Germany	26.1	31.2	23.4	28.4
Hungary	24.0	27.2	21.3	24.7
The Netherlands	25.4	31.0	23.1	29.1
Portugal	25.4	27.5	23.3	25.7
Spain	26.1	29.2	23.7	27.1
Sweden	29.0	33.1	26.4	30.6
United Kingdom	25.3	30.4	23.0	28.3
USA	24.7	27.0	22.0	25.2

*Note:* All numbers except those from the USA are from United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (2005). The 2000 numbers for Spain are from 1995, the latest year available. The US numbers are from Arnett (2004).

experience their emerging adult years. Now the period from the late teens through at least the mid-twenties is, for most people in industrialized societies, a period not of settling into enduring (if not permanent) adult roles but a period that is highly unstructured and unsettled. Consequently, most young people in this age period feel like neither adolescents nor (fully) adults, but somewhere in between. In the USA, in numerous studies, I have found that when asked whether they feel they have reached adulthood, most people in the 18–25 age range respond neither 'yes' nor 'no' but 'in some ways yes, in some ways no' (Arnett 1997, 1998, 2001, 2003a, 2004). A study in The Netherlands reported similar results (Plug *et al.* 2003) across social classes, and I have found the same results in Denmark (Arnett 2003b).

Further insights on emerging adulthood in Europe come from recent ethnographic work by Carrie Douglass (2005) and colleagues. Douglass and her colleagues are anthropologists and ethnographers who set out to investigate the human experience behind the European demographic 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, the book contains a great deal of fascinating and important information on emerging adulthood.

Douglass and colleagues describe the diversity that exists across Europe, but the consistent theme across countries is 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. Three of the chapters provide a good illustration of this unity despite diversity, in Norway, Spain, and the Czech Republic.

In the chapter on Norway, Ravn (2005) describes how young Norwegians prefer to enjoy a long emerging adulthood before they take on parenthood. As Ravn observes, 'To be "ready for children" [is] to have lived in an independent household for some years; to have finished one's education; to have been employed for at least a year; to have lived with (or been married to) the partner of choice for some time and to have done some traveling or other self-developing activities' (2005, p. 41). There is a clear social norm that emerging adulthood 'should' be enjoyed for some years before full adulthood is entered. Norwegians believe that emerging adults 'should not get established too early, they should not become too mainstream, they should develop themselves with regard to traveling and education and they should provide themselves with a good "taste of life"' (Ravn 2005, p. 43).

In the chapter on Spain, Douglass describes her own ethnographic research. In recent decades the median marriage age in Spain has risen to 28 and the fertility rate has plunged to 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, 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. Douglass observes, 'Spaniards not only entertain themselves by becoming

importance of structural factors is in the area of unemployment. Rates of unemployment in Europe are typically about twice as high for emerging adults (ages 18–25) as for other adults, and are especially high in southern Europe (Sneeding & Phillips 2002). Clearly the experience of striving to find employment yet being unable to do so is frustrating and demoralizing for emerging adults. For example, one study in six European countries reported high rates of psychological distress among emerging adults who were unemployed, and in a longitudinal follow-up found that the distress had eased six months later for those who had found a full-time or part-time job or had gone back to school (Bjarnason & Sigurdardottir 2003). I have found evidence of similar distress among unemployed emerging adults in the USA, especially among African Americans, for whom the disadvantage of being young is frequently compounded by low educational attainment and discrimination by employers (Arnett 2004), primarily because they are more likely to be from lower SES backgrounds and consequently take on earlier responsibilities in their families (Arnett, 2003).

In other areas, structural factors may be less important. For example, I have performed numerous studies investigating emerging adults' views of what it means to reach adulthood (Arnett 1994, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2003a, 2004). Originally, I expected to find social class differences, with low socio-economic status (SES) emerging adults especially favoring economic transitions such as becoming employed full time. However, I have found consistently that, across SES groups, the same four criteria for adulthood end up at the top: accept responsibility for your actions, make independent decisions, become more considerate of others, and become financially independent. Becoming employed full-time ranks relatively low across SES groups, as do the rest of the traditional criteria for adulthood, especially finishing education and marriage. Structural factors matter more for one's subjective of reaching adulthood. African American and Latino emerging adults are more likely than Whites to feel they have reached adulthood, primarily because they are more likely to be from lower SES backgrounds (Arnett 2003a).

Structural factors also seem to have only a limited relation to what I have proposed as the five principal features of adulthood (i.e., emerging adulthood as the *age of identity explorations*, the *age of instability*, the *age of feeling in-between*, the *self-focused age*, and the *age of possibilities*). In studies testing these theoretical proposals (Reifman *et al.* 2006), emerging adults were distinguished from higher and lower age groups on each of these dimensions, and the responses of working-class and middle-class emerging adults were not significantly different.

Perhaps social class will be found to be a more important variable for European emerging adults than it is for Americans. Or perhaps not. As noted earlier, the European emerging adults described by Douglass and colleagues sound remarkably similar to the American emerging adults I have described. It may be, in fact, that social class matters *less* for European emerging adults than it does for emerging adults in the USA, at least in some respects. In the USA, emerging adults are expected to leave home at around age 18 or 19, and most do. Some stay longer, some come back

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again, and most receive some financial support from their parents for at least several years after they leave (Aquilino 2006), but nevertheless the expectation that they will strive for self-sufficiency is clear. Europeans, in contrast, can anticipate more support for a longer time; southern Europeans from their families, whom they may continue to live with until age 30 or even beyond, and northern Europeans from their governments, who typically provide emerging adults with a stipend for years after they leave home. Thus in one way or another Europeans can expect more support for an extended period of emerging adulthood that allows them to try out various possibilities in love and work while also living an active leisure life, as they gradually meander their way towards full adulthood. Furthermore, the range of social class differences is narrower in most European countries than it is in the USA, which may make for fewer differences between emerging adults of different social classes.

Well, then, perhaps it is different, at least, in the UK? Perhaps the British tradition of class stratification makes for sharper class divisions in emerging adulthood as well, with those in the middle class experiencing their late teens and twenties much more as the age of identity explorations, the age of possibilities, and so on, than those in the working class. Bynner observes that his cohort analysis shows that 'Increasing postponement of family commitments accompanying rising human capital accumulation is strongly evident from these figures in line with the Emerging Adulthood thesis,' but he adds that 'Extended participation in education and occupational achievement was concentrated in the most advantaged sections of society, and was also strongly related to qualifications gained. Here the gap between the haves and the have-nots was actually getting wider, with a substantial minority of young people at the bottom end of the social scale, falling substantially behind the rest.'

This point is well taken. In fact, a similar phenomenon has taken place in the USA, with the gap between university graduates and others growing wider as the economy has become more information-based and high-paying manufacturing jobs have become scarce (National Center for Education Statistics 2005). Still, I would add that the UK has changed a great deal since Bynner's latest cohort, born in 1970, entered the work force nearly 20 years ago. The British economy has undergone dramatic economic restructuring that has led to new opportunities, especially for young women, as well as new difficulties, especially for working-class young men (McDowell 2003). Furthermore, as Table 1 shows, by 2000 the median marriage age in the UK was 30.4 years for men and 28.3 years for women, *over four years higher* than the figures presented by Bynner. This, too, suggests the likelihood of dramatic recent changes in the lives of British emerging adults. It will be important to add findings from a cohort of emerging adults born in the period 1985–1990, to see how their lives may be similar to or different from the cohorts Bynner described.

The emphasis of the European research by Bynner and others has been mainly on structural and demographic variables, and there is much to be learned about the other aspects of the lives of emerging adults. One hypothesis that I would propose is that in Europe, as in the USA, and in fact in all industrialized countries, for emerging adults their choice of work is now primarily identity-based. For most emerging adults

it is no longer enough simply to earn a wage that puts a roof over one's head and bread on the table, as it may have been in previous generations. Today emerging adults wish to find a job that is an expression of their identity, not just a way to make money but an activity that is personally fulfilling and enjoyable. Thus the frequent job changes that occur during the twenties in European countries (as well as in the USA) may be explained not only by structural factors, specifically the reluctance of employers to hire new employees because of laws that make it difficult to fire people once they have been hired, but also by emerging adults' search for a job that matches their identity.

Furthermore, I hypothesize that the entire European educational and school-to-work system, which was developed decades ago when the meaning and purpose of work was quite different, is incompatible with emerging adults' desires to try different possible educational and occupational paths until they find the one that provides the right identity match, and is increasingly experienced by them as intolerably rigid and inflexible. The clarification of one's identity is something that takes place primarily in emerging adulthood, not in adolescence. Consequently, the pervasive requirement in Europe that individuals decide by age 15 which general occupational path to follow will be increasingly resisted by emerging adults. As their identities become clearer in their late teens and perhaps early twenties, they will seek to change educational and occupational paths to match their identity needs, and they will press their school officials and governments to allow them to do so.

This is one example of how the theory of emerging adulthood leads to ideas and hypotheses that go beyond the traditional emphasis on demographic events such as finishing education, leaving home, and marriage that have previously dominated research on the 18–29 year age period. In the next section, I provide a more detailed argument for the potential fruitfulness of the theory of emerging adulthood.

### Why 'Emerging Adulthood'?

As Bynner notes, many other scholars have observed over the past 30 years that higher education is more widespread and is lasting longer, that the median marriage age has risen sharply, and that young people have fewer children and wait longer to have their first one. So, what is different about 'emerging adulthood,' and why is that concept preferable to how these changes have been described in the past?

European social scientists have long used the term 'youth' to describe adolescence, and as Bynner states they have generally responded to the later entry into adult roles by regarding it as an extension of the 'youth phase.' In the USA, too, 'youth' has been used, but in a different way. Kenneth Keniston (1971) used this term to describe a period after adolescence but before full adulthood and applied it to the college student activists he studied in the late 1960s, and some American social scientists since that time have used 'youth' in this way.

However, 'youth' is a term that has numerous deficiencies. First, it is a word that has a long history (at least in English) and has been used elastically during that

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history, to describe not just persons who are going through puberty or persons who are beyond puberty but not fully adult, but also children. In the USA, this history is reflected today in terms such as 'youth organizations,' which are organizations for children and perhaps adolescents, almost never for persons who are beyond adolescence. Thus 'youth' is too vague and elastic a term to be useful in describing the new and unprecedented period that now lies after adolescence but before full adulthood.

A second problem with 'youth' is that it is often intended to include not just a period after adolescence, but adolescence as well. As noted, European social scientists have largely regarded the period after adolescence as an extension of the 'youth phase,' but this practice fails to recognize the important differences that exist between the age period from 10 to 17 and the age period from 18 to 25. Any word that is intended to be applied to people in the entire age range from 10 or 12 until at least 25 cannot possibly work, because the typical 10, 12, 15 or 17 year old is simply too different from the typical 25 year old. Adolescents (ages 10–17) have in common that they are going through puberty, they are attending secondary school, and they are live in their parents' household and are financially dependent on them. None of these things are true for emerging adults (ages 18–25). They have reached sexual maturity and are no longer going through puberty. They are no longer in secondary school but are pursuing a wide variety of different combinations of school and work. They have either moved out of their parents' household or have considerably more autonomy within the household.

Sometimes the age range for 'youth' is specified as 15–24, but this is even worse. Nothing happens at age 15 that makes it worthy as the starting age of a new developmental period. Puberty begins earlier and ends later, 15 year olds are as likely as 14 year olds to be living with and financially dependent on their parents, 15 year olds are nowhere near full-time work or marriage or parenthood. True, 15 is often the age when primary school ends, but some form of secondary education continues for years for most people.

Bynner mentioned that 'postadolescence' has also been used, but this term suffers from many of the same deficiencies as 'youth,' mainly the lack of a clear meaning that would distinguish it from adolescence or young adulthood. Furthermore, to call the period 'postadolescence' is defining it by what it is *not* rather than by what it is. 'Postadolescence' is not exactly adolescence—but what *is* it, then? We do not call childhood 'post-infancy' or adolescence 'post-childhood,' so let us not call the period after adolescence 'postadolescence.' Nor are 'late adolescence' or 'the transition to adulthood' adequate, as I have explained elsewhere (Arnett 2004).

'Emerging adulthood' is preferable because it is a new term for a new and unprecedented phenomenon—the long period of years that now lies between the attainment of biological maturity and the entrance into stable adult roles. Unlike 'youth,' the term emerging adulthood clearly distinguishes this period from the adolescence that precedes it and the young adulthood that follows it. Understanding emerging adulthood as a developmental period in its own right leads us to ask a wide

range of questions that have been asked about other developmental periods but have been neglected up to now with regard to this one. What is their cognitive development like, and how do they think about practical problems and social relations differently than adolescents do? What do they aspire to in their love relationships, and how does this match up or fail to match up with what they actually find? What kinds of media do they use, and for what purposes? And many, many other questions about all aspects of their lives. A forthcoming book illustrates the ideas and questions generated by using the theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett & Tanner 2006), and hopefully the chapters in that book will be the first fruits of many to come.

But does 'emerging adulthood' mean that people in this age period will be described homogeneously, without regard to the structural and individual differences that distinguish them, as Bynner fears? I do not think this will be the case. There is no reason why this should be a greater fear with respect to emerging adulthood than with respect to any other developmental period. In fact, as I have emphasized in everything I have written about it, the heterogeneity of emerging adulthood is one of the most important characteristics of it. Children and adolescents have institutional structures of compulsory schooling and residence within the family, young adults and beyond have institutional structures of long-term employment, marriage, and parenthood, but emerging adulthood is a time that is exceptionally unstructured by institutions (Arnett 2005, 2006 forthcoming). Any institutional participation they do engage in, most notably continued education, is volitional rather than compulsory. Consequently, the life circumstances of emerging adults are extremely diverse and their pathways in love and work change frequently. It is crucial to the study of emerging adulthood to portray the diversity of these circumstances and pathways.

Even as we recognize and investigate their diversity, it is important to use the overarching term 'emerging adulthood' to describe the age period. As noted, conceptualizing it as a distinct developmental period is useful because doing so leads us to ask questions we ask about other developmental periods and also to consider what questions might be unique to this age period. Within Europe, emerging adults in different countries will no doubt have different experiences during this period (Douglass 2005), and these differences are important to explore and describe. Nevertheless, the demographic patterns reflecting the development of a period of emerging adulthood—more widespread and later education, later marriage, and later and fewer children—are remarkably similar across Western Europe and are clearly headed in the same direction in Eastern Europe.

But what about those who do not obtain higher education and/or who marry and have their first child relatively early; do they experience emerging adulthood? This is a fascinating question, worthy of extensive investigation. My response at this point would be yes, most of them have a period of emerging adulthood, although it may be shorter. From interviews with emerging adults in the USA, I have found that those who do not obtain higher education are similar in many key ways to those who do



obtain higher education (Arnett 2004). Both experience emerging adulthood as the age of identity explorations, the age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feeling in-between, and the age of possibilities, although there are differences in the content of their experiences. For example, in the course of their identity explorations, college students change educational directions while non-college emerging adults change jobs.

The one event that seems to me to exclude a period of emerging adulthood is having a child in one's teens. The demands of caring for a young child are so strong that they severely restrict the parent's opportunities for identity exploration, strongly promote being other-focused rather than self-focused, and narrow the range of future possibilities. I have found that those who become parents early feel like they become adults 'overnight' when the child is born, rather than experiencing a long period of feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett 1998, 2004).

However, the proportion of young people who become parents while still in their teens or very early twenties is small and shrinking yearly in European countries, much smaller even than in the USA. Thus it seems possible and potentially desirable to describe 18–25 year olds in Europe as emerging adults, as a group. There will be some in this age period who do not fit the normative experience of emerging adulthood, but this is true of other developmental periods as well. For example, we describe adolescents as living with their parents, but some are homeless. We describe older adults as retiring from the work force, but many of them continue to work through their sixties or even seventies.

### **Conclusion**

The theory of emerging adulthood can be a useful framework even as we explore and describe the diversity that exists among them, both within and between countries. No doubt such investigations will lead to modifications and adaptations of the five features that I have proposed as characteristic of emerging adults in the USA. What seems indisputable is that the median age of entering marriage and parenthood has risen to unprecedented heights and is now in the late twenties or beyond in every industrialized country, that more people obtain at least some post-secondary education today than at any time in the past, and that people change jobs and love partners and residences more frequently in their twenties than in any later period of life. In my view, this is enough to merit recognition that a separate period of life now exists between adolescence and young adulthood. I am pleased that Bynner believes the theory of emerging adulthood works well in many ways, and I am hopeful that my European colleagues will be similarly persuaded that this new period of life requires a new term with a distinctive meaning.

Using the term 'emerging adulthood' does not mean embracing everything I have proposed about what it contains. I believe 'emerging adulthood' is a useful term for 18–25 year olds in industrialized societies, but what precisely this period holds

developmentally is an exciting question we have only begun to explore. I look forward to joining my European colleagues in this enterprise.

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