

Emerging Adulthood, a 21st Century Theory: A Rejoinder to Hendry and Kloep

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett

Clark University

ABSTRACT—*I offer a rejoinder to Hendry and Kloep's critique of my theory of emerging adulthood. We differ in our perspectives in that I see more value than they do in overall terms for and conceptions of periods of the life course, including emerging adulthood. Also, they claim a greater influence for social class on well-being in emerging adulthood than I believe is warranted. However, we agree on the necessity of investigating the diversity of paths through emerging adulthood and in recognizing its cultural and historical context.*

KEYWORDS—*emerging adulthood; young adulthood; transition to adulthood; well-being; mental health*

In their essay critiquing my theory of emerging adulthood, Hendry and Kloep borrow a metaphor from the Hans Christian Andersen story about "the emperor's new clothes." Not surprisingly, I am not crazy about this metaphor given that I am cast in the role of the naked, deluded emperor. So, allow me to suggest an alternative metaphor, the one of the blind men and the elephant. In this story, various blind men describe an elephant quite differently, not realizing that they are grasping different parts of the same beast. In the same way, I believe that Hendry and Kloep and I are describing different aspects of the same phenomenon. Furthermore, I believe that in the end, we are describing the same beast, and consequently, there is more common ground than there may have seemed in our initial exchange. However, there are points on which we differ as well.

In the original essays, we each responded to four questions. Due to space limitations, I cannot address each point in their

essay, so for each of the first three questions I will address what I believe to be their central point. For the fourth question, their response was brief and I essentially agreed with it.

IS DEVELOPMENT TOO FLUID TO WARRANT STAGES?

One of the Hendry and Kloep's objections to the theory of emerging adulthood is that it proposes "a new stage in human development, distinct from adolescence and adulthood, overlapping with both stages." They disagree with this model because "development is domain-specific and demonstrates plasticity. . . . Young people might reach adult status early in some domains, later in others, and in some aspects, never. Further, development is non-linear and reversible."

However, these points do not make it necessary to reject the theory of emerging adulthood. In fact, I agree with them, as most developmental psychologists would. But it is possible to see development as domain specific, as demonstrating plasticity, and as (at least in some ways) nonlinear and reversible, and still regard it as useful to conceptualize development in terms of general periods of development, including emerging adulthood. Hendry and Kloep did this themselves, in the model they presented in their original essay, showing development from adolescence to "early adulthood" to middle adulthood to old age. By proposing this model, they implicitly conceded the usefulness of general conceptions for different stages of the life course.

The question then becomes, which conception of the life course is most useful? Instead of one "early adulthood" stretching all the way from adolescence to middle adulthood, I believe it is preferable to recognize a period of emerging adulthood followed by a period of young adulthood. An "early adulthood" lasting from adolescence to middle age simply does not fit how people in industrialized societies live in the early 21st century. The lives of most 20-year-olds are vastly different

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, Department of Psychology, Clark University, 950 Main Street, Worcester, MA 01602; e-mail: arnett@jeffreymar.net.

from the lives of most 30- or 35-year-olds, and it is not fruitful to lump them all together into one stage.

IS THE THEORY OF EMERGING ADULTHOOD BOUND BY HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS?

In their critique, Hendry and Kloep assert that "modern developmentalists have claimed that emerging adulthood is not a universal stage, but depends on the cultural context in which young people develop and the social institutions they encounter." Well, we agree on that because one of the "modern developmentalists" who has claimed that is, in fact, me:

Is emerging adulthood a period of life that is restricted to certain cultures and certain times? The answer to this question appears to be yes. . . . Emerging adulthood, then, is not a universal period but a period that exists only in cultures that postpone the entry into adult roles and responsibilities until well past the late teens. (Arnett, 2000, pp. 477–478, emphasis in original)

They go on to state that "the theory of emerging adulthood is merely a description limited to a certain age-cohort in certain societies at a certain historical time with particular socioeconomic conditions. This implies that the concept will almost certainly become out-dated, since Western societies are bound to change and new cohorts emerge with different developmental characteristics in different social contexts." I agree with this, too, except for the "merely" part. In theorizing about the life course, I hope we have moved beyond the claims of 20th-century theorists of asserting universal, timeless stage theories of human development. From infancy to old age, human development takes place within a historical and cultural context that profoundly influences the course it takes. As cultures change across historical time, development, too, changes.

Right now emerging adulthood is a normative period of development in industrialized societies that are moving rapidly toward a postindustrial, information- and technology-based economy. These economic conditions make it possible for young people to delay stable adult work into their late 20s because their families and societies are not in desperate need of their labor, and increase the demand for young people to obtain postsecondary education or training in order to get the best jobs available in the new economy. However, not only industrialized societies but also economically developing societies are rapidly entering the new global economy. From China to South Africa, from India to Chile, the same pattern is taking place in the lives of young people: longer education, later marriage ages, and later entry to parenthood. These are all indications of the rise of a period of emerging adulthood.

Currently, in developing countries emerging adulthood is experienced by a minority of the population, mainly the urban middle class, but as their economies develop further emerging adulthood is likely to grow and may become normative as it is in

industrialized countries. Eventually, the theory of emerging adulthood may be displaced by other theories as cultures and economies change in ways we cannot imagine today, but for the foreseeable future it will be an increasingly useful framework and model for the lives of young people, as emerging adulthood spreads around the world in the course of the 21st century.

IS THE EXPERIENCE OF EMERGING ADULTHOOD POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE? HOW IMPORTANT IS SOCIAL CLASS?

Hendry and Kloep claim that my portrait of generally increasing well-being during emerging adulthood is too rosy and applies mainly to emerging adults who are from social class backgrounds that are middle class or higher: "Although it may be true that independence, possibilities and choices are available for those who can access consumer markets, this may hold only for the young person who has an income, or better still, supportive parents: Wealthy middle-class youths do have better options."

I agree with Hendry and Kloep that middle-class emerging adults have greater educational opportunities than those who are working class and that educational attainment makes an enormous difference in what takes place in emerging adulthood and in future income and occupational opportunities. Nevertheless, the question remains: How much difference does social class background and its influence on educational and occupational opportunities make in whether emerging adulthood is experienced positively or negatively? The limited evidence available shows little relation between social class background and well-being in emerging adulthood (e.g., Gore, Aseltine, Colton, & Lin, 1997). In my research, I have found that emerging adults from lower social class backgrounds are even *more* optimistic than emerging adults from middle-class backgrounds; that is, they are more likely to believe that their adult lives will be better than their parents' lives have been (Arnett, 1997, 2004).

Hendry and Kloep claim that their research on adolescents and emerging adults (ages 16–20) in Wales shows that emerging adulthood is experienced quite negatively by many of them, and they are pessimistic and frustrated. This is a difficult claim to evaluate because it is based on an unpublished manuscript (Kloep & Hendry, 2007). Furthermore, they restricted their sample to those who were either working or unemployed and not in school, and it is unclear how well this sample represents the Welsh population of 16- to 20-year-olds.

I do not doubt that some emerging adults experience their lives negatively in Wales, the United States, and everywhere else. Here as in other areas, it is important to recognize the heterogeneity of the period. But it remains an open question how much social class is related to experiencing emerging adulthood positively or negatively, and how much this may vary among societies. So far it appears that, for Americans, the relation is not

strong. Even working-class emerging adults have high hopes for their adult lives, and even upper middle-class emerging adults have anxieties about whether their hopes will be realized (Arnett, 2004).

CONCLUSION

This exchange with Hendry and Kloep has revealed differences in our perspectives but also important common ground. We agree that the lives of young people from their late teens through their mid-20s in industrialized societies have changed dramatically in recent decades, toward a longer and less structured passage to adulthood, including longer education and training and later ages of entering marriage and parenthood. We agree that the paths taken by emerging adults during these years are diverse, both within and between societies, and that it is important for scholarship to recognize and investigate this diversity. Many parts of the emerging adulthood elephant have

yet to be glimpsed or grasped, offering the prospect of many fruitful investigations in the years to come.

REFERENCES

- Arnett, J. J. (1997). Young people's conceptions of the transition to adulthood. *Youth & Society*, 29, 1–23.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55, 469–480.
- Arnett, J. J. (2004). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gore, S., Aseltine, R., Colton, M. E., & Lin, B. (1997). Life after high school: Development stress, and well-being. In I. H. Gotlib & B. Wheaton (Eds.), *Stress and adversity over the life course* (pp. 197–214). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Kloep, M., & Hendry, L. B. (2007). *Transitions to adulthood for young Welsh people not in education*. Manuscript in preparation.