

## 2 Challenges Regarding the Concept of Emerging Adulthood

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### 2.1 Emerging Adulthood – A (New) Stage Theory?

#### 2.1.1 The Beginnings

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett already used the term “emerging adulthood” (1994, p. 222; Arnett & Taber, 1994, p. 534) in contributions towards the end of the last millennium. At that time, he still presented his thoughts regarding a (new) stage theory as a “concept” (Arnett & Taber, 1994, p. 517; see also Arnett, 1998, p. 312). When he introduced this “concept” as a “theory” to the scientific community in his article “Emerging Adulthood. A Theory of Development from the Late Teens through the Twenties” (p. 469) published in 2000 in *American Psychologist*, he attracted much interest from the scientific community (compare also Syed, 2016, p. 12). Arnett describes the life phase of young people between ages 18 and mid to late twenties – focused on ages 18-25 – as “emerging adulthood” and defines it as “a normative period of development in industrialized societies” (e.g. Arnett, 2007b, p. 81).

Subsequently some scholars criticized Arnett’s focus on the ages of 18-25 as too narrow. Côté (2006) for example suggested an extension to ages 18-30 (especially for young people pursuing higher education), and Buhl and Lanz (2007) supported an age extension for the European context as well. Douglass (2007, p. 106) argued “If marriage and parenthood mark the end of emerging adulthood, populations in many European countries have pushed the age of that ending from 25 to 30.” Arnett (2012b, p. 237) agreed and consequently stated that concerning age markers for emerging adulthood and young adulthood “18-25 and 25-45 may be more fitting in the USA, and 18-29 and 30-45 more fitting in the rest of the industrialized world.”

With the theory of “emerging adulthood”, Arnett stirred up the scientific community and started a discourse among experts that continues today. In his 2000 article he first mentioned the term “stage”, even though he did this in reference to Erikson’s stage theory: “in his [Erikson’s] theory of human development across the life course he did not include a separate stage that could be considered analogous to emerging adulthood as proposed here” (Arnett, 2000, p. 470). Finally, Arnett described the defining features of emerging adulthood in more detail and elaborated

on emerging adults' living situations in his book *Emerging Adulthood. The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (2004), where he illustrated the life of emerging adults with multiple examples coming from interviews he conducted with emerging adults. An extended version of the book was published as a second edition in 2015. But already in the preface of the first edition he called emerging adulthood a stage theory and used the terms "distinct" and "separate (age) period in life" (2004, p. vi and vii). In later contributions, he presented emerging adulthood as a "new life stage" (e.g. Arnett, 2011, 2012b) by using this terminology in article titles and keyword sections. Even the question "does it make sense to call emerging adulthood a life stage?" he explicitly answered by saying, "I think it does, as long as we recognize the diversity within it" and drew the conclusion "one stage, many paths" (2012b, p. 241).

Arnett's awareness for this diversity shows when he understands and recognizes contextual influences. Context variables such as culture, ethnicity, class, religion, etc. affect the coming of age trajectory, as well as when adulthood is reached, and which influencing factors (in Arnett's opinion) are present. Already in 1994, Arnett and Taber stressed that emerging adulthood is influenced by socialization: "Emerging adulthood is intended to apply mainly to cultures characterized by broad socialization, where the achievement of adult status is individually defined" (p. 534).

### 2.1.2 The Founder – J. J. Arnett

Flammer (2010) argues that personal involvement of researchers is a likely factor for new theories to arise and thus sees strong personal world views and conceptions of the individual, as a vital root for many developmental theories, especially regarding theories developed by one researcher only. This also seems to be the case for Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, who in the preface of the first edition of "Emerging Adulthood. The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties" wrote "my interest in the topic was drawn from my own experience. At that point of my life ... I felt at least that I had reached adulthood. I began to wonder, how and when do other people feel they have reached adulthood?" (Arnett, 2004, p. v).

Does Arnett – who works at Clark University (Worcester, Massachusetts, USA), a university historically known for its youth research – see himself following the footsteps of G. Stanley Hall? In 1904, Hall published two volumes covering *Adolescence* (Arnett, 2000, p. 476; Steinberg & Lerner, 2004, p. 46), and he is also considered (at least in the Anglo-American world) to be the founder of the psychological research on adolescence. Similarly, in 2007, Arnett edited two volumes reflecting

on the life situation of adolescents in various countries around the world, *International Encyclopedia of Adolescence* (Arnett, 2007cd). A selection of these country-specific descriptions of adolescents' life situations was updated in 2012 and published in a separate volume, *Adolescent Psychology around the World* (Arnett, 2012a). In this way, Arnett published or edited several books on adolescence, established a new developmental phase called emerging adulthood, and introduced his ideas to a wide scientific community of different disciplines (e.g. psychology, sociology, anthropology) – very open for critique (as one may assume at first sight). In 2003, Harvard hosted the first conference on emerging adulthood (see SSEA-website). Since then the “Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood” has organized bi-annual conferences in the United States. Arnett's and other researchers' interest in the ages of 18-29 led to the development of this society, which was established in 2003. In 2013, the SSEA initiated the new journal “Emerging Adulthood” (Swanson, 2016; van Dulmen, 2013).

Ultimately, Arnett deserves credit for popularizing the term emerging adulthood for 18-29-year-olds in the scientific community. Arnett (2004, 2015) claimed that a new identification of this age period was needed, as other terms – *late adolescence*, *young adulthood*, *early adulthood*, *transition to adulthood*, *novice phase* (referring to Levinson, 1978, as cited in Arnett, 2000, p. 470), and *youth* (referring to Keniston, 1971; as cited in Arnett, 2004, p. 20) – seemed unfitting to him (Arnett, 2004, 2015).

### 2.1.3 The Need For a (New) Stage Theory from Arnett's Point of View

When Arnett (2000) introduced his (new) stage theory of emerging adulthood to a broad scientific community, he presented two main arguments why the definition of a new developmental phase was necessary. His first argument concerned objective *demographic shifts* (meaning time-related delays in social transitions) in Western industrialized societies.

According to sociological literature, five important events mark the onset of adulthood (Pinquart & Grob, 2008, p. 111): 1) completing school, 2) moving out (of parents' home), 3) onset of employment, 4) marriage, and 5) birth of the first child. Nurmi (2004) organized these five transitions into productive areas of culture and society (such as school, education and professional life) and reproductive areas of culture and society (such as marriage or committed relationship, and parenthood). To demonstrate demographic changes, Arnett (e.g.

2000, 2006a) references shifts in social transitions (e.g. marriage and parenthood). These objective markers indicate that in many European countries there is a delay in accepting adult roles (e.g. Žukauskiene, 2016; for an overview of when objective markers in selected European countries are reached see chapter 1). Furthermore, 18-25/29-year-olds subjectively rate the importance of objective markers or social transitions for being considered adult as rather low, while they regard criteria of psychological maturity and autonomy as the most important (e.g. Arnett, 2001; Puklek Levpušček & Zupančič, 2010; Sirsch, Dreher, Mayr, & Willinger, 2009; for detailed information about subjectively important criteria for adulthood in selected European countries see chapter 1). In any case, what actually defines being “adult” also depends on which criteria are used. Krampen and Reichle (2008, pp. 333–334) list 1) formal and legal criteria (e.g. age of legal majority), 2) objective criteria (e.g. parenthood), 3) psychological criteria (e.g. detachment, autonomy, psychological maturity) and 4) subjective criteria (i.e. self-classification to a certain age group).

Arnett’s (2000) second main argument for the need of a new stage theory concerns the finding that many emerging adults subjectively rate their own adult status (perceived adult status) as feeling in-between (between adolescence and adulthood). Reflecting on Krampen and Reichle’s above mentioned criteria, Arnett’s second main argument covers subjective criteria. It is interesting to note that in his two main lines of argument, Arnett borrows from distinct research traditions; on the one hand he cites objective markers and on the other hand he reports subjective ratings of individual’s perceptions of feeling adult. However, the following part will first present the current knowledge base regarding empirical research on emerging adulthood as reviewed by Swanson (2016), then describe Arnett’s argued theoretical background of emerging adulthood.

#### 2.1.4 Research on Emerging Adulthood

Swanson (2016) reviewed 1334 empirical, peer-reviewed articles on emerging adulthood published in English between 2000 and April 2015. The selected papers stemmed from the databases PsychINFO and Academic Search Complete. In addition, Swanson used the SSEA website and articles from the journal “Emerging Adulthood”. In sum, research was published in 452 different journals. 61.6% of the studies were based on quantitative, 29.6% on qualitative methodology. In 8.8% of the articles, researchers used mixed-methods (Swanson, 2016, p. 393). Five leading journals for research on emerging adulthood materialized: the *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *Emerging Adulthood*, *Journal of Youth*

*and Adolescence, Journal of Adolescent Health, and Developmental Psychology*, taking into account the number of published articles on emerging adulthood and the journal's publication metrics (Swanson, 2016, p. 395).

Although Swanson stated “research about emerging adulthood is international in scope” (p. 395), her report revealed that only 4% of the reviewed studies (57) dealt with other countries than the US; 12% (157) focused on specific ethnicities. Swanson (2016, p. 400) defined 84 topics, summarized in seven broad main categories (the subcategories with the highest endorsement within each main category are added in brackets): demographic (e.g. college/adulthood, gender, demographics), contextual (e.g. parent/family relationship, culture, home environment), cognitive/intellectual (e.g. spirituality/religion, motivation/self-regulation, cognitive development), physical/health (e.g. alcohol/drugs, development, sexual development/intimacy), social/emotional (e.g. identity development, peer relations, social coping), work/leisure (e.g. career/development, money, employment), and technology matters.

### 2.1.5 A (New) Stage Theory - Enrichment of Enrichment?

Flammer (2010) describes the following possibilities regarding how development theories come to exist and persist with reference to the history of development theories: a repositioning vis-à-vis common theories; an advancement of preceding theoretical thinking; an application of a general developmental theory to specific functions; a reformulation; and an enrichment or formalization of existing theories. Thus, to Flammer, Psychosocial Theory of Development for example essentially represents Freud's Psychosexual Theory of Development enriched with and complemented by psychosocial aspects.

Keeping this in mind, it can be argued that Arnett does not present a new idea per se. Arnett rather enriches an extract of Erikson's enrichment – his enrichment entails the focus on changed context variables in Western industrialized societies (which he sees as normative for 18-25/29-year-olds) and thus claims a new “concept” or a new “theory”. Looking at Arnett's theoretical foundation of his concept or theory of emerging adulthood, Arnett quotes Erikson (Erikson, 1950, 1968, as cited in Arnett, 2000, p. 470). Erikson considers development in the context of environment in his psychosocial theory of development (with looking at the number of reference persons increasing). Especially relevant for this treatise on Arnett are Erikson's stages 5 and 6 – “identity achievement vs. identity confusion” as the main theme of adolescence, and “intimacy vs. isolation” as the main topic of young

adulthood (or crisis in Erikson's terminology, used in a developmental sense as a turning point, see Erikson, 1968, p. 96).

Although Erikson perceives identity development as a lifelong task, he assigns the solution of this task as central to adolescence. For Erikson (1968) successful solution of the identity crisis is the prerequisite for committing to a stable partnership and being capable of intimacy. Erikson does not postulate a specific sequence for successfully resolving the crises (Flammer, 2009, p. 106; although Erikson defines an orderly sequence of the postulated crises occurring), but findings from other authors, e.g. Beyers and Seiffge-Krenke (2010) and Seiffge-Krenke and Beyers (2016) support Erikson's (1968) reflections on successfully solving the sequencing of identity and intimacy. Results show that identity essentially contributes to the development of intimacy.

Robinson (2016, p. 26), however, suggests an "update" to Erikson's terminology and structure. Instead of "intimacy" and "isolation", Robinson uses the terms "commitment" and "independence". On a structural basis, Robinson ascribes independence to the period of emerging adulthood, while he sees commitment as a goal for young adulthood. Because each pair of opposites in Erikson's theory can be understood as a crisis between two poles, Robinson describes a dual typology of quarter life crisis (p. 24), in that a "quarter-life crisis" can emerge as a "locked-in crisis" (from commitment to independence, which ideally is solved by reaching independence) and/or "locked-out crisis" (from independence to commitment, ideally solved by reaching commitment). According to Robinson (2016), the locked-in type occurs at a younger age compared to the locked-out type. The term "quarter life-crisis", less frequently used in European countries than in Anglo-American contexts, was most likely popularized by the American authors Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner who published their book *Quarterlife Crisis* in 2001, in which they report on a (supposed) life crisis experienced in the mid-twenties.

In some ways, Robinson's (2016) two types seem to recall identity development in the terminology of Marcia (1966) considering foreclosure identity, followed by a moratorium and/or a moratorium ending up in an achieved identity, which suggests a clear direction in development. Is it that simple? Kroger, Martinussen, and Marcia (2010) analyzed findings of studies regarding development of identity aspects of adolescents and young adults aged 13-36. The authors could show that a high number of adolescents develop progressively (towards a more mature identity) but a small number of subjects also showed regression, which points out the important fact that the road to identity development is not a one-way street.

### 2.1.6 New Phenomenon or Prolonged Adolescence?

In Erikson's psychosocial theory of development, he understands the life cycle as a succession of psychosocial crises that need to be solved. Erikson envisions an extended adolescence or prolonged adolescence, when society allows for a "psychosocial moratorium" (Erikson, 1968, p. 156). Erikson himself (1968, p. 157) uses as examples of an extended adolescence "Wanderschaft" (meaning journey-men's years of travel after completing their apprenticeship) and "academic life" – without however mentioning a separate stage nor a new designation for this period of development.

What is presented as an exception in Erikson's writing, becomes the norm for an entire age cohort in Arnett's writings (e.g. Arnett, 2007b). But is this phenomenon of delaying social transitions really that new? An example of a "prolonged adolescence" or subjects feeling in-between (using Arnett's terminology) can be detected in a longitudinal study conducted with a cohort of German high school students. The male participants of this study were interviewed at the ages of 16, 30, and 43 in the years 1969, 1984 and 1997 regarding their life and whether they felt adult. The results showed that when participants were at age 30 (second wave), 10.4% of the subjects felt they were still adolescents, 14.6% felt ambivalent, and 75% felt adult (Meulemann, 1995, 2001, 2003). Thus, the phenomenon of "feeling in-between" – a defining feature of emerging adulthood – was already experienced by a subset of participants in Meulemann's research back in 1984. In sum, 25% of the subjects did not feel themselves fully adult. Fadjukoff, Kokko and Pulkkinen (2007) describe similar findings from the Jyväskylä Longitudinal Study of Personality and Social Development (JYLS) in Finland. 25% of the participants born in 1959 had either no clear reference, did not clearly identify themselves adult, or did not feel like an adult at the age of 27. These results show that Arnett's supposed new stage theory labeled emerging adulthood is not a new phenomenon; some empirical findings from longitudinal studies, with data collection decades ago, already reported a quarter of their participants not thinking of themselves as adults.

### 2.1.7 Erikson's and Arnett's Understanding of Development

Regarding development, it turns out that Arnett and Erikson fundamentally differ in their understanding of human development. Although Erikson considers development in the context of environment, he assumes an orderly fixed sequence of his defined crises. Erikson's theory is *an invariant stage theory*, which follows a ground plan (*epigenetic principle*, Erikson, 1968, p. 92).

When Arnett initially started the discussion about the need for a new developmental stage within the scientific community (see “The Beginnings” in this chapter), he did not make his case based on arguments of biological development of the brain. In none of his early discussions for the need of “emerging adulthood” (e.g. Arnett, 2000) did he present arguments that would have allowed the assumption that he was including arguments of ongoing development in brain structure and functions lasting into the twenties and even thirties. In Arnett’s early writings, he presented a stage theory of emerging adulthood without mentioning changes in the brain. Côté and Bynner (2008, p. 264) argue “if it is a developmental stage, where did it come from epigenetically?” Hendry and Kloep (2010, p. 178) say when “classifying emerging adulthood as a developmental stage, there should be ‘something’ that develops during this time, and Arnett never clarifies what exactly that might be.” Only when Arnett and Tanner on one side and Kloep and Hendry on the other, debated emerging adulthood as stage or process (Arnett, Kloep, Hendry & Tanner, 2011), Tanner and Arnett (2011) mentioned changes in the brain development for decision-making that exceeds the period of adolescence.

As neurodevelopment continues throughout emerging adulthood (for an overview see Taber-Tomas & Perez-Edgar, 2016) problems in decision-making processes decrease. These “problems” may arise from earlier maturation of the limbic system associated with increased preference for proximate rewards and protracted development of the frontal cortex and frontostriatal connections, which are associated with the ability to regulate and control. Van den Bos, Rodriguez, Schweitzer and McClure (2015) could demonstrate that adolescents’ impatience decreases with increased frontostriatal connectivity. They tested 50 participants between ages 8 and 25. Drawing on their results, they suggest that it is mainly increased control, and not sensitivity to immediate rewards, that influences developmental reductions in impatience. Furthermore, they argue that there is a relation between this decrease and increased future orientation. Thus, the ongoing developmental changes in the brain during the emerging adulthood period could bring some scholars to the assumption that - from a neurobiological point of view - this developmental period is a period of prolonged adolescence, but others may argue that it is a new stage because of developing new capabilities. Either way, in what ways did youth evolutionarily benefit from this early imbalance of maturely developed brain functions? Do late maturing brains somewhat hinder becoming an adult nowadays? Gerrig (2015, p. 377) states that the evolutionary impulse for novelty-seeking and risk-taking has no longer an adaptive function because many young people leave parental home in their twenties (or even thirties, see chapter 1).



### 2.1.8 Emerging Adulthood and Its Defining Features

Arnett (2004, 2006b, 2015) describes emerging adulthood by defining five main features of this life period:

1. *"Identity Exploration"*: Young people try to find answers to the question "Who am I?" and explore various life options (especially in the domains of love, work, and worldviews).
2. *"Instability"*: A lot of changes take place in this age period (e.g. in love, work, and place of residence), which may cause stress and worry.
3. *"Self-focus"*: Emerging adults typically only have few obligations to others, and at the same time they are not restricted by parents, thus emerging adults may mainly focus on their own needs (without being selfish).
4. *"Feeling in-between"*: Emerging adulthood is a time when many emerging adults feel neither adolescent nor adult.
5. *"Possibilities/optimism"*: Emerging adults' hopes flourish, young people think they will successfully reach their goals in life. They also perceive an opportunity to transform their lives.

To assess self-identification within the processes of emerging adulthood, the questionnaire "Inventory of the Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA)" was designed by Reifman, Arnett and Colwell (2007). The IDEA operationalizes the defining characteristics and distinguishing principal features of this period. Aspects of exploration and low commitment can be found specifically in identity exploration, possibilities and self-focused concerns. But Côté and Bynner (2008, p. 265) harshly criticize the items of the identity exploration scale (e.g. time of experimentation), arguing that they "may merely be tapping unresolved identity crises and chronic identity confusion, not a progressive resolution of identity issues".

### 2.1.9 What are the Developmental Tasks for Emerging Adulthood?

Arnett derived potential developmental tasks for this age period from the defining features of emerging adulthood (as he mentioned at the third conference on Emerging Adulthood, February 15-16, 2007, Tucson, Arizona, USA). Arnett described these tasks in more detail in a personal email communication to students of mine (personal communication, November 25, 2013). He referred in his answer to the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood and mentioned 1) developing a clear identity; 2) accepting a narrower range of possibilities; 3) becoming less self-focused (in part by entering into commitments to others); 4) making life decisions

that reduce instability; and finally, 5) feeling more like an adult. In addition, Arnett referred to those criteria of being considered adult which he identified as being particularly important in various studies where he had used a list of transition criteria (e.g. Arnett, 2001). The top (individualistic) single criteria for adulthood described by Arnett (e.g. 2004, 2015) are 1) accept responsibility for yourself, 2) make independent decisions, and 3) become financially independent (Arnett, 2006b, see also Nelson & Luster, 2016).

Arnett developed and summarized items regarding criteria of transition (e.g. Arnett, 2001) in which he included a wide range of different criteria of adulthood from different disciplines (e.g. psychology, anthropology, and sociology). The items in this list were theoretically grouped into domains; later on, slightly different versions of this questionnaire were used by various researchers (e.g. Badger, Nelson, & Barry, 2006; Mayseless & Scharf, 2003; Nelson, Padilla-Walker, Carroll, Madsen, Barry, & Badger, 2007). The questionnaire measures the importance of specific criteria people should have met to be considered adult. “Individualism / independence / relational maturity” measure responsibility and independence (from one’s parents), “family capacities” assesses the perceived capability of caring for a family, “norm compliance / responsible norm-abiding behavior” indicates the avoidance of illegal actions. Biological and age-related transitions estimate the capability of fathering/bearing children. Legal and chronological transitions refer to reaching a specific age (related to specific rights, e.g. obtaining driver’s license). Role transitions include criteria belonging to education, career, and family status. “Other“-items (Arnett, 2001) were later on labeled “interdependence” (Arnett, 2003) and include several lifelong commitments (such as “committed to long-term love relationship”). The highest endorsed domain across countries was “individualism / independence / relational maturity” (for an overview regarding subjectively important criteria to be regarded as an adult in selected European countries, see chapter 1).

### 2.1.10 Emerging Adulthood as Synthesis of Various Paradigms?

Arnett’s introduction of a (new) stage theory (1994, 2000; Arnett & Taber, 1994) to the scientific community stirred a broad discussion with a lot of critical comments, mainly by the following scholars: Leo Hendry and Marion Kloep (2007a, 2007b, 2010, see also contributions in Arnett et al., 2011; Arnett, 2007a), Bynner (2005, see also Arnett, 2006a) and Côté (2014; Côté & Bynner, 2008). Scholars generally concluded that Arnett’s new stage theory is not universal, cannot be applied to all cultures, is limited to Western industrialized societies, is

specifically focused on well-educated young people living in Western industrialized societies, and does not take into account structural differences and different socio-economic conditions.

Syed (2016, p. 14) in his recent critical discussion of Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood points out that with using the term "new life stage", Arnett got himself into a fundamentally controversial discussion of developmental psychology: Does development proceed continuously (as proposed by the "life span theory", e.g. Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980) or discontinuously (as described by Freud, Erikson, or Piaget in their stage theories)? By designating his "theory" as a "life stage" Arnett somewhat borrows from completely different theoretical backgrounds of how development is explained. On the one hand, Arnett uses the term "life" and on the other hand "stage". Some criticisms may have been caused or initiated by combining two terms originating in distinct research traditions. Furthermore, and also appearing somewhat contradictory, Arnett focuses on only one single stage (spanning about 10 years) within lifelong development. The question arises if Arnett sought – or even intended – an association with renowned "grand theories" (Steinberg & Lerner, 2004, p. 47), such as Erikson's psychosocial theory of development or Piaget's theory of cognitive development, by using the term "stage theory"?

Other researchers, however, interpret Arnett's conception of emerging adulthood at least as a grand theory. Syed (2016, p. 11) for example states, "he [Arnett] proposed a grand theory". Interestingly, Arnett himself criticizes representatives of grand theories, such as Freud, Erikson, Piaget, or Kohlberg, for committing the failure of conceptualizing stage theories as universal and equally valid for everyone. In contrast, he suggests using stages merely as "useful frameworks for understanding human development" (2012b, S. 242) and reflecting on them as being affected by context variables. Nevertheless, Arnett's "theory of emerging adulthood" initiated a lot of research in various countries (see Swanson's review, 2016). Syed (2016, p. 22) in his discussion summed up the question if emerging adulthood is a theory according to its characteristics the following way: "Emerging adulthood has been incredibly generative, but it does not have a lot of explanatory power. Thus, I would say that it is a theory of development – emerging perhaps – but that much work needs to be done". Nelson and Luster (2016) acknowledge the work that has already been done, but call for more research regarding individuals' perception of becoming adult and possible influencing factors tied with these perceptions – to shed light on various important aspects. They question if many scholars, referring specifically to Côté and Bynner (2008) and Hendry and Kloep (2007a), may be arguing about the wrong question (p. 428) i.e. if emerging adulthood is a universal period of development.

Nevertheless, the answer to this question seems fundamental to me, as it opens up research to investigate possible influencing factors for becoming adult more broadly than assuming that all young people in Western industrialized societies experience a normative period of several years of emerging adulthood.

## 2.2 Aspects of the Macro, Micro and Individual Level Possibly Influencing Individuals' Perceptions of Becoming Adult

When Arnett argues that changes in objective markers show a delay for assuming adult roles and simultaneously argues that many emerging adults feel themselves in-between and not fully adult, the questions arise: are objective markers and subjective criteria related and, if so, what do these ties look like?

### 2.2.1 Are Objective and Subjective Criteria of Adulthood Related?

Pinquart and Grob (2008, referring to Shanahan et al., 2005) state that with the number of transitions, the likelihood of feeling adult increases, whereas Eliason, Mortimer and Vuolo (2015) report a significant but low relation between feeling adult by age 25-26 and the life paths under study (reflecting key demographic markers).

Meulemann (2001, 2003) reports that biographical self-definition (or perceived adult status) at age 30 cannot be explained easily. He hypothesizes that at a certain point in life people somehow move beyond their previous life decisions by specifically deciding to be adult. Macek, Bejček and Vaničková (2007) in their study discovered that about one-third of 436 Czech subjects aged 18 to 27 felt adult compared to two-thirds feeling in-between. Comparing the subjectively adult-feeling participants with the group of respondents feeling in-between, the authors did not find clear-cut indicators changing the subjective status of young people turning into adults, although most married respondents and all parents perceived themselves as adults. In addition, subjectively perceived emerging adults were largely dependent on their parents. Also, Swedish young people (Westberg, 2004) who have completed role transitions assign those transitions less value for reaching adult status (except for becoming a parent, which supports results reported by Macek et al., 2007). Westberg argues that potentially people rethink and change their perceived importance after they have already reached these transitions, and that this might explain the somewhat complex relation between objective and subjective adult roles. Somewhat similar, Gurba (2008) found that 15-year-olds place higher demands on adulthood status than adults themselves. Maybe having reached (some) eagerly awaited and highly valued transition criteria may change one's perception of adulthood. Sharon (2016)

mentions the possibility that “they [young people] can accept traditional markers as defining and necessary features of adulthood and fall short, or they can take on the task of redefining what it means to be an adult, selecting markers that are personally meaningful while still attainable” referring to individualistic criteria. Reitzle’s (2007) findings shed light on another possible reason for this not very clear relation between objective and subjective criteria. He pointed out effects of regression, which Kroger et al. (2010) also found regarding identity development. Focusing on young people’s subjective perception of becoming adult, Reitzle reported an increasing likelihood of feeling adult when consistent relationships are maintained and when having a child. The loss of a partner or less commitment in a relationship increased the likelihood of returning to a perceived adolescent-self, whereas work-related predictors were not significantly associated with a change towards a perceived adult-self.

In the following I will present only a few selected factors, which I expect may eventually be important for thinking over what kinds of influences on subjective perceptions on adulthood may exist (see also Neslon & Luster, 2016). I am indeed aware that there are many more to add. On the macro level (referring to Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological system theory; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) there could be an influence of culture and society (such as cultural values, economic conditions, social class, educational tracks etc.). On the micro level young adults’ socialization by parents might be important. And on the individual level, self-efficacy to master developmental tasks positively may play an important role.

### 2.2.2 Globalization

For the time being, Arnett confines his (new) stage theory to young people from Western societies, but expects a potential expansion in the future due to advancing globalization: “However, as globalization proceeds, and economic development along with it, the proportion of young people [in developing countries] is likely to increase as the middle class expands” (Arnett, 2011, p. 263). What he more or less assumes is that the number of young people feeling in-between, or the number of emerging adults respectively in (so called) developing countries, is low now but will be rising in the future. Either way, the possible influence of globalization in the future is one we cannot deny and one that may also affect other domains in life (e.g. media, see chapter 7).

### 2.2.3 Culture and Country

First, when reflecting upon the age period of the twenties from a societal, respectively culture-related point of view, different patterns for delaying adult roles

in Mediterranean, Northern European, Central European, and post-communist countries exist (see chapter 1). Côté and Bynner (2008, p. 264) state, “Arnett’s qualities of ‘feeling in-between’ and a ‘sense of possibilities’ are more plausibly subjective reactions to the economic exclusion and marginalization from the adult labor force that would grant these young people financial independence.”

However, value systems may also vary across countries. Arnett (2015) describes emerging adulthood as age of possibilities/optimism where hopes flourish and young people are very optimistic to become whatever they like to become or are very optimistic about reaching their life goals. He therefore renamed the defining feature “possibilities” (2004) to “possibilities/optimism” (2015). Nelson (2009, p. 408) reports “a pervasive optimism about the future, including their careers, relationships, finances, and overall quality of life” for a sample of Romanian college students.

Focusing in more detail on possible culture differences regarding the American dream – the hope of a better future and of personal and economic improvement (from rags to riches) – the United States has always been considered a country of (nearly) unlimited possibilities. Arnett himself questioned the influence of the American dream but denied it more or less, arguing that there are comparable levels of optimism among emerging adults in Denmark (Arnett & Tanner, 2011, p. 38, see also Arnett & Padilla-Walker, 2015). Nevertheless, it might motivate young Americans to look more positively into the future. Thus, this positive outlook may differ when comparing young people in European countries to those in the US. In the following, I describe results from cross-cultural comparisons which used Schwartz’s value survey, hypothesize possible differences regarding selected European countries.

Schwartz and Bardi (2001) and Ralston et al. (2011) describe comparisons across countries using the original 10 values defined by Schwartz (1992). Value hierarchies of representative and nearly representative samples from 13 nations exhibit a pattern which is similar to value hierarchies of college students of 54 nations (including US samples and samples from Slovenia and Austria as well). Benevolence, self-direction, and universalism are consistently most important; power, tradition, and stimulation are least important; and security, conformity, achievement, and hedonism are in between (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001). Results of samples with professional young people in Austria, Slovenia and the US confirm these results (Ralston et al, 2011). Schwartz’s values were originally organized in two bipolar dimensions 1) openness to change (independent thoughts, actions, and feelings) and conservation and 2) self-enhancement and self-transcendence. The domain “openness” consisted of hedonism (pleasure and enjoying life), stimulation (excitement,

novelty, and challenge) and self-direction (independent thinking, exploring, and freedom) (Bilsky, Janik, & Schwartz, 2011; Schwartz & Bardi, 2001). The dimension “openness” shows several aspects and similarities to those of IDEA’s subscale “possibilities” (Reifman et al, 2007). Taking a closer look, differing results between the European and US-American culture could be detected. While hedonism, stimulation and self-direction were rated on the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> rank by Austrians and Slovenians, the US-participants perceived these values as more important (3<sup>rd</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> rank). The “country of opportunity” is not only a dream or fiction, it seems to be part of the US-American culture and US-American value system in people’s perceptions (Ralston et al., 2011; Schwartz & Bardi, 2001).

In the following, I present results of a cross-national project with data from the US, Slovenia and Austria collected 2008 where Wolfgang Friedlmeier, Maja Zupančič and the author from this chapter were responsible for in the respective countries (for further results see Zupančič et al., 2014). The whole sample consisted of 636 individuals and rendered findings which in some way supported the above-mentioned assumption. 225 US students enrolled at the State Universities of Grand Valley, Michigan, 201 Slovene, and 210 Austrian students participated in this study. European students were enrolled at the public State Universities of Ljubljana and Vienna. Females were overrepresented in all three samples (US: 79%, Slovenia: 70%, Austria: 87%). The students’ age ranged from 18 to 27 years (mean ages: US: 20, Slovenia: 21, Austria: 22). Results of the IDEA subscale “possibilities” showed significant differences (when controlling for sex and age) between students from the US compared to those from Slovenia and Austria. Furthermore, nearly all additional dimensions of the IDEA differed across the countries. Emerging adults from the US perceived higher identity exploration, possibilities, negativity and self-focused concerns than emerging adults from Austria and Slovenia. For all the dimensions except self-focused concerns only the differences between the participants from the US and the subjects from the European countries were significant (and not those between Austria and Slovenia). For self-focused concerns, the differences between all three countries were significant, with highest scores among emerging adults from the US and lowest scores from Austrians (Sirsch & Bruckner, 2011).

#### 2.2.4 Social Class and Different Educational Pathways

Arnett portrays a shorter period of emerging adulthood – between the end of secondary school and the entrance to adult roles, lasting about 6 years – for young people in Western industrialized countries coming from lower social classes (2011,

p. 263). Although Arnett has frequently argued that context matters (e.g. Arnett & Taber, 1994), results from the Clark University Poll of emerging adults let Arnett (2016a, p. 231) conclude “the differences between the three social class groups were minimal and were not statistically significant.” The survey comprised about 700 subjects from different regions of the US, aged 18-25, and included 43% full-time students. Mother’s educational attainment was used to represent social class (34% lower class: high school diploma or less; 32% middle class: some college or vocational schooling; 34% upper class: 4-year college degree or more). Participants’ own educational attainment was 21% high school diploma or less, 51% some college or vocational schooling, and 28% 4-year degree or more (see p. 229 and 231). Results showed that social class did not have a significant influence on subjects’ answers to the items of the IDEA (Reifman et al., 2007).

Du Bois-Reymond (2016) mentions two fundamentally different educational systems in Europe – first, the comprehensive school system (e.g. in Finland, Slovenia, and Italy) and second, selective schools, sorting students into different educational levels after primary school allowing for fewer subsequent changes (e.g. in Germany, the Netherlands, and Austria). The consequences might be that those young people following the second system may begin full-time-employment or become a parent somewhat earlier than those finishing their education in the mid- to late-twenties. Mitchell and Syed (2015) for example describe different trajectories regarding parenthood in a US longitudinal study, where lower-educated emerging adults had more children. Seiffge-Krenke’s (2016) findings from emerging adults in Germany confirm this earlier attainment of specific objective transition markers of adulthood – young employees (compared to students, apprentices and unemployed emerging adults) reached highest attainment in the categories “living with a partner”, “entry into the labor market”, and “raising a family”, while attainment of the latter was the lowest among students and apprentices. She reports detailed results from a large German sample of apprentices, students, and employed and unemployed individuals with a mean age of about 24 years, and states that the four groups strongly differ. Nevertheless, she interprets her findings in that way, that many features which are typical for emerging adulthood are similarly experienced. She found highest scores in identity exploration, trying out possibilities, negativity and self-focus among students and in contrast comparable findings among the other three groups.

Reitzle (2006) describes somewhat similar results regarding lower rates of objective transition markers of adulthood among college-youth compared to non-college-youth in a German sample. In addition, subjective perceived adulthood was lower among college-youth. Reitzle further found that college-youths’ subjective



adulthood was not connected to role transitions, while for less-educated youth, subjective adulthood remained connected to role transitions. Crocetti et al. (2015) reports small differences regarding the perceptions of emerging adulthood, comparing Italian students and emerging adults with different working contracts (or self-employed). Results showed lower identity exploration, possibilities, instability, feeling in-between and higher self-focus for the working group.

An Austrian study (Gollubits, 2010; Sirsch, Gollubits, & Sramek, 2012) compared 137 university students and 102 subjects who already worked full-time after completing vocational training (apprenticeship). Both groups were between 18 and 25 years of age. Results showed a higher tendency to feel only partly adult for students (perceived adult status, see Arnett, 2001). In addition, students reported higher identity exploration and self-focus (assessed using the IDEA, see Reifman et al., 2007). Regarding Arnett's (e.g. 2001) criteria for being considered adult, employed emerging adults showed higher importance for norm compliance, biological transitions, legal and age-related transitions, role transitions, and transitions including commitments to others than did students. The groups did not differ in their perceptions of the importance of individualism and family capacities.

An additional Austrian study (Keiblinger, 2013; Keiblinger, Talaska, Filip, & Sirsch, 2014; Talaska, 2013; Talaska, Keiblinger, Filip, & Sirsch, 2014) tried to shed light on two variables, which possibly influence the perceptions of the criteria and which are often confounded: To start a successful career of work and to attend or have completed different educational tracks. In this study the authors aimed to investigate whether subjects with different educational pathways (i.e. students attending secondary schools, adolescent apprentices, subjects working after having completed vocational training, university students, university graduates working) 1) differ in their views of emerging adulthood (IDEA, Reifman et al., 2007), 2) differ in their perceptions of various criteria to consider somebody adult, and 3) differ in their perceived adult status (according to Arnett, 2001). 702 subjects – 128 adolescents aged 16 to 18 years and 574 19-29-year-old emerging adults – were asked using an online-questionnaire. Not working subjects (students and adolescents attending secondary schools) experienced a higher sense of experimentation and possibilities, higher instability and felt less adult compared to working subjects (adolescent apprentices, working emerging adults who already finished their vocational training, and university graduates). Adolescents in secondary schools and students at university perceived a higher sense of experimentation and possibilities than did adolescent apprentices and 19-25 year-old employed emerging adults. In addition, results showed that all groups regarded individualism, family capacities

and norm compliance as the most important criteria for reaching adulthood. Legal transitions, role transitions and other transitions, including commitment to others, turned out to be more important for apprentices and emerging adults after having finished vocational training, compared to adolescents still attending school, students, and university graduates. Working subjects who have finished a specific educational pathway and subjects still in this specific educational pathway seem to experience this time period similarly, even though they differ in age. It seems that environment determines how emerging adulthood is experienced and influences the subjective importance of the criteria for adulthood. Moreover, different educational pathways – which are often also tied to educational backgrounds, social class, parents' education etc. – develop or offer somewhat different subcultures with possible different rules or norms for becoming adult.

### 2.2.5 Parents

Nelson and Luster (2016) mention parents as a possible influencing factor on emerging adults' perception of being adult (e.g. parents' parenting styles and practices; parents may not perceive their children as adults – even though they legally are – and therefore do not behave towards them in such a way). In addition, research on individuation shows (see chapter 3) that the process of individuation seems to differ in some respects between parent-child dyads with regards to gender. Parents may also have problems letting their growing-up-children act autonomously – maybe because of worries about the child, maybe because our society highly values youth and therefore recognizing that one's own kids are becoming adults would mean recognizing that oneself is becoming old.

### 2.2.6 Individual Level

In his recent paper about life stage concepts, Arnett (2016b) proposes a new field of research, namely on indigenous life stages. He proposes "to have people indicate their conceptions of the stages or periods of the entire lifespan, both for themselves and for people generally in their culture" (p. 312). His suggestion seems intended to enrich research of Bernice Neugarten and colleagues (e.g. Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965) on cultural expectations when life events have to be completed. Her research is well known by the term "social clock" (societally prescribed timelines for accomplishing typical objective markers of adulthood).

Arnett (2016b, p. 297) argues that conceptions of human life stages in history and across cultures are only partly biological and have likewise been constructed culturally

and socially. He illustrates this by describing four examples of different life stage concepts across history (by ancient Greeks, Hindus, Jews, and medieval societies) and three examples across cultures (the Gusii of East Africa, the Trobrianders of New Guinea, and the Maya of Latin America). Thus, he suggests a new field of research on “indigenous life stage concepts” (Arnett, 2016b, p. 291). Overall, Arnett looks at emerging adulthood as part of a life stage master narrative between adolescence and young adulthood for Western industrialized countries – this means that young people build life scripts for themselves (with delayed adult roles following one or more master narratives). Once again, Arnett stresses the subjective perception of becoming adult.

But master narratives (or social norms in terms of Neugarten) could be perceived differently by each single individual, and may therefore influence building subjective life scripts. Nevertheless, in specific subgroups of society, there might be additional social norms. The subjective life scripts may influence expectations for fulfilling these life scripts, and the output could vary depending on the importance of the criteria, and the importance of fulfilling these criteria as well. Thus, perceived societal perceptions may function as additional influencing factors (e.g. if the perceived social norm asks for the attainment of a specific criteria, but the criteria is not important to the individual, what would that mean for the perceived adult status?).

How young people perceive prospective critical normative life events when taking over adult roles (e.g. full-time employment) may also have an influence on the individual level. Is the transition from adolescence to adulthood perceived as a challenge or a threat? Are results of various appraisals (e.g. Lazarus, 1991, 1999) – evaluating own perceived resources to cope with specific life-events when facing the opportunities of this life period – positive, negative or even ambivalent?

What I have learned from children taking part in the Vienna School Transition Study (VSTS, Sirsch, 2003) is that positive feelings towards (normative life) events, like transition to secondary school, can occur simultaneously with negative ones. From 856 children taking part in this study, 45.7% described perceptions of higher academic challenge and higher academic threat. 35.4% reported higher social challenge and higher social threat regarding the prospective transition to secondary school.

Thus, could positive, negative, and ambivalent perceptions also be assumed for the transition from adolescence to adulthood? Empirical findings from 500 German 12-16-year-old adolescents about becoming adult support this assumption: Subjects were asked what becoming adult means to them and what the positive and negative aspects of becoming adult are. Results show independence as the highest ranked positive aspect. Interestingly, responsibility was regarded as the

most important negative aspect (because of anxiety to fail). But even so, a small number of participants mentioned responsibility as a positive aspect and independence as a negative one (Dreher & Dreher, 2002). Macek et al. (2007, p. 460) describe five modalities in their small qualitative study with 15 young Czechs experiencing emerging adulthood: 1) positive, 2) uncertain, 3) ambivalent, 4) insecure, 5) negative (with anxiety and doubts) arising from lack of experience or unwillingness to accept responsibility and to use offered possibilities. A recent person-centered approach regarding empirical findings on views of emerging adulthood, using the IDEA (Reifman et al., 2007), uncovered different perceptions in various groups of 19-30-year-olds. Tagliabue, Crocetti and Lanz (2016, pp. 382-384) pointed out six different subgroups of young people in an Italian sample of about 1500 participants: 1) Young subjects with negative feelings and high-perceived instability, 2) another group, labeled positive transition, who perceived low instability, but high-perceived possibilities, self-focus, identity exploration, and feeling in-between, 3) a self-focus-group characterized by low identity exploration and low feeling of in-between but high self-focus, 4) a stall group, who seemed to not experience any feature at all, 5) young people who perceive a high lack of possibilities, and 6) a typical group of emerging adults called transitional time, who could be characterized by all of the five emerging adulthood features (Reifman et al., 2007).

Hendry and Kloep (2010) described three subgroups arising in their interviews with 38 Welsh participants between ages 17 and 20. They could discover: 1) a typical emerging adult group (either feeling not-adult or feeling in-between; they have assumed only few or no responsibilities, are not in a steady relationship, have no job or no temporary job, have no clear career plans, and in addition, are largely dependent on their parents, but happy with this situation), 2) a prevented adult group (feeling in-between or adult, with only some responsibilities, some are in a steady relationship, work fulltime but not in the chosen career, and are partly dependent but want to move, 3) adults (feeling adult, with a range of responsibilities in family and/or job, often committed to a steady relationship, employed full-time, often in a chosen career, and not or only partly dependent on parents).

## 2.3 Conclusion

Arnett's formulation of emerging adulthood as a new stage theory and normative period in life was widely criticized. First, from those who wanted to point out specific living circumstances which limit growing up as an emerging adult, specifically for those who do not have the possibilities to explore identity deeply (e.g.

Bynner, 2005; see also Mitchell & Syed, 2015). Second, from those who worried about the description “normative“ and the related risk of people labelling others who are not typical as “abnormal“ (Hendry & Kloep, 2010). And third, those who worried about the consequences of a delayed adulthood and a fear of the future among young people (Seiffge-Krenke, 2015), and that Arnett’s concept may influence public opinion and policymakers (Côté, 2014). All of these arguments are important and have to be taken seriously.

The perceived adult status and what kinds of criteria are deemed important to young people can only be understood – in my opinion – as a subjective theory of individuals’ perceptions of becoming adult – where people construct what they think is important to consider themselves adult regarding (an) individually important subjective indicator(s) for this perception. This article tries to point out some additional important factors (see also Nelson & Luster, 2016) that might influence young peoples’ perceptions of feeling adult and becoming adult. But many factors remain unexplored and await further research.

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