

# Emerging Adults in America

Coming of Age in the 21st Century

Edited by Jeffrey Jensen Arnett  
and Jennifer Lynn Tanner



American Psychological Association  
Washington, DC

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## Recentering During Emerging Adulthood: A Critical Turning Point in Life Span Human Development

*Jennifer Lynn Tanner*

Arnett has proposed the concept of emerging adulthood as a new stage of the life course. His work highlights the force of culture, suggesting that industrialized cultures, predicated on broad socialization practices (Arnett, 1995; Arnett & Taber, 1994), and demographic shifts have created environments in which the life course has expanded to include a new stage of development, one that is unique and distinct from adolescence and young adulthood (Arnett, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2004). In essence, he argued that industrialized countries have institutionalized a preparatory stage that precedes young adulthood and that emerging adults experience as feeling in-between—feeling neither adolescent nor adult.

Arnett's theory offers a cross-sectional perspective of the population features of this era (i.e., the age of instability, identity, possibilities, self-focus, feeling in-between), including a description of the characteristics that 18- to 25-year-olds share as an age group. Arnett's proposition that emerging adulthood is a new developmental stage encourages a theoretical and empirical investigation of his theory from a developmental perspective. The developmental perspective takes the long view—focusing on intraindividual change and stability, variation in individual's developmental trajectories, and influences that modify and optimize development across the human life span (Baltes, Reese, & Nesselroade, 1988). If, indeed, emerging adulthood represents a new stage of the life course, the stage should not only be characterized by unique features but also be linked to prior and later development and adaptation.

The overarching goal of this chapter is to consider how emerging adulthood fits into life span development. The thesis of this chapter is that emerging adulthood is characterized by unique features and that this age period represents not only a stage of life span development but also a critical turning point.

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Drawing on life events research, the first section of this chapter delves into explanations for consistent findings that emerging adulthood represents a peak period of occurrence of significant, marker life events in individuals' lives. These findings support the argument that emerging adulthood is a critical juncture in life span development when the relationship between the individual and society takes on a new meaning.

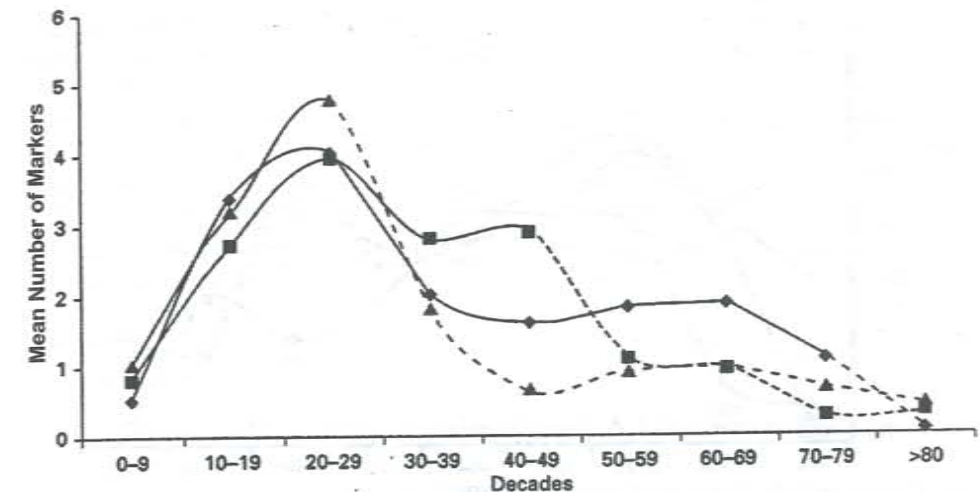
Toward an integration of emerging adulthood into life span theory, using a developmental systems framework, I propose the concept of recentering as the process that underlies emerging adults' gains in adult sufficiency. The process of recentering is conceptualized as a three-stage process, during which emerging adults make the transition from dependent adolescents to independent young adults. According to a definition that highlights the relational nature of emerging adult development, recentering is the critical and dynamic shift between individual and society that takes place across emerging adulthood during which other-regulated behavior (i.e., behavior regulated by parents, teachers, and society) is replaced with self-regulated behavior toward the goal of adult sufficiency, the ability to meet the demands of adulthood.

This chapter draws on recent empirical work that illustrates the dynamic yet highly variable paths that emerging adults take from dependence toward independence. Moreover, in this chapter, the recentering process is linked to two life span developmental processes (i.e., separation-individuation, ego development) in an effort to elucidate how the unique features of emerging adulthood are embedded within life span development from birth and to explore possible sources of variation in emerging adult development. Last, this chapter explores college as a context for emerging adulthood and asks what we can learn about modification of emerging adult development from the college student development literature. A summary and discussion of future research directions conclude the chapter.

### The Critical Years of Emerging Adulthood

What meaning do the years of emerging adulthood hold compared with other decades of life span development? Emerging adulthood represents the years during which the most significant events of people's lives are most likely to occur. Findings from several studies reveal that significant, life-marker events most often occur during the third decade of life. Recent work by Grob, Krings, and Bangerter (2001), drawing on data from three Swiss cohorts, found that life-marker events were most commonly recalled between ages 20 and 29, increasing from infancy through the teens and decreasing in the fourth decade of life (Figure 2.1). Likewise, Fitzgerald and colleagues' work (Fitzgerald, 1984, 1988, 1996) revealed a "reminiscence bump" in memories of significant life-marker events occurring between ages 20 and 29, during emerging adulthood, and of these "benchmark memories" the three most significant life-marker events named were most likely to have occurred during emerging adulthood (Elnick, Margrett, Fitzgerald, & Labouvie-Vief, 1999).

Review of life events research provides insight into why the events of emerging adulthood are most often recalled as the most important. Martin and



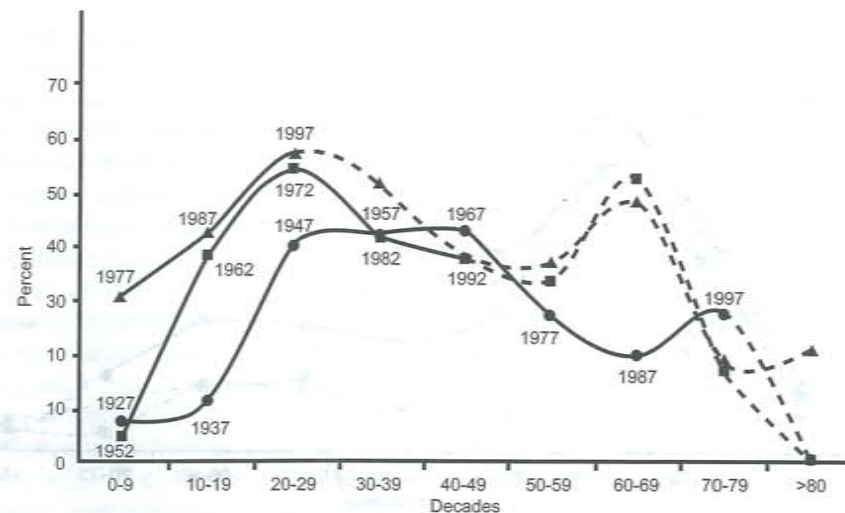
**Figure 2.1.** Recall of life-marker events. Mean number of life markers reported for each life decade and cohort. Experienced decades are depicted in bold lines and expected decades in dashed lines. From "Life Markers in Biographical Narratives of People From Three Cohorts: A Life Span Perspective in Its Historical Context," by A. Grob, F. Krings, and A. Bangerter, 2001, *Human Development*, 44, p. 182. Copyright 2001 by Karger. Reprinted with permission.

Smyer (1989) reported similar findings and noted that the majority of significant life events named were traditional transition events such as marriage and first jobs. It is interesting that such life events do not surface as the significant markers of adulthood (Arnett, 1998) but that, with retrospective recall, these events are coded as very meaningful. Why?

Fitzgerald and colleagues concluded that these life events were coded as significant in individuals' memories because they occurred coincident with a key era of self-development. Erikson (1950) suggested that identity development may arise as an important developmental task during adolescence but that some people experience an extended period beyond adolescence during which identity explorations continue. Arnett (2004) contended that it is perhaps during emerging adulthood when identity explorations are most salient and that resolution of identity may be postponed as a function of emerging adult explorations. However, it is Blos (1962) who observed that "the transition from adolescence to adulthood is marked by an intervening phase, postadolescence, which can be claimed rightfully by both, and can be viewed from either of these two stages" (p. 148) and offered a key interpretation of the life events findings. He posited that the adolescent years are marked by explorations of identity, whereas the postadolescent years, which Arnett termed *emerging adulthood*, brings with them the consolidation of identity.

In terms of ego development . . . the psychic structure has acquired by the end of late adolescence a fixity which allows the postadolescent to turn





**Figure 2.2.** Perceptions of control over life marker events. Percentage of personally controlled life markers for each cohort and decade. Experienced decades are depicted in bold lines and expected decades in dashed lines. Historical time is indicated for each experienced decade and cohort. From "Life Markers in Biographical Narratives of People From Three Cohorts: A Life Span Perspective in Its Historical Context," by A. Grob, F. Krings, and A. Bangerter, 2001, *Human Development*, 44, p. 183. Copyright 2001 by Karger. Reprinted with permission.

to the problem of harmonizing the component parts of personality. This integration comes about gradually. It usually occurs either preparatory to or coincidentally with occupational choice—provided that circumstances allow the individual any choice at all. The integration goes hand in hand with the activation of social role, with courtship, marriage, and parenthood. (p. 149)

Thus, it is at the end of the era of possibilities and exploration that the self consolidates around a set of roles and beliefs that define a relatively stable adult personality. The life events research suggest that this consolidation into an adult self is reflected in the significance of establishing careers, getting married, and becoming parents during these first years of adulthood.

To further investigate why life-marker events were most likely recalled during the 20s, Grob and colleagues considered the role of personal control. It is interesting to note that patterns of perceptions of control over life-marker events took the same shape as did the distribution of significant life events (Figure 2.2). These findings add to an understanding of emerging adulthood as a critical period of life span adjustment. These years represent a period of the life span during which individuals perceive having the most control over the significant events in their lives. In turn, the choices and decisions made during this era are considered life-marker events and define personal biographies across the life span. When findings are pulled together, it is clear that the emerging adult years represent a period during which individuals perceive

control over the life events that, in turn, establish adult selves around traditional transitions into adult social roles.

Adulthood begins to take shape during the emerging adult years. Shanahan (2000) remarked that these years are an integral part of biographies that reflect the early experiences of youth and shape the rest of life. In essence, emerging adulthood seems to represent a unique turning point in human development when the exploratory nature of emerging adulthood gives way to commitments to adult roles. Life events research provides insight into the unique features of emerging adulthood from a life span perspective. In addition, interpretation of the findings leads one to consider how life changes from adolescence to emerging adulthood and from these years to young adulthood.

### The Process of Emerging Adulthood: A Life Span Perspective

Whereas other scholars have also noted the lengthening of adolescence (Hamburg, 1989) and the increased variability in patterns of adult role transitions into adulthood over the past decades (Booth, Crouter, & Shanahan, 1999; Shanahan, 2000; Shanahan, Sulloway, & Hofer, 2000), Arnett's perspective on these years between 18 and 25 suggests that a new developmental period has emerged. His work (2000, 2004) has specified the population features of these years as the age of identity explorations, self-focus, possibilities, feeling in-between, and instability. If emerging adulthood is indeed a new developmental period then it is imperative to link emerging adulthood with the years that precede and follow this period as this is the way that life span human development is understood. That is, it is important to take a developmental perspective and ask: How does emerging adulthood fit into life span human development? How do these years link adolescence and adulthood?

Although scholars have long been interested in the distinction between adolescence and adulthood, there remains a lack of research on development across these years. One traditional schism that has limited research on development across the emerging adult year is the division of study between preadult (i.e., infant, child, adolescent) and adult development. Textbooks, courses, departments, training, assessment, and licensure in the field of psychology subscribe to this division. For example, the Society for Research in Child Development, the Society for Research on Adolescence,<sup>1</sup> and the Gerontological Society of America are outlets for scholarship on specific age period development—the distinction between research on child and adolescent development and adult development or aging is clear. This distinction and a lack of continuity in understanding development across the transition to adulthood is one barrier that has led to a lack of focus on the developmental processes that bridge adolescence and adulthood. Professional boundaries, rather than theoretically meaningful distinctions, have obfuscated the critical years of emerging adulthood, the years that connect childhood and adolescence to adult development.

<sup>1</sup>In 2000, a Special Interest Group on Emerging Adulthood (<http://www.s-r-a.org/easig.html>) was established through the Society for Research on Adolescence as a forum for the development of scholarship on emerging adult development.



Human developmentalists have sought to unify the study of preadult and adult development by proposing theories and models that coalesce the two developmental epochs. However, a second schism has presented an obstacle in developing an understanding of development postadolescence. Two theoretical camps offer contrasting perspectives on the attainment of adulthood. Life span theory has traditionally represented the psychological perspective, whereas life-course theory has traditionally represented the sociological perspective on development through these years (Mayer, 2003). These two theories have led to a division in work between sociologists' emphasis on transitions to adult roles (Settersten & Mayer, 1997; Smith, 2003) and psychologists' concern with the development of maturity (i.e., cognitive, ego, identity, and moral development; see Tilton-Weaver, Vitunski, & Galambos, 2001) as markers of adult status. Arnett's interdisciplinary model offers a framework for integrating perspectives.

One strength of Arnett's (2000) concept of emerging adulthood is that it incorporates psychological (i.e., identity) and sociological (i.e., geographic and occupational instability) features of this era while emphasizing the role of cultural conditions (i.e., industrialization, secularism) in shaping emerging adult experiences. To maintain the complexity of Arnett's view of this developmental period while taking on the goal of this chapter—to explore how this developmental period fits into life span development—one needs to invoke a lens that not only recognizes the complexity of emerging adulthood but also offers a framework for viewing development through the emerging adult years. The developmental systems perspective (Lerner, 2002) offers such a lens. In this contemporary developmental framework, "the person is not biologized, psychologized, or sociologized" nor culturalized; "rather, the individual is 'systematized'—that is, his or her development is embedded within an integrated matrix of variables derived from multiple levels of organization . . ." (Lerner, 1998, p. 1). In terms of emerging adulthood, the developmental systems perspective highlights the complexity of influences on developmental experiences during this era with particular emphasis on the continuity of individual development influenced by transactions between individuals and their contexts.

Most important, the developmental systems framework stresses the relational nature of development—key to understanding emerging adult development from a life span perspective. Arnett uses the expressions "learning to stand alone," "self-sufficiency," and "independence" to characterize the tasks of emerging adulthood. Data have been presented consistently that indicate that the criteria of adulthood represent progress toward independence rather than transitions to adult roles: The criteria "accept responsibility for one's self," "financial independence," "independent decision-making," "general independence/self-sufficiency," and establishing an "independent household" are the top five (Arnett, 1998, p. 305). However, the relational nature of the criteria of adulthood should not be overlooked.

From the individual's perspective, momentum toward the task of achieving independence is clear. However, from a developmental perspective, which emphasizes the underlying process of becoming adult, the relational nature of this task is striking. What is understated in these characteristics ascribed to adult status is that emerging adulthood is the process of transferring from

dependent to independent status in regard to emerging adults' relationships with their parents. That is, emerging adults are involved in the task of becoming responsible for oneself (in contrast to sharing responsibility for one's actions with parents), becoming financially independent from parents, gaining self-sufficiency (in contrast to dependency on parents), and establishing a household independent from parents. In essence, the process of attaining adulthood happens in relation to others and roles important to the emerging adult (i.e., families-of-origin).

Inherent to the developmental systems framework is the centrality of parent-child relations as the most proximal and instrumental shaping force on individual development. The impact of these interactions on emerging adult development is no exception. Unlike theories of family development (i.e., Carter & McGoldrick, 1999), which consider power relations (between parents and children) central to understanding dynamics of both individual and family development, theories of individual development traditionally underemphasize the power shift that occurs at the beginning of the transition to adulthood. However, this very shift "from childlike dependence on the family-of-origin to the autonomies of adulthood" (Shanahan, 2000, p. 2) characterizes the uniqueness of emerging adulthood from a life span developmental systems perspective. At no other period of the life span do the relations between the individual and contexts of development (i.e., family) shift as they do at the beginning of emerging adulthood.

I propose that the heart of this shift is the process of recentring and that recentring is the primary task of emerging adulthood from a life span developmental systems perspective. Recentring constitutes a shift in power, agency, responsibility, and dependence between emerging adults and their social contexts—primarily experienced by emerging adults as a period during which parent regulation is replaced with self-regulation. Building on Arnett's concept of emerging adulthood as the era of learning to stand alone, as well as Blos's (1967) conceptualization of this era as the second separation-individuation process and Ausubel's (1996) model of desatellization, the process of recentring captures and highlights the integrated and relational nature of the process, one that puts at the center of the process the relationship between individual and context. The process can be summarized as a shift in orientation between emerging adults and their environments, during which time they gain self-direction within the systems in which they are involved. A three-stage process of recentring is proposed.

At the end of adolescence and the beginning of emerging adulthood, Stage 1, the individual is embedded within the family-of-origin. Responsibility for the pre-emerging adult child and adolescent remains with parents, teachers, and the community (Figure 2.3a). Prior to emerging adulthood, parents are legally responsible for the behavior, adjustment, development, and care of their dependent children. At age 18 (in American society), social and legal responsibility are transferred to the individual when the individual becomes independent, from the perspective of social responsibility for one's own behavior. Social expectations toward emerging adults begin to change, beginning with the arrival of legal responsibility that emerging adults are forced to take for their behavior. With great variability between emerging adults and across



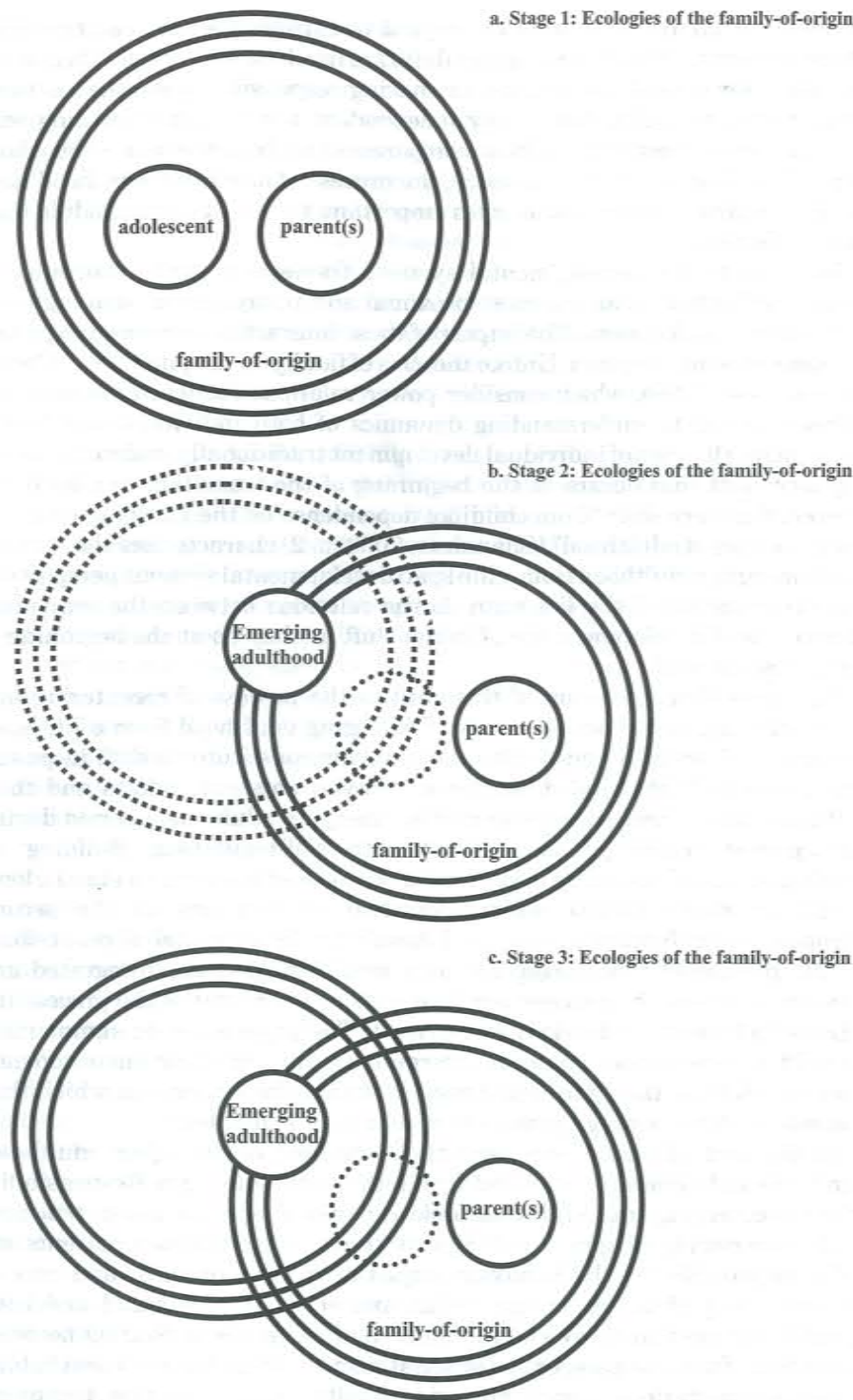


Figure 2.3. The recentring process: Stage 1 (a), Stage 2 (b), and Stage 3 (c).

the contexts in which they are involved, expectations for emerging adults to become self-governing adults (McCandless, 1970) begin to increase at the transition into emerging adulthood. Recentring highlights the intersection of the psychological experience of becoming responsible for self (in the sense of striving to be self-sufficient) and the sociological demand of taking responsibility for self (in the sense of becoming accountable for one's actions).

Gould (1978, p. 45) noted the critical shift between adolescence and emerging adulthood: "until the age of 16 or 18, we have only been the lowly actors in our lives—others have been the producers, directors, and screenwriters." Although the developing person is always an agent (Brandstaedter & Lerner, 1999), at the threshold of emerging adulthood is a gain in self-directedness. Making progress toward financial independence, a set of personal values and beliefs, and equal relationships with parents are characteristics strongly associated with becoming adult in industrialized societies (Arnett, 1997) as these tasks support emerging adults' abilities to progress toward adult sufficiency away from the dependence of adolescence.

Emerging adulthood proper, Stage 2, can be characterized, according to Arnett (2000), by emerging adults' involvements in systems of education, occupation, and intimate relations that are exploratory and temporary in nature. From a developmental systems perspective, "the age of identity explorations and instability" differs from adolescence as it is relatively free from the contextual structures (e.g., family, school) of earlier years. Rather, transitory enrollment in several different college majors and programs, employment in several different types of work, and involvement with different intimate partners reflect the real-life experiences of many emerging adults (Arnett, 2004). Figure 2.3b shows the tenuous nature—denoted by the dashed and incomplete lines—of these system involvements. These commitments to partners and jobs are temporary rather than permanent as they are constructed in response to the exploratory temper of this period. Also, as illustrated, the emerging adult remains connected to, but no longer embedded within, his or her family-of-origin and contexts of adolescence.

During this stage of the recentring process, the parent-child relationship confronts a unique challenge. As the boundaries of an emerging adult's adult self and adult commitments have yet to be confirmed, ties to one's family-of-origin for financial and other support challenge the emerging adult to question, Do I make decisions for myself or according to my parents' directives? In turn, parents are in the process of renegotiating an adult relationship with their emerging adult child, a relationship in which adult children are afforded the freedom to make choices and decisions based on their own values and beliefs. However, emerging adults often require ongoing partial or full financial support from parents, involving them in the lives of their emerging adult children to the extent that the support parents are giving is used in a way that is acceptable to parents. Here murky territory between parents and emerging adults often leads to conflicts different than those of adolescence. Parent-child conflict during adolescence most often revolves around the concrete tasks and rules of daily functioning (i.e., chores, curfew; Smetana, 1989) in terms of adolescents wanting autonomy to set their own rules. In contrast, the conflicts of emerging adulthood revolve more around the psychological component of establishing



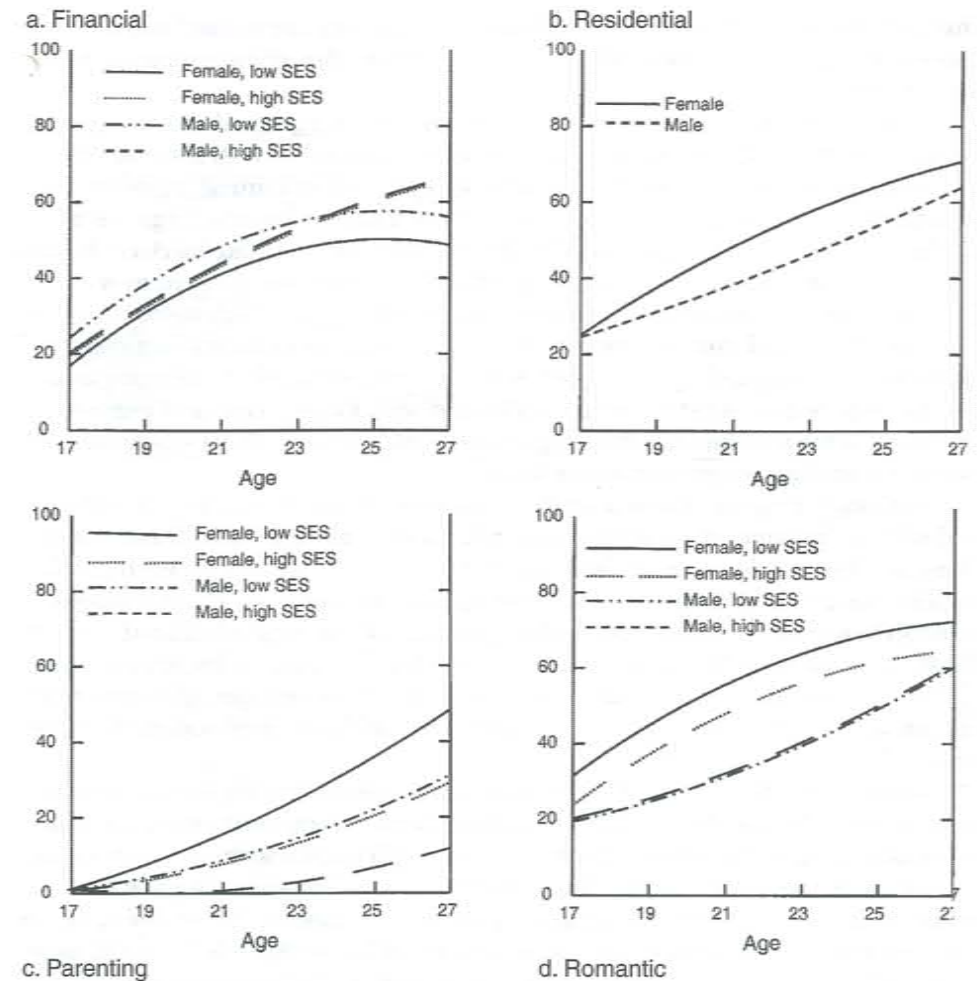
self as a separate, yet connected, individual (i.e., the separation-individuation process). What may seem like a conflict between parents and an emerging adult child about living arrangements—perhaps whether the emerging adult should come home between semesters or live with friends—has a psychological subtext for both parents and emerging adults: When is the appropriate time for emerging adults to make their own decisions based on their own values and beliefs?

The choices and commitments to adult roles and beliefs that emerging adults make have a dual effect: First, the emerging adult is moving toward lifelong commitments that will characterize one's adulthood; second, the boundaries between the emerging adult and the family-of-origin are becoming more definite. At the same time, emerging adults gain resources to support themselves through a career or other means of adult sufficiency, and boundaries between emerging adults and their families-of-origin gain clarity, which leads to the final stage of the recentering process.

At the close of the recentering process, emerging adulthood gives way to young adulthood, Stage 3, marked by system commitments—firm and long-lasting binders to careers, intimate partners, and (for most but not all) children (Figure 2.3c). These commitments, marked by solid lines to denote the permanence of these ties to others and to roles, stand in contrast to those of emerging adulthood when instability is more characteristic. The effect of these transitions to adult roles is that they place new demands on the young adult. These commitments encourage a young adult to maintain a consistent self, one who meets the expectations of and responsibilities to these system commitments, which replaces the exploratory self of emerging adulthood. In terms of the gains and losses of life span development (Baltes, 1987), giving up the exploratory self, reflected in young adults' fears of getting old, may be the essence of what is traded—the instability of emerging adulthood for the stability underlying the momentum of adulthood.

Indeed, emerging adulthood as the age of identity explorations, instability, possibilities, and self-focus stands in contrast to demands of adult system commitments. As Eccles, Templeton, Barber, and Stone (2003) noted, a new type of relational self-reliance, or adult interdependence, needed for one's own well-being and the parenting of the next generation, brings to a close the emerging adult period. The exploration of emerging adulthood gives way to consolidation of a system organized around the emerging adult's life choices and decisions that structure the starting point of adult pathways. In return, the gains in independence of the individual during emerging adulthood lead to commitments to new systems that mark the beginning of young adulthood. Young adulthood, then, is the stage of the life course during which individuals embark on the first stage of true adulthood, when behavior is regulated toward maintaining self and the systems to which one becomes committed; in return, the systems to which the individual is committed sustain the life of the individual.

The recent empirical work of Cohen, Kasen, Chen, Hartmark, and Gordon (2003) highlights the gradual process of recentering during emerging adulthood. Drawing on data collected from over 200 narrative interviews, the re-



**Figure 2.4.** Mean trajectories of financial (a), residential (b), parenting (c), and romantic (d) domains. From "Variations in Patterns of Developmental Transitions in the Emerging Adulthood Period," by P. Cohen, S. Kasen, H. Chen, C. Hartmark, and K. Gordon, 2003, *Developmental Psychology*, 39, pp. 665–666. Copyright 2003 by the American Psychological Association.

searchers rated emerging adults' behaviors in four domains on a scale from behavior "more like that of a child" to "approximated fully adult role behavior, defined by independence of parental control, expression of own goals and preferences, and assumption of responsibilities" (p. 660). When trajectories of gains in independence from parents from ages 17 to 27 were mapped, findings revealed linear increases in independence from ages 17 to 27 in residential, financial, romantic, and parenting domains for both males and females, illustrated in Figures 2.4a through 2.4d, respectively. These overall trends indicate



that, at the crudest level (taking least into account individual trajectories) there is a general trend toward increases in independence<sup>2</sup> for emerging adults as a group.

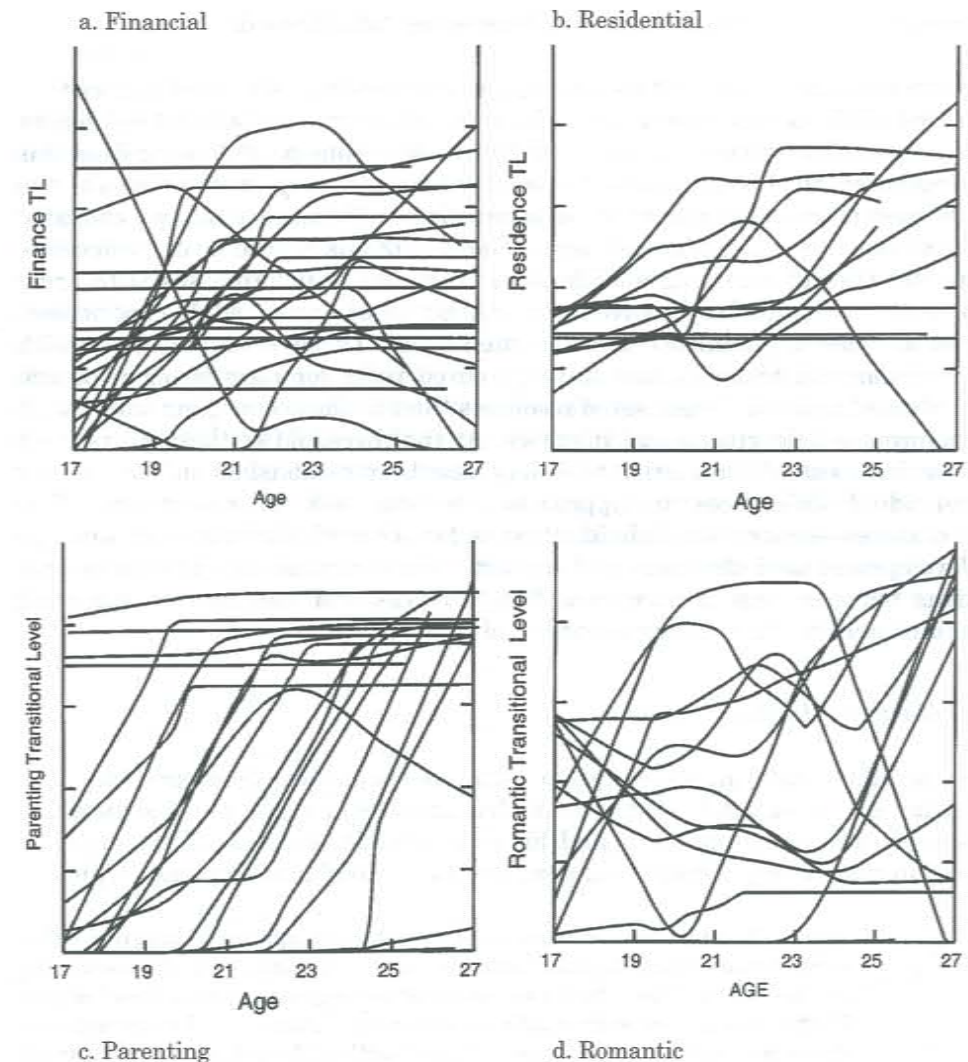
Beyond the group, or average, trajectories of emerging adult experiences, the complexity and heterogeneity that Arnett suggested is central to the emerging adult experience comes into focus from maps of individual trajectories of emerging adults' progress toward adult system commitments (Figures 2.5a–2.5d). As noted by Cohen et al. (2003), "despite the gradual increase in the extent to which the *average* [emerging adult] had assumed adult roles in these four domains, the actual progression of individuals was much more variable, moving back and forth between increasing and decreasing dependence" (p. 668). These data clearly support Arnett's proposition that emerging adulthood is a period of great variability. Replete with progression and regression, emerging adults make variable progress toward financial and residential independence and marriage and parenthood.

Although progress toward adult independence and roles is highly differential within the population of emerging adults, census data (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000) indicate that by age 30 the majority of the emerging adult population has made transitions to marriage and parenthood. These transitions to adult roles, in turn, affect individuals' senses of reaching adulthood (Arnett, 1998, 2001; Greene, Wheatley, & Aldava, 1992). As indicated by Arnett's work (2000), by the late 20s and early 30s only a small percentage of respondents do not see themselves as adults and approximately one third report "both yes and no."

These data tell a story of increasing independence during emerging adulthood and emphasize the variance in individual pathways that emerging adults take moving into adulthood. Altogether, this empirical work validates emerging adulthood as a critical turning point in the human life span. Review of these findings reveals that the emerging adult years are marked by gradual, linear gains in independence toward control over one's life and a gradual shift away from childlike dependence in terms of educational and occupational events and changes with families and relationships. Review also reveals great variability in recentering.

But why such variation? Taking a life span developmental systems perspective supports the investigation of this question by the consideration of the factors that influence the development of the individual prior to emerging

<sup>2</sup>Cohen et al. (2003) provided additional analysis of the breakdown in trajectories of independence by sex and by socioeconomic status. Although not germane to this chapter it is worth noting several broad findings of interest: (a) young women showed earlier residential independence associated with earlier financial independence, but young women never ascended to the same level of financial independence as men because support from partners became a substantial contributor to their financial independence; (b) there were no differences in residential independence between low and high SES groups although the two groups may have achieved independence differently; that is, higher SES emerging adults move out of the home sooner, but to semi-independent statuses (i.e., college) and lower SES emerging adults move out later, but also to semi-independence through financial contributions to the household; and (c) higher SES emerging adults were significantly slower to take on marriage and parent roles.



**Figure 2.5.** Individual trajectories of financial (a), residential (b), parenting (c), and romantic (d) domains. From "Variations in Patterns of Developmental Transitions in the Emerging Adulthood Period," by P. Cohen, S. Kasen, H. Chen, C. Hartmark, and K. Gordon, 2003, *Developmental Psychology*, 39, pp. 665–666. Copyright 2003 by the American Psychological Association.

adulthood. Going back to the hypothesis that the process underlying the transition to adulthood is recentering, the following section reviews research that explores variation in emerging adult development from two sources, family (i.e., separation-individuation) and individual (i.e., ego development) characteristics. The chapter now turns to a discussion of how the recentering process relates to separation-individuation and ego development.



### Variation in Emerging Adulthood

Central to the thesis of this chapter, that emerging adulthood is a critical period of life span development, is the notion that emerging adult development builds on all previous and affects all future development. Following from this proposition, in this section of the chapter I tie the recentering process to the life span processes of parent-child separation-individuation and psychosocial development (i.e., ego development). The goal of linking the primary developmental task of emerging adulthood to these life span processes is to bring attention to two likely sources of variation in emerging adult experiences. Not all emerging adulthoods are created equal. Those emerging adults with developmental histories that have prepared them for recentering approach adulthood with a different set of resources than do those emerging adults with compromised developmental histories. At the threshold of these years, past experiences of self in relation to society have been established and account for individual differences in approaches to the task of recentering. Two literatures—separation-individuation (a family-level characteristic) and ego development (an individual-level characteristic)—provide insight into associations between past developmental experiences and variation in emerging adults' abilities to recenter toward adult sufficiency.

#### *Separation-Individuation*

As noted, recentering takes center stage as the critical developmental task during emerging adulthood, a task that involves a relational restructuring between the emerging adult and his or her family-of-origin. The concept of recentering closely resembles the separation-individuation process, which

minimally involves a renegotiation of relationships with caregivers. The press toward individuation requires the young adult to shed parental dependencies, yet this should not come at the expense of close familial ties. Rather, the goal of individuation is relational autonomy, whereby independence and self-governance are affirmed within the content of continuous, mutually validating relationships. (from Josselson, 1988, as quoted in Lapsley & Edgerton, 2002, p. 485)

The difference is that the process of recentering is embedded in a developmental systems framework, to highlight the relational, the give and take, between the emerging adult and his or her contexts.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>The difference between the concepts is that recentering maintains that the process is relational. A measure of recentering is, by definition, relational and a systems-level variable that describes the extent to which an emerging adult is embedded within the family-of-origin and how established new system commitments are. Recentering takes into account relations both to one's past systems (i.e., parents, school) and to one's future systems (i.e., work, partners, children). Separation-individuation, in contrast, is generally considered an individual-level variable that describes a level of differentiation of self from family.

Findings from a longitudinal study of associations between parent support for and adolescent progress toward separation-individuation reveal that healthy separation-individuation predicts adjustment and the ability to gain adult-sufficiency in emerging adulthood. O'Connor, Allen, Bell, and Hauser (1996) found that adolescents who had difficulty establishing relations with parents characterized by balanced separation and individuation (at age 16; note that the authors refer to this process as autonomous-relatedness) reported very close contact (e.g., not characteristic of healthy emerging adult individuation) with their parents as young adults and lower relationship satisfaction with fathers (at age 25). In the same study, separation-individuation (at age 14) was associated with educational attainment and occupational prestige during emerging adulthood (Bell, Allen, Hauser, & O'Connor, 1996). And again, data from the same longitudinal study revealed that having a secure attachment style, associated with the ability to establish healthy and well-functioning intimate relationships during emerging adulthood (age 25), was associated with progress toward separation-individuation during adolescence (age 14; Allen & Hauser, 1996). Separation-individuation seems to predict not only intimate relationships but also adjustment to marriage for emerging adults. These findings indicate that the separation-individuation process that begins in adolescence and is usually resolved as a task of emerging adulthood is highly predictive of variation in emerging adults' progress toward recentering and adult-sufficiency. Close relations with parents that border on enmeshment and a lack of educational and occupational resources clearly impede an emerging adult's ability to recenter and make progress toward the establishment of adult system commitments (i.e., intimate relationships). It can be extrapolated from this research that some emerging adults, those characterized by parents who support separation-individuation, look different from emerging adults with parents who do not support separation-individuation, which explains some of the variation in emerging adults' abilities to recenter and gain adult sufficiency.

The majority of studies that have investigated links between separation-individuation and adjustment during emerging adulthood have relied on college student samples. Given the limitation of reliance on this specialized group of emerging adults, the literature on separation-individuation of college students clearly illustrates the association between feeling individuated from one's family and feeling like an adult. Moore's (1987) research based on 391 college students' endorsement of the importance of 34 items in describing the extent to which they had separated and individuated from their parents revealed that Self-Governance was the factor most strongly associated with feeling that one had established a self separate from parents. Items that loaded onto the self-governance factor were Feeling Mature Enough, Feeling Like an Adult, Having To Do Things for Self Now, Being Independent, Making My Own Decisions, and Having To Take Care of Myself. In contrast, emotional detachment from parents (i.e., No Longer Being Attached to Family, Not Feeling Close to Family, Breaking Ties to Family, Feeling of not Belonging at Home Anymore, Feeling of Being a Visitor When at Home, Not Seeing Family Very Often) was least associated with feeling individuated from one's parents, underscoring the relational nature of the recentering process. Note



that relations with one's family-of-origin are maintained in the developmental process.

In another foundation study that linked separation-individuation to college student adjustment, Lapsley, Rice, and Shadid (1989) reported that separation-individuation from parents occurs along multiple dimensions,<sup>4</sup> that increases in separation-individuation occur from freshman to senior year of college (although not uniformly), and that there are sex differences in separation-individuation between mothers and fathers and daughters and sons. Drawing on a sample of undergraduate emerging adults, Perosa, Perosa, and Tam (2002) found that indices of emerging adults' sense of individuation from family were associated with 32% to 55% of the variance in identity development. Using the same measure (Personal Authority in the Family System Questionnaire; Bray, Williamson, & Malone, 1984), Fraser and Tucker (1997) found that individuation was associated with problem-solving abilities in college students and concluded that "highly individuated college students and students who are good problem solvers may share certain characteristics. Perhaps parents who allow their children to achieve optimal levels of individuation also promote a strong sense of responsibility, self-confidence, and optimism in their children that leads to their adeptness at problem-solving" (p. 466). In sum, findings from research with college students reveal that separation-individuation is associated with resources that will help emerging adults make strides toward adult-sufficiency.

Although the process of recentering is central to emerging adulthood, it is important to note that separation-individuation is a life span process that begins at birth (Mahler, 1975; Spitz, 1959). In addition, these early experiences bring about transformations in parent-child relationships through adolescence and emerging adulthood, and result in parent-adult child relationships defined more by mutuality than hierarchy (Hill & Holmbeck, 1986). As Stierlin (1974) noted, "we conceive of separation in adolescence as part of a continuous movement toward relative mutual individuation in which parents and children participate. The ultimate aim is mature interdependence of the parties" (p. 173). Stierlin's seminal contributions to the literature on the effects of parent interactions on adolescent and emerging adult development were predicated on the hypothesis that parents' constraining interactions (i.e., withholding, overindulgence) inhibit, whereas parents' enabling interactions (i.e., explaining, empathy) support maturation and by *maturation*, Stierlin was referring to ego development. Ego development is a life span developmental process, one that describes individuals' orientations toward autonomy and independence

<sup>4</sup>Hoffman (1984) published the Psychological Separation Inventory, a widely used measure of separation-individuation. The measure has been successfully used to demonstrate four dimensions of separation-individuation from parents: Functional Independence (the ability to manage and direct one's personal and practical affairs with minimal assistance from parents), Emotional Independence (freedom from excessive need for approval, closeness, and emotional support in relation to parents), Conflictual Independence (freedom from excessive guilt, anxiety, resentment, responsibility, and anger in relation to parents), and Attitudinal Independence (the image of oneself as unique from parents and having one's own set of beliefs, values, and attitudes); the subscales were differentially associated with adjustment (Moore, 1987).

that represents a second source of variation (an individual-level characteristic) in emerging adults' pathways and progress toward adult sufficiency.

### *Ego Development*

Ego development is a life span process that has roots at birth and is influenced by parenting behaviors during childhood (Dubow, Huesmann, & Eron, 1987; Kremen & Block, 1998) and adolescence (Hauser, Powers, Noam, Jacobson, Weiss, & Follansbee, 1984). Ego development is a master trait (Loevinger, 1976) that integrates previous interactions and guides future interactions between the individual and the environment. Second only in importance to intelligence in explaining human functioning, the theory of ego development integrates multiple perspectives of human development (i.e., Sullivan, Freud, & Piaget; see Hauser, 1993) and is proposed as an index of individuals' psychological mindedness (ability to understand self and world in psychological terms; i.e., "my work is part of my identity" vs. "I work to make money"), integration and synthesis of perceptions and cognitions, and agency or active mastery (Hauser, 1993).

Trends in ego development can be discerned in terms of increases in internalization of rules of social intercourse, cognitive complexity, tolerance of ambiguity, and objectivity. In addition, the individual's impulse control becomes progressively guided by self-chosen, long-term intentions, accompanied by an enhanced respect for individual autonomy and an interest in genuine mutuality. (Hauser, Borman, Jacobson, Powers, & Noam, 1991, p. 98)

The task of recentering requires the emerging adult to organize and self-regulate one's efforts toward the task of gaining adult sufficiency. Whereas progress toward the developmental tasks of childhood and adolescence (i.e., moral development and educational progress) is scaffolded by institutions (i.e., family, school), emerging adults are challenged to scaffold their own progress from adolescence to adulthood. Because of the importance of agency, active mastery, self-regulation, and impulse control as predictors of adult sufficiency, higher levels of ego development should be considered a core component in understanding differences between those who do well in emerging adulthood and those who flounder. In sum, ego development can be considered an underlying, life span developmental characteristic predictive of emerging adults' potentials to learn to stand alone.

Over the course of the individual life span, experiences are integrated and consolidated by ego development, which results in variation in individuals' senses of mastery over the environment and abilities to cope with and be flexible in relation to the environment. After adolescence, the emerging adult stands related to, but no longer nested within, the family-of-origin. As emerging adults recenter toward adult sufficiency, they stand at the beginning of emerging adulthood with all previous interactions and experiences between self and environment neatly organized in the ego (Bockneck & Perna, 1994, p. 30). It follows that higher levels of ego development should be associated with the ability to take on the task of recentering and adult sufficiency.



**Exhibit 2.1.** Emerging Adults' Autonomy Strivings as a Function of Ego Development

| Preconformist EAs   | Conformist EAs  | Postconformist EAs  |
|---|---|---|
| "the needy and volatile affect was striking. . . . These girls felt inadequate, insecure, and not in control of themselves or their lives. . . . Although they all had handled the academic challenges of high school, none seemed confident in her ability to function independently in college." (p. 328) | "felt that it was necessary to submerge their real thoughts and feelings [about going away to college] in order to maintain their attachment to their parents. . . . These adolescents were struggling to separate and individuate from their families, yet appeared caught in inner conflicts that mitigated against their autonomous development." (p. 335) | "felt eager to move on to the next phase of their lives . . . appeared to feel confident about their adequacy to function autonomously, while still recognizing their sadness about leaving home." (p. 341) |

Note. EA = emerging adult. Data from Lasser and Snarey (1989).

Linking life span ego development to emerging adult experiences contributes a frame for understanding variation in emerging adults' orientation toward autonomy and independence. Qualitative findings from Lasser and Snarey's (1989) study of female high school seniors' strivings for autonomy when making the transition to college revealed significant differences between emerging adults' pathways toward independence as a function of ego development. The authors compared three groups of emerging adults: those with immature (preconformist), moderate (conformist), and mature (postconformist) levels of ego development. It was expected that higher levels of ego development would be associated with healthier autonomy strivings and greater adaptation to the challenge of transition to college. Indeed, emerging adults with higher levels of ego development were more comfortable with the task of learning to stand alone, whereas emerging adults at lower levels of ego development were less comfortable. Exhibit 2.1 illustrates differences in emerging adults' orientations toward autonomy and ego development.

The quotations in Exhibit 2.1 clearly indicate differences in emerging adults' capacities for and orientations toward adult sufficiency. Those emerging adults less mature in terms of their ego development are much less prepared to take on the task of a large step toward independence, the transition to college. In contrast, those at more mature levels of ego development recognize the losses associated with the gains in independence that will come their way as a result of the transition. Furthermore, these findings link a developmental process, ego development, to the core task of emerging adulthood, recentering, highlighting the developmental strand that links earlier life experiences to emerging adult experiences. Ego development, therefore, that occurs prior to emerging adulthood has some predictive validity in determining emerging adults' initial orientations toward experiences of gaining adult sufficiency.

There is evidence to indicate that ego development is also predictive of the ability to apply skills and resources that support emerging adults' abilities to engage in exploratory commitments (i.e., relationship and friendships). In terms of emerging adults' interpersonal relations, Schultz and Selman (1998) found that, at age 23, higher levels of ego development were related to greater skill negotiating needs for autonomy and relatedness and balancing these relationship dimensions in close peer and intimate relationships. The authors noted that individuals at "lower stages of ego development have limited abilities to relate to others, with a progression to higher levels at which individuals have strengths that facilitate intimate, collaborative relationships . . ." (Schultz & Selman, 1998, p. 181). As well, Hennighausen, Hauser, Billings, Schultz, and Allen (2004) reported that those emerging adults who had reached higher levels of ego development during adolescence were rated as more flexible and less hostile by their peers and reported more complex and maturing interpersonal styles at age 25. In sum, those emerging adults with higher levels of ego development are better at developing the relational, temporary system commitments that allow emerging adults to explore their identities and possibilities.

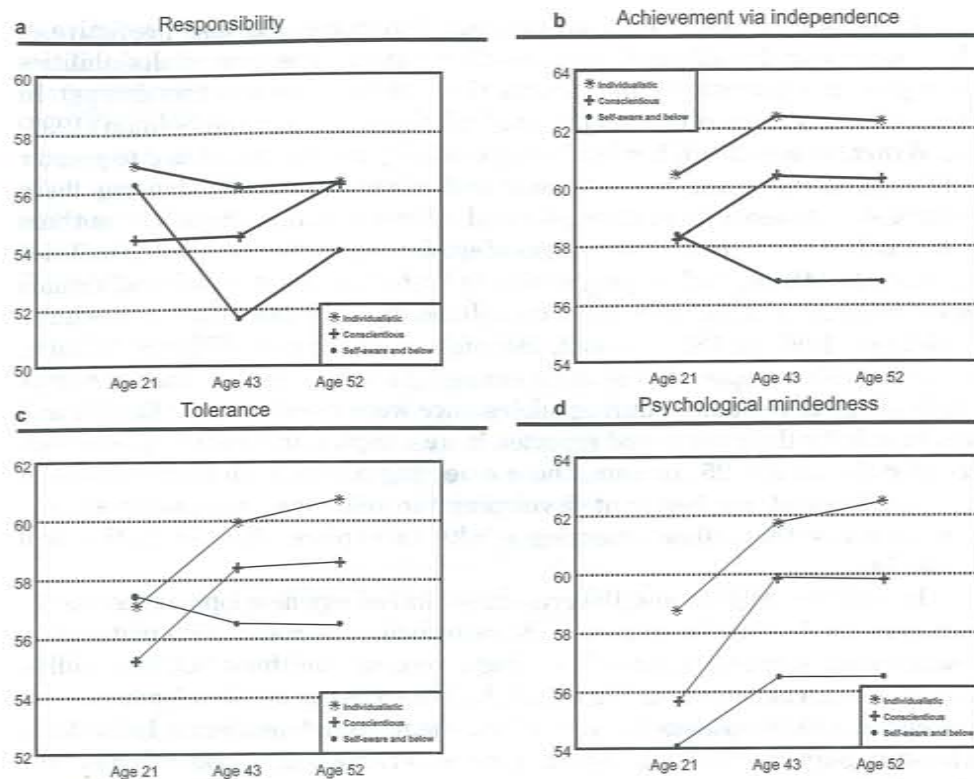
In addition, Helson and Roberts (1994) linked ego development at age 21 to higher levels of and increases in characteristics associated with maturation toward adult sufficiency not only during emerging adulthood but into midlife as well. As can be seen from Figure 2.6, higher scores on ego development were associated with Responsibility and Achievement via Independence. Individuals who score high on responsibility are more reasonable and responsible and take their duties more seriously than do those low on this measure. Those who score high on Achievement via Independence have stronger drives to do well and like to work in environments that encourage individual initiative than do those lower on this index. Both of these characteristics, associated with higher levels of ego development, have clear implications for success in meeting the tasks of emerging adulthood.

These studies underscore the significance of ego development during emerging adulthood and the impact that ego development has on critical features of emerging adulthood—educational and occupational achievement, interpersonal functioning, and personality characteristics associated with adult sufficiency. Research on associations between life span ego development and emerging adult resources and adjustment indicates that ego development prior to emerging adulthood predicts emerging adults' abilities to take on the tasks of this developmental period and meet them with success. The following section highlights the continuity of ego development during emerging adulthood and the important role that ego development plays in shaping success and adaptation through emerging adulthood into young adulthood.

### Ego Development and Life Goals

As emerging adults make strides toward adult sufficiency, the need to structure and guide their own life increases and the ability to do so motivates them to formulate life plans that guide them through emerging adulthood into young





**Figure 2.6.** Ego development from emerging adulthood to midlife. Panels a–d: Change shown by ego-level groups in responsibility, tolerance, achievement via independence, and psychological mindedness. Means are given in standard score form ( $M = 50$ ,  $SD = 10$ ), on the basis of norms from a representative sample of 2,000 men and women (Gough, 1987). From “Ego Development and Personality Change in Adulthood,” by R. Helson and B. W. Roberts, 1994, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 66, pp. 911–920. Copyright 1994 by the American Psychological Association.

adulthood. In light of the link between the tasks of emerging adulthood and life span development, the ego takes on a new task of emerging adulthood—laying out a life plan toward adult sufficiency:

At late adolescence, these [ego] processes lead to a delimitation of goals definable as life tasks; while at postadolescence, the implementation of these goals in terms of relationships, roles, milieu choices become the foremost concern. The ego . . . now becomes conspicuously and increasingly absorbed by these endeavors. (Blos, 1962, p. 151)

Arnett (2004) drew attention to the importance of the plan during emerging adulthood. It is during these years that emerging adults lay out life plans, or dreams, for their futures. Others, as well, have suggested that the formation of this life plan is critical to the postadolescent years. For example, Wittenberg

(1968) labeled this process the establishment of a *weltanschauung*, or a life philosophy that was used to guide individuals through adulthood. This same notion, that the landscape of emerging adulthood motivates individuals to formulate a life dream, is described in Daniel Levinson's stage theory of adult development.

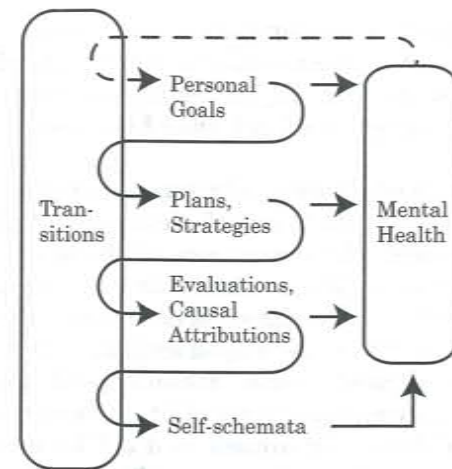
Levinson's (1978) original intent, which resulted in his well-known theory of adult development, was to study midlife development. However, interviews with midlife men revealed the importance of the emerging adult years in establishing adult pathways. He concluded that during the emerging adult years, which he called the novice phase, formation of a dream, “a vague sense of self-in-adult-world” (p. 91), is developed and that the task of the following years is “giving it [the dream] greater definition and finding ways to live it out” (p. 91). Although Levinson's (1996) adult study of women's development did not emphasize the dream for women as it did for men, Plunkett's (2001) analysis of women's career development postcollege emphasized the salience of women's inner scripts as guides across these critical years.

Nurmi (1993) proposed a systems perspective to describe how emerging adults formulate life plans by focusing on the construction of personal goals. Personal goals are defined as individuals' motivations for certain goals that will meet individuals' needs and have the potential to be actualized in regard to opportunities available (see Pulkkinen, Nurmi, & Kokko, 2002). Noting both personal agency and opportunity structure as defining influences, Nurmi (1993) suggested that emerging adults set goals that reflect the specific tasks (Havighurst, 1972) of the developmental period. Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, and Tellegen (2004) have since presented evidence that the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood include both salient (i.e., friendship, academic, and conduct) and emerging (i.e., occupational and romantic) developmental tasks.

During the emerging adult years, possibilities are explored and goals are established. Constructing a set of goals, activating the goals, evaluating goals and achievements, and reflecting on one's progress are the four stages of the self-definition process that is activated during life transitions (Nurmi, 1997). In turn, this model (Figure 2.7) suggests that individual's abilities to deal with the goal construction, actualization, and evaluation of one's life have implications for success and mental health during this developmental period. In sum, the extent to which emerging adults are able to establish life plans during emerging adulthood—that is, an emerging adult's ability to meet the developmental challenge to the ego for this developmental stage—should be associated with adjustment. Future research that explores associations between emerging adults plans for the future, agency in carrying out the plan, and adjustment will help to shed light on the salience of the plan during this developmental period.

In regard to the developmental systems framework, the notion of the individual-in-context arises when considering the developmental task that lies in front of emerging adults: to establish a plan that leads to adult sufficiency and to carry out this plan. The context that is most often associated with emerging adulthood is the college environment. Acknowledging that institutional contexts are established to support the developmental needs of age groups (i.e., nursery schools for preschool children, nursing homes for the





**Figure 2.7.** Nurmi's model of self-development and mental health. From *Health Risks and Developmental Transition During Adolescence* (p. 397), edited by J. Schulenberg, J. L. Maggs, and K. Hurrelmann, 1999, New York: Cambridge University Press. Copyright 1997 by Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission.

elderly), the college context, often considered a dominion of self-exploration, is most commonly associated with the emerging adult period. If some emerging adults are afforded the opportunity to attend college and some are not, and college is an environment that supports emerging adult development (i.e., exploration, identity, possibilities, establishing life plans), then exploration of the differences between emerging adults enrolled in college versus those who are not enrolled is a worthy avenue for exploring variation in emerging adult development.

### College as a Context of Emerging Adulthood

The questions that arise are as follows: In light of the variation in experience of emerging adults, do contextual opportunities available (e.g., cultural, historical) define whether an individual will have an emerging adulthood? Moreover, do contextual opportunities available define the length of an individual's emerging adulthood? Last, do opportunities available predict emerging adult adjustment?

Arnett's work suggests "in some respects yes, in some respects no." He acknowledged that education, both undergraduate and graduate training, supports exploration and delay of adult role commitments—key elements of emerging adulthood. However, Arnett also suggested that emerging adulthood is a concept useful for understanding the experiences of the "forgotten half"—those who do not attend college after high school (W. T. Grant Foundation, 1988)—as well as the experiences of postcollege young adults prior to an individual's

engagement in adult roles. Arnett's goal in presenting the theory of emerging adulthood is to bring scholarly attention to an age period that has previously been studied almost exclusively with college student samples, which suggests that there are universal developmental principles that bridge the college and noncollege populations during this age period. Are there?

Teasing apart the role of context in emerging adulthood from the characteristics of the age period is important. If the concept of emerging adulthood is inextricably linked to the college student experience, the concept of emerging adulthood adds little to the body of knowledge of development between ages 18 and 25 above and beyond that established in the college student development literature<sup>5</sup> (Chickering, 1969; see Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). However, if the concept of emerging adulthood can be disentangled from the college student experience, then how is the college experience, and education in general, associated with emerging adult development?

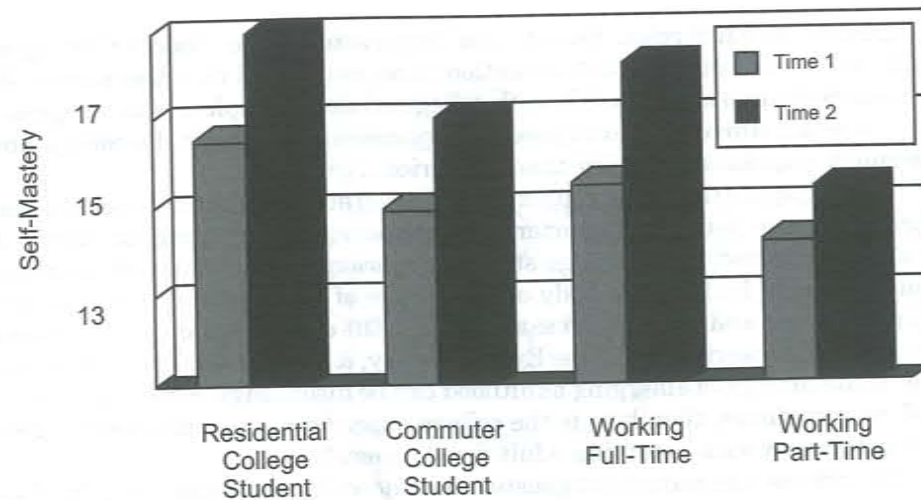
To address this important question, one needs to distinguish the developmental features of this period from the contexts of emerging adulthood, highlighting the variation in development that can occur as a function of emerging adults' involvements with different (college vs. noncollege) contexts. Research that offers comparisons of developmental outcomes between college and noncollege emerging adults should offer insight. One study by Klerman and Karoly (1994) reported findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY) of emerging adult men comparing the two groups. Drawing on a subsample of males who participated in the NLSY, males who entered the labor market before high school graduation were compared with males who entered the labor market after high school graduation and after completion of college in regard to their occupational stability. Results revealed that, regardless of highest level of education completed (i.e., high school dropout, high school graduate, some college, college graduate), all emerging adults experienced a period of "milling about" and multiple job transitions after educational completion. It is interesting to note that those emerging adults with the least education experienced the greatest number of job transitions. This finding suggests that one population feature of emerging adulthood as proposed by Arnett (2000)—instability in terms of occupational transitions—holds true for both college-student and noncollege-student emerging adults.

A second finding from this same study further indicates that educational attainment has an impact on the age of instability in that it seems to curtail the exploration associated with emerging adulthood. Klerman and Karoly (1994) found that as soon as it was feasible (i.e., posteducational completion), those with the most education reported the highest job stability (i.e., length of time in same job). In some respects, those with the least education experienced the longest period of occupational instability; in other words, higher academic attainment was associated with accelerated commitments to careers.

Also offering comparisons between college-bound and non-college-bound emerging adults, Gore and colleagues (Gore, Aseltine, Colton, & Lin, 1997)

<sup>5</sup>For example, models of psychosocial (Chickering, 1969) and cognitive-structural (Perry, 1968) development have been advanced as theoretical frameworks for understanding college student development.





**Figure 2.8.** Self-mastery change post-high-school. From *Stress and Adversity Over the Life Course* (p. 206), edited by I. H. Gotlib and B. Wheaton, 1997, New York: Cambridge University Press. Copyright 1997 by Cambridge University Press. Adapted with permission.

investigated changes in sense of mastery from high school (Time 1) to 2 years post-high-school (Time 2). The authors used Sense of Mastery as the index of adaptation, interpreting emerging adults' perceptions of agency as a measure of competence. They investigated whether emerging adults' sense of mastery increased over time and whether or not it was associated with their post-high-school role commitments. The findings were interesting. As can be seen in Figure 2.8, there was a significant overall increase in self-mastery after high school graduation across groups. This finding is consistent with the earlier reviewed life events research that indicated increases in sense of control following adolescence. Second, these findings indicated that increases in self-mastery are significantly higher in the groups that made the transition to full-time college and those who made the transition to full-time work compared with part-time commuter students and part-time and unemployed groups. It can be inferred from this research that gains in self-mastery are optimized by contexts that afford full-time gains in self-governance.

In sum, the population features of emerging adulthood seem to hold true for both college-student and non-college-student emerging adults in terms of their progress toward increasing self-governance. Such findings indicate that taking on roles that support gains in self-sufficiency from parents—whether it is the geographical distance of college or the financial independence of a paycheck—promotes the primary developmental task of emerging adulthood. What is important about these studies, toward understanding variation in emerging adult experiences, is that, in contrast to sharing population features of emerging adulthood (i.e., instability, gains in control), college-bound and non-college-bound emerging adults, by definition, do not share contexts of emerging

adulthood. These studies support Arnett's claim that the population features of emerging adulthood cut across both college-student and non-college-student emerging adults. There is also evidence, however, that the context of college may impact pathways of emerging adult development. That is, whereas college and noncollege emerging adults may look alike in terms of the population features of the developmental period (e.g., feeling in-between, explorations), the different contexts in which they are involved during this developmental era may be associated with differences in their development and adjustment both during and following this age period.

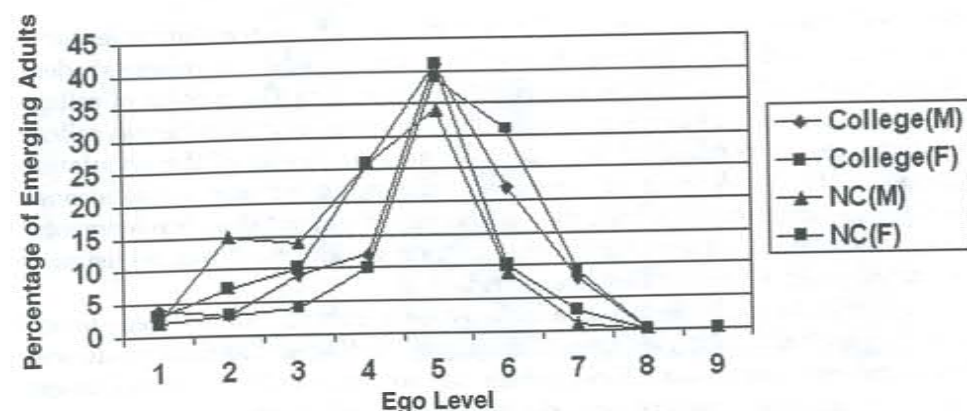
According to the literature available, several features of the college-bound trajectory are linked with features of emerging adulthood that do not hold true for non-college-bound youth. First, college has an indirect effect on development because educational involvement during these years delays system commitments. College and graduate student enrollment delays transitions to marriage (Gaughan, 2002; Thornton, Axinn, & Teachman, 1995) and parenthood (Marini, 1984; Wu & Macneill, 2002). Such delays in system commitments (i.e., marriage and parenthood) extend the period of emerging adulthood, protracting the period of exploration. In turn, some research suggests that delay of system commitments or exploration before commitment is associated with adjustment across adulthood.

In addition to the indirect effect of college—extending emerging adulthood—college also has a direct effect on development (Arnstein, 1980; see Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, for a review). College experience has been associated with ego development (Whitbourne & Tesch, 1985), identity development (Hood, Riahinejad, & White, 1986), moral development (Rest & Navarez, 1991), and cognitive development (Pascarella, Bohr, Nora, & Terenzini, 1995). Although more research needs to be conducted to flesh out preexisting differences in college-bound versus non-college-bound enrolled emerging adults that are sometimes attributed to differences between the two groups associated with college, college experience is positively and significantly related to increases in psychosocial development.

In his well known model of college student development, Chickering (1969) suggested that the college context supports development along seven vectors: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. It is interesting to note that these vectors of development map onto the master trait of ego development. If the theoretical proposition holds true, that differences between college- and non-college-educated adults will be reflected in developmental differences, this proposition should be supported by empirical findings. Indeed, Holt's (1980) empirical comparison of college and noncollege emerging adults (ages 16–25) revealed that the proportion of emerging adults rated at the higher levels of ego development were more likely to have attended college. As can be seen in Figure 2.9, emerging adults were more likely to be at higher levels of ego development if they had attended college.

This latter finding supports the hypothesis that college has a significant effect on emerging adult development. Consistent with the proposition that emerging adulthood is an extension of prior experience, inherent differences





**Figure 2.9.** Comparison of ego development between college and non-college emerging adults. Data adapted from "Loevinger's Measure of Ego Development: Reliability and National Norms for Male and Female Short Forms," by R. R. Holt, 1980, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39, pp. 909-920. Copyright 1980 by the American Psychological Association.

between college- and non-college-bound emerging adults exist prior to these years that, in turn, determine who does and does not attend college. In addition to adolescent-era characteristics that differentiate college-bound from non-college-bound individuals, there is evidence that these differences in trajectories of individuals who will and will not be exposed to the development-promoting effects of college during emerging adulthood are established in the earliest years of life. For example, Duncan and colleagues' work (see Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000), drawn from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, revealed that highest level of educational attainment was significantly predicted by family income—not family income during adolescence, but during the first 5 years of life—after controlling for a variety of other family factors. It is important to keep in mind that differences between emerging adults may be meaningful in terms of both concurrent and future adjustment, but in many cases, the roots of these differences are developmental and lie in the earliest years of life.

Teasing apart the context of college and emerging adult development is important because although the features of emerging adulthood may be the same for college- and non-college-enrolled emerging adults, experiences and developmental trajectories may be different. Put forth as one hypothesis in this chapter, I argue here that beyond variation in emerging adults at the beginning of emerging adulthood (i.e., parent-child interactions, ego development, parent socioeconomic status [SES]), differences in contexts of emerging adulthood (i.e., college vs. no college) increase the spread, or variability, in emerging adult differences already visible before emerging adulthood. Individual differences in preparedness for the tasks of emerging adulthood may explain some variation in the pathways that emerging adults take from adolescence

to adulthood toward adult sufficiency. Simply put, some emerging adults have more resources (i.e., developmental, financial) that help them to recentre than do others. These same resources (i.e., autonomy, identity, self-esteem, family SES), in turn, influence whether development is supported by an emerging adult's context. Together, differences in starting points before emerging adulthood as well as experiences during emerging adulthood interact to increase the spread between those who go into emerging adulthood more or less advantaged. In sum, it is possible that early factors can predict who becomes forgotten during emerging adulthood and that contexts of emerging adulthood that do not continue to promote development further divides emerging adult populations. Research that tests this spread hypothesis will help indicate whether support for emerging adult development and adjustment should be aimed at adolescents (or even children) or whether interventions with emerging adults are the most fruitful for helping them achieve their potentials.

Taking the perspective that the forgotten half may be left behind long before emerging adulthood has implications for how we, as professionals, think about shaping lives and fostering development during these years. The W. T. Grant Foundation (1988) has urged researchers to think about the challenges that the forgotten half face during the transition to adulthood. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2004) recently drew attention to specific non-college-bound groups (i.e., teens in foster care, youth involved in the juvenile justice system, teen parents, and high school dropouts) who are especially vulnerable because they are disconnected from institutions that foster development and adjustment during the transition to adulthood. The spirit of working toward a greater understanding of emerging adult development emphasizes the significance of supporting the potential of all emerging adults, rather than a restricted focus on college student development and adjustment. Keeping with the goals of developmental science, I consider in the following section whether elucidating how the college environment meets the needs of emerging adults might lead to an understanding of ways that development can be supported, even optimized, during this period.

### Modifying and Optimizing Emerging Adult Development

Because emerging adulthood is a critical turning point in human development, the extent to which these years coincide with development before taking on system commitments has implications for life span development. In short, emerging adulthood may further accentuate the differences between college-bound youth and the forgotten half. Emphasizing the association between emerging adulthood as a developmental stage and college as a context of emerging adulthood furthers an understanding of how the college environment, for example, is a modifier of emerging adult development rather than a defining feature of this period.

From this perspective, college is one ecological niche available to individuals who have the resources to delay entry into adult roles, rather than a niche that defines emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is the age of feeling in-between, instability, identity explorations, self-focus, and possibilities (Arnett,



2004). In addition, the college environment has the potential, for some, to facilitate explorations, soul-searching, and optimism about one's potential to change the world. College has this effect on emerging adults, it is widely believed, because it is in this supportive context that emerging adults are exposed to people, ideas, and experiences that challenge their expectations and worldviews. Much like the formula for healthy parenting, effective teaching, successful management, and coaching, the college environment has the potential to buttress emerging adult development by simultaneously providing support and challenge, which results in more advanced identity and ego development. Although the existence of college environments that combine support and challenge may not characterize the college experience for all (or even most) students, it is important to observe that that these are the elements of a successful college experience, one that promotes optimal development during these years.

If this formula supports emerging adult development, can these factors converge in noncollege contexts? Yes. According to the mentoring literature (e.g., Parks, 2000), one special relationship can define an emerging adult's trajectory toward success (Handel, 1990). Levinson (1978) underscored the significance of men establishing a mentor relationship during the emerging adult years, with mentors who would champion their careers and support them in the challenging climb up the corporate ladder. Referring back to Klernman and Karoly's (1994) work, non-college-bound emerging adults' exposure to multiple jobs should increase their opportunities for gaining a mentor, one who helps the individual and guides the individual toward adult stability. In one potential solution to a lack of scaffolding for noncollege adults, the forgotten half may benefit the most from an institutional and cultural shift that encourages and rewards adults for mentoring emerging adults. Although currently society is not structured to mentor emerging adults into young adulthood, the college student development model combined with meaningful interactions with mentors is one potential model for supporting development of both college- and non-college-enrolled emerging adults. Understanding that emerging adulthood is a developmental period during which individuals benefit from exploring themselves and possibilities in love and work before they make commitments implies that resources should be established (e.g., public policies, workplace initiatives, counseling opportunities) to encourage the developmental and adjustment of all emerging adults. In this critical turning point in the life span, the years during which adult pathways are established, all emerging adults should be encouraged to develop a plan and accrue resources that will help them to carry out their plan toward adult self-sufficiency.

### **Conclusion: Emerging Adulthood as a Critical Turning Point in the Human Life Span**

The first steps of adulthood are taken during the emerging adult years. According to life events research, these first steps significantly affect pathways of adulthood, leaving indelible marks on individuals' memories from these critical years. In light of the significance of this era on life span development, it is

important to understand how development occurs during this age period and the influences that support both emerging adult and life span adjustment.

To elucidate the developmental processes that come into play during this critical era of development, I have made the overarching goal of this chapter to link population features of emerging adulthood to theoretical and empirical notions of the ways that emerging adults change between adolescence and emerging adulthood. The key idea presented is that recentering is the process that defines individual change during emerging adulthood and that life span processes underlie individual variation.

The significant feature of this critical turning point is the changing nature of the relationship between the individual and society. Prior to emerging adulthood, the individual is dependent on and regulated by parents, teachers, and the laws of society. During emerging adulthood, the individual accrues experience and prepares for self-governance with variable amounts of support still available from parents (i.e., financial gifts) and institutions (i.e., college). As resources from parents decline and the emerging adult ages out of institutions that structure the development and goals of emerging adults (this can be high school or college), there is a push and a pull for emerging adults to make commitments to systems that afford them a way to support themselves. Indeed, this absence of control (i.e., parental) and presence of strain (i.e., need to financially support oneself) has been associated with commitments to adult roles (Hagan & Wheaton, 1993). Thus, the earlier that support for development ends, the shorter the emerging adult period and the earlier young adulthood begins. In turn, the amount and quality of exploration, linked to development during emerging adulthood, has implications for development and adjustment across the adult years.

By establishing the task of recentering as the primary developmental task of emerging adulthood, we, in the field, can begin to focus on forces that shape and influence emerging adults' success and adaptation. Future research should elucidate early precursors to healthy emerging adult development and adjustment—that is, the characteristics and experiences of childhood and adolescence that are most related to healthy emerging adult development. Although this chapter has linked family individuation and ego development to emerging adult adjustment, a good deal remains to be learned about the influence of cognitive, social, interpersonal, physical, moral, spiritual, and self-development during childhood and adolescence on emerging adult experience.

Over a decade ago, Nurmi (1993) reviewed Greene and colleagues' (1992) research on adolescents' perceptions of adult status and observed that "no research has so far been carried out on the extent to which these beliefs [about adult status] influence how young people set personal goals, plan their future lives, and evaluate pertinent goal attainment" (pp. 179–180). This gap remains; very little is known about pathways through emerging adulthood—how individuals get from adolescence to young adulthood. The three-stage process of recentering offers a framework for understanding how individuals make the transition into emerging adulthood, experience the developmental period of emerging adulthood, and transition from emerging adulthood into young and later adulthood. Research that focuses on the plans that adolescents make for themselves, revise in emerging adulthood, and carry out in young adulthood should



provide insight into more and less adaptive pathways through this critical age period.

Taking a life span perspective on emerging adulthood reveals many frontiers of research. For instance, Cohen et al.'s (2003) work on gains and variability in independence from ages 17 to 27 lend support to the proposition that the key developmental process of emerging adulthood is recentering—the reestablishment of self-in-adult-system, committed to social contexts that, in turn, support adult development and adjustment. What is not known is whether these gains in independence are the steepest between ages 18 and 25. For example, midlife and later life may represent steep increases in independence from commitments established during the emerging adult years (i.e., commitments to careers, intimate relationships, and adult children). To compare trajectories toward independence, one needs to rely on longitudinal data that can describe pathways into, across, and from emerging adulthood.

Also, because the concept of emerging adulthood has only recently been proposed, can it be assumed that the contemporary features of development between ages 18 and 25 are associated with the same pathways of life span adjustment that past cohorts experienced or future cohorts will experience? That is, what impact does an elongated emerging adulthood have on life span adjustment? One hypothesis is that greater exploration during the emerging adult years may lead to system commitments characterized by better fit than were system commitments made during the early 20s. However, the opposite may be true. Perhaps delayed commitments to marriage and parenthood represent risk factors for poor mental health. Because previous research suggests that marriage promotes stability, which, in turn, fosters mental health (Horwitz, Raskin-White, & Howell-White, 1996), delayed marriage may postpone the protective nature of a committed relationship. Given the contemporary landscape of the years between ages 18 and 25, the association between exploration and commitment has the potential to be further complicated. For example, delayed commitments to marriage ultimately are tied to a greater number of partners, greater personal identity development, and a longer time to establish habits and preferences that are unique to the individual—all experiences that may lead to difficulties compromising and prioritizing others over self, key components of healthy marriages and partnerships. Because delay of transitions to adult roles may have been different for past versus contemporary generations, it will be important to examine how emerging adult experiences prior to system commitments affect adjustment during young adulthood.

Past research has been skewed toward understanding the development and adjustment of college students. Parsing apart the context of college from emerging adult development leads one to look at the viability of models designed to support college student development and adjustment and to ask whether these same models can be used to support the development of non-college-bound adults. Or do alternative models need to be developed to support the recentering of this latter group? Arnett's contribution of the concept of emerging adulthood supports such investigations and progress to be made in the direction of understanding the complex intersection between emerging adults and their contexts, and cultural and subcultural variations.

In sum, I have argued that emerging adulthood is a unique period of life span human development. Variations in emerging adults' abilities to recenter, to learn to stand alone, have been linked to the process of life span ego development. In turn, the roots of emerging adulthood have been exposed, as they are planted in early family experiences. Moreover, I have argued that the lack of ecological constraints frees up an emerging adult to explore possibilities and spend time focusing on self-development and that, in contrast, system commitments to adult roles and relationships change the association between age and development at this critical turning point.

In light of the critical nature of these years, it is striking that more empirical work has not focused on these pivotal years. Arnett's contribution has opened a dialogue about the complexity and salience of the third decade of life, the launching pad of adulthood. I have sought, in this chapter, to make a strong case for emerging adulthood as a unique stage of development, one that poses a specific task to the ego—to gain self-governance. It is my hope that this work can bring to light the importance of interactions with emerging adults and lead the field to consider ways to scaffold their development and facilitate the understanding of the importance of this period, when adult pathways begin.

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