

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, PhD — Developmental Psychologist

THE IN-BETWEEN PHASE

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, PhD, has dedicated his career to understanding how people change and grow across the lifespan. He explains his passion as a drive to understand how young people perceive and engage their world, especially as they evolve from children into adults and take on additional responsibilities.

For nearly 20 years, Arnett has been studying what he terms “emerging adulthood” — the transition from adolescence to adulthood among 18- to 29-year-olds. When he began his work in 1995, little psychological data on this in-between period of life existed. Since then, it has grown into an entire field of study.

“At first, I was interested in exploring what it means to be an adult,” says Arnett, a research professor at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. He began his research by interviewing 300 young people in cities nationwide over five years, asking them questions about what they wanted out of life.

“Because this was new, I felt my research method should be open-ended and qualitative. I didn’t want to go in with a set of assumptions that could be wrong,” he says. “I learned a lot about young people’s criteria for adulthood and that led to questions about all the other aspects of their lives.”

DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS, SIMILAR EXPERIENCES

Despite the differences in the subjects’ social background and economic status, the similarities in the responses Arnett received were remarkable. Young people seemed to define their life experiences as being “in between” — they were separating themselves from their adolescent experiences and starting to feel independence, while still being closely tied to their parents and other family members — and not feeling entirely adult.

This demographic, which Arnett defines as emerging adults, shares five key characteristics:

- 1) Exploration of identity;
- 2) Instability in love, work and residence;
- 3) Self-focus (without constraints of marriage, children and a career);
- 4) A feeling of being “in between;” and
- 5) A sense of possibilities.

“Emerging adults have to decide what they want to do, where they want to live and who they want to be with, and they are trying to make these decisions before their choices are limited by the constraints of marriage, children and a career,” says Arnett.

A NEW FIELD OF STUDY

Arnett’s research about emerging adulthood has sparked a great deal of interest among the media and in the field of psychology. As a result, an entirely new field of study has grown out of his research. Arnett founded the Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood, which has more than 400 members, and has published several books on the subject. In his most recent research he has directed two national surveys, one on 18- to 29-year-olds and one on their parents.

“Many people respond [to this work] because they see the same things I explore in my research in their personal lives or in people they know,” says Arnett. “Emerging adulthood is a time of life when a lot of important turning points are reached, so it’s endlessly dramatic and fascinating.”



“I want to understand how young people become adults, including changes in their relations with parents, the transition to stable work, their search for a life partner and their hopes for the future.”

DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

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