Emerging Adulthood: A College Student, Middle Class Perk?

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ABSTRACT. Arnett (2000) postulated that, in industrialized nations, many people between 18 and 29 experience the stage of emerging adulthood (EA). Researchers including Arnett have suggested that EA might be limited to individuals of certain education and income levels. We investigated how income and education influence EA traits. Participants completed the Inventory of the Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA) to measure the extent to which they exhibited EA traits. The IDEA and demographic survey were distributed through our university's general psychology subject pool and social media. Results from the study indicated that participants with more education exhibited more EA traits, $F(6, 346) = 6.94$, $p < .001$, partial $R^2 = .11$. Furthermore, there was a significant interaction between family and/or personal income and EA traits, $F(42, 303) = 2.03$, $p = .006$, partial $R^2 = .11$. Participants who reported lower personal incomes expressed more EA traits. Likewise, participants who grew up in families that earned around $75,000 exhibited more EA traits compared to families with lower or higher income levels. The results suggested that emerging adulthood is experienced by individuals with more education and a middle class financial background.

Although Erik Erikson's eight life stages have become universally accepted, Arnett (2000, 2004) proposed a new stage in personal development referred to as emerging adulthood. This stage occurs after adolescence but before adulthood, thus describing people between ages 18 and 29. Arnett postulated this stage because he noticed that the onset of certain major life events such as marriage, parenthood, and the establishment of permanent careers occurred at a later age than before in industrialized societies (Arnett, 2000, 2004, 2006). Additionally, more people enroll in postsecondary education after high school (Arnett, 2000, 2006). Arnett stated that the number of Americans continuing education after high school has increased exponentially since the 1940s, from 14% to over 60% by the 1990s (Arnett, 2000; Arnett & Tabor, 1994). This delayed entry into the real world led Arnett to characterize emerging adulthood as a period of five distinct traits: possibilities, instability, exploration, self-focus, and feeling in-between (Arnett & Tabor, 1994; Reifman, Colwell, & Arnett, 2007).

However, some researchers (Hendry & Kloep, 2010; Marcotte, 2012) have questioned the universality of emerging adulthood, arguing that this developmental period is merely the consequence of a change in cultural norms and expectations for young adults rather than a valid developmental stage. Arnett's research (2000) included participants of various socioeconomic statuses, education levels, and cultures. Therefore, he maintained that emerging adulthood is a universally experienced stage that is applicable to all people regardless of education level, socioeconomic status, and culture. The results of the current study expanded on this debate by investigating whether emerging adulthood is dependent upon various factors including education and income level.

The Forgotten Half

Most of the previous research regarding emerging adulthood has focused predominantly on college students, most of whom are from the upper or

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middle class. As a result, individuals who did not attend college or those who come from lower income families have often been referred to as *the forgotten half* (Hendry & Kloep, 2010; William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship, 1988). People may fall into the forgotten half because they either opt out of or are financially unable to attend college. College serves as the means by which researchers gain access to their participants. Therefore, those who do not attend college are relatively inaccessible to researchers (Arnett, 2000).

Members of the forgotten half may not attend college for various reasons. They may enter the workforce immediately following high school, enlist in the military, or become pregnant at a young age and choose not to enter college. Also, members of the forgotten half may not attend college because they do not have the financial means to do so. For traditionally aged students, college provides the time to explore personal identity by delaying entry into the "real" world and allowing time to search for the ideal major of study. Higher education allows for instability and self-focus, and the forgotten half individuals may feel more of an urgency to commit to a career and life path without college.

Higher socioeconomic status affords more opportunities to explore interests, lifestyles, identities, residencies, and career paths, rather than committing to any specific options. Being financially secure permits individuals to focus on their own needs and long-term goals. Therefore, it is reasonable to assert that a higher socioeconomic status predisposes an individual to manifest the five traits associated with emerging adulthood.

To explore certain life factors and circumstances associated with emerging adulthood, we investigated the effects between education level and family and personal income on emerging adulthood. Our first hypothesis was that participants with higher levels of education would express more emerging adulthood traits. Our second hypothesis was that participants with higher socioeconomic status, determined by either their family or their personal incomes, would exhibit more emerging adulthood traits.

Method

Participants

A total of 362 people participated. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 29 (M = 21.86, SD = 2.63). Of the total number of participants, 29.8% were men and 70.2% were women. Most of the participants were European American and had either some college education or a bachelor's degree. Few participants (n = 23) indicated they had no college education and comprised the forgotten half population in the present study. Participants reported each parent's level of education along with their family and personal income. A small proportion of participants (n = 22) indicated coming from families making about $25,000 or less. Nearly half (41.8%) of the participants identified themselves as financially independent from their parents. Of those participants, most made around $25,000 or around $50,000 (see Table 1).

Measures

Emerging adulthood traits. We used a modified version of Arnett's (2007) Inventory of the Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA) to address the extent to which participants exhibited traits of emerging adulthood (Reifman et al., 2007). The scale has strong internal reliability, with a Cronbach's α of .85. This measure included 31 questions with possible responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Arnett's original measure included a 4-point Likert-type scale. However, the current study extended the response range to reflect the subtle variation in responses that would not have been captured in a 4-point scale, adding 2 (*disagree*) and 5 (*agree*) to the possible response options. Despite expanding the range of response options for this measure, the scale maintained strong internal reliability with a Cronbach's α of .88. Scores were summed, and a higher score on the IDEA indicated greater identification with emerging adulthood traits. A sample item from the survey asks, "Is this period of your life a time of personal freedom?"

Income. Due to the proposed role of socioeconomic status in the experience of emerging adulthood traits, for the purposes of the present study, we chose to examine both participants' combined annual family income levels and their annual personal income levels. We distinguished among the various income levels by dividing them into eight possible income categories, which we used to simplify the discussion of our results. In the present study, participants reported the combined annual amount made by the family in which the participant was raised as well as the annual amount made by the participant individually, if applicable. All of the reported figures were estimations based on the income categories provided, using Thompson and Hickey's (2005) personal

income chart as the guiding framework. There were seven levels of income responses for the family income variable, which were categorized as: (a) less than $10,000, (b) around $25,000, (c) around $50,000, (d) around $75,000, (e) around $100,000, (f) around $125,000, (g) and $200,000 or more. The same categories of income responses were used for the personal income variable, with an eighth option for *Not financially independent*. We believed that both the socioeconomic class in which participants were raised in addition to their current socioeconomic standing would impact their responses. Thus, both were taken into consideration. If participants indicated they had an annual personal income, their responses were used in both the family income and personal income categories. However, if participants indicated that they did not earn a personal income, their responses were only used in the family income category.

TABLE 1

Participant Demographic Distribution Among Race/Ethnicity, Education Level, Family Income Level, and Personal income Level (*N* = 362)

Demographic	%
Race/Ethnicity	
European American	84.3
Asian/Pacific Islander	4.4
Hispanic	4.4
African American	2.2
Arab/Middle Eastern	1.4
Other	3.3
Education Level	
Some high school	1.7
High school diploma or equivalent	4.7
Some college	34.8
Associate's degree or equivalent	5.2
Bachelor's degree	43.9
Master's degree	7.7
Doctoral degree	1.9
Family Income	
Less than $10,000	0.6
Around $25,000	5.5
Around $50,000	15.7
Around $75,000	20.2
Around $100,000	22.4
Around $125,000	16.6
$200,000 or more	18.5
Personal income	
Less than $10,000	5.8
Around $25,000	15.2
Around $50,000	13.8
Around $75,000	1.4
Around $100,000	1.1
Around $125,000	0.3
$200,000 or more	0.3

Demographics. Participants completed a measure in which they reported age, sex, racial and ethnic background, education level, parents' education level, combined annual family income level, and annual personal income level, if applicable.

Procedure

After institutional review board approval (2012-024) was given, we recruited participants using our university's general psychology subject pool and social media including Facebook® and Twitter®. We posted a link to the survey on our personal social media websites and encouraged friends to share the link in order to recruit participants. Participants from the subject pool took the survey online using provided computers. Each student from the subject pool was compensated with credit toward completing the general psychology course at a relatively small co-ed liberal arts university of about 4,000 undergraduate students. Participants recruited through social media were provided with a hyperlink that enabled them to take the survey from their own computer. Participants who accessed the survey through social media websites were not compensated in any way. Participants first read and accepted the terms of the informed consent, and then completed the IDEA followed by the demographic questionnaire to avoid priming. The order in which the measures were given was not randomized.

Results

The goal of the present study was to determine if education level and family and/or personal income mitigated expression of emerging adulthood traits. Therefore, a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine the effect of education level on participants' IDEA scores. After removing three participants whose scores on the IDEA were outliers due to the fact that they selected the first response option for every item, the results showed a significant difference among IDEA scores,

$F(6, 346) = 6.94$, $p < .001$, partial $R^2 = .11$, power 100%. The effect size indicated that approximately 10.7% of the variance in emerging adulthood traits was due to participants' level of education. Next, we conducted Tukey Honest Significant Difference (HSD) post-hoc analyses (see Figure 1). Participants who achieved only some high school ($n = 6$) showed significantly fewer emerging adulthood traits than participants with some college ($n = 119$), an associate's degree or vocational certificate ($n = 19$), a bachelor's degree ($n = 157$), a master's degree ($n = 28$), and a doctoral degree ($n = 7$). Additionally, participants who achieved only a high school diploma or equivalent ($n = 17$) showed significantly fewer emerging adulthood traits than those who obtained only some college and those who had a bachelor's degree.

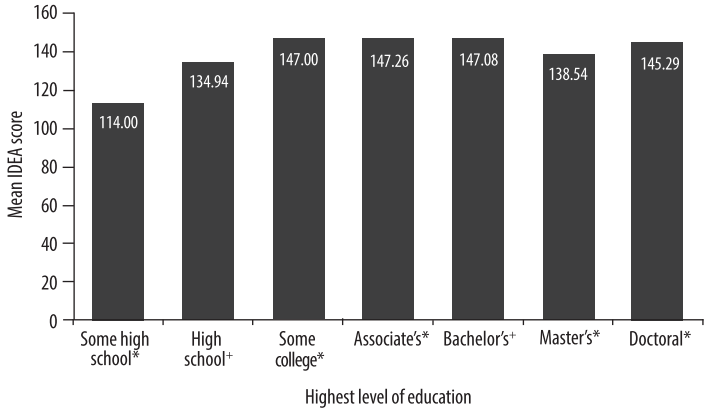
A 7 x 8 factorial ANOVA (family income: less than $10,000, around $25,000, around $50,000, around $75,000, around $100,000, around $125,000, $200,000 or more x personal income: less than $10,000, around $25,000, around $50,000, around $75,000, around $100,000, around $125,000, $200,000 or more, not financially independent) was conducted to determine the effect of family and/or personal income on IDEA scores. Results showed a significant interaction, $F(42, 306) = 2.03$, $p = .006$, partial $R^2 = .11$, power 98.7%. The effect size indicated that approximately 11.4% of the variance in emerging adulthood traits was due to participants' personal or family income. Tukey HSD post-hoc analyses revealed significant differences in IDEA scores based on personal incomes when family income was around $75,000 (see Figure 2). Specifically, participants whose personal incomes were less than $10,000 ($n = 4$) showed more emerging adulthood traits than those with personal incomes of around $25,000 ($n = 11$) and around $100,000 ($n = 1$). Moreover, participants whose personal incomes were around $25,000 displayed more emerging adulthood traits than those with personal incomes of around $100,000. Participants who indicated that they made around $50,000 ($n = 15$) exhibited more emerging adulthood traits than those who indicated that they made around $100,000. Lastly, participants who were not financially independent ($n = 42$) showed more emerging adulthood traits than those whose personal income was around $100,000.

Discussion

Our studies sought to discover some of the life factors that contributed to the expression of emerging adulthood because we postulated that the forgotten half does not experience this developmental stage (Hendry & Kloep, 2010; Marcotte, 2012). The results from our study supported our first hypothesis that participants who attended college showed more emerging adulthood traits than people who did not attend college. Contrary to our second hypothesis, we found that participants who were

FIGURE 1

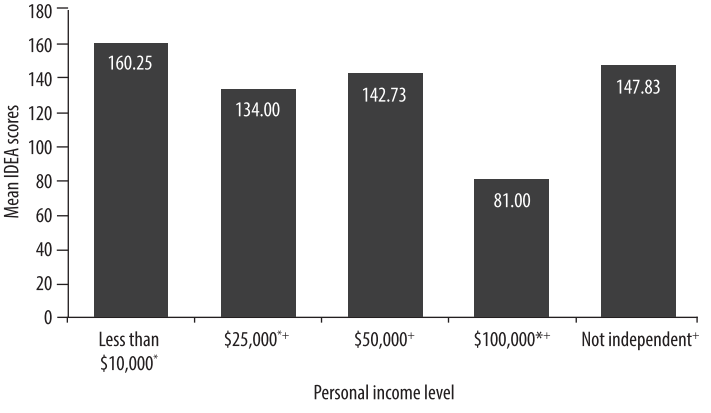
Mean Inventory of the Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA) Scores Based on Education Level



Note. The IDEA is from Arnett (Reifman, Colwell, & Arnett, 2007).
*Participants with some high school differed significantly from participants with some college, an associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees.
+Participants with only a high school degree differed significantly from participants with some college and those with a bachelor's degree.

FIGURE 2

Mean Inventory of the Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA) Scores for Family Income at $75,000 Based on Personal Income Levels



Note. The IDEA is from Arnett (Reifman, Colwell, & Arnett, 2007).
*Participants earning less than $10,000 showed significantly more emerging adulthood traits than those earning around $25,000.
+Participants earning around $100,000 showed significantly fewer emerging adulthood traits than all other personal income levels and those who were not independent.

of a lower personal income level expressed more emerging adulthood traits than those of a higher personal income level. However, participants who grew up in a family of middle income level, earning approximately $75,000 per year, were more likely to exhibit more emerging adulthood traits than those who grew up in families with either lower or higher income levels.

Higher education, specifically four-year colleges and beyond, emphasizes the importance of questioning, exploring, and experimenting. Therefore, it is logical that places of higher education instill a sense of emerging adulthood in their students. However, it was surprising to find that people who reported a lower personal income showed more emerging adulthood traits. This finding could have been a result of the unequal distribution of participants among personal income levels. People of a lower socioeconomic status often have fewer opportunities to attend college due to financial limitations and responsibilities (Levine & Levine, 2012). Nevertheless, the results from the present study suggested that financially independent individuals make less money because they are less established in their career. Therefore, they are still progressing through this developmental stage. However, these participants came from a family that earned about $75,000 per year, so one could speculate that they might have had more opportunities to attend college and explore. Families that fall within this income category are generally accepted as middle class (Thompson & Hickey, 2005), and the middle class may encourage values such as hard work, higher education, and the desire for "something better" for their children that particularly align with the emerging adulthood's ideals of possibilities, exploration, and self-focus. The middle class may epitomize the traditional American values of exploration and constant improvement (Middle Class American, n.d.). Families that earn around $25,000 or less per year may be constrained from fostering such notions out of necessity that adolescents work to contribute financially or the inability to fund higher education. On the other hand, families that earn around $100,000 or above may not find it necessary to obtain such education because they have more resources and job opportunities through networking to fall back on.

In accordance with our first hypothesis, those with a master's degree or above should have shown more emerging adulthood traits than those with a high school diploma. However, no significant differences were found. Participants who obtained above a master's degree only constituted a small proportion of our sample, which could have skewed the results. Furthermore, it is possible that these individuals generally exhibited fewer emerging adulthood traits than expected because the highly focused nature of their programs may not allow for a great deal of personal experimentation and exploration. At this point in their educational career, people might have already chosen a career path. Additionally, it is possible that age might have mitigated the expression of emerging adulthood traits in those with master's degrees or above because many people opt to take a break between undergraduate and graduate school to gain work experience or greater financial security. As a result, many people with a degree beyond that of a bachelor's may be older and more likely to have already progressed through this developmental stage.

It is also interesting to note that individuals who were raised in families earning approximately $50,000 per year did not significantly differ in their expression of emerging adulthood traits. For the purposes of the present study, these individuals were classified as middle class. However, due to financial constraints, they might not have had as many opportunities for personal exploration as those individuals whose families would be considered upper middle class, earning approximately $75,000 per year. Given inflation, a combined annual family income of $50,000 may not be sufficient to provide children with the opportunity and leisure to experience this developmental stage.

Our study was limited in that we did not assess participants' marital and parental statuses. Additionally, participants estimated their combined family income without consulting with their parents for accurate information. Likewise, the childhood familial situation was not included, so the effect of divorce, for example, was not taken into consideration. Our sample population was also fairly homogenous in racial and ethnic background, education level, and income level. The lack of variability among participants within the present study resulted in unequal representations among groups. Moreover, although we were studying the forgotten half, the current study was limited in that there was a small sample size of noncollege participants compared to college participants. Lastly, our study utilized social media sites to access participants. Therefore, the self-selection bias could have skewed the responses.

In the future, researchers could ameliorate the gaps in the present study by posing questions

related to participants' current life circumstances and their family history and dynamics, as well as obtaining more accurate reports of family income levels. More importantly, future studies should focus on achieving greater variability in the sample population, especially by sampling more members of the forgotten half. Emerging adulthood is a developmental stage that emphasizes values shared by individualistic cultures. Therefore, future researchers should look at a possible difference between urban and rural populations as well as less individualistic cultures (Arnett & Taber, 1994; Imamoğ lu & Karakitaploğ lu-Aygün, 2004).

Furthermore, future studies could examine the impact of technology on the expression of emerging adulthood. Technology can serve as an avenue to virtually experiment with different versions of the self, thereby creating an age of exploration and possibilities (Arnett, 2000). Access to technology varies broadly depending on the development of the nation. Therefore, a difference could exist in emerging adulthood expression between developed and developing countries. Studies that focus on the role of and access to technology in emerging adulthood could also shed greater light on within-nation differences, both cultural and socioeconomic, as they relate to this developmental stage.

It may be possible that individuals who do not attend college experience a type of emerging adulthood. However, the traits may manifest themselves differently. Additional studies that focus solely on the forgotten half would be advantageous to examine the differences in their developmental paths through young adulthood. Such alterations and expansions in future studies would allow for greater extrapolation of some of the life factors and traits associated with emerging adulthood.

Our findings lent support to the debate regarding the universality of Arnett's emerging adulthood (Hendry & Kloep, 2010), suggesting that it may not be a universally experienced developmental stage. More research must be done to explore the forgotten half and to determine if emerging adulthood is solely a college student, middle class perk. The present study and future research is important because it contributes to knowledge of human psychosocial development.

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