
‘Twenty something’: The social policy and practice implications of emerging adulthood

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Abstract

Emerging adulthood has been identified by Arnett (2000) as a new developmental stage that comprises 18-25 years. This period of the life span has characteristic and significant personal challenges, and it also contains New Zealand’s highest proportion of problem behaviours such as hazardous drinking, dangerous driving, loneliness and mental illness. Research on 18-25 year-olds who have overcome difficult upbringings can provide insights on how to respond to other young people whose development is compromised. As a society, it is recommended that we pay more attention to the particular circumstances of emerging adults and that we allocate more social service resources to the members of this age group who are experiencing difficulties.

Emerging adulthood, newly identified as a distinct phase of human development, must be an area of key interest for social policy analysts, social work practitioners and social service managers. This phase falls between the ages of 18 and 25 years and between adolescence and young adulthood. Like the categorisation of adolescence before it, emerging adulthood has come about as a consequence of economic progress and increased life expectancy, and it is a regular part of post-industrial societies such as our own (Arnett, 2004). On a simple and evidential level, this new division of the lifespan may explain why young people do not seem to settle down and marry like they used to. In fact, emerging adulthood is associated with an array of defining attributes and included here is a general sense of enhanced wellbeing for the young people themselves. This period is of particular relevance to human service professionals, nonetheless, because it also contains our highest proportion of troubled young people, and since it presents some unique opportunities for intervening in people’s lives in beneficial ways.

What is distinctive about emerging adulthood?

In a landmark paper in 2000 in the *American Psychologist*, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett distinguishes emerging adulthood as a recognisable developmental phase on the basis of its demographic characteristics, and in relation to the subjective feelings and identity explorations associated with the period. In terms of demography, the author cites living arrangements, and education and training, as indicative of the variability and instability of the stage. Young people, 18-25 years, live with parents, and in halls of residence, and they board, flat, cohabit, marry and

own their own homes. As well, they can alternate between these options fairly frequently and, as many parents know well, the family home is often a point of return. What emerging adults do during the day has a similar diversity and, with respect to education and training, it extends to part-time and full-time university, polytechnic, and wananga enrolments, and a myriad of apprenticeships, cadetships and other work-based schemes. Again, diversity and change combine, and even a university education is often pursued with false starts, restarts, and unexpected diversions and digressions (Arnett, 2000; Power, Edwards, Whitty, & Wigfall, 2003).

Emerging adults do not see themselves as either adolescents or adults but as occupying some sort of subjective in-between land, and studies have repeatedly shown that, for most people, it takes until they are almost 30 before they truly feel that they have reached adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Actually, many 18-25 year-olds are unsure that they want to be adults. Some view adult responsibilities as burdensome and annoying, some associate adulthood with personal stagnation, and some approach being adult with reluctance or even dread (Arnett, 2004). Nevertheless, emerging adults are generally optimistic people. They believe that they will do better in life than their parents, and this includes having happier marriages. Arnett comments that the dreams of the emerging adult are untested by reality and he repeats an observation by Aristotle about the young people of Ancient Greece: 'Their lives are lived principally in hope ... They have high aspirations; for they have never yet been humiliated by the experience of life, but are unacquainted with the limiting force of circumstances' (2004, p. 223).

We may be used to thinking of adolescence as the pivotal phase in the life span, and this may be because the teen years have traditionally been seen as the time when we discover ourselves and decide who we are. A contemporary view in human development studies, however, is that we confront identity decisions throughout our lives (Santrock, 2008). Furthermore, when adolescence and emerging adulthood are compared it is apparent that the self-explorations of the teen years give rise to more enduring developments in personal identity, whether in relationships, work or worldviews (Arnett, 2000). For instance, in adolescence, connections between males and females are usually tentative and transient. By contrast, love relationships among emerging adults are generally more intimate and serious, and understandings of self and others are more salient. Likewise, the part-time work that youths perform is primarily to obtain money whereas emerging adults actively try out vocational options. With respect to worldviews, 18-25 year-olds have more life experience on which to base new sets of personal beliefs and values.

Arnett (2006) summarises the features of emerging adulthood, and these attributes are largely the culmination of what has been discussed. The period that encompasses 18-25 year-olds is: (1) The age of identity explorations, when people have the freedom to clarify who they are and what they want; (2) The age of instability, and the high rate of residential change reflects the many other changes that are taking place at this time; (3) The self-focused age, which is not to be confused with selfishness or self-centredness since this self-preoccupation facilitates a self-sufficiency that involves consideration for others; (4) The age of feeling in-between, which is how emerging adults describe themselves developmentally; and (5) The age of great optimism; and while this is generally felt by young people, it has a special pertinence for emerging adults from troubled homes who see themselves as having a new beginning.

By way of critique, Bynner (2005) acknowledges that Arnett's identification of emerging adulthood has been responsible for a 'whole flurry of new thinking' (p. 1) but he sees it as a normative, age-related psychological theory that really only applies to young people who participate in higher education. The author cites cohort research that shows growing polarisation in Britain between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' and Bynner argues that contrasting social and institutional contexts mean that the traditional avenues to adulthood remain for a marginalised minority. Indeed, given that New Zealand is also characterised by significant income inequality (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010), it is probable that we too have many young people who achieve adulthood according to conventional means and markers.

Haverig & Roberts (2011) provide a further criticism of Arnett's position in relation to that iconic New Zealand custom, the overseas experience, or 'OE'. These authors suggest that the OE is a typical activity for emerging adults, in the sense that it is done by educated, middle class people in their twenties who are seeking freedom and self-exploration. However, this travel and work adventure is now an institution, or discourse, and regulatory frameworks and normative expectations constrain, and construct, the experiences that are available to those who participate in it.

Health and wellbeing of emerging adults in New Zealand

Young adults are generally the fittest and healthiest that they will be in their lives (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2007; Santrock, 2008) and they belong to the most healthy generation in history (Arnett, 2007). However, an array of problem behaviours also come into prominence in emerging adulthood and it is possible that, again, we have been preoccupied with the teen years as a time of challenge, and we have overlooked what the statistics are saying about the next phase of the lifespan. Briefly, young people in this country who are aged 18-25 years are the most likely to drink hazardously, die while driving, be a victim of crime, report loneliness, have a mental illness and be unemployed (Ministry of Social Development, 2010).

Emerging adults are our most blatant binge drinkers. In fact, half of our young men aged 18-24 years, and a third of the women in this age bracket, are considered to have a potentially hazardous drinking pattern (Ministry of Health, 2008). This alcohol consumption has its impact on an array of personal and social difficulties, and it results in nearly 20 percent of male deaths 20-24 years and 10 percent of female deaths (Law Commission 2009, as cited by Alcohol Advisory Council, 2011). With or without the prior ingestion of alcohol, young people and motor vehicles are truly a dangerous combination. This is exemplified in the 2009 statistics which show that, of the 112 fatal traffic accidents involving young people, they were considered to be at fault in 89 of them, and of the 755 serious injury crashes, 15-24 year-olds were held to blame 610 times.

Motor vehicle accidents involving the target age group contribute one third of all of the social costs associated with all injury crashes in our country (Ministry of Transport, 2009). Analysis of fatal motor vehicle crashes, 2007-2009, shows that 73 percent of the 15-24 year-olds who were killed were male (Ministry of Transport, 2009). In addition, young men of this age range predominate in workplace injuries, with about two times the general population claim rate (Ministry of Social Development, 2010).

Women in their early twenties have significantly more abortions relative to other groups of women. In 2009, the figure was 36 terminations per 1,000 females aged 20-24, compared to

the general abortion rate, which was 19.2 abortions per 1,000 women (Statistics New Zealand, 2009). At least in the United States, emerging adults are much more likely than younger or older age groups to have had two or more sexual partners in the last 12 months (Lefkowitz & Gillen, 2006). Interestingly, New Zealand data show that our young people have more live-in sexual relationships outside of marriage than many other nationalities. Research by Heuveline and Timberlake (2004, as cited by Papalia et al., 2007), positions New Zealand women third, relative to 17 other developed nations, in terms of likelihood to cohabit.

The statistics for criminal victimisation and offender incarceration among our population contain some predictable and some surprising findings. In 2005, of all age groups, 15-24 year-olds were most likely to be the victims of offences, with a prevalence rate of 55 percent. With respect to household violence (between partners), men are as vulnerable as women to being victimised at least once (Ministry of Social Development, 2010). Nevertheless, it is during emerging adulthood that most women (12 percent) are sexually assaulted (Ministry of Social Development, 2010). With regard to imprisonment, most men who are sent to jail are now over 30 years of age but, as the Department of Corrections website states, prison statistics hide considerable complexity. For instance, in 2009, three percent of all Maori 25 year-old males were in prison (0.5 percent of NZ Europeans) and 11 percent of Maori 26 year-old males were serving community sentences (Department of Corrections, 2009).

The Ministry of Social Development (2010) has established that loneliness peaks for New Zealanders during emerging adulthood, and it is most prevalent amongst young women (23 percent). In addition, mental health research (Oakley Browne, Wells, & Scott, 2006) shows that 16-24 year-olds are most likely to have emotional and behavioural issues, and they are also the most vulnerable to serious psychiatric disorders. The 12-month prevalence is 28.6 percent for any disorder and 7.2 percent for serious disorders. In fact, there is a five-fold difference between emerging adults and people aged 65+ in the prevalence of major depression. As a country, we have high percentages of anxiety, mood, and substance use disorders, and our treatment needs are significantly under met (Oakley Brown, Wells, & Scott, 2006).

Emerging adults do not fare well on financial indicators (Ministry of Social Development, 2010). They earn less, and unemployment for them is a much more regular feature (four times than the rate for 25-64 year-olds between 2007-2009, for example). Among all adults, 15-24 year-olds are most likely to live in over-crowded accommodation. Lastly, since the late 1980s in this country, there has been a large increase in the number of households spending more than 30 percent of income on rent and mortgages, and this inevitably impacts more on low income occupants (Ministry of Social Development, 2010).

Making it in emerging adulthood

Emerging adulthood is a paradoxical period because it sees both significant increases in problem behaviours and a general rise in wellbeing across the age group as a whole (Schulenberg, Sameroff, & Cicchetti, 2004; Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006). How can we explain the mixed fortunes encountered by 18-25 year-olds? Compared to teenagers who are attending secondary school and who are living at home, there is often a perceptible drop in protections and constraints when people enter tertiary education or full-time employment. Shanahan (2000, as cited by Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006) suggests that the density of social role changes is greater at this time than during any other developmental transition.

These changes provoke an array of responses from emerging adults. Many young people clearly do enjoy the extended freedoms, as evidenced in their enhanced wellbeing. For a minority, there is a mismatch between their individual needs and what the environment now offers and the consequence for them is an increase in problem behaviours and distress.

In addition to the young people who do well in emerging adulthood, and the young people who experience difficulties, there is a third group made up of individuals who have had hard lives up until now, and for whom the years 18-25 contain special opportunities and new beginnings. This group of emerging adults is of particular interest for several reasons; and the first point is that these resilient young people make it plain that personal challenges in childhood and adolescence do not inevitably mean that someone is destined to a lifetime of difficulties. The second point of interest is that the lives of people who bounce back from adversity very probably contain suggestions for programmes and interventions for the small group of 18-25 year-olds whose problem behaviour can characterise their age group (Masten, Obradovic, & Burt, 2006).

There are actually some fairly well-established 'turn around' experiences that emergent adults with troubled backgrounds can benefit from, and these have been identified in longitudinal studies of human development as higher education, work opportunities, military service, religious involvements, and marriage and romantic relationships (Masten et al., 2006). These authors have closely examined the development of resilience amongst 18-25 year-olds in the US and they found that there was a specific set of factors that contributed to wellbeing that included having a sense of autonomy, future orientation and planfulness, coping skills and adult support. These particular factors built on what are now understood to be the standard resilience resources of good intellectual functioning, parenting quality, and socioeconomic status (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Masten et al. (2006) also acknowledge that there can also be a lot of luck involved 'in the conjunction of a ready-to-change individual and transformational opportunities' (p. 188).

The present author is following the lives of 12 young people who have grown up in economically disadvantaged circumstances in New Zealand (Stanley, 2010). These participants in the Whatuora Longitudinal Study are now 24-25 years of age and, as with the US findings, relationships with others have proven to be a salient influence on personal outcomes. In several instances, relationships have clearly been transformational in their effects. 'John', who is one of the participants, provides an example of this, for, in the course of the research study, he has gone from being a disturbed and disturbing 11 year-old (self-described) to being a positive and purposeful young person. In the barest detail, what happened for John was that he was removed from his mother and placed in foster care with highly motivated caregivers who have provided a seamless envelope of supports that encompassed family, faith, friends, work, sport and culture.

Implications for social policy and practice

In times past, the study of human development was principally the study of childhood and adolescence and it is possible that these emphases have conditioned how we respond to young people and the sorts of human services that our community provides for them. The lengthening of the lifespan, amongst other influences, has created awareness that development continues beyond the teen years, and that subsequent developmental periods also

have particular, and important, personal challenges (Santrock, 2008). Emerging adulthood is special because so much that is important in terms of personal functioning is reviewed, revised and reorganised. As has been discussed, for most young people wellbeing is enhanced at this time, while others are either afforded more, or fewer, opportunities; and the contrasting circumstances that this minority group experiences can have significant personal consequences for them.

It is suggested that there are essentially two policy lessons to be learned from this description of a new developmental stage. Firstly, we probably ought to think some more about the place of emerging adults in our society. US commentators Nichols and Good (2004) contend that contemporary society has a 'careless indifference' toward its youth, and there is no reason to presume that this does not also apply to 18-25 year-olds with even greater force. Indeed, it is arguable that recent cohorts of emerging adults are actually the victims of generational inequity (Santrock, 2008), and that older adults have accumulated resources and advantages at their expense. Student loans may be a significant example, despite the fact that they do not now attract interest from the outset. Young people are required to participate in a user-pays education system which creates indebtedness, and which subsequently places them in a disadvantaged position in terms of acquiring assets and possessions.

New Zealand commentators Claiborne and Drewery (2010) believe that a primary task for many 18 to 25 year-olds is managing poverty. These authors say:

We know of young people who live in sub-standard accommodation, where the money runs out way before the next pay for food, electricity, and rent, on a regular basis. This means that many young people are living in impoverishment while trying to make ends meet through their poorly paid part-time jobs, and trying to keep their studies going at the same time. Nutrition, exercise, sleep, mental and general health are all at risk in such situations (p. 252).

Ministry of Social Development (2010) financial indicators give support to the claims made by Claiborne and Drewery (2010), and it could be that we need to reimagine the options and supports that are available to emerging adults. Various practical suggestions could be made, such as security of work tenure, more traineeships, and similar 'starter' options; but as much as anything, the need is likely to be at a personal level, which might mean that we should see the mentoring of young people become commonplace. In addition to the need for widespread support and scaffolding during emerging adulthood, we very probably underestimate the amount of support that school leavers need to successfully manage the school-to-work and school-to-study transition. When many of us look back, it is likely that we see that many of the decisions that we made (or did not make) in our last year at secondary school had a major bearing on what transpired in the following years of our life. In this sense, the final year of high school is probably a critical juncture for everybody (Cicchetti & Cohen, 1995).

The second implication for social policy arises from the statistics for challenging behaviours amongst 18-25 year-olds, and it is that we should deploy substantially more resources to this age group in terms of social and health services. We know that there are competing priorities in the allocation of scarce resources, but emergent adults have a special claim for services. The particular claim of this group is that they experience special psychological challenges, they exhibit multiple problem behaviours in high amplitude, and there is a probability that they will become parents. While the median age of becoming a first-time

mother has risen over time to almost 30 years-of-age, 20-24 year-olds continue to have 76 births per 1,000 women (Statistics New Zealand, 2011). The reality that emerging adults can also be parents adds an outstanding imperative to social service engagements because there is the possibility here of preventing subsequent generations of adjustment difficulties and distress.

We know that emerging adults who have hitherto been a problem to themselves and to others can achieve new levels of positive adjustment and wellbeing (Masten et al., 2006). Local research also suggests that a key to change is likely to be interventions and programmes that provide entry (or re-entry) to a system of relationships that structures, supports, and regulates everyday life (Stanley, 2010). As Arnett (2006) tells us, there is an optimism that comes with emerging adulthood but these young people probably should not have to rely quite so much on hope and good fortune. It is recommended that we more regularly and formally acknowledge that 18-25 year-olds are coping with the sorts of issues that, in times past, were seen as typifying the teen years, and that we make some innovative responses to those emerging adults who provide our most severe statistics for personal challenges and problem behaviours.

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