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The Dangerous Myth of Emerging Adulthood: An Evidence-Based Critique of a Flawed Developmental Theory

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This article examines the theory of emerging adulthood, introduced into the literature by Arnett (2000), in terms of its methodological and evidential basis, and finds it to be unsubstantiated on numerous grounds. Other, more convincing, formulations of variations in the transition to adulthood are examined. Most flawed academic theories are simply ignored by scientists. However, Arnett's unsubstantiated formulations have found their way to journalists, who are influencing public opinion, and policymakers, who are determining the fate of youth populations. As such, the article argues that an academic myth is being created that has serious economic and emotional repercussions for the many young people facing difficult circumstances in their transition to adulthood. Consequently, this myth requires corrections from the scientific community, one of which is provided here.

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Much fanfare followed the publication in the *American Psychologist* of the article "Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties" (Arnett, 2000). Since then, this article has been cited thousands of time in the literature and the concept *emerging adulthood* has been used in numerous publications. The term itself has formed the core idea of a recently launched journal, *Emerging Adulthood*. Although there are clearly a number of people who have taken up the call to view late adolescence and early adulthood (ages 18 to 25) as having the developmental-stage qualities proposed by Arnett, there is also a growing chorus of dissenters. I count myself among the latter group, and I explain why in this article.

I raise questions about the soundness of the initial characterization of this supposedly new developmental period and examine the evidence that has been offered for these claims over the past 15 years. I also raise questions about the adequacy of the methodological base of the initial characterizations; examine problems with the scientific quality and interpretation of the research published by Arnett to support these characterizations; explore alternative research into variations in the length of the transition to adulthood; point out what would be required to prove that this formulation is THE way to understand the prolonged transition to adulthood; and then argue that a myth has been created, one that threatens to make the lives of some young people more problematic. Indeed, the potential "translation" of the flawed evidence base for developmental claims into policies applied to the lives of adolescents and young adults makes the problems with the literature based on this concept of particular relevance to the readers of *Applied Developmental Science*. First, I set the stage by briefly reviewing how the concept of emerging adulthood is perceived by some social scientists.

In the inaugural editorial for the new journal, *Emerging Adulthood*, the chief editor provides a useful glimpse of how this concept is perceived, drawing a distinction between the concept of emerging adulthood as synonymous with the late teens and twenties on the one hand, and Arnett's formulation of emerging adulthood on the other hand (van Dulmen, 2013, p. 3). According to van Dulmen, this new journal aims to publish "manuscripts that use a variety of theoretical orientations or conceptualizations, and authors should not feel limited to *Arnett's formulization of emerging adulthood*" (p. 3, emphasis added). I ask readers to hold this distinction in mind—a term that describes an age period versus *Arnett's formulation of emerging adulthood.* For the sake

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of brevity, I use the expression ''Arnett's formulation'' to distinguish it from the idea of emerging adulthood as simply a descriptive term referring to an age period synonymous with late adolescence and early adulthood.

The foremost reason I recommend keeping this distinction in mind is that it appears that many academics, journalists, and policymakers now using the term emerging adulthood do not realize that for others it is loaded with a specific developmental-stage formulation. Some people appear to have accepted the new convention of using the term emerging adulthood to be synonymous with late adolescence and young adulthood when referring to this age period as a transitional phase of the life course that has objective demographic manifestations, such as the incremental assumption of adult roles. The problem is that others take the neutral use of the term as an acceptance of Arnett's formulation, even though they do not follow Arnett's stage-based usage of the term. In other words, there has been a conflation between using the term to *describ*e a transitional phase and using it in support of Arnett's stage formulation, as if every time the term is used it conveys acceptance of his formulation. In other cases, many people use the term to describe the transitional phase to adulthood *and* then proceed to adopt Arnett's stage formulation, apparently assuming his formulation has been scientifically validated.

However, what muddies the water most is a conceptual inconsistency that can be found in this literature wherein, depending on their purpose, writers switch between using the term emerging adulthood in some instances as a description of a transitional age period and in other instances in support of Arnett's stage formulation. As I will argue, Arnett does this himself—in cases where his developmental assertions do not seem to work, he shifts to using the concept as a description of a transitional age period with demographic characteristics (e.g., estimating the length of this ''stage'' in terms of demographic averages such as the period between high school graduation and age of first marriage).

This article is written for the community of social scientists who require that all ideas withstand logical and scientific scrutiny. It is my conclusion that Arnett's formulation withstands neither form of scrutiny and that little has been added to the literature that could not have been researched using the older terms, late adolescence or early adulthood, with the provision that the transition to adulthood has *on average* become more prolonged over the past few decades, with considerable variation around this average. In this spirit, the new journal *Emerging Adulthood* could have more neutrally been called something like *Early Adulthood* (just as there is a journal *Early Adolescence*), thereby avoiding the conflation between the term as a demographic descriptor and Arnett's stage formulation. The journal also would have appealed to a wider variety of researchers from the various disciplines in the field of Youth Studies (Côté, 2014a). Moreover, given the questionable scientific validity of Arnett's formulation, I raise concerns that a policy base is developing based on the prescriptive elements of Arnett's formulation. My concern is that his formulation is seriously skewed by assumptions that do a disservice to many of the young people currently facing serious social structural obstacles and poor economic opportunities during this prolonged transition to adulthood (e.g., Côté, 2014b; Standing, 2011; Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2011). Were this merely a case of a flawed academic theory that will not stand the test of time, developmental scientists might be justified in simply ignoring it. However, Arnett's unsubstantiated formulations have found their way to journalists (e.g., Henig, 2010), who are spreading misinformation among the public, and among policymakers (e.g., Gaudet, 2007), who are determining youth policies, or the lack thereof. Consequently, an academic myth is influencing cultural change. For this reason, I argue that the myth of emerging adulthood is a dangerous one, with the potential to seriously undermine the well-being of many young adults of the current generation, and generations to follow.

METHODOLOGICAL AND CONCEPTUAL BASE OF ARNETT'S FORMULATION

Arnett's formulation is apparently based on some 300 nonrandom interviews with Americans aged 18–29 (2004, p. 24). He does not report the analytic strategy he used in extracting the five themes or features that he asserts make emerging adulthood a ''distinct developmental period'' (Arnett, 2000, p. 476). There are a wide range of qualitative methodologies available to researchers, including for example the extraction of themes to saturation (i.e., the point where no more themes emerge as more cases are added; e.g., Marshall, 1996; Mason, 2010; Neuman, 2006). However, Arnett does not report the methodology he used, making it difficult for other researchers to evaluate the basis on which he selected these five themes and to judge whether interpretations of the interview material were affected by a *confirmation bias* (Nickerson, 1998) determining what Arnett thought was most important to extract from his interviews.

Given his methodological approach in conjunction with the strong claims he has made based on this approach, I thus believe it is appropriate to refer to Arnett's formulation as a *metanarrative*. However, I temper this characterization of his formulation with the scientific skepticism that he might have missed other narratives. That is to say, his formulation is presented as comprising the range of possible narratives expressed among those between the ages of 18 and 25, including

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from all social classes, economic circumstances, and educational achievements in the United States (Arnett & Tanner, 2011a, p. 15). His metanarrative comprises five narratives or themes that make emerging adulthood what he calls a "distinct developmental period" or stage: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood, and an optimistic sense of future possibilities.

Arnett has been very careful to qualify that his formulation is not culturally universal, but he does assert that his formulation applies to all young Americans of recent cohorts (although the cohort that would have first experienced this new developmental period is never identified). These differences within the United States (and other similar countries) are said to be a matter of degree, as follows: "Variations in socioeconomic status and life circumstances also determine *the extent to which* a given young person may experience emerging adulthood, even within a country that is affluent overall" (Arnett, 2004, p. 22, emphasis added). Again, referring to social class differences, he states that some people would be "less likely to experience their late teens and early twenties as a period of emerging adulthood . . . with young people in the middle class or above having more opportunities for the explorations of emerging adulthood than young people who are working class or below" (2004, pp. 22–23).

The most recent defense of these claims can be found in Arnett and Tanner (2011b). In that source, it is asserted that his research from the beginning has taken "education and social class background into account in the study of emerging adults" because it "has consistently included people with a variety of educational levels, not just college" (pp. 31–32). Because the samples used have included young people from a range of economic backgrounds, it is asserted that "it would not be justified to claim that the theory of emerging adulthood is based on middle-class college students and applies only to them" (p. 32). This source goes on to claim:

> overall, then, social class has been found to be significantly related to certain aspects of emerging adulthood, but not in ways that would challenge the framework of Arnett's theory. (p. 39)

> Although social class is crucial to how the years 18–25 are experienced, people in this age range can be designated as emerging adults across social classes. . . . Young people in lower social classes may enter these [marriage and parenthood] roles a year or two earlier than their peers in the middle and upper classes, but for most this still leaves a period of at least 6 years between the end of secondary school and the entrance to adult roles, certainly long enough to be called a distinct stage. (p. 49)

Thus, Arnett stands by his original claims that those in all social classes in the United States experience this new developmental stage for at least six years, albeit with some variation, with lower class membership shortening it by "a year or two" (Arnett & Tanner, 2011b, p. 49). However, what I see here is the conceptual inconsistency noted above. Arnett is basing these claims on the timing of first marriage—a demographic event affected by the parameters of the transition to adulthood—not on his developmental metanarrative. In making these claims, he has, therefore, switched from justifying the use of the concept of emerging adulthood in terms of his formulation, to using it in reference to an age period (a period that others would currently recognize more simply as early adulthood). There is no evidence based on his formulation supporting the claim that those 18 to 25 "can be designated as emerging adults across social classes" (Arnett & Tanner, 2011b, p. 49).

I have previously challenged Arnett's metanarrative on a number of grounds, including its generalization to all social classes (Côté v. Arnett, 2005; Côté & Bynner, 2008), with no concessions on Arnett's part that his formulation might be overextended or in need of revision to increase its accuracy. Others have challenged his formulation as well. For example, on the developmental-stage issue, Hendry and Kloep (2010) argue that "in classifying emerging adulthood as a developmental stage, there should be 'something' that develops during this time, and Arnett never clarifies what exactly that might be. There might be changes in living conditions, but human development is not synonymous with simple changes, which occur all the time" (p. 178). Similarly, on the distinction between the term as a neutral indicator of the prolonged transition to adulthood versus Arnett's stage formulation, Schoon and Schulenberg (2013) write:

> Although the term "emerging adulthood" may be a useful synonym for the prolonged transition to independent adulthood, it does not take into account the social and economic conditions that have produced extended transitions, instead offering a psychological model of free choice focusing on the postponement of commitments . . . Transition outcomes are however dependent on structural opportunities and constraints as well as individual resources and capabilities . . . (p. 46)

Schoon and Schulenberg (2013) go on to identify the harm these assumptions can do to some young adults if policymakers are misinformed about what is causing the transition to adulthood to be prolonged, prefiguring my concern of the "dangerous myth":

> Moreover, the assumption of a new, universal life stage leads to an ever increasing marginalisation of those who continue to pursue the traditional routes to adult life through early entry to the labour market, or who due to a lack of personal and family resources cannot take advantage of the moratorium opportunities available,

> especially regarding participation in further and higher education . . . (p. 46)

Many other social scientists would have re-evaluated their theory in light of sustained criticisms and new evidence, conceding that the original formulation has some validity but is limited in certain ways. They would have then revised their theory, as the scientific method dictates. For example, a more reasonable approach would be to admit that only a subset of young people fit his metanarrative, whereas others are experiencing a prolonged transition to adulthood for other reasons and with other consequences; and yet others are experiencing no such prolongation, either demographically or subjectively.

Such a reformulation would be reasonable given that Arnett claims to base his ideas regarding identity explorations on Erikson's work, and Erikson's theory easily subsumes what happens to identity formation when the transition to adulthood is, and is not, prolonged (e.g., Côté, 2006). For example, writing in the mid-20th century, Erikson (1980) observed that most cultures provide their young people with some sort of structured delay from adult responsibilities, during which they can develop their adult identities. In his words: "Societies offer, as individuals require, a more or less sanctioned intermediary period between childhood and adulthood, *institutionalized moratoria*, during which a lasting pattern of "inner identity" is scheduled for relative completion" (Erikson, 1980, p. 119).

These moratoria usually grant young people the license to experiment with various roles, if they so wish, without carrying permanent responsibilities and commitments. In the 1950s and 1960s, Erikson (1958) observed that these adult-identity moratoria could sometimes last until age 24 as a normative event, especially among college students, but were more often limited to late adolescence (Erikson, 1959). At that time, some moratoria were taking various prolonged forms, including travel, military service (or programs like the Peace Corps), higher education, or even just "dropping out" for a while (Erikson, 1968, p. 157). For the most part, these prolonged moratoria were undertaken voluntarily, especially among the affluent.

However, to update Erikson's work to match more recent circumstances affecting the identity moratoria, it appears that as a result of declining economic opportunities for the young, beginning in the 1980 s, the delay of adult roles has become increasingly *involuntary*, with more young people either forced out of workforce and/or driven into higher educational systems in the hopes of improving their employability (Côté, 2006). Côté and Allahar (1996) discussed the reasons for, and consequences of, these delays in *Generation on hold: Coming of age in the late 20th century*. In the 20 years since the publication of that book the situation has become even more deleterious for a greater proportion of the youth population (Côté, 2014b; Côté & Allahar, 2006), again prompting me here to identify a "dangerous myth" that covers up the causes and consequences of these young peoples' disadvantages.

ARNETT'S EVIDENCE FOR HIS FORMULATION

In spite of numerous critiques and alternative formulations based in the very literature on which his theory is based, Arnett stands by his claim of having discovered "a new, universal life stage" in the U.S. (Schoon & Schulenberg, 2013, p. 46). Arnett and Tanner (2011b) claim that two publications provide the primary empirical evidence proving the *universality* of his formulation with respect to social class in the U.S.—Arnett (2001) and Arnett (2003). Accordingly, it is worth taking a close look at those two sources to see how well they support the claims that young Americans "in this age range can be designated as emerging adults across social classes . . . [for] at least 6 years . . . [thereby making this] a distinct stage" (Arnett & Tanner, 2011b, p. 49).

Before examining these sources, it is useful to point out that a good statistical test of the universality Arnett's developmental formulation across social classes would be one of factorial validity, where the factor structure of the developmental criteria for emerging adulthood as a stage is examined across discrete social class groupings. For example, if the same factor structure were found among a large sample of working class young people *and* among a comparable middle class sample, factorial equivalence or invariance would be established. This is now a very common type of procedure (Confirmatory Factor Analysis) and was used for instance by Schwartz, Côté, and Arnett (2005) on variables operationalizing variations in identity-based agency, finding invariance in two factors across three ethnic groups in the United States (non-Hispanic Whites, non-Hispanic Blacks, and Hispanics). The same objective could be accomplished qualitatively if the equivalent set of themes or narratives could be extracted from two social class samples from interviews using one of the many accepted methods for theme extraction.

Turning to the first source (Arnett, 2001), we find several problems. First, social class is operationalized only in terms of father's education, with about 40% of fathers having a "high school degree or less" (p. 136). For reasons beyond the purview of this article, father's education is a weak proxy of socio-economic status, and is not an operationalization of social class. Second, this study did not evaluate the validity of the five narratives that ostensibly make this age period a new developmental

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period. Rather, empirical measures focus on perceptions of adulthood. The principal finding is that regardless of father's educational level there is remarkable consistency among the three age groups sampled (teens, twenties, thirty+) in endorsing individualistic criteria of adulthood, including (a) accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's actions, (b) deciding on personal beliefs and values, and (c) being financially independent. Not only does this *not* show anything that is developmentally distinctive about emerging adulthood, but father's education was used only as a covariate, thereby statistically removing its influence, and not examining the extent of its influence as an independent variable. Father's education was also not used as a basis for testing factorial invariance across social classes, which could have been approximated by comparing the 40% with fathers having a "high school degree or less" with the remainder of the sample. All considered, then, this study is not relevant to the claim that young people "in this age range can be designated as emerging adults across social classes" (Arnett & Tanner, 2011b, p. 49).

Similarly, the second source (Arnett, 2003) is a study of conceptions of the transition to adulthood, not of the metanarrative applying across social classes. In fact, this study followed the same methodology as the 2001 study, including using father's education as a proxy for social class. This study simply examined potential differences among four American ethnic groups on the same variables as the 2001 study, finding "that conceptions of the transition to adulthood among emerging adults in ethnic minority groups were much the same as those of whites" (p. 70). Once again, a study was cited as supporting the social class universality claims when it does no such thing.

Surprisingly, a study not mentioned in Arnett and Tanner (2011b) quantitatively tested the statistical validity of the five narratives using the *Inventory of the Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood* (IDEA), which was developed specifically to operationalize those narratives as measurable factors (Reifman, Arnett, & Colwell, 2007). However, the hypothesized factor structure was not confirmed for the sample as a whole. A proxy question of social class asked subjects to self-identify as "working class, middle class, and upper-middle/upper class" (p. 20), but there was no reporting of tests of factorial invariance across classes. For example, perhaps the hypothesized factor structure held only for the middle class group, a finding that would have been very useful to report in the literature. In any event, once again there was no attempt to assess factorial invariance across discrete social class groupings. Indeed, I have been unable to find any such research published to date.

In sum, nowhere in Arnett's publications or in other investigations of his formulation could I find evidence that Arnett's developmental metanarrative applies to all young Americans regardless of their social class background. Why would it be so important to hold to a claim that is logically problematic and empirically unsupported? Perhaps the reason is because of the other claim that this age period has become a new and distinct developmental period. Unless the evidence is clear that everyone in a given society experiences a given set of circumstances, something could hardly be called a *developmental stage*. Although definitions of what constitutes "development" and "stages" vary (Lerner, 2002), such a class-based assertion would be like claiming that only those who are more affluent experience childhood or adulthood. Consequently, we have what appears to be a shaky foundation, with a developmental formulation resting on the claim that young Americans "in this age range can be designated as emerging adults across social classes" (Arnett & Tanner, 2011b, p. 49). Without this foundation, the developmental logic of the formulation disintegrates. This failure may explain the conceptual inconsistency noted above, where sometimes reference is made to Arnett's formulation of emerging adulthood, with its specific and limited developmental assumptions, and other times to "emerging adulthood" as if it is a neutral term that is synonymous with early adulthood or some similar, descriptive concept.

ALTERNATIVE FORMULATIONS ABOUT THE PROLONGED TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

As we saw in the preceding section, Arnett's claim that people "in this age range can be designated as emerging adults across social classes" (Arnett & Tanner, 2011b, p. 49) is challenged by a lack of empirical evidence. Moreover, the fact that he misrepresents his own work as supporting his claims is troubling. But, as with all universalistic claims (even if the "universe" is limited to one country) Arnett's formulation is vulnerable to the logic of the "negative instance method." For example, this method was Margaret Mead's (1928) strategy in her study that invalidated Hall's (1904) claims of the phylogenetically based universality of "adolescent storm and stress." She needed to study only one culture in which not all adolescents experienced symptoms of storm and stress as Hall's theory predicted. As is well known, she reported one negative instance in Samoa, and, therefore, Hall's claims could not have been correct. Her findings have since been corroborated, with many negative instances reported in the literature (Côté, 1994).

In this section, I examine empirical research undertaken on young adults that challenges Arnett's metanarrative, as well as his social class claims. As we see, there appear to be many young adults with "narratives" other than those proposed by Arnett. Given that Arnett's formulation is based on qualitative research (with a

nonrandom sample), I first examine two qualitative studies that use a sort of negative instance method.

Hendry and Kloep (2010) undertook a qualitative study with the intention of determining the extent to which Arnett's metanarrative matched the narratives of a sample of young people in Wales aged 17 to 20. Their sample purposely included only young people not in higher education (both working and unemployed). They found that "Arnett's emerging adulthood stage held good for only one subgroup of those interviewed" (p. 169). Two other subgroups were identified: "prevented adults" and "adults."

Hendry and Kloep (2010) concluded that there was substantial heterogeneity of narratives regarding choices and opportunities/obstacles in their sample. In reference to the five narratives from Arnett's formulation, only some subjects expressed narratives of identity explorations, as was the case for feelings of instability. That is, many of Hendry and Kloep's subjects had established stable identities in their teens, including those anchored in a job and/or marriage. In addition, many of their subjects were more other-focused than self-focused because of their familial, caretaking responsibilities, while at the same time feeling firmly rooted in adulthood, and thus not feeling "in between." This is perhaps the most telling finding: in this sample of 17 to 20 year olds, the majority—25 of their 38 subjects—self-identified as adults. At the same time, about half of their subjects did not optimistically perceive the future in terms of possibilities; instead, they felt trapped by a lack of opportunities, and were resigned to their situations.

Meanwhile in the United States, Silva (2012) reported uncovering four "coming of age narratives" in a study focusing on the working class. Her study took an entirely different approach, eschewing Arnett's formulation entirely (which she criticized as examining "individualistic and psychological meanings of adulthood," p. 519). Silva's (2012) study exposes what can be called "the hidden injuries" of the forced, prolonged transition to adulthood for young Americans (cf. Sennett & Cobb, 1972). She interviewed 93 Americans in their twenties and thirties who had fathers without a higher education. Silva placed these narratives within the context of "an era of increasing uncertainty, where traditional markers of adulthood have become tenuous," asking as a research question "what kinds of cultural models do working-class young people employ to validate their adult identities?" (p. 505).

Based on several rounds of interview coding and analysis of "critical personal junctures in the transition to adulthood" (Silva, 2010, p. 510), Silva reported uncovering four "coming of age narratives." The "traditional" narrative emphasized achieving the social markers of adulthood. The "therapeutic" narrative focused on managing "psychological wounds and self-growth" (p. 510). Some interviewees drew on both narratives and were classified as "traditional/therapeutic." A fourth group combined a religious theme with the traditional narrative, constructing its "delayed transition to adulthood as 'God's plan'" (p. 510), and was classed as "traditional/religious."

The dominant narrative was the therapeutic one, describing about 60% of her sample. The other three narratives were equally represented among the remaining 40%. Silva (2010) concluded that for these working class subjects, the transition to adulthood is not primarily about self-exploration or passing social markers because both were denied to them by economic circumstances. Instead, they adopted personal markers anchored in religious and therapeutic institutions (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous, therapy, and parenting courses) that functioned as "witnesses" for these narratives. Those young adults who could not find validation for their therapeutic narratives in a witness or audience "became suspended in a narrative of suffering, and the ritual failed to produce a newly adult self" (p. 519). Silva recommends that future research should examine the narratives of middle-class youth to determine the extent to which a therapeutic narrative is adopted concerning the transition to adulthood in conjunction with the (Arnett's) psychological narrative of self-discovery and the sociological one based on achieving the social markers of adulthood.

Both of these qualitative reports challenge Arnett's formulation and, based on the negative instance method, suggest that his metanarrative represents just some of many subjective mindsets that young people can adopt toward their prolonged transition. Arnett's metanarrative apparently leaves out much in the variety of experiences and behaviors currently found among young adults. But this finding stands to reason: the vastly differing circumstances associated with attaining financial self-sufficiency are bound to produce different subjectivities and behavioral responses.

When we turn to quantitative research of large population-level samples that would assess the external validity of Arnett's formulation, we find a similar variety of alternative hypotheses, none of which require the assumption that a new development stage has emerged.

Indeed, the burgeoning research on the prolonged transition to adulthood suggests that there are a number of possible trajectories/tracks and outcomes in regard to education-to-work transitions and adult lifestyle/family formation. For example, Osgood, Ruth, Eccles, Jacobs, and Barber (2005) conducted latent class analysis on 1,410 American 24-year-olds, finding six clusters of subjects representing paths in the passage through five adulthood markers. They named the clusters as follows: fast starters (12%), parents without careers (10%), educated partners (19%), educated singles (37%), working singles (7%), and slow starters (14%). Those in the two "fast tracks" to adulthood (fast starters, parents without

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careers) were more likely to be from less affluent backgrounds, but so were slow starters. However, the slow starters were far less "adult-like" than those in the two fast tracks, where the young people were heavily involved in adult roles. Osgood et al. comment that the slow starters roughly resemble Arnett's depiction of the emerging adult (although they did not measure the five defining features of Arnett's metanarrative), as do the educated singles, but together these constitute only about half of their sample.

Similarly, Schoon and Schulenberg (2013) report finding five clusters of transitions among large samples of two cohorts the United Kingdom, the United States, and Finland (the inter-country ranges of occurrence are reported in parentheses): (1) the highly educated (10–20%), (2) work orientation without children (33–46%), (3) traditional family track (22–40%), (4) slow starters (15–33%), and (5) fragile transitions (5–12%). Schoon and Schulenberg (2013) concluded the following from this analysis:

> there is a growing polarization of fast versus slow transition prevalences, with those from less privileged backgrounds making the transition to employment and parenthood earlier than others, potentially due to insufficient resources to take advantage of educational opportunities and to support an extended period of education. . . . Fast track transitions to adulthood are however not necessarily associated with lower levels of life satisfaction and wellbeing, as the active engagement with meaningful social roles can present turning points in the lives of young people, opening up opportunities to experience competence and accomplishment. (p. 55)

On the basis of the evidence reviewed in this section, numerous other plausible narratives emerge, along with different causes for variations in the length of the transition to adulthood, none of which require developmental assumptions. We also saw that economic circumstances are fluid and apparently deteriorating for a good proportion of young adults, introducing considerable variance into the transition to adulthood. On this evidence, I suggest that Arnett's formulation constitutes a "rubber sheet" theory, with him attempting to explain too much on the basis of a limited conceptual structure, trying to stretch it to cover many more phenomena than is justified by the assumptions of the theory (Wertheimer, 1972).

WHAT EVIDENCE IS MISSING?

In the 15 years since the introduction of the theory in the *American Psychologist*, there have been surprising few studies that have attempted to put it to true empirical tests where the results would either confirm or falsify hypotheses. Instead, those adopting Arnett's formulation have generally substituted the term "emerging adult" for "late adolescent" or "college student." One would have thought that these researchers would have first sought more confirmatory evidence, rather than assuming *petitio principi* that these untested assumptions are valid. Indeed, as one reads some of Arnett's responses to critics, it appears that he defends his theory by making it unfalsifiable. For example, Arnett and Tanner (2011c, pp. 128–134) dismiss as "outliers" the cases that Hendry and Kloep (2010, 2011) identify as negative instances of the metanarrative. Arnett and Tanner make their case, however, only by selectively choosing confirmatory themes out of Hendry and Kloep's cases that match Arnett's metanarrative, often reading these themes into a few confirmatory statements, while ignoring the bulk of the material that does not match it. For instance, in the case a young single mother, they concede that "emerging adulthood ends (or never begins)" in such cases (Arnett & Tanner, 2011c, p. 130). However, they take one statement from this single mother that she would like to some day be teacher as evidence that she "still hopes to pursue identity-based work eventually . . . [and thus] she resembles her emerging adult peers in that she is still very much in the process of building the structure of an adult life" (p. 130). In other words, any sense of possible futures is taken as proof of the entire metanarrative.

In light of this selective evidence and the aforementioned rubber sheeting, it needs to be asked just how many "outliers" can exist before a theorist revises his or her theory to accommodate those outliers? Is not science about testing and reformulating theories in the light of new evidence and rejecting unsubstantiated ones? Still, with universalistic claims, one negative instance is invalidating, explaining why Arnett will not concede to even one.

What, then, would be necessary to prove his case? Namely, what hypotheses need to be empirically tested that would convince scientific skeptics that his formulation is THE way to understand the prolonged transition to adulthood?

To begin, I would argue that he needs to more clearly define what it is he claims is "developing," as Hendry and Kloep (2010) argue (and noted above). This point would require a developmental theory rather than a description of some psychological attributes (Hendry & Kloep, 2011). This theory needs to define in operational terms what the "it" is that is developing. As it stands, it is a leap of logic to conclude that because it takes people longer to pass certain social markers of adulthood they are experiencing a new developmental stage. As shown above, there are other, more plausible explanations for why it takes longer to adopt adult roles and responsibilities, including the economic challenges contemporary young people are encountering (see also, e.g., Edwards & Weller, 2013; Mortimer, 2012).

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And, as Hendry and Kloep (2011) argue, the idea of emerging adulthood as a "stage" does not withstand scrutiny. The field of the sociology of youth, and more generally Youth Studies, does just fine without stage concepts, instead viewing the concept of "youth" as "floating signifier," which acknowledges the wide historical and cultural variations in the period between childhood and adulthood (Côté, 2014a). Purely psychological, and culturally specific, models such as Arnett's are out of sync with the field as a whole, where more nuanced approaches explicitly account for the contextual interplay of structure and agency in the transition to adulthood in different societies (e.g., Helve & Evans, 2013). Accordingly, it is considered sufficient to examine the empirically discernible trajectories or tracks that people take in terms of interactions between structure and agency, a position equivalent to developmental contextualism as formulated in developmental psychology (e.g., Lerner, 2002). As noted in the preceding section, multiple trajectories have been empirically identified based on longitudinal studies of population-level surveys. These trajectories represent the wide variations in experiences and circumstances and do not require the dubious exercise of fitting everyone into one developmental category, even if there are internal variations of the proposed criteria in this category (Arnett & Tanner, 2011a).

Turning to the reception of Arnett's formulation in developmental psychology, it is worth noting that it is this developmental assertion that draws the most skepticism from many developmental experts. For example, Lerner (in Henig, 2010; see also Lerner, 2002, regarding stages in general) makes the following observation:

> To qualify as a developmental stage, emerging adulthood must be both universal and essential. If you don't develop a skill at the right stage, you'll be working the rest of your life to develop it when you should be moving on . . . The rest of your development will be unfavorably altered. The fact that Arnett can be so casual about the heterogeneity of emerging adulthood and its existence in some cultures but not in others—indeed, even in some people but not in their neighbors or friends—is what undermines, for many scholars, his insistence that it's a new life stage. (p. 13)

To be more convincing, Arnett's formulation would have to employ better logic on which to accumulate evidence. For example, if this were a stage, how would its start and finish be empirically assessed? These points cannot simply be based on demographic school/work contexts or descriptive accounts of autonomy from parents, because there are too many variations in these that have nothing to do with ontogenetic potentials (cf. Shanahan, 2000; Shanahan, Porfeli, Mortimer, & Erickson, 2005). Arguing that high school completion marks the beginning of a developmental stage is a weak premise. Not only do large numbers of young people not finish high school, but also these percentages are greater among those from less affluent backgrounds, a factor compounded among certain ethnic groups.

Hinging a theory on "identity explorations" as the primary basis for young people finding a career in current economies is also weak. Economists refer to unstable youth work histories as "churning," but Arnett reduces the churning experienced by many young people to freely chosen "identity explorations" with various types of jobs rather than seeing their actions as coping with precarious, ambiguous, and exploitive job situations. Arnett appears to sense this when he admits that his use of the term identity exploration "is a bit too lofty a word to describe their work history." He goes on concede that these work experiences are often "not nearly as systematic, organized, and focused as 'exploration' implies. 'Meandering' might be a more accurate word, or maybe 'drifting' or 'bouncing around'" (2004, p. 373).

More seriously, though, it is difficult to see any developmental propositions or theory with respect to this main pillar of his formulation. In fact, Arnett has offered no modifications to Erikson's identity theory that would distinguish identity formation between the ages of 18 and 25—which he is claiming is a distinct stage of identity formation—from identity formation before or after. Moreover, the literature has failed to report any findings that were not explained using the concepts of late adolescence/early adulthood before the emerging adulthood concept came into vogue. Indeed, Schwartz et al. (2013) ostensibly provide a review of the literature on identity formation in emerging adulthood in the new journal *Emerging Adulthood*, but there is nothing in this review that distinguishes 18- to 25-year olds from other age groups. Much of the research they review was conducted on college students, who have traditionally been considered late adolescents in some journals, like the *Journal of Adolescence*, or young adults or youth in other journals, such as the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.[1] However, this revisionist review simply substitutes "emerging adult" for those terms. What is more remarkable is that Schwartz et al. end their review by raising questions of what really changes between

[1]It is worth noting that the primary operationalization of identity formation in this field—the identity statuses—was from the outset designed to be "applicable to late adolescence between the ages of 18 to 22" (Marcia, 1989, p. 403). The vast majority of the studies in this field have been conducted on successive cohorts of college students since the 1960s. A recent meta-analysis found consistency in the processes and contents of identity-status formation from the 1960s to the present (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010)—in other words, nothing has changed that would mark the emergence of new types of identity formation circa 1980 s or 1990s, so there is no justification in this literature for changing the terms late-adolescents or college students to "emerging adults."

adolescence and emerging adulthood, other than things like greater autonomy from parents, because the existing literature apparently does not point to anything unique about the latter age period:

> Emerging adulthood has been labeled (among other things) as the "age of identity exploration" (Arnett, 2007b, p. 69). However, adolescents clearly engage in identity work, even if most of this work involves reducing identity confusion (Schwartz, Mason, et al., 2009) and reconsidering commitments previously internalized from parents (Klimstra et al., 2010). How does one transition from the identity work of adolescence to the identity work of emerging adulthood? Does this transition occur similarly for individuals who attend colleges and universities as it does for those who enter the workforce immediately after completing their secondary education? Do identity development activities in adolescence and emerging adulthood operate similarly across gender and for individuals from majority versus minority ethnic groups? Do specific identity domains—such as gender and sexuality, religion and spirituality, politics, and career—necessarily come to ascendance during adolescence and emerging adulthood? (p. 107)

More generally, as noted above, social scientists from a variety of disciplines would want to see some evidence of the confirmatory factorial validity among large samples of the five narratives in Arnett's formulation, with evidence of invariance across social classes. As noted, only one (weak) study has been published to date that attempts this empirical test. Even reporting non-confirmatory data would be useful, if only to help the field to move on. But, even if evidence could be found for social-class invariance of the five narratives, validating evidence should also include "threshold effects" between the age ranges Arnett attributes to adolescence, emerging adulthood, and adulthood. This research would require empirically demonstrating the thresholds at which the five proposed narratives "become more prominent" (Arnett & Tanner, 2011a, p. 16) circa age 18 and then stop being so around age 25 or 30. Otherwise, these attributes would merely constitute variable attributes experienced by people regardless of their "stage" in life.

Finally, developmental scientists would also want better justifications for why the other narratives, such as an optimistic sense of future possibilities, are "developmental." For example, Arnett makes much out of the findings that those in their twenties are optimistic. The problem with this claim is that the literature on optimism shows that people in all age groups are highly optimistic, at least in the United States where the *optimism bias* prevails. As Sharot (2012) notes:

> We wear rose-tinted glasses whether we are eight or eighty. Schoolchildren as young as nine have been reported to express optimistic expectations about their adult lives and . . . older adults (ages sixty to eighty) are just as likely to see the glass half full as middle-aged adults (ages thirty-six to fifty-nine) and young adults (ages eighteen to twenty-five). Optimism is prevalent in every age group, race, and socioeconomic status. (p. xiv)

THE DANGEROUS MYTH

Arnett has publicly declared that he sees things in "glass half full" terms (Arnett, in Côté v. Arnett, 2005). True to form, throughout his various works one detects such an optimism bias. For example, in a recent report he assures readers that although "emerging adults often struggle in the course of their long and sometimes perilous transition to adulthood. . . . they are thriving in many ways, too, and they are remarkably hopeful about how their adult lives will turn out. Their optimism and determination should give the rest of us hope, too" (Arnett & Schwab, 2012, p. 2).

The prospect of this bias would explain why he tends to misread his critics. For example, in 2004 he wrote: "For a perspective on the darker side of emerging adulthood, including the limitations imposed by social class, see Côté (2000)" (Arnett, 2004, p. 231). Later in that source, after providing a selective and inaccurate summary of Côté's 2000 book, he states that he views "Côté's portrayal of the emerging adult years as much too bleak" (Arnett, 2004, p. 240). I am not sure what he means by "dark" or "bleak" in reference to the experiences of the less fortunate in society, but what Arnett misrepresents most about that source is that Côté does not claim that most people end up floundering "indefinitely in a state of default individualization" (Arnett, 2004, p. 240). Interestingly, in a 2005 joint publication, Schwartz, Côté, and Arnett provide sophisticated statistical evidence that operationalizes "default individualization" and "developmental individualization" in identity formation among a sample of American university students, finding that this sample splits rather evenly with about 50% showing developmental (i.e., agency-based growth) paths in their identity formation, while about 50% are more default (i.e., stagnate or passive) in their identity formation.

Tannock (2001) has taken up the issue of how some academics dismiss the severity of the situation facing youth people in the labor market, arguing that they typically adopt a "pathway model"; that is, they focus on "the trajectories of youths from school . . . to career," but pay little attention to "what youths are actually doing in any particular job during their transition from school to career" (2001, p. 23). Although many of the jobs available to young people involve poor working conditions, Tannock submits that most academics ignore issues of exploitation and how the nature of jobs available to young people might be improved.

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Those adopting the pathway model, according to Tannock (2001), dismiss the types of poor jobs available to young workers as "stop gap" jobs that are suited to them in terms of their supposedly transitory life circumstances, rather than considering that many young people would like to be earning a living wage in a good job "now," not in some distant point in their late 20s or early 30s. Arnett's formulation is one such pathway model that does not capture the limitations of the youth labor market and the various subjective states of the young people facing these limitations. For example, as noted above, Arnett reduces the churning experienced by many young people to "identity explorations" with various types of jobs, rather than seeing their actions as coping with exploitive job situations. In the following passage, Arnett's pathway assumptions are discernible:

> Adolescents tend to view their jobs not as occupational preparation but as a way to obtain the money that will support an active leisure life—paying for compact discs, concerts, restaurant meals, clothes, cars, travel, and so forth. . . . [In contrast] in emerging adulthood, work experiences become more focused on preparation for adult work roles. Emerging adults begin to consider how their work experiences will lay the groundwork for the jobs they may have through adulthood. In exploring various work possibilities, they explore identity issues as well: What kind of work am I good at? What kind of work would I find satisfying for the long term? What are my chances of getting a job in the field that seems to suit me best? (Arnett, 2000, pp. 473–474)

By normalizing the degraded status of young people in the political economy that has taken hold since the 1980s, Tannock (2001) argues that models such Arnett's aggravate the precarious education-to-work transition by "advocating" emerging adulthood to the public and policymakers:

> as the category of youth is extended upward into adulthood, the childlike characteristics of adults are emphasized: adults as youth (emerging adults) are constructed as immature, still in development, not yet fully "grown up," and consequently, may be said to be less entitled to make claims on such things as a family wage job, career stability or the means to live independently. Indeed, the promotion of emerging adulthood as a normal stage of development, that is argued to be healthy for society and positively experienced by most individuals in their late teens and 20s (e.g., Arnett 2007a, 2007b), works directly to normalize the erosion of social and economic standards of living that has taken place for large segments of younger generations under conditions of neoliberal restructuring. (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2011, pp. 683–684)

Along with Tannock, my objection to "recommending" that young people go through the stage Arnett imagines is that many policymakers will be all too happy to take this questionable science as an excuse to do very little in terms of formulating youth policies. If young people are "choosing" to delay the assumption of financial and emotional independence, there is little need for a youth policy that attempts to support transitions among those who cannot achieve independence yet do not have familial support to rely on. Indeed, policymakers appear to be taking up Arnett's theory as if the scientific community has accepted it (i.e., they can claim the policy is evidence-based). For an example of the policy influence of the Arnett's formulation see Gaudet (2007).

Thus, taking up his formulation as a basis for policy will have potentially disastrous consequences for those young people who do not experience the benefits Arnett attributes to delaying adulthood. Indeed, there is evidence of a growing "precariat" in many countries that draws in young people from less affluent backgrounds, especially among minority groups (e.g., Sum et al., 2011; Standing, 2011). At the same time, counselors are noting emotional problems among those from more affluent backgrounds who believe they *ought to be* delaying adulthood by putting off goals and adult roles (Jay, 2012). This growing problem appears to be associated with confusing "is" with "ought." This logical error finds a parallel with a mistake that academics commonly make in confusing descriptions (e.g., prolonged transitions) with prescriptions (e.g., that prolonged transitions are always functional).

CONCLUSIONS

I implore researchers to discontinue assuming that the prolonged transition to adulthood is synonymous with the term emerging adulthood. In the beginning, I (and others) accepted the use of the term in its neutral, descriptive sense, of an age period, but Arnett's relentless "selling" of the concept, while at the same time insisting that his unrevised formulation is THE way to view the prolonged transition to adulthood, is not palatable. Although Arnett has been willing to "debate" critics (e.g., Arnett, 2006; Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011; Bynner, 2005; Côté v. Arnett, 2005), he has refused to modify his original premises in light of counter evidence, instead shifting among the two uses of the term noted above, one neutral and the other conforming to his formulation. His formulation not only muddies the waters, but it is has potentially dangerous consequences for many young people for the reasons discussed in this article.

I argued above that Arnett's formulation is implausible on several grounds; yet many people now using the concept appear to be unaware of both the loaded nature of the term and the limitations of Arnett's use of it as a

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developmental concept. Arnett's formulation ostensibly follows in the traditions of developmentalists like Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1993) who formulated in the mid-20th century a phase of identity development as one of "moratorium" involving experimentation before final adult identity commitments were made (Côté, 2006). Yet, neither Erikson nor Marcia argued that all young people pass through such a period of undertaking *active* identity explorations, even in adolescence (i.e., many simply operate on the basis of childhood identifications and these can find a functional fit with no effort on the part of the person). Certainly, the prolonged transition to adulthood is extending certain domains of identity formation, such as occupational identity, which might last for a decade or more in the face of structural obstacles, but no updated theory is offered by Arnett to account for how extended identity formation differs from adolescent identity formation other than lasting longer (cf. Phillips & Pittman, 2003; Yoder, 2000). Although he limits his formulation to the United States (with the proposal that it applies to other industrial and post-industrial societies), within the United States, Arnett insists it applies to young people of all social classes. To maintain logical consistency in this claim, it appears that he must insist that even those facing oppressive and non-normative economic circumstances, or who prefer traditional routes to adulthood from adolescence, experience this stage.

As I have stressed, there are numerous logical and evidential fallacies in this developmental-stage formulation. Even if evidence could be found for social-class invariance of Arnett's formulation, validating evidence should also include threshold effects between the preceding and following life-course periods. No such evidence appears to exist. As Schulenberg and Schoon (2012) argue:

> Key gaps in the literature pertain to the failure to view this period from adolescence to adulthood in a longer-term developmental perspective (Bynner 2005). For example, despite the needed attention that the concept of emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000) has brought to the age period, especially among some psychologists, much of the relevant research has focused only on experiences during this age period, with little regard for developmental and sociodemographic antecedents and long-term consequences. As a result, the extent to which experiences during this age period reflect developmental continuity or discontinuity remains a critical gap. (p. 166)

Based on the evidence reviewed above, Arnett's formulation of emerging adulthood as a developmental stage invariant across social classes appears to be a myth. It is dangerous myth because it misinforms the public about how the transition to adulthood has changed over the past few decades. Parents and young people alike are thus misinformed, especially by media reports of Arnett's supposed "discovery" of a new developmental stage (e.g., Henig, 2010). Individualistic explanations for social structural changes are being accepted and young people are enticed to believe that they *ought to* delay the assumption of adult roles, producing a variety of personal problems, self-blame for failures, and wasted opportunities (e.g., Jay, 2012). But perhaps most seriously, public policy is affected as policymakers come to believe that the exclusion of young people from the work force and the delay of their financial opportunities are both "natural" developmentally and a "choice" individually, and therefore no youth policies need to be formulated to support those in need. Consequently, the financial and emotional needs of current and future generations are being ignored or misconstrued to the detriment of the wider society.

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