Abstract
The present article reviews three key issues regarding the emerging adult life stage—the ways in which emerging adulthood represents a key turning point in the life span (and the influences that help to determine the path that a given individual will follow), differences in the experience of emerging adulthood between college students and noncollege-attending individuals, and international diversity in the existence and manifestation of emerging adulthood. Within each of these areas, extant knowledge is reviewed and areas in need of further attention are specified. In particular, the social, economic, and cultural forces that shape emerging adulthood are discussed in terms of who is most (and least) likely to experience emerging adulthood and the ways in which the stage is likely to manifest itself. Recommendations for future theorizing and research are presented.

Keywords
emerging adulthood, college students, work, relationships, family, peers, identity, international diversity

The purpose of this article is to trace the evolution of emerging adulthood as a life stage as well as to outline key challenges for emerging adulthood theory and research. Scholarship on emerging adulthood has come a long way since Arnett (2000) first introduced the term and proposed the five features (identity exploration, possibilities, feeling in between, self-focus, and instability) that characterize this life stage. We now understand some of the ways in which emerging adulthood may be distinct from adolescence and from later stages of adulthood. We understand the ways in which, for many people in Western countries, emerging adulthood may represent a turning point—a time when a difficult earlier life can be redeemed or when a previously easy life can become more troubled. Although such a characterization may apply to any postadolescent life stage, emerging adulthood is likely the first time when one can redirect one’s life course—either for better or for worse.

Speakers of American English will likely be familiar with the term “two faced,” which refers to a person who tells others one thing and then does something quite different behind those other people’s backs. Being two faced is generally regarded as something undesirable and dishonest, and calling someone two faced is usually an insult. But can a developmental stage also be two faced in a way that has nothing to do with dishonesty? If that stage is simultaneously a time of great optimism but also characterized by the onset of anxiety and depressive disorders in many people, then would that stage be considered two faced? That is, the stage has two faces—some people experience one face, others experience another face, and still others may experience both. This two-faced characterization is different from normative gains and losses in development (e.g., Heckhausen, Dixon, & Baltes, 1989), in that the life course can be redirected in emerging adulthood. For example, someone who experienced a difficult childhood can develop a positive and successful life trajectory in his or her 20s, and someone whose early life was fairly comfortable can become involved in personally or socially destructive activities as an emerging adult. Such a redirection can be more than a gain or a loss—it represents a wholesale change in how one’s life is experienced.

Emerging adulthood may represent such a two-faced developmental stage. For many people, well-being is higher in emerging adulthood than during adolescence (Galambos, Barker, & Krahn, 2006). For others, however, emerging adulthood is a time of worsening symptoms of anxiety and depression (Reinherz, Paradis, Gianconia, Stashwick, & Fitzmaurice, 2003). Paradoxically, emerging adulthood is both an “age of possibilities” (Arnett, 2000, 2007) and is often fraught with precarity and worry regarding one’s future (Côté, 2014; MacMillan, 2007). Emerging adulthood is a time of productive identity

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The two-faced nature of emerging adulthood suggests that this is one of the first times time when life can either “go good” or “go bad” for many people. Psychosocial and health outcomes in emerging adulthood are, to a large extent, dependent on one’s personality, family relationships, and socioeconomic situation during childhood and adolescence (Luecken, Kraft, & Hagan, 2009; Orth, Robins, & Roberts, 2008). However, there is a great deal of room for the exercise of agency and self-direction, which can promote resilience in young people who have faced great difficulties earlier in life (Masten et al., 2004). At the same time, individuals who appeared to function well in childhood and adolescence can transition into negative behaviors during emerging adulthood. McAdams (2010) uses the example of former U.S. President George W. Bush, who became an alcoholic in his 20s despite having grown up in a warm and supportive family. As individuals gain increased autonomy from their families of origin, exposure to new contexts and relationships can change the likelihood of positive and negative life trajectories (Luecken & Gress, 2010).

Research also indicates that success in completing the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood—such as career preparation (e.g., through college) and sustaining friendships—is predictive of career and relational success later on (Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, & Tellegen, 2004). Similarly, risky behavior in emerging adulthood—such as problematic alcohol use—is predictive of failure to prepare adequately for the challenges of adulthood (Gotham, Sher, & Wood, 2003). So the “fork in the road” that one follows during emerging adulthood holds important implications for later adult functioning, and as a result, emerging adulthood represents a key juncture in the life course (Arnett, 2000, 2007). Again, although this is likely true of later parts of adulthood as well, emerging adulthood is likely the first time that young people have encountered a developmental stage where they have sufficient autonomy to direct their future life paths.

The remainder of this article is devoted to three primary topics—predictors of emerging adult outcomes, differences between college students and their noncollege counterparts, and cultural and international diversity in the manifestation of emerging adulthood. These issues were selected because they are unresolved and/or pivotal concerns within the study of emerging adulthood. Each of these topics is addressed in its own section, and the concluding section is devoted to tying together the themes raised in these three sections.

**Predictors of Emerging Adult Outcomes: Parents, Peers, and Identity**

What accounts for the two-faced character of emerging adulthood? What predicts who will go good and who will go bad during their late teens and 20s? There are clearly a number of factors that can be implicated, but we will review three primary factors here—parent–emerging adult relationships, peer influences, and identity development.

**Parent–emerging adult relationships.** For the most part, family relationships exert their effects on emerging adult outcomes through events and bonds that occurred earlier (e.g., Kim, Conger, Lorenz, & Elder, 2001). When parents and adolescents establish a secure relationship with one another, adolescents likely carry this emotional security into their adult relationships. However, as the case of George W. Bush suggests, this is not always true.

Parenting during emerging adulthood may also be important for emerging adults’ life outcomes. In particular, autonomy-supportive parenting, where parents encourage young people to make their own decisions, is especially facilitative of well-being and competence among emerging adults (Kins, Beyers, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2009). One key emerging-adult transition that directly involves family members involves leaving home and venturing out on one’s own. Seiffge-Krenke (2006) found that emerging adults who left home at a “normative” time (ages 21–23 in this specific German sample) tended to enjoy the most favorable relationships with their parents. Those participants who left home at a later time tended to be insecurely attached and to manifest greater degrees of mental health problems (e.g., depressive or anxiety symptoms), especially according to parent reports. Paradoxically, although emerging adulthood involves increased degrees of self-direction and independence from parents, establishing oneself as an increasingly independent adult appears to be best accomplished in the context of parental warmth, guidance, and support (Aquilino, 2006).

A number of potential moderators may explain why parent–adolescent and parent–emerging adult relationships exert stronger effects on emerging adult outcomes for some individuals than for others. For example, young people with certain genetic profiles may be more or less susceptible to parental influences (and may evoke more or less warmth or hostility from their parents; Feinberg, Button, Neiderhiser, Reiss, & Hetherington, 2007), parent–youth relationships may be less protective in dangerous and violent community contexts than in less dangerous contexts (Law & Barber, 2007), parents with psychiatric or substance use issues may be more likely to transmit these problems to their children (Anda et al., 2014), divorced parents (especially nonresident parents) may exert less influence over their children’s behavior compared to parents in intact families (Carlson, 2006), and youth with more impulsive or difficult temperaments may be more resistant to parental influence and may have trouble establishing and maintaining close family relationships (Kahn, Holmes, Farley, & Kim-Spoon, 2015).
is essential to consider these (and other) moderators when studying parental influences on emerging adult outcomes.

**Peer influences.** Peers are among the most proximal influences on adolescent and emerging adult behavior. Emerging adults are likely to cite fitting in with friends as a reason for engaging in binge drinking and other problematic forms of alcohol use (Borsari, Murphy, & Barnett, 2007). Sexual risk taking in emerging adulthood—which often occurs in the company of similarly aged peers—has been associated with a host of other risky outcomes, such as hard drug use and domestic violence victimization and perpetration (Ellickson, Collins, Bogart, Klein, & Taylor, 2005). Although being in a committed relationship is generally related to lower levels of risk taking in emerging adulthood, involvement with substance using partners is predictive of greater risk for one’s own substance use (Fleming, White, & Catalano, 2010). It can be surmised, then, that the kind of risks that peers confer depends on who those peers are and the activities in which they are involved.

Peers do not only confer risk in emerging adulthood—they also help to facilitate positive developmental outcomes. For example, having at least one close friend is predictive of more favorable adjustment during the first year of college (Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008). Friends and romantic partners serve as important attachment figures and support sources during emerging adulthood (Markiewicz, Lawford, Doyle, & Haggart, 2006). Positive peer relationships can guide emerging adults toward civic engagement and other positive contributions to society (Obradović & Masten, 2007). Again, the functions of peer relationships may depend on which specific individuals the emerging adult has chosen as friends.

Of course, peers are not necessarily people with whom one interacts in person. Social media have allowed young people to maintain different online and off-line social networks (Subrahmanym, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Online and offline networks each contribute differently to well-being, in that young people are likely to seek less personal types of support from online friends (Manago, 2015; Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012). Further, some emerging adults, especially those who are unsure of themselves, may seek social support by presenting a “false self” online (e.g., developing an online personality than is different from their off-line personality; Michikyan, Subrahmanym, & Dennis, 2014). Moreover, preference for online versus off-line friends may place emerging adults at risk for loneliness and Internet addiction (Smahel, Brown, & Blinka, 2012). Online social networks might be most effectively used to supplement, rather than replace, traditional peer connections in emerging adulthood—and face-to-face friend interactions appear to be essential for emerging adult well-being.

**Identity development.** Identity is another critical domain that helps to determine whether emerging adults are successful in assuming and maintaining adult roles and responsibilities. The questions “Who am I?” “How do I fit into the world?” and “How do the various parts of myself fit together?” begin to be addressed in adolescence, but the majority of identity work in many Western countries occurs during emerging adulthood (Luyckx, Klimstra, Duriez, Van Petegem, & Beyers, 2013). Due both to increased autonomy and more advanced cognitive abilities, emerging adults are able to experiment with a number of potential roles, relationships, and behaviors in a way that is not possible during adolescence (Thompson, 2014). Increased autonomy from parents and other family members allows emerging adults to travel independently, go away to college, cohabit with romantic partners, and engage in other behaviors that are generally not permitted in adolescence (Arnett, 2007).

Further, moderate degrees of risky behaviors may serve a developmental purpose during emerging adulthood. Drug use, casual sex, and dangerous driving, among other potentially harmful behaviors, can represent attempts to explore possibilities (Arnett, 2005; Ravert, 2009). Young people can experiment with different types of sexual relationships and with different types of recreational activities (including those that involve health risks)—and then decide whether these relationships and activities fit with whom one wishes to become. Clearly, however, these behaviors carry potential dangers, especially when taken to extremes—and although most emerging adults move on to adult responsibilities and leave dangerous behaviors behind, some do not. Generally, those individuals with genetic- or personality-based predispositions toward addiction, impulsivity, or thrill seeking, or those who were already involved in nonconventional activities during childhood and adolescence, are most likely to engage in severe extents of risk-taking behaviors during emerging adulthood and to experience long-term negative consequences of these behaviors (Harden, Quinn, & Tucker-Drob, 2011; Shin, Hong, & Jeon, 2012). Identity exploration is clearly not without potential risks and dangers, especially for those individuals who may be predisposed toward severe risk-taking behavior.

There are a number of life domains in which emerging adults may work to develop a sense of identity (see Schwartz et al., 2013, for a review). These include career, relationships, ethnicity, morality, sexuality, gender, nationality, religion, and politics; among others. Different domains are likely to be salient to different individuals at different points in time (Azmia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2008). For example, academic identity is likely most important to individuals in college, ethnic identity is likely most important to individuals from ethnic minority groups, and sexual identity is likely most important to individuals from sexual minority groups. Further, identity elements within one domain may influence or conflict with those in other domains—such as religious individuals feeling conflicted about exploring their sexuality (Schachter, 2004); and elements within one domain may intersect with those in other domains to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts (Bowleg, 2008). For example, being a female engineer or a male nurse likely involves more complexity than the simple sum of gender and career identities.

All individuals hold multiple identities—that is, roles or commitments in multiple domains—that influence another at least to some extent (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011).
A general principle is that, in emerging adulthood, the ability to integrate one’s various identities into a coherent whole is associated with the greatest levels of well-being, the lowest levels of internalizing symptoms, and the lowest likelihood of engagement in harmful and dangerous behaviors (Gonzales-Backen et al., 2015; Meca et al., 2015). To the extent to which integration is important for well-being and for protecting against risky behavior, conflict between or among identities during emerging adulthood may be distressing and might be linked with attempts to self-medicate through drug and alcohol use, sexual risk taking, and other potentially harmful behaviors. More research is needed to examine this possibility. Indeed, Syed and McLean (2015) provide a number of recommendations for studying identity integration.

In more general terms, we can draw on Erikson’s (1950, 1968) theorizing about identity to pinpoint ways in which identity helps to determine whether development “goes good” or “goes bad” in emerging adulthood. Erikson spoke of identity as an interplay between synthesis and confusion, where synthesis refers to an integration of domain-specific elements into a coherent whole, whereas confusion refers to a poorly developed and/or integrated sense of self. Indeed, some research has supported Erikson’s position. For example, Schwartz et al. (2015) found that individuals with well-integrated identity configurations were the most psychologically healthy and engaged in the lowest degrees of delinquent and health-compromising behavior, whereas those who were largely confused about their identities reported low well-being, high levels of internalizing symptoms, and the highest probability of risk behavior engagement.

Importantly, identity confusion—and the distress and risk behavior that accompany it—can be either transitional or characterological (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006; Schwartz, Klimstra, Luyckx, Hale, & Meeus, 2012). That is, while individuals are sorting through identity alternatives (which may involve suspending one’s existing commitments), identity confusion and internalizing symptoms are likely to increase (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Rodriguez, 2009). In this “temporary confusion” scenario, identity confusion is likely to decrease once new commitments are enacted (cf. Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, & Pollock, 2008). However, in cases where confusion is more characterological, individuals may engage in very high levels of risky behavior (Schwartz et al., 2011). Indeed, the highest levels of risk taking were observed among those individuals who were not interested in developing a sense of identity, with those who were trying to explore but could not sustain their exploration reporting somewhat lower degrees of risk taking. In contrast, Schwartz, Beyers, et al. found that individuals who were unsuccessful at sustaining identity reported lower well-being, and higher levels of internalizing symptoms, compared to those who were uninterested in identity issues. Emerging adults experiencing temporary confusion—that is, those who were exploring identity issues—reported less severe symptomatology than either of the characterological confusion groups. So characterological identity confusion, whether characterized by an inability to engage with identity issues or by a lack of interest in identity issues, appears to be linked with the greatest extent of problematic functioning.

Of course, the three mechanisms that we review here—family, peers, and identity—are interconnected and may work together to influence outcomes. For example, family relationships, peer affiliations, and identity processes may work together to influence adolescent and emerging adult psychosocial and health outcomes (Schwartz, Mason, et al., 2009). More research is needed that assesses multiple mechanisms and examines the relative contributions of—and interactions among—these (and other) mechanisms.

Differences Between College Students and Their Noncollege Counterparts

Arnett’s (2000, 2007) theory of emerging adulthood has been endorsed by many scholars, but it has also drawn its share of critics. Côté (2014), for example, contends that Arnett’s opti-
mistic portrayal of emerging adults does not generalize across socioeconomic gradients. He also argues that the theory of emerging adulthood unnecessarily homogenizes the transition to adulthood rather than recognizing the diverse ways in which young people come of age. Schoon, Chen, Kneale, and Jager (2012) and Maggs, Jager, Patrick, and Schulenberg (2012), for example, have identified several heterogeneous groups of young people transitioning to adulthood—many of whom never attended college, work full time, and are raising families. Côté and Schoon et al. ask rhetorically whether these low-socioeconomic-status individuals—who are not financially able to delay adulthood and explore future possibilities—can be considered to be emerging adults in the sense in which Arnett has defined the term.

Many researchers studying emerging adulthood have studied samples of full-time students attending 4-year universities (Hendry & Kloep, 2007). Arnett himself (2016-a) acknowledges this trend as problematic, given that college students often differ from their noncollege peers in terms of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and prior educational opportunities (e.g., attending well-resourced vs. underfunded schools; Maggs, Jager, Patrick, & Schulenberg, 2012) and have very different earning potentials and future lifestyles compared to individuals who do not attend college (or who do not finish; Mitchell & Syed, 2015).

If we examine the distinguishing features of emerging adulthood proposed by Arnett (2000, 2007)—identity exploration, possibilities, feeling in between, instability, and self-focus—one might most easily picture college students who live on or near campus and spend most of their time in an environment that is isolated from the “real world.” In Arnett’s (2016-a) words,

Residential colleges and universities … represent a social island set off from the rest of society, a temporary safe haven where emerging adults can explore possibilities in love, work, and worldviews with many of the responsibilities of adult life kept at bay. (p. 1)
Individuals within such a context are exposed to a natural laboratory for trying out potential worldviews, romantic and sexual relationships, and career paths without the expectation that these choices will be permanent (Montgomery & Côté, 2003). Residential mobility is expected—many university students live in a different dormitory, fraternity/sorority house, or apartment each academic year (Arnett, 2004)—and residential mobility carries a quite different meaning among full-time college students (especially those who live on or near campus) than it does among individuals who are working full time and/or raising families. For example, college students living away from home may spend their first year in the dormitory, their second year in a fraternity or sorority house, and their last two or three years sharing apartments with friends or cohabiting with a romantic partner. In contrast, noncollege emerging adults—especially those from low-socioeconomic backgrounds—may be more likely to move in search of work or because they can no longer afford to stay in their current residence (Mitchell & Syed, 2015).

In terms of the other pillars of emerging adulthood, a 20-year-old who is attending college in a “university town” will likely have many opportunities to explore his or her identity, dream of possibilities for the future, contemplate what it might be like to hold adult responsibilities (but likely be grateful that these responsibilities are not upon him or her as yet), and spend a great deal of time thinking about herself. In contrast, a 20-year-old with a full-time job and a young family may not be able to engage in these activities. Of course, there are many scenarios in between, such as college students who commute to campus from their families’ homes and students who work full time while attending college. Arnett’s criteria for emerging adulthood may manifest themselves differently among young people who are not able to—or choose not to—delay adult responsibilities or who enjoy less than complete “freedom” (such as those who live at home with family members; Arnett, 2016-b; Syed & Mitchell, 2013). As Arnett (2011, p. 265) notes, there are “many emerging adulthoods,” depending on how a specific person navigates this age period. For example, some individuals live at home with their parents, others attend residential colleges, and still others marry and begin raising families.

However, we must keep mind that this variability is not necessarily based on choices people make—it is often based on socioeconomic status and ethnicity (Schoon, Chen, Kneale, & Jager, 2012). Young people in the “forgotten half” who do not attend college are disproportionately poor and non-White (Maggs et al., 2012). If we are not careful to take into account all of the factors that dictate the specific life course a given individual follows, we might wind up pathologizing poor and minority individuals. Accordingly, a concern expressed by many critics of Arnett’s work has been “To what extent is the theory of emerging adulthood a theory about White, middle-class people?” Although Arnett (2016-b) has provided evidence that the five pillars of his theory apply equally across socioeconomic brackets, among low-income individuals, these pillars may manifest themselves in ways that are less consistent with much prior research on emerging adulthood. For example, low-income individuals may be more likely to explore their identities through work experiences than through attending college.

One way to address the criticisms of emerging adulthood theory is to heed the advice of Syed and Mitchell (2013) and distinguish emerging adulthood (the stage) from emerging adults (the individual people). A 20-year-old who works full time and is raising children may nonetheless still have friends who are living a more “typical” emerging adult lifestyle. Our hypothetical 20-year-old working parent might therefore find time occasionally to socialize with these friends and may be able to spend at least some time sampling the emerging adult experience. So the answer to whether or not our 20-year-old working parent is an emerging adult may be more complex than we might assume at first glance.

From a sociological perspective, emerging adulthood represents a “gap” between the realities of childhood, such as structured schooling and living under parental authority, and the realities of adulthood, such as “permanent” work and romantic partnership (MacMillan, 2007). As a group, people aged 18–25 tend to move residences more often, are more likely to change jobs or be unemployed, and are less likely to be married or to have children, compared to people in their late 20s and beyond (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The emerging adult age-group has been, to some extent, “left out” as the gulf between the externally structured life stages of adolescence and adulthood has widened. Sociologically speaking, there is no firm “place” for individuals ages 18–25 in many contemporary Western societies (Côté, 2000). They are no longer minors attending secondary school, and for the most part, they have yet to enter the full-time workforce and to assume adult commitments such as permanent partnership and parenthood.

At the same time, whereas life stages refer to normative expectations for individuals at a given point in the life cycle, there is considerable variability in terms of how people experience that life stage. Social-class indicators are powerful predictors of how—and the extent to which—young people experience the pillars of emerging adulthood (see Maggs et al., 2012; Schoon et al., 2012, for empirical evidence). It may be mistaken to argue that individuals who do not experience emerging adulthood in specific ways therefore do not experience emerging adulthood at all (Arnett, 2016-b). Rather, it likely behooves us to study the diverse ways in which young people navigate the transition from adolescence to adulthood—where such studies do not necessarily contraindicate the existence of emerging adulthood at the societal level. Although college students are among the easiest groups of emerging adults for academic researchers to study, we must be careful not to generalize their experiences to the whole of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2016-a; Mitchell & Syed, 2015).

Two examples of comparative research are provided: identity development and substance use. Regarding identity, two studies (Crocetti et al., 2015; Luyckx et al., 2008) have compared college students and working emerging adults. Crocetti et al. found that, among Italian and Japanese emerging adults,
those enrolled in college were significantly higher in identity exploration, self-focus, and feeling in between compared to those who were employed full time. Luyckx et al. found that, among Belgian emerging adults, those working full time were more likely to view themselves as adults, maintained stronger identity commitments, and engaged in less ruminative and unproductive identity exploration (e.g., worrying whether one has made the correct choice), compared to their college student counterparts. These findings suggest that college students are more likely to exemplify the features of emerging adulthood than are their noncollege counterparts.

Concerning risky activities, only alcohol-related behaviors are more prevalent among college students than among noncollege emerging adults. College students consume more alcohol (White et al., 2006) and report more symptoms of alcohol abuse (Slutske, 2005) compared to their noncollege counterparts. However, although college men reported more drunk driving compared to noncollege men, the opposite pattern was observed for women (Bingham, Shope, & Tang, 2005). Further, Bingham et al. found strong differences between college completers and students who started college but did not finish—generally, the college completers engaged in less problematic alcohol use, and less drunk driving, than did college noncompleters.

In terms of other types of risky behavior, noncollege emerging adults may be at greater risk compared to college students. For example, marijuana (Bingham et al., 2005) and methamphetamine (Herman-Stahl, Krebs, Kroutil, & Heller, 2007) use tend to be more prevalent among noncollege emerging adults. Bailey, Haggerty, White, and Catalano (2011) found that noncollege emerging adults were more likely than college students to engage in casual sex and in unprotected intercourse. These findings for identity and health risk behaviors suggest that college students and noncollege emerging adults differ in a number of ways. Further still, college completers may differ from noncompleters. Using college student samples (generally first- and second-year students) therefore provides an unknown degree of generalizability to the emerging adult population. Of course, this is not an indictment against college student research. Rather, it is simply a word of caution that college student samples should be labeled and discussed as just that—college student samples—and generalized only to the universe of students attending institutions of higher learning. More research is needed to compare college students against other types of emerging adults (and college completers against students who do not finish their degrees) in terms of other important variables, such as family relationships, peer associations, and conceptions of adulthood. A full understanding of emerging adulthood—including the ways in which the ways in which emerging adulthood represents a “turning point” in the life span—requires studying many different segments of the emerging adult population.

**Emerging Adulthood in Cross-Cultural Context**

A final issue to be addressed here is the extent to which the applicability of emerging adulthood to various societies and the forms in which it appears across societies. As noted by a number of sociologists and anthropologists (e.g., MacMillan, 2007; Schoon, McCulloch, Joshi, Wiggins, & Bynner, 2001), the Western transition from adolescence to adulthood has widened as a result of massive social and economic changes. This extended transition to adulthood, the gap in the life span that it has created, and the need for postsecondary educational credentials and individualized life trajectories are what have given rise to emerging adulthood. A perusal of Arnett’s (2000, 2007) pillars of emerging adulthood suggests that at least some of them are largely agency based—such as identity exploration (Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005) and consideration of future possibilities (Luyckx, Lens, Smits, & Goossens, 2010). In a traditional, non-Western society where entry into adulthood is marked by specific rituals, occurs in the same way for everyone, and does not involve individualized decision making, emerging adulthood may not exist (Arnett, 2000, 2011). For example, isolated tribes in the Amazon jungles likely do not expect their members to decide what to do with their lives, to experiment with different social and sexual relationships, or to find their way into the workforce. Indeed, these roles and trajectories are likely scripted for most members of the group. Gelfand et al.’s (2011) distinction between tight and loose cultures is useful here—cultural contexts where rules are strictly enforced, where men’s and women’s roles are sharply differentiated, and where deviance is not tolerated may be less likely to support an inherently amorphous life stage like emerging adulthood.

But what about societies that are in transition—that is, where tightness-looseness is changing and where globalization is taking hold? Does emerging adulthood exist there, and if so, in what form does it appear? There are a number of such societies that could be used as examples, but here we will use two examples—Japan and the Republic of Georgia.

Japan was traditionally regarded as a largely collectivist and “tight” country (Matsumoto, 2002). However, for more than a generation, Japanese culture has been shifting toward what Matsumoto calls “individualistic collectivism.” By this, he means that, although young people are expected to be respectful and deferential to their parents and other elders, they are more able to choose their own life paths than were previous generations of Japanese adolescents and young adults. Today’s young Japanese people might be said to experience emerging adulthood because they are charged with finding their way into a technologically oriented labor market (Sugimura & Mizokami, 2012). As a result, whereas emerging adulthood may have been less applicable to Japan in the 1980s, it is likely important there now (Crocetti et al., In Press).

The Republic of Georgia provides an example of a society that is undergoing rapid social change and where stability is difficult to find. Georgia was occupied by the Soviet regime until its collapse in 1991—at which time Georgia became an independent nation. Georgian national identity has been in flux in the two-plus decades since, for at least three reasons. First, in contrast to the denial of religion that was enforced during the Soviet occupation, the Orthodox Church has increased strongly

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A final issue to be addressed here is the extent to which the applicability of emerging adulthood to various societies and the forms in which it appears across societies. As noted by a number of sociologists and anthropologists (e.g., MacMillan, 2007; Schoon, McCulloch, Joshi, Wiggins, & Bynner, 2001), the Western transition from adolescence to adulthood has widened as a result of massive social and economic changes. This extended transition to adulthood, the gap in the life span that it has created, and the need for postsecondary educational credentials and individualized life trajectories are what have given rise to emerging adulthood. A perusal of Arnett’s (2000, 2007) pillars of emerging adulthood suggests that at least some of them are largely agency based—such as identity exploration (Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005) and consideration of future possibilities (Luyckx, Lens, Smits, & Goossens, 2010). In a traditional, non-Western society where entry into adulthood is marked by specific rituals, occurs in the same way for everyone, and does not involve individualized decision making, emerging adulthood may not exist (Arnett, 2000, 2011). For example, isolated tribes in the Amazon jungles likely do not expect their members to decide what to do with their lives, to experiment with different social and sexual relationships, or to find their way into the workforce. Indeed, these roles and trajectories are likely scripted for most members of the group. Gelfand et al.’s (2011) distinction between tight and loose cultures is useful here—cultural contexts where rules are strictly enforced, where men’s and women’s roles are sharply differentiated, and where deviance is not tolerated may be less likely to support an inherently amorphous life stage like emerging adulthood.

But what about societies that are in transition—that is, where tightness-looseness is changing and where globalization is taking hold? Does emerging adulthood exist there, and if so, in what form does it appear? There are a number of such societies that could be used as examples, but here we will use two examples—Japan and the Republic of Georgia.

Japan was traditionally regarded as a largely collectivist and “tight” country (Matsumoto, 2002). However, for more than a generation, Japanese culture has been shifting toward what Matsumoto calls “individualistic collectivism.” By this, he means that, although young people are expected to be respectful and deferential to their parents and other elders, they are more able to choose their own life paths than were previous generations of Japanese adolescents and young adults. Today’s young Japanese people might be said to experience emerging adulthood because they are charged with finding their way into a technologically oriented labor market (Sugimura & Mizokami, 2012). As a result, whereas emerging adulthood may have been less applicable to Japan in the 1980s, it is likely important there now (Crocutti et al., In Press).

The Republic of Georgia provides an example of a society that is undergoing rapid social change and where stability is difficult to find. Georgia was occupied by the Soviet regime until its collapse in 1991—at which time Georgia became an independent nation. Georgian national identity has been in flux in the two-plus decades since, for at least three reasons. First, in contrast to the denial of religion that was enforced during the Soviet occupation, the Orthodox Church has increased strongly...
in importance since the early 1990s (Froese, 2004). Contrary to what has occurred in Western Europe and North America, the younger generation of Georgians are more likely to attend church than their parents are. Second, as a result of globalization, Georgian society has rapidly transitioned from an isolated region of the world to a member of the global community—resulting in an uncomfortable mix between traditional and Western values. Young people are expected to live with their parents even after they are married, and premarital sex is quite uncommon (Bearinger, Sieving, Ferguson, & Sharma, 2004). At the same time, however, younger Georgians are more likely to want to explore different ideologies and relationships, perhaps leading to clashes within their families (Pelkmans, 2006). Third, Georgia is a largely poor country, with few economic opportunities for young people (Nichol, 2013) suggesting that when young people do explore their identities, they will likely be unable to actualize the choices they have made (Skhirtladze, Javakhishvili, Schwartz, Beyers, & Luyckx, 2016).

What do these trends mean for emerging adulthood in Georgia? Skhirtladze, Javakhishvili, Schwartz, Beyers, and Luyckx (2016) found that identity exploration in breadth—sorting through a range of possible alternatives before committing to one or more of the options considered—is more strongly linked with rumination and anxiety in Georgia than in Western European and North American contexts. Identity exploration and consideration of possibilities might be difficult given the lack of opportunities for most young people, and self-focus may be incompatible with the collectivist and family-centered values that characterize mainstream Georgian culture. Like many low-socioeconomic contexts (Mitchell & Syed, 2015), instability in Georgia may occur not because of a transitional life stage, but rather due to a need to move in search of work or because one’s current residence is no longer affordable. So we do not know the extent to which emerging adulthood, as defined by Arnett, exists in Georgia. The separation of adolescence from adulthood, with the transitional period in between, may not have occurred in this context.

Of course, Japan and Georgia are only two examples of national contexts in which emerging adulthood might exist to greater or lesser extents and where social, cultural, and economic changes may or may not have ushered (or be ushering) in the social and economic gap between adolescence and adulthood that facilitates emerging adulthood. One can imagine a number of Middle Eastern, Latin American, Asian, and African countries and regions where emerging adulthood might be contraindicated by tight social norms and strict adherence to traditional customs and beliefs. The freedom and amorphousness that characterizes emerging adulthood may be most compatible with “loose” cultures where individual choice and discretion are prioritized over allegiance to familial, national, or other group expectations. Indeed, the freedom to explore one’s identity, to feel in between adolescence and adulthood, to spend time considering future possibilities, and to focus on oneself is most likely to be presented within a cultural context with relatively few formal rules and a high tolerance for countercultural or deviant behavior (Côté, 2000).

Not coincidently, tight cultures that may contraindicate emerging adulthood are generally characterized by higher poverty rates, more overpopulation, scarcer natural resources, more natural disasters, and more dangerousness (e.g., sectarian violence) compared to loose cultures (Gelfand et al., 2011). These precarious social and environmental conditions likely make it more difficult to engage in identity exploration or to spend time thinking about the future or focusing on oneself. Although the extent to which these conditions contraindicate the existence of emerging adulthood requires further study, it does stand to reason that a gap between adolescence and adulthood may be less likely to exist in these kinds of contexts. To the extent to which it does exist, its existence may be largely limited to college students and individuals from wealthy backgrounds (Galambos & Martinez, 2007; Nelson & Chen, 2007).

For this same reason, findings obtained with Western samples should not be generalized to individuals from other parts of the world. Arnett (2008) refers to this problem as the “neglected 95%.” He does so because the overwhelming majority of research samples in American Psychological Association journals in the early 2000s were from the English-speaking world or from Western Europe, with almost no representation from Latin America, Asia, Africa, or the Middle East. Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) refer to the majority of research samples published in international journals as “Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic”. The argument furthered by Arnett and by Henrich et al. is that Western samples are, in fact, taken to be generalizable to the rest of the world even though there is considerable evidence that such generalizations should not be made. There are important differences in cultural tightness/looseness, availability of economic and natural resources, preparedness to respond to natural and man-made disasters, and overpopulation between Western and non-Western nations (Gelfand et al., 2011). Indeed, the vast majority of the world’s population growth is occurring in non-Western countries such as China, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Brazil (Internet World Statistics, 2015).

Emerging adulthood research is plagued by many of these same issues. The majority of studies on emerging adulthood are conducted in Western nations, with far less attention to the extent to which the features of emerging adulthood—as well as the social and economic separation between adolescence and adulthood that facilitates the emergence of these features—generalize to non-Western contexts. Addressing this issue is of primary importance if we are to understand the types of contexts in which emerging adulthood operates as well as the differences in how it operates across a range of contexts. Which specific social, cultural, and economic factors are most supportive of or inhibitive toward emerging adulthood? Is emerging adulthood as pivotal and two faced in non-Western contexts as it is in the West? Are the differences between college students and their noncollege peers even greater in societies with fewer resources and more danger? These are questions that
have the potential to guide the next generation of emerging adulthood research.

Conclusion

This article has addressed three key issues in emerging adulthood theory and research—the two-faced character of this life stage (including discussion of factors that are likely to influence whether life goes good or goes bad), differences between college students and their noncollegiate peers, and cross-cultural and international differences in the existence and manifestation of emerging adulthood. Of these three issues, we probably know the most about the two-faced character of emerging adulthood. We have a sense of the ways in which family, peers, and identity influence positive and negative psychosocial and health outcomes in emerging adulthood and beyond. We know far less, however, about how college students differ from their same-age noncollegiate peers and how emerging adulthood generalizes (or does not generalize) across important cultural, social, economic, and environmental factors that differ systematically between Western and non-Western nations and regions.

Further, we have proceeded from the assumption that emerging adulthood results from the social and economic gap that has emerged between adolescence and adulthood (e.g., Arnett, 2000, 2007). Some writers (e.g., Côté, 2014; Schoon et al., 2012) have argued that this gap between adolescence and emerging adulthood can exist without the need for an emerging adulthood stage as defined by Arnett, but the opposing question—whether emerging adulthood (or at least some of its features) can exist in the absence of the gap between adolescence and adulthood—has not been examined. In tight societies with few economic or natural resources, where the majority of citizens live in poverty and where autocratic, corrupt, or ineffectual governments are in power, do many young people search for an identity, think about a range of possibilities open to them, view themselves as being in between adolescence and adulthood, focus largely on themselves, and experiment with a variety of lifestyles?

The fact that we are ready to pose the key questions outlined in this article is evidence that emerging adulthood theory and research is coming of age. Although the concept of emerging adulthood does have its critics, it is widely accepted enough that it is time to explore the nuances and wider applicability of the stage. It is hoped that this article represents a step in that direction.

Author’s Note

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