

Slacking as Self-Discovery

The Rebranding of Indolence as 'Emerging Adulthood'

Last August, the *New York Times Magazine* inspired a national moment of navel-gazing when it ran a cover story on a new phase of human development coming to a young person near you: "emerging adulthood." Previously known as the years between eighteen and twenty-five, or casually as young adulthood, this time is now no mere period of being in school and then embarking on an occupational and family path:

The traditional cycle seems to have gone off course, as young people remain untethered to romantic partners or to permanent homes, going back to school for lack of better options, traveling, avoiding commitments, competing ferociously for unpaid internships or temporary (and often grueling) Teach for America jobs, forestalling the beginning of adult life.

New demographic fashions call for scholarly counterparts, and Clark University psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett has answered that call, naming this trend "emerging adulthood," a psychologically fraught time of transition, marked by what he has categorized as "identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between and... a sense of possibilities."

Extrapolating primarily from the statistics on the increasing age of marriage and childbearing in the United

States and refusing to lament them, Arnett argues forcefully that emerging adulthood is a positive development. Free from external constraints (and often supported financially by their parents), twentysomethings have the opportunity to try an array of temporary jobs, relationships, educational paths, and residences to find which of these are most to their preference. In winnowing down the options, they are also able to "find themselves," a discovery that will serve them well as adults, assuming they ever decide to become adults. Armed with the self-knowledge gained from a decade of working at Starbucks, joining the Peace Corps, and sharing a basement studio in Brooklyn with four other emerging adults, those at the end of emerging adulthood will better make the family and career decisions they had been putting off, resulting in a future of greater life satisfaction and stability.

Emerging apace with emerging adults is a slew of self-help books to aid in their self-discovery as un-self-discovered. One of the earliest and most well known is the 2001 book *Quarterlife Crisis: The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties* by Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner, followed three years later by Damian Barr's *Get It Together: A Guide to Surviving Your Quarterlife Crisis* and Arnett's own *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road From the Late Teens Through the Twenties*.

If this all sounds a bit confused, fluffy, and New Agey, Robin Marantz Henig, the author of the *Times Magazine* piece, has Arnett's studies and vague neuroscientific speculation about brain maturation to back it up. Emerging adulthood, she argues, isn't merely a description of the way a narrow sliver of affluent and well-educated people are choosing to spend their twenties, but a seismic shift that will have political consequences.

Henig's and Arnett's argument about the benefits of emerging adulthood rests on an understanding of human authenticity as freedom of the will from external constraint. The most (in modern parlance) "self-realized" person is the one who most freely chooses his course and has the least imposed on him by necessity. The notion of childhood as a time of freedom from obligation plays into this conception of authenticity, since it seems to create a socially accepted hiatus from otherwise ubiquitous necessities. Thus, in Henig's cursory history, there was a time before the periods of adolescence and even childhood were recognized, a dark age when people had to marry and bear children young, start working early and never stop, and otherwise do the things that we can now put off; otherwise, they would starve to death or be eaten by bears. Because these young people were not free to choose these burdens for themselves, they were never truly happy. But then man developed technology, and through it, luxury and a growing GDP, and found that he no longer had to subject him-

self to the grinding impositions of nature for his entire life.

The first evidence of this new freedom was adolescence, which was discovered when the necessity of child labor was peeled away in the early twentieth century to reveal the angst, rebellious, hormonal but authentic fourteen-year-old within. The very existence of this creature demonstrated that the previous incarnation of the fourteen-year-old—the one who worked in the mines or the fields or the sculleries—was a product of necessity and not truth. The adolescent was now liberated. But everyone was still bound by necessity after leaving adolescence.

Now emerging adulthood is here to advance the upper limits of human freedom by a few more years by casting off later necessities: "fewer entry-level jobs even after all that schooling; young people feeling less rush to marry because of the general acceptance of premarital sex, cohabitation, and birth control; and young women feeling less rush to have babies given their wide range of career options and their access to assisted reproductive technology if they delay pregnancy beyond their most fertile years." Newly free from these externally applied burdens, people in their twenties have more space to shape their lives according to their own arbitrary wills. And what have they made of themselves with this newfound freedom? It seems that at present, the self-realization of the will manifests itself in the phenomenon of hipsters. But, hey, they're still working out the kinks.

Henig flirts with circumstantial explanations for the rise of emerging adulthood: Perhaps we can attribute it to a weak economy, or to a mismatch between the available jobs and the educational qualifications of recent graduates, or to social pressures to delay marriage. But she finally rejects these causes, since they would all make emerging adulthood a necessity rather than a matter of freedom and self-realization. If the twentysomethings who are living with their parents and meandering in and out of work and relationships are not trying to find themselves but really trying to find increasingly elusive jobs, then there is nothing to celebrate.

In practical, hard-nosed terms, freedom from necessity is good because it buys time, and time results in better decisions: “Maybe if kids take longer to choose their mates and their careers, they’ll make fewer mistakes and live happier lives.” This seems to be intended as the most persuasive argument in favor of welcoming emerging adulthood as a developmental phase. No doubt many adults wish in hindsight that their youth had lasted longer, but it’s not actually clear from such nostalgia that a longer youth would have resulted in a happier or wiser adulthood, assuming they ever decided to try out adulthood. Since time itself is not guidance in matters of marriage or vocation (especially if both are delayed because they are either unavailable or no longer worthwhile in principle), today’s emerging adults may just be taking longer to make the

same mistakes. Unless we believe that the longer one takes to make a decision, the better it will be—such that the person who delays marriage until the age of 90 is most likely to choose the best spouse—we must look to some other standard to determine the wisdom of such decisions.

Or maybe these past decisions were not mistakes at all. The view that decisions about marriage, work, and childrearing made in the past were generally misguided is the fundamental assumption held by the boosters of emerging adulthood. According to Henig, decisions made under constraint are by definition bad decisions: “When people are forced to adopt adult responsibilities early, maybe they just do what they have to do, whether or not their brains are ready.” But did these poor past victims of necessity perform their responsibilities ineffectively? How do we know they were forced to take them up too early if we don’t know that they did them badly, or in some clearly immature way?

If we reflect on the problem of early responsibilities, we immediately come up against the realization that the freedom-quashing necessities of the past are actually still present in most of the world. Emerging adulthood is

rare in the developing world, [Arnett] says, where people have to grow up fast, and it’s often skipped in the industrialized world by the people who marry early, by teenage mothers forced to grow up, by young men or women who

go straight from high school to whatever job is available without a chance to dabble until they find the perfect fit.

Paying lip service to the disciplinary expectation in psychology that group behavior be universally observable to be classified as a developmental stage, Henig goes through some perfunctory hand-wringing over emerging adulthood's narrow application to affluent Americans. But in reality, the narrowness of observed emerging adulthood is no problem, since its premise is that *all* people in their twenties would behave this way if they could only be untethered from the grinding pressures that force them "to grow up fast." Underneath every seemingly grown-up twentysomething with a family and a steady job, a directionless emerging adult is gasping to be released.

There is, for example, Nicole, a young woman Arnett interviews in his book who grew up in a housing project and began working at eight to care for her younger siblings. In a strikingly mature, *actually* adult way, she managed to hold down a full-time job, take care of her family, and earn a degree. Though this may strike some as a remarkable achievement, this view overlooks how much more fun she could have had if she didn't have all those pesky responsibilities to weigh her down. "Is it only a grim pessimist like me who sees how many roadblocks there will be on the way to achieving those dreams and who wonders what kind of freewheeling emerging

adulthood she is supposed to be having?" Henig laments. Given freedom from economic want, social mores that encourage early marriage, and limits to college access, every poor Vietnamese rice farmer and rural Pakistani bride could be going to yoga classes and selling her handmade textiles on Etsy. Wouldn't that make the world a better place?

Such descriptions of emerging adulthood as something that one is "supposed to have" soon enough slip into talk of emerging adulthood as a right, and one that government programs are obliged to provide for everyone:

There aren't institutions set up to serve people in this specific age range; social services from a developmental perspective tend to disappear after adolescence. But it's possible to envision some.... How about expanding programs like City Year, in which 17- to 24-year-olds from diverse backgrounds spend a year mentoring inner-city children in exchange for a stipend, health insurance, child care, cellphone service and a \$5,350 education award? Or a federal program in which a government-sponsored savings account is created for every newborn, to be cashed in at age 21 to support a year's worth of travel, education or volunteer work.... It requires only a bit of ingenuity—as well as some societal forbearance and financial commitment—to think of ways to expand some of the

programs that now work so well for the elite, like the Fulbright fellowship or the Peace Corps, to make the chance for temporary service and self-examination available to a wider range of young people.

If the great difficulty of Arnett's theory is that emerging adulthood is not yet universal, then the universalization of emerging adulthood through government incentives will take care of that problem. And what more important use of tax revenues is there than to level the emerging-adulthood playing field so that the less fortunate can have equal access to a year or two of aimless hipsterdom after college? Some stingy doubters may insist on withholding subsidies for sailing the seas of self-discovery, but Henig duly chastens them: "A century ago, it was helpful to start thinking of adolescents as engaged in the work of growing up rather than as merely lazy or rebellious.... Twentysomethings are engaged in work, too, even if it looks as if they are aimless or failing to pull their weight, Arnett says."

But if self-reflection is a kind of essential psychological labor that needs to be recognized and supported by society, then by what principle is it to be limited to twentysomethings? Important life changes and decisions arise in subsequent years, too. If, "during the timeout they are granted from nonstop, often tedious and dispiriting responsibilities, 'emerging adults develop skills for daily living, gain a better understanding of

who they are and what they want from life and begin to build a foundation for their adult lives," then why can't adults do the same? Certainly the twenties can't be the only time when people wish for a reprieve from punching the clock and getting dinner on the table. People in their thirties and forties need to think through things too. What about the social-service needs of these groups? Shouldn't they be freed from necessity as well, via government subsidy? (And, in fact, Arnett seems to anticipate this objection when he calls the period after "emerging adulthood" not adulthood, but "young adulthood." Watch out for the next *New York Times* piece on the unwillingness of *thirtysomethings* to grow up.)

What marks off adulthood these days is, according to Arnett's findings, "Learning to stand alone." In surveys of late adolescents' and college students' views of adulthood, Arnett has consistently found that they elevate fuzzy character traits like selflessness and responsibility above concrete accomplishments like marriage and childrearing as the necessary milestones for adulthood. The items deemed most "necessary" to adulthood were, "Accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions" (93 percent), "Decide on personal beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences" (81 percent), "Become less self-oriented, develop greater consideration for others" (81 percent), and "Financially independent from parents" (74 percent). Full-time employment, marriage, childbirth, and even finishing

one's education ranked at the bottom of the survey. Arnett takes these findings to point to a conception among young adults that self-sufficiency is the fundamental prerequisite for adulthood.

If this is really how young adults are thinking about their futures, they are in for a good deal of disappointment. Noble as it may sound to aspire to selflessness, independence of mind, and responsibility for one's actions, these qualities are subjective, limitless, and have little specifically to do with adulthood. They are marks of good character—in children as much as adults—but being an adult is not clearly synonymous with being a nice or admirable person. Even a relatively responsible person can always become more so—is he not an adult at forty-five even if he becomes *more* responsible at fifty-five? Moreover, if adulthood comes to be defined as independence from other people—"standing alone"—then it is at odds with family and indeed, most of the social life of adults, which has the tendency to trap one in a web of pesky obligations and dependencies without which society cannot persist.

One reason that Arnett's survey generated such a distorted picture of adulthood is that it was administered to the very demographic that Arnett admits is most intensely self-absorbed and unlikely to have experienced concrete milestones like marriage and full-time employment. This cohort's picture of adulthood can only be aspirational—vague, elusive, romantic, and muddled together with ideas

about the meaning of life in general. This exercise is akin to asking young children to describe their view of marriage and discovering a widespread belief that it involves frog princes. The picture that adolescents and college students have of adulthood may be closer to reality, but it still demands correction by experience and advice, not wholesale endorsement.

Ann Hulbert, the dean of the history of American childhood, has pointed out that the adults who have been so eager to legitimize emerging adulthood do not "seem to be asking themselves whether fixating on the phase will help twentysomethings outgrow it." In a response in *Slate* to the Henig piece, she wrote, "Arnett's new category perhaps says more about how parental figures think about young people than about how young people think about themselves (unless they've by now swallowed their elders' theories)." What Henig and Arnett and their supporters have overlooked is the possibility that young people have in fact modeled themselves on their elders' theories, and that the well-meaning army of parents and nonprofit administrators enlisted to support their self-explorations and self-realizations are merely exacerbating a delusion.

It is clear that what irks Henig most about adulthood is its demands of responsibility for other people. Over and over, she treats adulthood as a period of burdensome obligations we should be only too happy to postpone or avoid. She laments that people like Nicole—the woman who

began working at age eight—are, by assuming such responsibilities, actually doing themselves harm. Reflecting on neuroscience research on brain development, Henig writes, “Maybe it’s only now, when young people are allowed to forestall adult obligations without fear of public censure, that the rate of societal maturation can finally fall into better sync with the maturation of the brain.” She reaches this conclusion based on the familiar neuroscientific finding that, as she puts it, “the brains we have are shaped largely in response to the demands made of them”—but she does not seem to appreciate that one could just as easily conclude, in the other direction, that properly shaping ourselves requires that adequate demands be made of us.

Such wistful desire to evade responsibility exposes the childishness of the adults now preaching the good news of emerging adulthood. They have decided that taking responsibility for other people—spouses, children, employees and subordinates, neighbors, friends,

eventually even parents—and relying on them in turn is the heaviest burden that can befall a person. But what if this is instead the means to happiness? Advocates of emerging adulthood share in common with children a proclivity to see the future as nearly infinite and themselves as, for all practical purposes, immortal. In their view of themselves and their world, it is never too late and there is never any rush. But a few-year increase in the average life expectancy has bought us much less time than they think, and it has done nothing to mitigate our potential to make irreversible errors and experience gnawing regret. The indefinite extension of childhood doesn’t even approximate the immortality required to free us from these miseries. In the meantime, putting off all responsibilities and commitments as long as possible to avoid hard realities may only result in missing the opportunity to make these decisions at all.

—*Rita Koganzon is a graduate student at Harvard.*