



# Research Briefing

## Children's Research Centre

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### EMERGING ADULTHOOD - THE CHILDREN'S RESEARCH CENTRE'S ANNUAL LECTURE 2007

#### *Coming of Age in the 21st Century: The New and Longer Road to Adulthood*

Liz Kerrins

The Children's Research Centre's Annual Lecture 2007 was delivered by US Psychologist Professor Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, Clark University, Massachusetts on November 14th 2007 in Trinity College Dublin on the subject of his theory of Emerging Adulthood. Dr. Maureen Gaffney, Chair of the National Economic and Social Forum, responded to Professor Arnett's lecture. An invited roundtable was convened following the lecture to discuss the policy implications of emerging adulthood for young people's career and work patterns. This Research Briefing summaries messages from both events.

#### Key Messages

- ▶ Professor Arnett (2004; 2007) suggests that 'emerging adulthood' is a distinct developmental period in the life course for young people in industrialised countries, lasting from age eighteen to the mid or late twenties.
- ▶ In this period of instability and self-focus, the transition to adulthood is postponed and identity and possible life directions are explored. In previous theories of development adolescence was positioned as the period of independence and identity formation and people used their twenties to make the transition into adult roles and responsibilities.
- ▶ The advent of emerging adulthood is the result of social change - delayed marriage and parenthood and increasing numbers of young people entering higher education and staying for longer.
- ▶ It is a phenomenon of affluence, and cultural and economic factors mean that young people in low-income families, lone parents, young homeless people and those leaving care may not be able to benefit from the opportunity to postpone adult roles and responsibilities.

#### Key Policy Implications

- ▶ A tension exists between education and employment systems and norms, formed in an era when people were considered adults in their early twenties, and the attitudes and expectations of emerging adults.
- ▶ The design and delivery of higher education in Ireland may require re-evaluation. It seems incongruous, and may be a cause of poor retention rates, that we ask young people to make fixed education and employment choices when they are entering emerging adulthood, and then penalise them when they change course.
- ▶ Emerging adults are not looking for a job or career for life but an endless series of opportunities. Policy remains overly focused on developing skills and competencies and has given insufficient thought to the importance of new attitudes to work and new patterns of behaviour.
- ▶ Non-traditional higher level students (mature and access students) become non-traditional graduates when seeking employment. They come to workforce with responsibilities related to their background, and tend to not have the same levels of confidence when job seeking as traditional students. The challenge is to develop strategies to increase the employability of the non-traditional graduate. National policy needs to increase support for childcare and undertaking post-graduate qualifications.



Trinity College Dublin

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## EMERGING ADULthood

### COMING OF AGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY: THE NEW AND LONGER ROAD TO ADULthood

#### Background

The Children's Research Centre's Annual Lecture 2007 was delivered by US Psychologist Professor Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, Clark University, Massachusetts on November 14th 2007 in Trinity College Dublin on the subject of his theory of Emerging Adulthood. Dr. Maureen Gaffney, Chair of the National Economic and Social Forum, responded to Professor Arnett's lecture. An invited roundtable was convened on November 15th to discuss the policy implications of emerging adulthood for young people's career and work patterns, with presentations by Professor Arnett; Mr. Sean Gannon, Director, Careers Advisory Service, TCD; and Ms. Carmel Carroll, Coordinator, Alumni Development, Trinity Access Programmes.

This Research Briefing summaries key messages from both events.

#### Emerging adulthood

- ▶ Professor Arnett (2004; 2007) suggests 'emerging adulthood' as a distinct developmental period in the life course for many young people in industrialised countries, lasting from age eighteen to the mid or even late twenties.
- ▶ In human development theory, the development of independence and identity - gaining independence from family and figuring out who you are and what you could do with your life - has been considered the task of adolescence. By age 21, young people were believed to have 'come of age', using their twenties to make the transition into adult roles and responsibilities: moving from education into employment, from the family to their own home, from financial dependence to independence, and marriage and parenthood.
- ▶ But with recent social changes - delayed marriage and parenthood and increasing numbers of young people entering higher education and staying for longer - people now use their late teens and twenties to explore possible life directions and identities and postpone the transition to adulthood. This is considered by Arnett to be the period of emerging adulthood.

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*I think a person of my age should not yet be considered an adult as I feel that life is a huge learning curve and I don't know the half of it. I also feel that I am not looked upon by elders as an adult yet. But at the same time I am expected to have huge responsibilities. Being an adult means that your wild days are over and you have been fitted with a sensible head, ready for settling down for what's ahead. In my opinion there are many years ahead to be an adult and you have to explore what suits you best in order to be the person you want to eventually be, as you will be stuck like that forever!\**”

**23 year old female, working full-time, Ireland**

- ▶ In emerging adulthood young people wonder which life partners and work possibilities will satisfy them in the long-term and they question the worldviews they have learned in adolescence and childhood. These explorations are not just about preparation for adult roles, but exploration for its own sake before taking on enduring adult roles and responsibilities (Arnett, 2000).
- ▶ As yet, emerging adulthood as a life period is little studied and understood, despite its economic and social ramifications. Scholars have not clearly developed ways of conceptualising development in the late teens and twenties and so may not think about young people of these ages as a focus for developmental research (Arnett, 2000).

#### Characteristics of emerging adulthood

- ▶ Emerging adults are not looking for a job or career 'for life' but an endless series of opportunities. It is an age of instability, of feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood, of possibilities, and it is a self-focused age (Arnett, 2004; 2007).
- ▶ In Arnett's research in the US and Denmark (2004; 2007), young people in their late teens and early to mid twenties themselves disagreed that they had reached adulthood. They saw themselves as gradually making their way towards adulthood.

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*No I don't think I'm an adult, and no I wouldn't call myself an adult yet. In my opinion an adult is a person who works and fend for themselves and is no longer dependent on their parents. An adult has more responsibilities than a student like myself, such as taxes, work and in some cases children and a mortgage.*”

**19 year old male, third level student, Ireland**

- ▶ Young people take on semi-autonomy; they take some of the responsibilities of independent living but have high residential mobility, often moving in and out of their parents' home in their twenties. They pursue education in a non-linear way (Arnett, 2004).
- ▶ They have high levels of optimism and confidence about finding the career and future that best suits them, and value work-life balance often saying that they do not want to devote their lives to their jobs in the way that they perceive their parents have.
- ▶ It is not the demographic transitions - finishing education, marriage, parenthood, career - that emerging adults consider important criteria for attaining adulthood, but qualities of character that indicate self-sufficiency: accepting responsibility for one's self; making independent decisions; and becoming financially independent (Arnett, 2000; 2007).

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*I would consider that I was an adult at 18. I've been financially independent since I moved out of home at 17, however I think that financial independence is only part of being an adult. I think that once you are making your own decisions and accepting responsibility for the consequences of these decisions, then you are an adult..... I don't think you need to have children or a mortgage to be an adult, but you do have to accept responsibility for yourself, your beliefs, your decisions and any consequences arising from these.*”

24 year old Irish female, working full-time

## Emerging adulthood in Ireland

- ▶ Although the term 'emerging adulthood' is not currently used outside academia, the phenomenon is certainly evident and recognised in Ireland (Greene and Mayock, 2007).
- ▶ As more young people enter third level education, undertake post-graduate studies and postpone marriage and other commitments, parents are faced with supporting their children far beyond the age of eighteen. The majority of university students in Ireland still live at home, in contrast with the UK and the US (Flynn, 2007).
- ▶ Even when working, some young people in their twenties continue to live with their parents (Greene and Mayock, 2007), moving in and out of the family home, with some parents supporting their adult children financially. Twenty per cent of first-time house buyers borrowing from one of Ireland's largest lending institutions relied on a gift from their parents to help with buying, with an average gift size of €15,000 (Duffy and Quail, 2005).
- ▶ The Graduate Careers Survey 2008 (Faller, 2008) with 2,681 students in Irish universities tells us that optimism is also a feature of Irish graduates. On average, graduates expect starting salaries of about €27,500, with 20% expecting to earn €100,000 per year by age 30. Marriage and children are not major priorities, with 40% expecting to be married and 30% expecting to have children by age 30. A 'job for life' was not their aim - almost a quarter expect to have worked for three or more organisations over the next decade.

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*I only see myself as an adult when the bills need paying and even then I feel out of my depth. I've had to be a 'grown up' for a long time and I wonder when I will feel like an adult and what it feels like. I don't feel like I belong, I grew up in a home and I still feel like a young person in care and that I am not worthy of adulthood, I've yet to prove myself. Being an adult means being in your own home with a steady job and a steady mind. Life no longer scares you, I'd imagine. It's hard work being an adult, you haven't the security of family or being young to fall back on. You are responsible only for yourself.*”

23 year old female, in training, Ireland

- ▶ Emerging Adulthood is a phenomenon of affluence, and cultural and socio-economic factors can structure and limit exploration and result in quicker transitions to adulthood. Children growing up in poverty are more likely to leave school early to enter the world of work (Greene and Mayock, 2007), young lone parents have the responsibility of parenthood and being the family 'breadwinner', while young people leaving care at age 18 are considered adults and make a rapid transition to adulthood and self-sufficiency. Unstable and impoverished childhoods can lead to youth homelessness, resulting in transitions to adult responsibilities as young as 14 years (Mayock and O' Sullivan, 2007).

## Policy consequences of emerging adulthood: The implications for educationalists and employers

- ▶ The policy seminar debated the implications of emerging adulthood for education and employment policy, exploring such questions as: Has our educational system caught up with the changes in attitudes and expectations in emerging adulthood? What are the implications of emerging adulthood for employers and policy when work becomes about self-fulfillment and identity exploration? Do 'non-traditional' students in higher education not buffered by well-off parents have the opportunity to accumulate qualifications and new life experiences?
- ▶ These questions have direct relevance to the implementation of Ireland's *National Development Plan 2007-2013, Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation 2006-2013* and *Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy (2007)*, and for national policy and practice in third level educational institutions in their careers advisory provision and access programmes.
- ▶ Overall, it seems that there is a tension between education and employment systems and norms, formed in an era when people were considered to have reached adulthood by the late teens and early twenties and, it was assumed, understood what they wanted from life, and the attitudes and expectations of emerging adults.

## Flexibility on higher education decisions in emerging adulthood

- ▶ Given the features of the emerging adulthood life period that they are about to enter it seems incongruous that we ask young people to make fixed choices in secondary school about their educational and employment path. The choices they make at 18 years of age can be immutable in the Irish higher education system. We penalise young people when they change course in third level rather than allow them to explore different options to see if they fit with their emerging identities. The result can be poor retention rates.
- ▶ The challenge for educational policymakers in recognising emerging adulthood as a new period in the life course is in reconsidering how higher level education in Ireland is designed and delivered in order to take account of this new life course. It may be that more flexibility and choice could reverse the national trend in retention rates.

## Emerging adulthood entering employment

- ▶ In Ireland's 'Celtic Tiger' economy, emerging adults expect more from their jobs than their parent's generation. They are not looking for a job or career 'for life' but an endless series of opportunities (Gannon, 2007). They seek self-fulfillment and opportunities for growth, a job that fits with their sense of self-identify and self-worth, and they spend their twenties searching for that role. Understanding and negotiating this change is a challenge for employers in Ireland.
- ▶ In this period of exploration and self-focus some young people are taking 'time-out' after third-level education and so are not available for work. In Ireland's booming economy, just over half (54%) of 2005 graduates (n=23,496) entered employment, with 33% in further study/training, 5% in employment overseas, 3% seeking employment and 5% unavailable for work/study (HEA, 2006). We do not know the longer-term outcomes for graduates as we require longitudinal research on the issue.
- ▶ Overall, Irish skills policy remains overly focused on developing skills and competencies and has given insufficient thought to the importance of new attitudes to work and new patterns of behaviour (Gannon, 2007). Policymaking is hampered by the incomplete understanding of the influences on work attitudes and behaviour.

## Non-traditional students become non-traditional graduates

- ▶ A different situation pertains for non-traditional students not buffered by well-off parents. While Trinity's Access Programmes are successful, challenges remain when the non-traditional student becomes a non-traditional graduate (Carroll, 2007).
- ▶ The non-traditional student comes to college with economic and family responsibilities related to their backgrounds, and these responsibilities remain when they enter the workforce. Given their backgrounds, they also tend to have different expectations of the education-employment relationship than the 'traditional' student, with more of an emphasis on getting a 'good job' that is better than the job their parents had.
- ▶ The increasing participation rate amongst the general population is making a degree a threshold qualification for job seeking. Non-traditional students are then disadvantaged in job seeking as, research indicates, they often lack the confidence of the traditional student to proceed in the labour market.
- ▶ The challenge remains to develop workable strategies to increase the employability of the non-traditional graduate. National policy has a role in supporting the non-traditional student and increasing their employability by offering increased support with childcare and with undertaking post-graduate qualifications.

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## Further Information

\*All quotations are from interviews conducted by Síle Murphy, Children's Research Centre with Irish people aged from 18 years to late twenties in response to the questions: Are you an adult? What is it like to be an adult and what does it mean? The quotations were displayed at Professor Arnett's lecture.

For information on further Children's Research Centre lectures and seminars, contact the Children's Research Centre at: + 353 (0) 1 8962901, crcentre@tcd.ie.

**The views expressed in this Research Briefing are the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily represent those of Professor Arnett or any other lecture participants.**

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