PART I

INTRODUCTION

1

Emerging Adulthood and Romantic Relationships: An Introduction

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This chapter offers a very brief orientation to the construct of emerging adulthood and introduces the reader to the remainder of the book.

WHAT IS EMERGING ADULTHOOD?

In contemporary western society, adolescence begins earlier and adulthood (e.g., marrying, becoming parents) comes much later than in prior generations (Arnett, 2000, 2004). Today's young people leave home at about age 18 or 19, but most do not marry, become parents, and find a steady job until much later in their twenties. For most young people, the late teens to mid-twenties is a time with "both excitement and uncertainty, wide-open possibility and confusion, new freedoms and new fears" (Arnett, 2004, p. 3). Consequently, this period has been proposed as a unique and important developmental stage that is distinct from adolescence and young adulthood.

Arnett (2000, 2004) referred to this period between ages 18 to 25 as "emerging adulthood" and described it as having several distinct features. First, it is a period of continued identity explorations. During this stage, emerging adults become more independent of their parents than they were as adolescents, but have not yet committed to adult roles and responsibilities. In the course of exploring possibilities, emerging adults clarify their identities by answering such questions as "What kind of person am I?" and "What kind of person should I find as a partner through life?" Second, emerging adulthood is an age of instability, with emerging adults shifting between choices in love and work and moving from one residence to another. Third, emerging adulthood is a self-focused age. Unlike young children and adolescents, emerging adults are not subject to their parents' constant monitoring, yet most have yet to assume spousal or parental responsibilities. It is a self-focused age in that emerging adults make their own choices in love, education, and work. Fourth, emerging adulthood is an age of feeling in between adolescence and young adulthood; many persons at this time do not feel like they are adolescents, yet they do

not see themselves as adults either. Finally, emerging adulthood is an age of possibilities, a time of freedom when individuals have the opportunities to explore their options.

IS EMERGING ADULTHOOD A UNIQUE DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE?

Since Arnett (2000) first conceptualized this stage and coined the term "emerging adulthood," it has received much attention. However, some researchers have raised questions about whether emerging adulthood is indeed a unique developmental stage (see Chapter 2). One critique focuses on whether "emerging adulthood" is just another term that duplicates ones already found in the literature, such as "late adolescence," "young adulthood," or "transition to adulthood." Arnett (2004) considered each of these alternatives, concluded that none was adequate to describe this unstable and exploratory period of time, and determined that a new term – emerging adulthood – was needed to reflect this unique age period.

Another critique is whether emerging adulthood only applies to a certain group of young people, in a certain culture, and at a certain historical time (Hendry & Kloep, 2007). Further, some scholars argue that behavior during emerging adulthood might not be as exploratory as Arnett (2000, 2004) has suggested and that it could vary dramatically by social class, race and ethnicity, and other factors (e.g., Kimmel, 2008; Meier & Allen, 2008). Indeed, Arnett often used college students when illustrating the concept of emerging adulthood, which is understandable in light of the fact that some 64% to 69% of high school graduates in the United States immediately enroll in college after graduation (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Yet what about the sizable minority of young people who may not experience such opportunities for exploration? Amato (see Chapter 3), offers an alternative approach to recognizing the diverse pathways to young adulthood that people take during this period of life.

It is doubtful whether emerging adulthood is a developmental stage in the structural developmental sense found in some theories of human development such as those put forth by Piaget and Kohlberg. This is because it is difficult to see emerging adulthood meeting critical stage criteria such as universality and fixed ordering. It may therefore be conceptualized more accurately as a phase of life or even as an individual difference.

Despite debate regarding the conceptualization of emerging adulthood, it has been widely accepted by scholars today as a useful term to refer to this period of time in the life course. In this book, we use this term to describe the period from the late teens through the mid- to late twenties, and we also use the emerging adulthood framework to guide some of the research. Regardless of the terms used, this is a critical period of life. We now turn to

an important developmental task during emerging adulthood – the formation and maintenance of romantic relationships – which is the focus of this book.

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS IN EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Arnett (2004) suggested that emerging adulthood is a time for young people to explore their options in romance and love, to discover what kind of person they would like to marry, and to gain relationship experience before settling on someone to partner with permanently. Therefore, Arnett proposed that emerging adults could have many different romantic relationships and that these relationships could be self-focused and unstable. From this perspective, romantic relationships during emerging adulthood are largely exploratory and should have little direct influence on later marital behavior.

However, as Collins and van Dulmen (2006) pointed out, there is substantial continuity in close relationships (e.g., parent–child relationships, friendships, romantic relationships), and development in one period of life is built on development from an earlier time. This view is consistent with the life course perspective (Elder, 1985) that people's life trajectories are determined by a series of linked stages in which transitions from one state to another are always embedded in and have an impact on those trajectories. Emerging adults have many possibilities and options, and the choices they make could have important consequences for later life trajectories. Therefore, the establishment of stability, satisfaction, and closeness in romantic relationships is important for emerging adults' later development, including marriage.

Until recently, it was assumed that romantic relationships in emerging adults were not particularly important or formative. However, recent data have made clear that such an assumption is no longer tenable. Romantic relationships in emerging adulthood are important for at least three reasons. First, the formation and maintenance of romantic relationships are critical developmental tasks for emerging adults. On the one hand, emerging adults could explore their options in romance and gain relationship experience during this period. For example, they might learn to terminate a physically or psychologically abusive relationship or might experience personal growth through different relationship experiences (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). On the other hand, research findings have also shown that emerging adults do not break up their romantic relationships for the purpose of exploring other romantic options. Instead, relationship dissolution is usually preceded by low levels of commitment, low relationship efficacy, high levels of conflict, poor communication, cheating, aggression, and low relationship satisfaction and quality (Rodrigues, Hall, & Fincham, 2006; Simpson, 1987). These characteristics of romantic relationships are not only important in their own right but also have long-term implications for later development.

Second, romantic relationship development has important consequences on youth well-being and behavioral adjustment. Chapters 14 and 16 provide evidence to support this view. Finally, patterns of romantic relationships in emerging adulthood could be predictive of later relationships and marriage in adulthood. From a developmental perspective, Karney and Bradbury (1995) suggested that some risk factors for marital problems and divorce can be identified in premarital relationships. Attitudes and behaviors related to romantic relationships can also predict attitudes and behaviors in marriage (e.g., Axinn & Thornton, 1993). Consequently, it is important to study both romantic relationships during emerging adulthood and the developmental precursors and consequences of these romantic relationships.

THE NEED FOR THIS BOOK

The context just described provides the foundation for developing a much needed contribution to the field of romantic relationships. Although there is an increasing number of empirical articles on romantic relationships in emerging adults, the field lacks an integrative volume that pulls together work in this area. This book attempts to do so and is intended to be a resource for anyone interested in understanding romantic relationships in emerging adulthood.

We do not know of any academic books specifically devoted to romantic relationships in emerging adulthood. However, the topic of emerging adulthood has been addressed more generally in several recent books, including *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road From the Late Teens Through the Twenties* (Arnett, 2004); *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*, edited by Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut (2005), and *Emerging Adults in America: Coming to Age in the 21st Century*, edited by Arnett and Tanner (2006). These books address the key features and multiple pathways in emerging adulthood, but pay only limited attention to the topic of romantic relationships. Most books cover the topic in a single chapter, although one does devote two chapters to it.

In contrast, the subject of romantic relationships has been addressed more fully in books on adolescence, such as *Romantic Relationships in Adolescence: Developmental Perspectives: New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, edited by Shulman and Collins (1998); *The Development of Romantic Relationships in Adolescence*, edited by Furman, Brown, and Feiring (1999); and *Adolescent Romantic Relations and Sexual Behavior: Theory, Research, and Practical Implications*, edited by Florsheim (2003). However, as noted, these books focus on adolescence rather than emerging adulthood. The only book on romantic relationships that includes the stage of emerging adulthood is *Romance and Sex in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: Risks and Opportunities*, edited by Crouter and Booth (2006), but it too focuses on adolescence

rather than on emerging adulthood or on the distinction between adolescence and emerging adulthood. The developmental processes, meaning, and consequences of romantic relationships in adolescence could be very different from those in emerging adulthood (Furman, 2002). The gap in these books and in related articles in academic journals points to the importance of focusing on romantic relationships in emerging adulthood and the need for the current book.

In addition to pulling together research on romantic relationships in emerging adults, this volume also contributes to the literature by addressing some methodological issues. For example, previous research on emerging adulthood has focused heavily on college students and cross-sectional studies. However, as Arnett (2004, p. 317) pointed out,

> Especially enlightening would be longitudinal studies that follow a sample of people closely from adolescence through emerging adulthood and chart the changes that take place in their close relationships along the way. . . . How do they meet new ones and develop relationships with them? What sorts of factors precipitate the dissolution of close relationships, and how does such dissolution influence emerging adults?

Indeed, many of the studies presented in this book used longitudinal designs that followed emerging adults from diverse backgrounds.

This book emerged from a multidisciplinary mini-conference on romantic relationships in emerging adulthood hosted by the Florida State University Family Institute in February 2009. The purpose of the conference was to further explore romantic relationships during emerging adulthood and to facilitate communication among researchers in this area. This book includes the papers presented at the conference as well as some additional work.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into four parts: conceptual and methodological foundations, the developmental context, romantic relationship processes, and practical implications. This introduction summarizes the chapters briefly to provide an overview of the content of the book.

Conceptual and Methodological Foundations

In Chapter 2, Alan Reifman provides an introduction to emerging adulthood and an overview of the conceptual links between emerging adulthood and romantic relationship processes. Following Arnett's (2000) work, Reifman describes both how emerging adulthood became a unique developmental stage in contemporary society and the special characteristics of emerging adults.

More important, he outlines the various conceptual frameworks used in studying romantic relationships during emerging adulthood.

Taking a related but different perspective in Chapter 3, family sociologist Paul Amato explores an alternative conceptual framework for studying youth development during emerging adulthood. Rather than focusing on emerging adults who attend college (and therefore have many opportunities for self-exploration), Amato adopts a life course perspective and explores the multiple and divergent pathways that young women take during emerging adulthood. This approach complements Arnett's (2004) emerging adulthood framework and acknowledges the complexity of life course transitions during emerging adulthood by demonstrating multiple family formation trajectories among young women.

In addition to providing theoretical foundations, this book also includes two chapters on the methodological foundations for studying romantic relationships. By definition, relationships occur over time. Chapter 4 by Young, Furman, and Laursen is therefore timely in its exploration of several modeling techniques that can be used to capture continuity and change in romantic experiences. Using data from Project STAR, they offer a detailed illustration of modeling change in stochastic vs. deterministic processes by means of auto-regressive cross-lagged panel models, latent growth curve models, and growth mixture models.

Chapter 5 by Ackerman, Donnellan, and Kashy provides an introduction to the methodological and analytic issues that are relevant when considering dyadic data from romantic couples. Many of the important concepts and models, including the test of empirical distinguishability and the actor–partner interdependence model (APIM), are clearly illustrated with couple data. Further, the authors provide 10 recommendations for addressing many of the practical issues related to analyzing dyadic data that arise in the study of romantic relationships.

The Developmental Context

The next three chapters take on issues concerning the developmental context of romantic relationships in emerging adulthood. Based on the family stress model, Conger, Cui, and Lorenz in Chapter 6 draw on three important themes in contemporary research on families and on emerging adults' romantic relationships to provide new insights regarding important precursors of romantic relationships. Using a prospective, longitudinal study of 284 emerging adults and their partners and parents, they show that (a) economic stress was associated with conflict among couples of both generations, (b) economic difficulties of the first generation were associated with economic difficulties of the second generation, and (c) conflict in the first generation was associated with conflict in the second generation.

Next in Chapter 7, Ming Cui and colleagues study how parental divorce and conflict influence the timing of emerging adults' first cohabitation or marriage. Survival analysis of nearly 500 emerging adults demonstrated that parental divorce predicts emerging adults' early entry into cohabitation but slightly delayed entry into first marriage. Further, for emerging adults from intact families, parental conflict predicts early entry into cohabitation, but shows no effect on the timing of marriage.

Camillo Regalia and colleagues extend research on romantic relationships in emerging adulthood to other cultures and examine cultural variation in family differentiation and romantic relationships in emerging adulthood in Chapter 8. In one study, they found differences in the association between family differentiation and emotional functioning among emerging adults from the United States, China, and Italy, suggesting that family differentiation has different meanings for emerging adults in different countries. Their European data alone highlight marked heterogeneity in the path toward adulthood. They identify cultures that support autonomy development within the family of origin (e.g., Italy) and compare them to those that support separation from the family in the service of developing autonomy (e.g., United Kingdom). In a final study, emerging adults' perception of parent–child relationships was affected by the quality of their romantic relationships, but the converse was not the case.

Relationship Processes

The next five chapters focus on processes and aspects of relationship development: relationship evolution, initiation, sexuality, cohabitation, and emotion regulation in romantic relationships. Given the potential difficulties inherent in forming and maintaining a romantic relationship, Jon Maner and Saul Miller in Chapter 9 use an evolutionary perspective to uncover the cognitive processes involved in solving such relationship challenges. In particular, they examine the cognitive processes involved in finding a romantic partner, avoiding the temptation of attractive relationship alternatives, and warding off romantic rivals.

Similarly, in Chapter 10 Margaret Clark and Lindsey Beck address the challenges of initiating and evaluating romantic relationships. They propose that the relationship initiation phase involves identifiable processes of strategic self-representation, evaluation, and self-protection from rejection and failure. In addition to developing a model of romantic relationship initiation involving those three processes, they also offer insights into how studying relationship initiation will help us understand the special nature of emerging adulthood.

Sexuality is an important element of romantic relationships during emerging adulthood, and Lefkowitz, Gillen, and Vasilenko explore this topic in

Chapter 11. They examine theories of sexuality and of romantic relationships and provide an overview of studies of sexual behavior, sexual attitudes and motives, contraceptive use, pregnancy and parenthood, sexual violence, and sexual minority (bisexual, gay, lesbian, or transgendered) emerging adults. More important, the chapter discusses the association between sexual behavior and aspects of romantic relationships among emerging adults (e.g., communication with partners about sex).

In Chapter 12, Stanley, Rhoades, and Fincham address an increasingly important feature of romantic relationships in emerging adulthood – cohabitation. Drawing on a large longitudinal study on relationship development among emerging adults, Stanley and colleagues examine trends in cohabitation during the period of emerging adulthood, values, decision processes (e.g., sliding vs. deciding), commitment, and behaviors associated with cohabitation. Further, they address the ambiguity of relationship stages and development during emerging adulthood and how cohabitation and ambiguity influence romantic relationship outcomes.

Lisa Diamond and Christopher Fagundes examine the association between affect regulation and romantic relationships in Chapter 13. They consider the role of one particular trait-like physiological substrate based on the autonomic nervous system – parasympathetic nervous system functioning – in the distinctive romantic relationship challenges faced by emerging adults. Specifically, they provide a review of the parasympathetic nervous system and its relevance for the self-regulatory and affect-regulatory processes that underlie mature romantic functioning. They conclude by identifying several of the most promising directions for future research on the developmental psychobiology of emerging adults' romantic relationships.

Practical Implications

The final three chapters focus on more applied issues. In Chapter 14, the first chapter in Part IV, Joanne Davila explores the extant literature on romantic relationships in emerging adulthood, mental health in emerging adulthood, and the association between romantic functioning and mental health among emerging adults. In addition, she provides numerous suggestions that may contribute to a research agenda to help guide the continued development of this area of research.

Fincham, Stanley, and Rhoades broaden our attention to applied issues in Chapter 15. They focus on how to implement relationship education among emerging adults to facilitate learning of the knowledge and skills needed to initiate and sustain a romantic relationship successfully. This chapter starts by making the case for relationship education during emerging adulthood. It then offers a review of current relationship education programs, demonstrates the efficaciousness of one such program implemented at The Florida State

University (Project RELATE), and discusses further challenges and implications for relationship education.

In the final chapter, Wendy Manning and colleagues explore the influence of romantic relationships on academic and career trajectories in emerging adulthood. Using the data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study, they find that romantic partners have both positive (e.g., help holding a steady job, reaching career goals and objectives) and negative (e.g., drawing attention away from work and school) impacts on emerging adults' careers.

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