

What Do You Want to Accomplish in the Next 10 Years? The Goals of Emerging Adults

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Emerging adulthood is a period characterized by transition. Individuals in this stage of development find themselves in between adolescence and young adulthood, faced with consequential decisions related to their educational attainment, career trajectory, and the overall direction of their life course. This study focused on the goal-setting behavior of emerging adults. Data were collected through interviews with individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 (N = 91). It was expected that the goals of this group would be oriented toward more individualistic pursuits, with less emphasis placed on more collectivistic goals. It also was anticipated that interviewees would have wide-ranging and multiple goals, which is reflective of the exploratory nature of emerging adulthood. Results show partial support for these hypotheses as interviewees listed more collectivistic goals than anticipated, but also were likely to list multiple and wide-ranging goals.

Keywords: emerging adulthood, goals, identity, life course, qualitative methods

Emerging adulthood is a critical period in one's life. It is a time in which individuals enjoy a greater sense of independence and are given the freedom to explore many options and ideas. Emerging adulthood is also a period characterized by transition. Individuals in this age group (typically age 18 to 25) find themselves in between the stages of adolescence and young adulthood, and though they may be allowed a certain amount of liberty to experiment, they also are faced with important decisions related to their educational attainment, career trajectory, and the overall direction of their life course.

It is important that emerging adulthood be understood within a cultural context. It is a stage of development that is most prevalent in more industrialized societies where entry into career-oriented roles and the assumption of traditional adult responsibilities often is delayed (Arnett, 2000; Nelson & Chen, 2007). Greater affluence, opportunities for education, and more relaxed social expectations in these societies allow for a longer period of identity exploration in which individuals develop their own values and interests (Badger, Nelson, & Barry, 2006). During this exploratory period, individuals go through a selection process where their priorities start to take

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shape and their options begin to narrow to those considered most important (Baltes, 1997; Freund & Baltes, 2002).

This paper describes a qualitative study that explored the 10-year goals of emerging adults through an analysis of semi-structured interview data. The paper begins with a review of research literature related to emerging adulthood and goal setting. Topics to be visited include the characteristics of emerging adulthood, the influences and benefits of goal setting, and the goal-setting behavior of emerging adults. Interview data were analyzed to determine if the self-reported goals of emerging adults in this study are consistent with what has been reported in the existing literature on the goal-setting behavior of emerging adults.

Review of Literature

A Profile of Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood has several key features. Nelson and Chen (2007) outline these features by describing emerging adulthood as a period in which individuals tend to experience feelings of being in between two stages of development: adolescence and young adulthood. During this period (typically between the ages of 18 to 25), individuals go through a stage of development and identity exploration marked by both instability and possibility. It is during emerging adulthood that individuals start to develop a true self as they start to discover and develop their own interests, personal beliefs, and values, while also making decisions that will have a significant impact on their future (Barry, Nelson, & Christofferson, 2013; Nelson & Chen, 2007).

It is important to recognize that the phenomenon of emerging adulthood is often more applicable to industrialized and westernized societies. In these societies, access to greater economic resources affords individuals the opportunity to delay entry into the workforce and other adult roles as they explore a wide range of options for the future (Badger et al., 2006; Baltes, 1997). Emerging adulthood also is argued to be found in societies that place a stronger emphasis on individualism and where the rites of passage that demarcate the entry into adulthood differ when compared to societies that stress more collectivistic ideals (Beutler, 2012; Shulman, Feldman, Blatt, Cohen, & Mahler, 2005).

Within this context, emerging adulthood is best outlined in the work of Arnett (2000), whose theory proposes that emerging adulthood is a period of human development that is distinct both demographically and subjectively from adolescence and young adulthood due to delayed entry into institutions such as marriage and parenthood and the evidence that emerging adults are often reluctant to consider themselves to be full-fledged adults. Perhaps most importantly for the purposes of this study, however, Arnett (2000) describes emerging adulthood as a period of development that greatly emphasizes the importance of role and identity exploration. This

argument may best be summarized in one of Arnett's (2000) concluding remarks in which he describes emerging adulthood as "an age of possibilities, a period in which many different potential futures remain possible and personal freedom and exploration are higher for most people than at any other time" (p. 479).

The Importance of Goal Setting

Goal setting—and the benefits of this behavior—is, by no means, a new subject of study. In the human development literature, goals tend to be defined as aspirations related to what a person wants to become or what a person wants to accomplish in the future (Roberts, O'Donnell, & Robins, 2004). Goals can be wide-ranging and often are predicated upon one's age or stage of development (Krings, Bangerter, Gomez, & Grob, 2008; Salmela-Aro, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007). Often goals involve accomplishments related to establishing a career, starting a family, achieving a desired type of lifestyle, and enjoying some level of economic success or security (Hill, Jackson, Roberts, Lapsley, & Brandenberger, 2011; Roberts et al., 2004). There are many factors that influence the goals that individuals set for themselves, with the most important factors possibly being the opportunities and constraints certain environments present (Mayer, 2004).

One of the greatest benefits of meeting one's goals is the positive effect it can have on individual well-being (Nurmi & Salmela-Aro, 2002; Sheldon & Cooper, 2008). The dedicated pursuit of goals increases the likelihood of goal attainment, which has been found to enhance individual self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001). In contrast, the lack of a goal has been found to have negative effects on individual well-being and an increased likelihood of developing symptoms of depression (Shulman & Nurmi, 2010).

The Goals of Emerging Adults

Past research has found emerging adulthood to be a period in which individuals consider multiple options as they plan for the future (Arnett, 2000; Hill et al., 2011). Often, the personal goals of emerging adults and younger age groups have focused more on individualistic interests, such as the pursuit of education, career, and economic success (Krings et al., 2008). Less emphasis is placed on goals related to collectivistic ideals, such as raising a family and service to the community, especially in the early periods of this stage of development (Arnett, 2003). This individualistic scenario is seen as more typical of industrialized and westernized societies in which emerging adulthood is found to be most prevalent (Badger et al., 2006; Nelson & Chen, 2007).

Although it is a time for exploration, emerging adulthood is also a period in which one's goals eventually become more focused (Baltes, 1997). This change is due to the major decisions

individuals in this period of development must make regarding their transition into young adulthood and the overall direction of their life course (Roberts et al., 2004; Shulman & Nurmi, 2010). Once education is attained, relationships are established, and more work and life experience is gained, individuals in this developmental period hopefully have adequately prepared themselves for the next stage of development (Roberts, Wood, & Smith, 2005).

This study used semi-structured interview data to explore the self-reported goals of emerging adults. Based on past research, two major hypotheses were proposed. First, it was expected that the goals of the interviewees would be oriented toward more individualistic pursuits related to future educational and career accomplishments, while less emphasis would be placed on more collectivistic goals, such as starting a family or giving back to the community (Arnett, 2003; Krings et al., 2008; Shulman et al., 2005). Second, it was anticipated that interviewees would report wide-ranging and multiple goals, which is reflective of the exploratory nature of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Hill et al., 2011; Roberts et al., 2004).

Methodology

Data and Sample Profile

Data were collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with 91 individuals between the ages of 18 and 25. Interviewees responded to questions related to the physical, social, psychological, and mental changes they have experienced during the transition from their previous stage of development and which of these changes they viewed as most important. In addition to these issues, interviewees were asked about how their relationships and priorities have changed, the benefits and challenges of their current stage of development, and the advice they would give to younger people about how to prepare for the future. The main focus of this study, however, was the interview item related to the most important goals that interviewees stated they wanted to accomplish over the next ten years.

Interviewees were selected through convenience sampling by student interviewers enrolled in a human development course at a large public university in the southeastern United States. Because of the target age group (ages 18-25), many of the interviewees were enrolled in college at the time of the study. However, as part of the assignment, student interviewers were instructed to refrain from interviewing students enrolled in the human development course from which the study originated. The average age of the interviewees was 21.6 years. The majority of the sample was female (56%). In terms of ethnicity, 55% of interviewees were White, 38% were African American, 6% identified with two or more ethnic groups, and 1% of the sample was Asian. The majority of interviewees (77%) had earned a high school diploma, 22% had earned a postsecondary degree (associate's or bachelor's), and 1% had earned a graduate degree. In terms

of marital status, 5% of interviewees were married, 3% were divorced or separated, 5% were cohabitating, 41% were dating, and 46% reported they were single.

Procedures and Implementation

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and data from these interviews were collected as part of a class assignment. Each interviewer was assigned to conduct a total of nine interviews of individuals representing three stages of adulthood: (1) emerging adulthood (ages 18-25), (2) young adulthood (ages 26-40), and (3) middle adulthood (ages 41-64). Before conducting the interviews, interviewers were required to attend a research ethics session in which they became certified by the university's internal review board and thus authorized to conduct research involving human subjects. The interviewers also received an introduction to research methodology and instructions on how to use the standardized interview guide for semi-structured interviews.

Before agreeing to participate, potential interviewees were presented with an informed consent form, which assured them that their participation was voluntary and all responses would be kept confidential. After consenting to participate, appointments were scheduled. Interviews were conducted in person, and interviewees were allowed to review the interview guide prior to the interview session. Interviewees were also allowed to refer to the interview guide during the interview session.

The interview guide was quite detailed with regard to its questions about adult development. Interviewees responded to questions related to the physical, social, psychological, and mental changes they had experienced during the transition from their previous stage of development and which of these changes they viewed as most important. In addition to these issues, interviewees were asked about how their relationships and priorities have changed, the benefits and challenges of their current stage of development, and the advice they would give to younger people about how to prepare for the future.

Data for purposes of analysis for this study, however, were collected from a single open-ended interview item. The item asked interviewees, "What is the most important goal you want to accomplish in the next 10 years?" Interviewees were allowed to state an unlimited number of goals. The following section explains how responses to this interview item were analyzed.

Analytical Strategy

Prior to full analysis of the interview data, an agreed-upon coding system was established among the authors, with goals ranked based on the order in which they were listed by the interviewees. Multiple reviews and analyses of the qualitative data were conducted to ensure inter-rater

agreement among the authors and to decrease chances of bias. Complete agreement on the coding system was required and obtained before proceeding with the final analysis.

Staying consistent with the agreed-upon coding system and analytical strategy, the first goal listed by the interviewees was classified as a primary goal. Every goal listed after that was classified as a secondary goal. The classification of goals did not necessarily indicate order of importance; rather it was a method used to more conveniently code and analyze the interview data. All goals listed by the interviewees were taken into account with the objective of identifying patterns or relationships regarding how goals were listed.

Results

Results of the analysis indicated that, as expected, interviewees had wide-ranging and multiple goals. Of the 91 individuals that were interviewed, only 2 stated having a single 10-year goal. In terms of primary goals, the most frequently listed goals were career-oriented. Over one-third of interviewees (34%) stated the desire to establish a career as their primary goal, while other interviewees were first concerned with educational pursuits (23%), starting a family (12%), achieving financial stability (7%), and owning property (7%) (See Table 1).

Table 1. Top 5 Primary Goals

Goal	Number	Percent
Establish career	31	34
Educational pursuits	21	23
Starting a family	11	12
Financial stability	6	7
Owning property	6	7

Although 88% of interviewees listed individualistic goals as their primary goal, it is important to note that interviewees consistently made conscious connections between the goals they listed, often indicating that their more individualistic primary goal was a precursor to a more collectivistic secondary goal. For example, after stating their desire to finish their education and be established in a career as a primary goal, interviewees often would follow these statements by explaining that they believed a stable career would provide them with financial stability and put them in a position to more comfortably raise a family. Aside from achieving financial stability and starting a family, other common themes for secondary goals included being employed in a prestigious occupation, increasing social networks, owning property, and pursuing more education.

Discussion

Evaluation of Hypotheses

As stated earlier, this study had two major hypotheses: (1) it was expected that interviewees would report more individualistic than collectivistic goals and (2) it was expected that interviewees would have wide-ranging and multiple goals, a phenomenon reflective of the exploratory nature of emerging adulthood. Partial support was found for the first hypothesis. Although several interviewees stated the desire to establish themselves in a stable career, these statements often were followed with the belief that having a stable career would provide them with the means necessary to achieve more collectivistic goals, such as raising a family. This sequencing of goals is consistent with the tendency to view marriage as a “capstone” event experienced only after establishing a career and financial stability (Cherlin, 2010; Edin & Kefalas, 2005). At the same time, some interviewees did list individualistic goals involving personal athletic accomplishments and maintaining their physical appearance. The balance of individualistic and collectivistic goals may be influenced by the heterogeneity of the sample, which was 45% non-White. Indeed, past research on emerging adults has detected a balance of individualistic and collectivistic ideals in more diverse samples, with emerging adults from ethnic minority groups tending to emphasize the importance of collectivistic ideals, such as family obligations and concern for others, when compared to Whites or those from the majority culture (Arnett, 2003).

A greater amount of support was found for this study’s second hypothesis. Of the 91 individuals that were interviewed, only two listed a singular goal, while all other interviewees listed multiple goals. It also could be argued that interviewees listed a wide range of goals. While establishing a career was by far the most commonly listed goal, several of the interviewees also listed finishing or pursuing further education, achieving financial stability, owning property, and starting a family as goals they hoped to accomplish over the next 10 years.

Limitations

This study was not without its limitations. One such limitation is the relatively small convenience sample from a southeastern US state. Future research could analyze larger and more representative samples to increase the likelihood of observing greater variance in interview responses. Next, focusing on only one interview item could be considered another limitation of this study. Comparing the responses related to the self-reported goals of respondents with their responses to the other interview items may open up avenues for future research. A final limitation to this study was the use of only one method (semi-structured interviews) to collect data. Though this limitation cannot be rectified in this study, future studies may be better served by employing multiple data collection methods in which triangulation could be achieved and

chances for bias can be further decreased. A more comprehensive approach to data collection also may increase the possibilities of gathering different types of information on interviewees, such as college major and other demographic characteristics.

Practical Implications

The findings derived from the current study provide some important implications for both research and practice. From a basic, exploratory research perspective, the use of data collected from semi-structured interviews allows for the qualitative analysis of the goal-setting behavior of emerging adults, providing a more detailed and subjective point of view on the topic when compared to a traditional closed-ended survey instrument. This methodological approach could serve as an example of using qualitative data to develop and test theories and hypotheses related to the stage of emerging adulthood. Indeed, the interview data that were collected provided an opportunity to test theories related to the goal-setting behavior of emerging adults.

In terms of its implications for practice, studies of this nature could be useful for high school guidance counselors, college career counselors, family life professionals, and other practitioners who work with individuals from this age group. Becoming more familiar with the goal-setting behavior and process of emerging adults could help professionals more effectively guide young people and inform them of the resources they will need as they make the transitions from high school to college to the working world.

Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to analyze interview data on the self-reported goals of emerging adults. A total of 91 interviews were conducted with individuals between the ages of 18 and 25. Results of the interviews supported several of the ideas and findings found in past literature on the goal-setting behavior of emerging adults. Partial support was found for the study's two major hypotheses, as interviewees listed more collectivistic goals than anticipated but also were likely to list multiple and wide-ranging goals.

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