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Emerging Adulthood: An Intersectional Examination of the Changing Life Course

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Abstract This article draws on qualitative data of U.S. high school students considering their place in the adult world; the purpose is to investigate Jeffrey Arnett's (2000) concept of "emerging adulthood" as a new stage of life course. Drawing on interviews and observational data collected around the time when Arnett's notion of emerging adulthood started to take hold, I use intersectional interpretive lens in order to highlight how race and gender construct emerging adulthood as high school students move out of adolescence. I consider Arnett's thesis twofold. First, when emerging adulthood is examined intersectionally, young people reveal that – rather than being distinct periods that can simply be prolonged, delayed, or even reached – life stages are fluid and constantly in flux. Second, since efforts to mitigate against uncertain futures characterizes the Millennial generation, I argue that the process of guarding against uncertainty reorders, questions or reconfigures the characteristics and stages that conventionally serve as markers of life course. I conclude that the identity exploration, indecision, and insecurity associated with emerging adulthood can also be understood as related to how the youth reveal and reshape the life course intersectionally.

Keywords emerging adulthood, intersectional analysis, life course, adolescence

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In 2000, Jeffrey Arnett first proposed that young people in the industrialized world were experiencing “emerging adulthood” as a new phase in life course. Arnett suggested that rather than moving seamlessly from adolescence to adulthood, in the contemporary era it takes young people significantly longer to reach traditional markers of being an adult, such as stable career choices and family formation. Arnett characterized this phase as one of deep exploration, instability, and identity discovery. While Arnett’s arguments have faced criticism for their reliance on white middle class development trajectories, they have also garnered significant empirical support, as evidence indicates that many people aged 18-24 struggle to attain financial and domestic independence and stability.

This article draws on qualitative data of U.S. high school students considering their place in the adult world. Drawing on interviews and observational data collected around the time when Arnett’s notion of emerging adulthood started to take hold, I use intersectional interpretive lens in order to highlight how race and gender construct emerging adulthood as young people transition into adulthood. Specifically, I capture adolescents as they are poised to become emerging adults and, in the process, question the construction of this new life stage. Given their trajectories during high school, I consider how adult behaviors and transitional markers are constrained and enabled as the next stage in life course. I investigate Arnett’s thesis twofold. First, when emerging adulthood is examined intersectionally, young people reveal that – rather than being two distinct life stages that can simply be prolonged, delayed, or even reached – adulthood and adolescence are fluid

and constantly in flux. Indeed, Arnett’s observation about the elongation of the adolescent life stage coincides with significant social and cultural changes (see: Bennett 2008; Woodman and Wyn 2015). In somewhat contradictory fashion, while these changes may elongate the time to adulthood, they also allow young people to engage with ‘adult’ questions and decisions at a younger age. Second, and connected to the point above, with the Millennial generation facing a context whereby their futures are insecure and uncertain, adolescents strive to mitigate this uncertainty. Viewed intersectionally, this striving takes numerous forms, but, importantly, it also demonstrates that – rather than just elongating one life stage – guarding against uncertainty reorders, questions or reconfigures the characteristics and stages that conventionally serve as markers of life course. As a result, the youth are on their own to confront, form, and grapple with decisions and tensions. The intersectional examination of life stage transitions reveals this to be a messy process with blurred boundaries between adolescence and adulthood (Woodman and Wyn 2015). In other words, the life stage of identity exploration, indecision, and insecurity is about how the youth reveal and reshape intersectional life course trajectories as much as the social circumstances that have given rise to a new life stage.

To illustrate this process, I ask how high-school-aged youth understand their transition out of adolescence. I explore the process of reaching adulthood as a contradictory and drawn-out process without a normative structure. Becoming an adult includes identity exploration, moving in and out of parents’ households, and struggles to gain financial

independence. However, maturity also includes responsibilities, such as having children, engaging with questions of sex and sexuality, and taking responsibilities for and within the community, which prior generations ascribed to adults. I specifically target the youth during the time period that Arnett saw as the dawn of emerging adulthood in order to reveal how the youth themselves understood and articulated this process.

My discussion proceeds as follows. I first describe the life course stage of emerging adulthood, arguing that it must be understood not as merely an experience of transition, but also in the context of post-industrial changes in the social and political life. Beyond taking account of the specific youth culture, I engage with generational arguments about changes that young people experience, and discuss the life course process as transitions between different stages of maturity. I then examine how the intersectional approach can shed light on the cultural understandings and transitions between life course stages, addressing specifically how the contemporary context draws on – and problematizes – being a raced and gendered adult. What emerges from the qualitative data is not just the ways in which young people have begun to struggle with embracing full adulthood, but also the fact that they question – and struggle with – the markers of adulthood, reshaping what those markers mean and when, where, and to whom they apply.

After this discussion, I describe my data and methods. I use data from the early 2000s in order to show how young people helped to create the life course stage of emerging adulthood through the process

of negotiating boundaries between adolescence and adulthood. My findings and data analysis both show that, while the transition is complex and nuanced, I can provide a glimpse into this process as we see it unfolding and as young people are navigating through – and imaging – their future adult lives.

Life Course Studies

Sociologists of youth and the life course have long seen adolescence as a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood. While psychologists view ages 13-19 developmentally, i.e. as a period of moving from being a child into adulthood, stratification scholars might conceptualize this age range as an important time for the younger generation to reproduce the social and economic circumstances of their parents (Blau and Duncan 1967). Coleman (1961) argued that during the adolescent stage the youth develop a culture specific to their generation, where they operate in contestation with the adult world and are much more influenced by their peers than their parents. As such, adolescence prepares people to enter the world of adulthood while equipping them with an understanding of the social world that is specific to their generation.

Sociological scholarship (supported at the individual level by developmental psychology) has thus conventionally examined adolescence as a specific life stage, one that is undertaken as children develop their own consciousness and outlook, and prior to entering the adult world of independence, responsibility, and self-sufficiency.

However, with the movement of the Millennial generation from adolescence into adulthood, scholars began to argue that – beginning after World War II – life-stage transition from teen years into adulthood did not happen so smoothly, with each generation taking longer to reach adulthood than those before them (Arnett 2000; 2015; Furstenberg et al. 2004; Risman 2018). The factors that life-course scholars use in order to measure adulthood – such as being financially independent from parents, getting married, and having children – are taking younger generations longer to achieve. For Millennials in particular, the path to adulthood began to emerge as significantly less clear-cut than it was the case for past generations (Arnett 2015; Furstenberg et al. 2004; Risman 2018).

On the forefront of this line of argument is the work of Jeffrey Arnett (2000), who proposed that young people in the industrialized world are experiencing “emerging adulthood” as a new phase in the life course. Arnett (2000; 2015) argues that, beginning with the Millennial generation, the trajectory for Americans has shifted in such a way that adolescence is now followed by emerging adulthood whereby 18-30 year olds grapple with identity exploration, lifestyle choices, and uncertainty in employment. Arnett characterizes this phase as one of deep exploration, instability, and identity discovery, but also one that delays stable career choices and family formation.

Empirically, this is evidenced by trends that show that people are delaying marriage, parenthood, and home ownership, extending their time in college or school, and spending additional time living with

their parents. Young people aged 18-30 are also much more likely now than in prior generations to experiment with various career options and choices, ‘boomerang’ back into their parents’ home after initial attempts to establish their own household and pursue cohabiting within romantic relationships (rather than marriages).

While contextual circumstances and post-industrial shifts in both economy and family life coincide with Arnett’s argument, it is less clear whether these changing circumstances give rise to a new life stage or, more simply, have shifted the ways young people can and do approach the sequential ordering of the life course. As more and more young people are moving on to obtain college degrees, almost 50% of those in their mid-twenties are still in school, while for some, college extends into their late twenties and thirties. Extended time in school delays entry into the full-time regular workforce and results in many people living with their parents rather than independently or with a romantic partner into their 20s and sometimes 30s (Furstenberg 2010; Pew Research Center 2016). In addition, the skyrocketing cost of college saddles many graduates with debt, redoubling the difficulty of financial independence (Draut 2006).

Delayed career paths and heavy college debt loads also mean that the youth take extended time until marriage, as Millennials are likely to want to be financially independent before committing within long-term relationships. In addition, this generation is cautious in choosing partners due to high divorce rates in their parents’ generation (Setterson and Ray 2010). The age of first marriage has steadily risen and

in 2016 the median age of first marriage was 29 for men and 27 for women (Pew Research Center 2014). Transitioning out of high school thus often foretells a period of personal and financial instability that comes with the accumulation of debt from college attendance and often subsequent graduate education while delaying entry into long-term romantic relationships in part due to unfavorable economic circumstances (see Risman 2018).

Taking account of these circumstances, scholars have argued that these changes represent an underlying shift in the structure of the life of young people in such a way that life course markers are not neatly attainable and articulated (Brooks and Everett 2008; Andres and Wyn 2010; Morimoto and Friedland 2011). Adding some complexity to Arnett's thesis, scholars argue that indecision and exploration—although experienced at the personal level and navigated independently—are not individual traits with a set trajectory. Instead, they represent changes in the social and economic circumstances in which the youth are growing up, and entail negotiating one's own life course individually. Taking all this into consideration, Furlong, Woodman, and Wyn (2011) argue that "the experiences of young people have become individualized [and] young lives are being lived out in contexts that are more mixed and demand new forms of reflexive engagement with the social world" (Furlong, Woodman, and Wyn 2011:375). As such, viewing young people's lives intersectionally demonstrates that the sequential steps to adulthood are not ordered, but navigated according to the complexity of changing circumstances, social position, and individual choices structured by and through gender, race, class, and sexuality.

Intersectional Perspectives

Examining emerging adulthood—or the life course more generally—from an intersectional perspective shows that the processes of development and maturation are shaped by race, gender, sexuality, and other attributes that coincide with—and inform—life decisions, expectations, and markers of entering adulthood. Intersectional scholars reveal that these categories are more than individual attributes of inequality; they are mutually-constituted relationships and structures of both penalty and privilege (Crenshaw 1991; Glenn 1999; Collins 2000). Markers of adulthood—such as having a family or choosing a career—are thus filtered through the lenses that comprise our identities and social position. At the same time, race, class, gender, sexuality, and other structures constrain, enable, and inform attitudes about what makes one an adult, such as family formation, workforce participation, education, and career aspirations. In particular, the last years of high school are a time when the youth contemplate or make decisions about the "continuation of education, movement into and out of the labor force, entry into marriage, and becoming a parent" (Fan and Marini 2000:258).

For example, Sarah Damaske (2011) shows that class and race contribute to young women's expectations of workforce participation, with middle-class white, black, Latina and Asian women expecting to work continually and full time, while working class women's expectations for continual workforce participation being differed by race. Likewise, Megan Bears Augustyn and Dylan Jackson (2017) find out that outcomes vary by race and socio-economic

status for those who take on adult responsibilities (e.g. childbirth or departure from parents' home) at an early age. Whereas these precocious transitions present a risk for individuals with a higher socio-economic status, less advantaged youth who go through adult markers earlier do not have higher rates of antisocial behavior. Accordingly, Augustyn and Jackson argue for a more complete examination of the "various cultural meanings and significance of transitions to adulthood" (2017:19).

The trajectory of the contemporary American life course – as established alongside white, middle-class post-World-War-II ideals of nuclear family – assumed that men and women would marry after high school and then go directly into forming a family, with the man as the primary worker and wage earner, and the woman primarily responsible for homemaking and child-rearing. While 'emerging adulthood' as a separate stage in the lifecourse makes sense in its ability to account for changes in college attendance and large-scale entry of professional women into workforce, it also reifies those raced, classed, gendered, and heteronormative ideals of life-course transitions. Indeed, in examining young people's articulation of their present and future selves, the process of the lifecourse emerges as an intersectional and complex combination of social position, identity, and expectations. As such, rather than the youth extending adolescence into 'emerging adulthood', structural changes to the life course – combined with a strong sense of individual agency – funnel the youth into a much more vulnerable position of consistently having to make choices regarding their own expectations and trajectories. Below I discuss these changes in terms of family, sexu-

ality, relationships, and expectations for careers, as well as in terms of how young people engage with – or invest in – their communities as they move toward independence.

Data and Methods

Sample Description and Strategy

Research for this study was conducted in four towns in the United States, two in the Midwest and two in the South, in the years 2004-2006, just as the notion of 'emerging adulthood' was taking hold in the scholarly literature. All of the respondents were high-school students and aged 14-19. The timeframe and age range of the respondents guide this analysis. Specifically, the goal was to assess how high-school students interpreted their transition into adulthood during the timeframe when Arnett (2000; 2015) articulated 'emerging adulthood' as a new life stage. Therefore, I applied the grounded theory approach in order to recognize emergent themes of adulthood among my research participants (Corbin and Strauss 1990). At the same time, I sought to understand life-course processes from the perspective of adolescents themselves. As such, my research was grounded in intersectional and life course perspectives, as I conducted interviews and observations with the goal of understanding and exploring the point of view of my participants as fully as possible (Ritchie et al. 2003).

In total, 116 students were interviewed in relation to this study. The racial composition of the sample included 15 African Americans, 5 Latinx, 5 Asian Americans, 1 Native American, and 1 Arab American.

The remainder of the students interviewed were white. All students self-identified within binary gender categories, with sixty-five of the students identified as women and the rest as men. The majority of the respondents were reached in high-school settings, although participants were also recruited in a variety of other contexts, including neighborhood centers, malls, and other hangouts.

Data Collection Methods

With each participant I conducted in-depth, semi-structured, and open-ended interviews, allowing students to discuss a range of topics related to their school, civic, and social lives. After I had established a rapport with the interviewees, they were asked about their activities, social lives, aspirations and expectations, home environment, and political beliefs. The interview protocol was thus structured around specific questions that I wished to address, with subjects including their plans and aspirations following high school and how they saw their place in the world. However, interviews were also open-ended, allowing the participants to expand and emphasize topics that were central to them, and allowing me to probe for more depth as points or themes in the conversation emerged.

In addition to the interviews, I also observed high-school-aged students in various settings, including school, volunteer work, community activities as well as at local hangouts (e.g. the mall, coffee shops) and at volunteer centers. Taken together, the interviews and observations allowed me to get a fuller picture of the day-to-day lives of high-school-aged youth and how they approached maturity. Their

responses, actions, and comments shaped further inquiries and provided an interpretive frame from which to examine their experiences of growing up and coming of age. Because this study explores how stages of the life course align with the experiences of young people entering 'emerging adulthood', the access to respondents' interpretation of life-course transitions formed a critical component of this research.

My sampling strategy was to use a stratified-purposive sample as I drew from different schools that represented diverse student populations. In order to do this, I selected large public schools in each of the towns. When conducting the interviews, I also learned how youth in each community were connected to civic or volunteer actions in the area, and I sampled from these locations as well. Therefore, to supplement these school-based samples, I also drew from neighborhood centers or other place-based sites that would tend to overrepresent lower-income and underrepresented minority students.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed through the coding of emergent themes and issues that came out of the interview and observational data. I summarized key themes, discussions, and theoretical issues that appeared in the interviews, and tracked patterns through extensive written memos and notes. The qualitative software program NVivo assisted in my analysis of the data and helped me to refine the codes as new patterns and ideas emerged. These methods allowed me to access young people's perspectives and gave me a broad

understanding of life course transitions and reaching adulthood.

For this analysis, I focused on the responses of the youth of color and young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Their perspectives made it possible for intersectional themes to emerge in the context of a life course analysis. In particular, themes about how the youth envisioned family life, how they represented masculinity and femininity, how they tended to see and understand the problems and barriers they faced as individually directed, as well as the notions of stress and anxiety all became key cornerstones to the argument. Because I am examining how the youth see their future selves, the research design is intended to explore the action of individuals and how they interpret, understand, and experience action (Giddens 1984). Burawoy (1998) explains qualitative social science data in terms of the notions that social actors “carry in their heads” while they recreate and/or transform the institutions of their daily life. These “pre-constituted theories and concepts of participants” need to be understood “in relation to the context of their production” (Burawoy 1998). Thus, I sought young people’s understanding of a range of issues relating to school, work, aspirations, activities, and ideas about becoming an adult as they pertained to higher education, citizenship, and community. Observations and in-depth interviews allowed me to explore and develop an understanding of youth as they were constructing and recreating their lives when reaching adulthood. My approach made it possible for me to explore students’ day-to-day experiences while building a broader framework for understanding those experiences.

Analysis and Findings

Intersectional Pathways to Adulthood and Family Life

A number of students discussed their decisions and attitudes about sex, sexuality, and family life as central to their adolescent identities, but they also described how they saw themselves moving into adulthood. In engaging with such questions, the youth reveal that they are not just delaying entry into a new life stage; they are also reshaping notions around heteronormativity and family relationships. Importantly, young people do not see marriage and family as central to adulthood (Furstenberg et al. 2004). Rather than being tied to expectations about their future family lives and maintaining norms of heterosexuality, romance, and gender boundaries (Christian-Smith 1994; Best 2000; Wilkins 2004), the youth are increasingly expanding on these ideas, both conforming to and problematizing conventional expectations.

Monique’s case illustrates one way in which this emerges. As an African American 18-year-old high school senior, she discusses how assumptions about her pregnancy are often misguided and based on other people’s judgments and opinions about the normative way of entering into parenthood and family life. As such, she is defensive when other girls ask her questions or draw conclusions about her on this basis. She relays a story about how a classmate reacted to her pregnancy:

For example me, I am about to have another child. The other day, I was in class and there was a girl, “Oh

are you pregnant?" It's like Yeah. You know, I'm excited about it because this was something I planned. I plan that when I'm 30, I don't want to be raising kids when I'm 30. I want to be just about done. I want to be able to live my life after I raise my kids because I do want kids. And the girl kind of looked at me like, (snaps fingers to express dismay). And she started whispering to her friend...and... It was obvious she was talkin' about me because she was lookin' at me while she was doin' it. And, I kinda got very upset.

Monique explains that her pregnancy is a choice and that others judge her without knowing anything about her or her circumstances. Monique's decision to plan a pregnancy when being a high-school student demonstrates not only that the decision to have children while unmarried and still in high school can be a well-reasoned choice that came about through deliberate thinking and planning, but also that young women have the capacity and ability to make these or other choices as they see their lives and futures. In doing so, Monique's articulation that she wants to have children, but she also wants to be done with child-rearing by the time she is 30, indicates that she is pushing up against the expectations of gender and family planning that are consistent with the concept of life stages and emerging adulthood. To put it another way, Monique's decision to have children while in high school so as to finish child-rearing by the age of 30 and have the freedom to explore highlights whether this life-course sequencing makes her 'more' or 'less' of an adult.

Monique's case also illustrates how the ideas of masculinity and femininity are not fixed, but relative to race and other intersections, and thus critical to un-

derstanding a life-course trajectory (Connell 1995; Corsaro 1997). As a black woman, her emphasis on family and integrating family responsibility into her ambition and life plans are not exceptional, but expected (Davis 1981; Collins 2000). Since Monique already has a young child, she wants to concentrate her child-rearing into a short span when she is still young, which will allow her to pursue further goals once her children are older.

Monique's situation illustrates that lifestages are consistently negotiated and subject to how contemporary notions of race and gender – and other stratifying structures – are changing. Kirta, a white 17-year-old, is another example of how young people are transitioning out of adolescence in ways that grapple with gender. Kirta, however, is questioning the binary categories of masculinity and femininity and, as such, offers an intersectional perspective on life course stages as she enters adulthood. Kirta explains that she started an organization called 'Students for Social Justice' that seeks "to end social injustices, like racism, sexism, you know, other -isms." Therefore, the justice Kirta envisions involves helping people, but in a way which entails demolishing structural inequalities. In addition, Kirta is active in the 'Gay Straight Alliance' at her school, whose "primary focus [is] to end homophobia."

It is with regard to Kirta's concerns about sexuality and sexual identity that she captures many aspects of emerging adulthood and the ways that the youth change expectations around the presumed structural constraint. Similarly to how Monique explains her deliberate decision to have and raise her children "out of order" from the traditional norms

and expectations, Kirta explains that she is bisexual, which stands behind her passion for the 'Gay Straight Alliance', but she goes on to explain:

I wish there wasn't a word. I wish you didn't even have to describe. I think people are just people. It's just normal you know. It's natural to fall in love with people. The idea should be so simplistic, but people struggle with it so much. I think there is too much emphasis put on what we love and not who. There are just so many social barriers.

For Kirta, therefore, the boundaries around sexuality and gender should not be determinative structures for her life outcomes. While for her it is about fighting for social justice and equity, from the life course perspective we can see her efforts as consistent with those qualities that define emerging adulthood. She does not want to be constrained by traditional family or relationship norms, because she does not see these as relevant and, in fact, even perceives them as inhibiting. Importantly, Kirta's decisions about family, like Monique's, are shaped intersectionally and make the stage of emerging adulthood problematic, since they necessarily question the life-course structure and trajectory for these young women.

Reifying Conventional Pathways through Individual Responsibility

Not surprisingly, a number of young people articulated a much more conventional understanding of family formation and the notions of masculine and feminine behavior. As Monique notes, her classmates have judged her choices without information about her specific circumstances or decision-mak-

ing. Interestingly, however, all of these students perceive these as adult choices and, as such, these choices belong to individuals. Specifically, sexual independence and the freedoms that allow young people to delay marriage also make it possible for adolescents to take decisions about adult behaviors, such as sexuality and sexual activity (see Coontz 1992). For adolescents, however, the key issue is that individual actors are making decisions about entering into adulthood through their independent behaviors and actions.

One example comes from Heather, a white junior who ponders about how many young women at her school are pregnant. She holds young women accountable for pregnancy and wonders "what the matter is" with them:

Well, another thing about my school is that there are a ton of pregnant people walking around. There are little freshman girls that are walking around that are pregnant. And one of them, actually, no joke, before she got pregnant she weighed about 100, about 100 pounds. And I was like, "What's the matter with these people and what's the matter with their parents?" You know? Is it their parents? Is it the kids? Is it like not enough sex education going on in school?... It's just like, you know, how can you allow yourself to be pregnant when you're 15years old, 16years old, 17years old, and even 18years old?

While Heather abides by conventional gendered standards of the 'appropriate' behavior for women and girls, these conventions also indicate that decisions and choices about sex and pregnancy are the responsibility of young women. While historically

teen couples with an unintended pregnancy might be steered towards marriage by a concerned family or for religious reasons, Heather indicates that these are ultimately choices that girls “allow” for.

Crystal takes a slightly different view, indicating that decisions about becoming sexually active affect boys and girls quite differently and, therefore, have an impact on what the lifecourse can and does look like with regard to having children. Crystal indicates that girls who have children are forced to grow up quickly, while boys can be absolved of that responsibility. Thus, her comments indicate the possibility that decisions about family and children are matters that can force women into adulthood early, while they cannot constrain young men in the same way. Not only is this indicative of how the life course trajectory is sex-specific, but it also shows that contemporary mores allow for the life course to be directed by individual choices made by teenaged young men and women. Crystal explains:

I see, like, students that are in this situation...Like having babies and having to struggle and having to grow up very fast.

Do you think it's different for girls?

I think it's a lot different for girls...Don't think that by having a guy's baby you are going to make him grow up. And don't think that because you know you have this guy's baby that means he's gotta stay with you. He doesn't. It's not going to tie him down to you. And you're gonna have to stay with it, not him, He's gonna be out. Probably making more [babies]. And you're gonna have to stay home with it and feed it when it wakes up at 2 or 3 in the morning. And the thought of

that didn't scare me, but it kinda made me mad. Like, how could a guy do that?

Crystal indicates that for girls, the decisions to have children at a young age result in them making adult decisions and having adult responsibilities well before boys assume the same responsibility. Moreover, these decisions belong to individuals, absent institutional support, or structures. As a result, girls may move into adulthood at quite a young age, whereas for boys, entering into adulthood is not necessarily determined by choices of being sexually active and starting a family. When examined through an intersectional lens, the life course is clearly something that is negotiated by young people of the current generation. Indeed, by articulating the negotiation of entry into adulthood, adolescents point out that – rather than moving from one stage to the next or extending one stage into the next – a life stage is determined by a series of choices that are made individually and informed by gender, race, class, and sexuality.

Individuality, Changing the System, and Giving Back

For a number of young people, exiting adolescence is not characterized by identity exploration as much as it is determined by navigating and grappling with the ways the lifecourse is structured. Dan Woodman and Johanna Wyn (2015) show that in contemporary circumstances, structures continue to constrain the opportunities and possibilities available to the youth.

Consistently with these authors' findings, the process of transition out of adolescence – particularly as

it emerges in those who feel marginalized or are from underrepresented groups – reveals how institutions and structures shape, and sometimes limit, possibilities available to young people. Because of this, as much as young people are involved in processes of exploration, they also seek out ways to navigate or reimagine those structures so that they accord with their own perspectives and experiences.

An example here is Jared, a black 17-year-old who sees the transition out of adolescence not in terms of job choices, romantic relationships, or a living situation, but he considers how he can give back to younger people in his community instead. Growing up is an economic and racialized process, one in which he does not like to see young children going through the same struggles that he had. Jared discusses “giving back to the people that have helped you” (see: Charles 2005) as part of his commitment to being a reading mentor at an elementary school. When asked about why he is interested in helping kids, Jared explains:

Well, it's like...I know where I'm from...know what I'm saying...the kids ain't got much there.

Where?

I know kids ain't got much. I feel like, when I came up here, teachers started helping me, so I can help other people too, know what I'm saying. But if there's something they need, if I've got it, I'll give them what they need.

Pass it on?

Yeah, treat them like they want to be treated.

And that will get you pretty far?

Because I don't like to see kids struggling either.

You don't like to see them struggling?

Like when kids be walking around with tore up shoes, you know what I'm saying? Like, I like to see them with good haircuts. Sometimes I just want to go over and buy them a haircut, buy them some new shoes or somethin'. I don't like to see kids dirty.

For Jared, adulthood is not about moving into adult roles and situations, but, rather, about acknowledging his own childhood and helping the younger generation move up and out of that situation as much as he can. As such, his view of moving into adulthood entails being a mentor in the community, but also acknowledging that that community limits the opportunities for adulthood. Jared has a strong desire to help others as much as possible by making sure that they are cared for and they do not have to struggle the way he had. He is aware of the difficulties young people face when they do not have opportunities, which is why he does his best to give to them and help in the ways he had been helped himself. As Wyn and Woodman (2006) point out, rather than being about the timing or the course of adulthood transitions, Jared's case is an indication that there are various types of adulthoods available to the youth. Examining this intersectionally, Jared's situation demonstrates that moving into adulthood can be understood in terms of mollifying the path for children like him. While these actions cannot change socio-economic disadvantages at the structural level, Jared sees these limitations and wishes to improve others' choices and opportunities, particularly that of those who are coming from the background like his own.

Crystal also sees similar problems, although she thinks about them more in terms of the opportuni-

ties offered by school and other social institutions that provide opportunities to all young people, not just those who are in the middle class or well-off. She is involved in the 'Stand Up Club', an organization that attempts to keep young people in school so that they graduate. Crystal is concerned with "not letting anyone else drop out because everyone's entitled to an education and pursue a higher learning." Interestingly, Crystal stresses that opportunities should not just be limited to those who are on the middle-class trajectory of high school to college to emerging adulthood and adult responsibilities. Instead, everyone should be educated and have a multitude of opportunities that are now often closed off to youth of lower socio-economic standing, particularly those who are racially underrepresented. As Crystal continues, "*High school is free. So you should have a diploma. A [Graduate Equivalency Diploma]. Something.*" She discusses how schools could be made more successful:

I would like to see high schools more student-centered. Maybe more relevant to the real world and us having success in our lives. It being more rigorous maybe. Some students say they dropout because it's boring. It's not rigorous. And their relationships better, better much better relationships. Whether it's between students and teachers or students and parents or parents and teachers. Just all relationships should be much better. Way better.

Crystal points to the need to make high school more rigorous and more relevant to young people's lives and futures, while she also indicates that there should be ways to improve relationships between parents, students, and teachers. As such, Crystal

is contesting the standard life course trajectory, because it does not fit in the expectations and experiences of young people from underrepresented populations. Since this trajectory is not available to all young people, the notion of emerging adulthood as a time for identity exploration and experimentation is also not available. Arguably, as with young women who start families in high school, those who drop out have to grow up more quickly than those who can take the time to try different careers, jobs, and identities. In suggesting that school should be "more relevant," Crystal is perhaps pointing to ways that the youth facing socio-economic and racial constraints contest the life course, but also the ways that they wish to change institutions into ones that are more applicable to everyone.

Students such as Keenon, a black 18-year-old, also express a desire to have their circumstances and life course reflecting their own experiences. Keenon did not really fit in at school, but he still placed value on the conventional ways of moving into adulthood, with college attendance and career aspirations. As a result, while still an adolescent, he looks to his community for support and friendship when he cannot foster these relationships within his school:

I'm like one of the only Black guys in my classes and stuff. There are not that many people I can relate to on a 'true friendship' level and that's kind of been detrimental to my experience in high school so that's why I've been trying to be out more in the community because that helps the time go by faster. You then meet people outside of [high school], you know, if they're older or whatever, you know, they tend to be able to

understand a little more and you just sort of develop a rapport with them.

He goes on to indicate that he is leading an effort within his school to allow other students to also be involved in the community beyond the school boundaries:

We basically started that club because I used to be in [student council] for a couple of years but I felt like [student council] wasn't really meeting the needs of people, other people who weren't like friends of the members of [council]. So I decided to start up an organization that would try to match community service opportunities with people who normally wouldn't be involved.

Keenon's efforts demonstrate how young people wrestle with identity, but also how they use their identity and situation to shape the world around them. For Keenon, this means taking matters into his own hands and creating opportunity even though his own opportunities are limited for financial reasons. Indeed, Keenon mentions that – although he has done well in school and is a high-achiever – he will attend the local state university, because his family cannot afford more costly (and prestigious) private university tuition. Through this process, Keenon is conforming to a fairly standard life-course path that is consistent with transitioning into emerging adulthood. However, at the same time he is stretching the boundaries of structural constraints in the adult world and community. As Woodman and Wyn (2015) explain, Keenon, Crystal, and Jared all serve as examples of young people who are redefining structural constraints. For each

of these young people, this redefinition is not because they no longer face constraints, but, instead, they continue to face them. Therefore, confronting these constraints involves acknowledging their circumstances and navigating social structures in a way that resonates with their own experiences and trajectories. However, as is the case with negotiating family planning and other adult decisions, adolescents tend to go through a life transition as an individual process that they maneuver around on their own terms.

As a result, the youth hold themselves responsible for their own trajectory and transitions (Morimoto and Friedland 2011). For the underrepresented youth, this means trying to forge a path that is meaningful to their own experiences, but with less assurance that structures either constrain or enable their choices (Beck 2006). The route to adulthood, therefore, is less about transition between life stages and more connected to how youth navigate the uncertainty that adulthood brings.

Ambition and Achievement

Scholars have partly linked this uncertainty to high levels of ambition and the culture that is based on achievement (Morimoto and Friedland 2013; see also Schneider and Stevenson 1999; Reynolds and Baird 2010). Specifically, the route to adulthood comes with pressures of performing well in academia, sport, and the arts, as well as with regard to young people having to distinguish themselves both inside and outside the classroom. Theoretically, this means that the youth are not constrained by gendered expectations about marriage and family

or racial structures of inequality (see: Woodman and Wyn 2015). Indeed, entering the stages of emerging adulthood means that the youth take up ambition and reach levels of achievement from which many of them may have been excluded in past generations. For example, while structural gender inequalities in pay and career trajectories remain in place, there are significantly more opportunities available for young women now than there had been for those entering adulthood in the 1980s or 1990s (Risman 2018). However, as discussed above, the notions of lack of structural constraint moves the burden of navigating structures of inequalities and unequal opportunities to the youth so that they must figure it all out individually and on their own. The youth internalize their ambitions and goals, seeing them as limited only by their imaginations and abilities; this is the case particularly among young white women. Characteristic of this type of ambition is Kerry, who explains her future as follows:

I'm going to become president of the United States! (laughs) So I'm thinking I'm going to [Ivy League college] and then go to law school and go to Washington, DC and work in government or politics in ways that will change peoples lives. Or I hope to anyways.

Rachel, another white high school junior, also indicates that she is only limited by her own expectations. She discusses 'having it all,' including a successful career and a family. For Rachel, this means moving to New York or Chicago to be a fashion designer, establishing a small business in breeding dogs, and being a wife and mother. She explains:

But you know how you have this thing that you just want. You just sit down [and do it]...I want to work with animals you know? I can do this all. And I can have a family and I can do well in school and I can get married and I can do anything. It just takes you to be you to do it, you know? Don't let others push you around and everything.

Thus, Rachel expresses equity in terms of setting her mind to what she wants and moving forward. While she does not articulate it explicitly, she implies that "being pushed around" is something she can prevent from happening, and accounts for why women historically have had to choose between family and career. From her perspective, with a proper mindset she can be professionally successful, entrepreneurial, and have a fulfilling personal life. Rachel shows the intellectual understanding that maternal and professional responsibilities are difficult to balance, but, by being grounded in who she is, she can "do anything." Indeed, research shows that young women often do not understand the difficulties and constraints they will face as adults (Coppock, Haydon, and Richter 1995; Sigel 1996). Rachel believes that her future adulthood is about her own choices and decisions; she is accountable to herself and this self is the only thing that can prevent her from meeting these expectations.

Pressure and Anxiety

Alongside these high levels of self-direction and individualized ambition comes the age of self-discovery and changing pathways that Jeffrey Arnett (2000) associates with emerging adulthood. For many young people, however, individualized ambi-

tion also comes with increased levels of pressure, anxiety, and alienation. In her study of college girls, Pamela Aronson finds out that young women “describe their feelings about graduating with words such as *panic, fearful, down, lost, nervous, scary, and frightened*” (Aronson 2008:70, emphasis original). Consistently with Arnett’s arguments about the life stage of emerging adulthood, Aronson (2008) points to uncertainty as a major theme in young women’s lives. However, beyond confusion with regard to reaching their next lifestage, the young people I interviewed discussed feelings of confusion and uncertainty as also stemming from pressures associated with high ambition and the need to find their own pathways to success.

Alienation and Uncertainty

Along with the sense of being lost, depressed, or other feelings and emotions similar to what Aronson describes, at the high school level this sense of uncertainty comes across as a kind of alienation of young people as they head into their adult lives. Thus, while Rachel feels confident that she can accomplish whatever she wishes, she also discusses how she became depressed during her junior year and how those feelings carried over into anxiety about college applications and her sense of personal identity:

I went through clinical depression. Then, depression does not go away for a very long time, so who’s going to help with that? Then I was dealing with all this stress with school. Getting accepted, doing this, this, this and this and worrying about who I am. And I came this far and now it’s basically coming to the end.

For Rachel, feelings of anxiety and unhappiness are connected to the stress and expectations about school, the worry about college applications, and a general sense that she does not have time to reflect on who she is. In particular, stress about college admission and attendance was an often-mentioned theme pertaining to moving into adulthood (see also Morimoto and Friedland 2013). Rachel, therefore, demonstrates the complex navigation that is a part of young people’s lives as they move into adult life. While she feels that the demands she has to meet are so great that she is unable to have a sense of self, she is also highly ambitious and self-reliant with regard to her many expectations of herself as an adult. For young people, therefore, the confusion, identity searching and anxiety that comes with transitioning into adulthood is partly due to having to choose from so many different pathways. Thus, becoming an adult is also a process of determining what that path to adulthood looks like and what it entails. All of this responsibility can feel like a burden and, thus, be alienating.

Cienna, a working-class 19-year-old Latina, explains how difficult imagining adulthood can be. From her perspective, high school is a struggle, especially as she gets older and feels she is facing greater responsibilities, making tough decisions, and struggling with hardships. Cienna is involved with school activities and organizations, but she finds high-school life itself somewhat overwhelming. As she explains, “As life goes on, you just...You have trials and tribulations. No one ever said life was going to be easy. I’m finding that out now.” Cienna and Rachel both describe feelings of stress and alienation as they prepare to embark on adult responsibilities and ex-

pectations. For both of these young women, their anxiety is internalized and generalized to feelings about who they are or how they deal with life.

The transition into adulthood, therefore, is far from easy and involves a long process of negotiation and navigation as students forge their pathway forward. As Arnett (2000) rightly points out, this is a long road. At the same time, however, the conventional life-course trajectory does not always comport with the experiences of young people as they transition into adult life. Instead, their lives and choices involve demonstrating how the emergent structures of race, class, gender, and sexuality shape their life course. In addition to revealing how standard transitions are not available to all students, they negotiate the terms and shape of the adulthood they imagine. In doing so, they are self-reliant in ways that make them grapple with stress and anxiety, which makes for a key component of adult life.

Discussion and Conclusion

Emerging adulthood is characterized as an extended transition from adolescence to adulthood. Arnett (2000; 2015) suggests that young people wait longer to establish themselves in adult lives, with job security or a career path, stable long-term relationships and families, and general security. Instead, they experience processes of identity exploration, insecurity, and low levels of commitment to career and family. From the perspective of the adolescents involved in this study, transition into adulthood is shaped by exploration, partly because young people (like Kirita) do not necessarily feel the need to get married, or they struggle to finance the college career they

desire (like Keenon). However, this is not limited to taking the long path on the lifecourse. On the contrary, young people are contesting and reshaping the various structures and constraints of previous generations, and in the process they are questioning that lifecourse by means of their own attitudes and behaviors. While many of these presumptions and structures remain in place, alternatives are available to young people nowadays and they are able to form their own legitimate pathways to adult life. In part, this is due to the emphasis on individuality and achievement; in teen years, before entering the adult years, there is an emphasis on achievement and being able to navigate the pathways as individuals. At the same time, however, young people problematize the structures that constrain them, suggesting that adult responsibilities can take place in a different order and various configurations, as well as finding ways to renegotiate structural constraints.

Noteworthy is how the structures of racial constraint and gender expectations are embedded into the life course, and how contesting these barriers leads to a broadening of opportunities and paths to adulthood. Thus, while Arnett's observations of a new life-course stage are well founded and documented, those in the emerging adult cohort are in that position also because they are exploring their individual identities and options as they are recreating what adulthood means by contesting gender and racial structures.

Therefore, the lifecourse that Arnett sees is largely based on the confluence of the generational context with gendered, classed, racialized, and heteronormative notions of what it means to be an adult.

An intersectional understanding of the process of growing up emerges in such a way that in examining the shift of our ideas about gender and gender boundaries, we can also see how race constrains and enables pathways to adulthood. These changes influence how young people experience the process of becoming adults – both in terms of the length of time it takes as well as a multitude of routes to adulthood that they must navigate. Importantly, being an adult is no longer implicitly contingent on being a man or a woman, a husband or a wife, a mother or a father. Rather, being an adult is contingent on navigating one's way through the world by reliance on networks and personal resources while defining the self and fulfilling goals. Thus, as the youth contest and change the boundaries around gender and the opportunities available to them according to race and class, one can see more clearly how growing up is a raced, gendered, classed, and heteronormative process.

The young people of today are involved in shaping, navigating, and negotiating their own lives and circumstances. In doing so, they 'complicate' what were once taken-for-granted categories, such as gender and race. As a result, today one enters into adult stages that for prior generations had been clearly – although not always explicitly – dependent on gender categories and the socio-economic status. In other words, adulthood is less about coming of age as a man or a woman, and more about navigating all of the complexity associated with being an adult, including – but not limited to – negotiating what it means to be a responsible gendered adult. Beyond simply elongating the time between the signposts of job, marriage, family, and stability, as young people

transition out of adolescence and into the stage of emerging adulthood, they are problematizing these signposts while shaping their own identities, futures, and circumstances.

Limitations of This Study

The research I presented is limited to a qualitative study conducted in the United States as adolescents were transitioning out of high school and into their expectations of future adult roles. While there is evidence (see, e.g., Beck 2006; Brooks and Everett 2008; Andres and Wyn 2010; Woodman and Wyn 2015) that the types of experiences they articulate are applicable on a more global scale, their comments and the analysis herein presents the U.S. perspective exclusively. Arguably, the life-course trajectory that Jeffrey Arnett describes is likewise grounded in the American view. At the same time, however, future research would benefit from a wider understanding of the process of life transitions in a global age, with the consideration of the global market and economy.

Another weakness of the presented study is that the young people interviewed here do not know how their lives will turn out, i.e. they cannot in all certainty say whether the decisions they are making at this point will delay, elongate, or complicate their paths to adulthood. Moreover, they do not know if they will remain in their careers long term, achieve school goals, or develop their communities in the ways they imagine. The value, however, is not in whether they enter 'emerging adulthood' *per se*, but in how they negotiate this transition and how their situated lives complicate the broader life course trajectory.

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