

Padilla-Walker, L., & Nelson, L. (2017). *Flourishing in Emerging Adulthood: Positive Development During the Third Decade of Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

## Foreword

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“I seem to be lingering, forwards and backwards but never settling into an adult role.”

With these words, Yanakieva—one of the emerging adults who contributed a personal essay to this informative and creative volume—compellingly captures the crux of this new stage of life. For much of human history, children transitioned into adult-like work at an early age. Now that transition often occurs only in the course of the twenties in economically developed countries and among the urban middle- and upper-classes in developing countries. Emerging adults are not as dependent on their parents as they were in childhood and adolescence but have not yet made commitments to the stable roles in work and love that structure adult life for most people (Jensen & Arnett, in press). As Nelson observes, “large proportions of young people do not see themselves as adults.”

While emerging adults, such as Yanakieva, may have an unsettled sense of moving forward and backward, societal responses to emerging adults are likewise in flux—even pulling in opposite directions. As the editors Padilla-Walker and Nelson observe in their introductory chapter, reactions range from extolling the unprecedented opportunities of this stage of life to labeling emerging adults as materialistic, immature, and narcissistic. Why such divergent views? Clearly, emerging adulthood has not yet become a custom complex. A custom complex is a pattern of interlocked beliefs and behaviors that most members of a society share without much questioning, and I would argue that developmental stages in many ways are custom complexes—

not simply fixed ontogenetic periods (Jensen, 2016). Developmental stages are ways that members of a culture segment the life course, imbuing each with distinctive roles and duties, tasks and goals. Cultural ways of segmenting the life course are not random or unmoored from biological constraints, but nonetheless cultures vary significantly on conceptions of life course stages. For example, one of the four traditional Indian life course stages is apprenticeship (*brahmachary*) when persons between about 8 to 18 years are supposed to acquire useful knowledge, refrain from sexual activity, and learn humility (Saraswathi, Mistry & Dutta, 2011). When a stage is a custom complex, it is not questioned. It just seems natural. Whereas emerging adulthood may not have reached the status of a custom complex, this volume takes us beyond whiplash-inducing views of its virtues versus its vices.

The volume title, *Flourishing in Emerging Adulthood: Positive Development During the Third Decade of Life*, indicates a tilt toward the merits of emerging adulthood. But the collection of almost 50 chapters by scholars and essays by emerging adults offers complex insights. King and Merola argue that “emerging adulthood is a propitious period of the lifespan.... Emerging adults have a newfound depth of psychological resources and breadth of social freedom.” In focusing on religiously-inspired service, their chapter joins with others that highlight realms in which many emerging adults thrive, such as identity formation, the development of purpose, civic and political participation, environmental activism, and global citizenship. Admirably, however, the editors have also included numerous essays addressing ways that some emerging adults face formidable odds, including inner city violence, discrimination, disabilities, perils of migration, and harsh systems of justice. Even as the authors of these chapters remind us that individual resilience and social policies are ways to improve the odds, the sheer breadth of

emerging adult experiences and life circumstances is rendered vividly and compassionately across chapters and essays.

Only a minority of young people in economically developing countries currently experience anything resembling emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2016). Yet, this volume makes it clear that this new stage is not simply a Western phenomenon. It is global, if patchy in places, and variegated. Five chapters on emerging adulthood in Africa (by Lo-oh), Asia (Law, Shek & Liang), Europe (Robinson & Zukauskiene), Latin America (Facio, Sireix & Prestofelippo), and New Zealand and Australia (Barber) offer yet another reminder of how emerging adults cannot be sorted into simple categories or judged along simplistic dimensions. I was struck by the prominence of emerging adults' family ties and obligations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Facio et al. point out that many Argentinean 18- to 21-year-olds want "to live near [their] parents in the future." Lo-oh describes family as a "buffer" among South African emerging adults. Emerging adulthood, then, involves tasks pertaining to individuality and independence in some places. In other places, family membership and duties are paramount. The two kinds of goals are not necessarily in opposition, but where the balance is struck varies across cultures.

While chapters in this volume brings to life the diverse array of emerging adult experiences within and across cultures, perhaps its most unusual and creative feature is the inclusion of personal essays by emerging adults from around the world. Each narrative has a distinctive writing style, tone, focus, and message. For a brief but powerful moment, each allows the reader to step into the shoes of the narrator. Perhaps more than anything else, it is this moment of almost feeling like an emerging adult that will leave the reader cautious of judging emerging adults in a facile way, and that will leave the reader committed to contributing to the flourishing of emerging adults. Certainly, some emerging adults experience this commitment. I

started with the words of one essayist, and will end with those of another. Of emerging adults, Dasianu writes: “We appreciate what we have been given and feel a sense of responsibility to give back.”

## References

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