

Konstam, V. (2007). *Emerging and young adulthood: Multiple perspectives and diverse narratives*. New York: Springer.

## Emerging Discourse about Emerging Adulthood

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### ABSTRACT

This review presents impressions of Konstam's (2007) book entitled "*Emerging and Young Adulthood: Multiple Perspectives and Diverse Narratives*". The review critiques the limited focus of current research, and highlights Konstam's contribution: expanding our understanding by extending the depth and range of existing scholarship on emerging adulthood.

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With the advent of Arnett's seminal work on emerging adulthood (2000, 2004; Arnett & Tanner, 2006), a new life phase in human development within the post-industrial west has been inaugurated. One of the signs of the growing importance of this movement is in scholarship on this phase of life by scholars outside of Arnett's group, as reflected in Varda Konstam's wonderful new book entitled "Emerging and Young Adulthood: Multiple Perspectives and Diverse Narratives". As Arnett has argued, emerging adulthood is the period of life taking place in the 20s in which young people are sorting out their life possibilities, extending the identity-exploration period well past late adolescence. Konstam's outstanding new book provides the sort of depth and nuance that is essential to understanding this phase of life more fully.

Konstam's book consists of an overview of the diverse perspectives that have culminated in the study of emerging adulthood, followed by a detailed description of an extensive and comprehensive qualitative study of emerging adults. As in Arnett's (2000, 2004) work, Konstam outlines the changes in the global economy, shifts in family life, and cultural transitions that have extended the period of exploration and experimentation which had heretofore been restricted to late adolescence and the very early part of young adulthood (i.e., the early 20s). Konstam included narratives from young adults in their early 30s, thereby providing insights into the nature of the post-emerging adulthood phase of life. In addition, Konstam includes informative narratives from her participants, which are often eloquent and moving. Furthermore, she has interviewed parents and employers, thereby providing different lenses through which to view the experience of emerging adults. Most importantly, Konstam's book is characterized by very creative insights and inferences derived from thoughtful analyses of the interviews.

### *The Dilemma of Choice*

Konstam's book documents the dilemma of college graduates in the United States who face extensive choices in their work and leisure lives, relationships and family structures. She illustrates this dilemma with narratives that describe the often-immobilizing experience of multiple options and little guidance in sorting out the implications and meaning of each decision. As in the best qualitative research, Konstam brings this issue to life by having the participants recount their struggles with a level of emotional depth that is rare in psychological scholarship.

One of Konstam's central conclusions is that young people do not have sufficient institutional and relational supports to facilitate their decision making after college. While many colleges and universities in the United States and other Western nations have increasingly accessible sources of support (such as career-development interventions, counseling, support from parents and friends), a number of participants in Konstam's study noted that the support diminished

once they emerge into adulthood. The fact that young people lose much of their available support after college parallels the experience of the vast majority of emerging adults who lack even the opportunities afforded by a four-year university. In short, a problem of emerging adulthood—redressed in part by Konstam’s thoughtful work (which intentionally included less-affluent college graduates)—is, How do emerging adults who have not attended college cope with their lack of support? It remains a thorny issue that merits further attention.

### *Culture, Poverty, and Emerging Adulthood*

Konstam’s chapter on culture represents a major contribution, which will help to generate considerable subsequent research. For example, the case of John (p. 60) describes how emerging adulthood would look and feel different in regions of the United States that are more traditional and bound by religion and tradition. In a similar vein, Konstam furthers a dialogue about social class and race that is essential in contemporary analyses of human development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

One of the tools that may help the emerging-adulthood literature become more inclusive and sensitive to culture, class, and race is a greater focus on the work context. As detailed in recent vocational psychological initiatives, work functions as a source of psychological health (Blustein, 2006, 2008; Fassinger, 2008; Fouad & Bynner, 2008; Richardson, 1993), yet work can also serve as a source of pain and despair. The psychology-of-working perspective, which seeks to examine the work lives of everyone who works or who wants to work, underscores the centrality of access to opportunity in the consideration and implementation of a self-determined work life (Blustein, 2006). Konstam’s research, which includes thoughtful analyses of work-based dilemmas, culture, and context, points the way toward a more comprehensive analysis of emerging adulthood. Hopefully, the next generation of scholarship in this area will seek out more inclusive samples that include non-college graduates, recent immigrants, and others who struggle to find meaning and dignity as they move into adult life. By focusing on the role of access to opportunity at work, scholars of emerging adulthood will be forced to reckon with social and economic inequities (such as unequal access to education, health care, etc.) which have an impact on research, theory, practice, and public policy.

### *Closing Comments*

Konstam’s stellar book advances the scholarship on emerging adulthood in numerous important ways. Her inclusion of less-affluent participants and her informative inferences about the interview data coalesce to form a wonderful addition to the literature. She writes incisively, with humor and grace. She has provided a significant advance, helping to move the emerging adulthood literature to a new level of relevance and rigor. More important, perhaps, I believe that her attention to culture, race, social class, and context will lead us to a fuller understanding of the problems faced by young adults.

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