

# Perceived adult status, critical life events, and features of emerging adulthood

Viola Meckelmann, Sophia Kugler, Universität Potsdam, Germany



## INTRODUCTION

Arnett has described "emerging adulthood as a normative life stage in developed countries" (Arnett, 2012, p. 401) that is identified by five characteristic developmental features. However, according to Arnett's theory (2006, 2014, 2015), development in emerging adulthood is also characterized by great heterogeneity. Whereas many empirical studies have focused on intercultural heterogeneity, there are fewer empirical studies that consider intracultural heterogeneity.

The current study explored this intracultural component by posing the following three research questions.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Do emerging adults with different perceived adult status (yes vs. in some ways yes, in some ways no) differ with regard to perceptions of the five features of emerging adulthood?
2. Do these results differ by age group (18-24 vs. 25-29) as well as by gender?
3. Are there correlations between the accumulation of critical life events and the perceptions of the five features of emerging adulthood?

## DESIGN

The participants in this study were 611 emerging adults (424 female and 187 male university students). They were investigated from July 2013 to September 2013.

## PARTICIPANTS

Participants <sup>1,2</sup>		yes		in some ways yes, in some ways no		differences between perceived adult status x age group x
Age group		18-24	25-29	18-24	25-29	
Gender	women	85	26	211	50	$\chi^2(3, 540) = 4.44$ $p = .218$
	men	30	17	91	30	
Age <sup>3</sup> M (SD)	women	22.81 (1.46) <sup>a</sup>	26.31 (1.12) <sup>a</sup>	22.21 (1.53) <sup>c</sup>	26.47 (1.31) <sup>c</sup>	$P$ (Fisher-Freeman-Holten) = 16.11 $p < .01$
	men	22.44 (1.55) <sup>b</sup>	26.78 (1.19) <sup>b</sup>	22.58 (1.54) <sup>d</sup>	25.87 (0.78) <sup>d</sup>	
Partner	no	42	16	150	34	$P$ (Fisher-Freeman-Holten) = 15.03 $p < .001$
	yes	62	26	144	42	
	married	6	1	1	1	
Children	no	112	41	302	76	$P$ (Fisher-Freeman-Holten) = 15.03 $p < .001$
	at least 1	3	2	0	4	

<sup>1</sup> distribution perceived adult status x age group, perceived adult status x gender: ns  
<sup>2</sup> father's level of education: father's level of education x perceived adult status x age group: ns  
<sup>3</sup> same indices indicate significant differences between the groups ( $p < .001$ )

## VARIABLE AND MEASURES

### perceived adult status

"Do you feel you have reached adulthood?" (Arnett, 2008)  
 yes / no / in some ways yes, in some ways no

### perceptions of the five features of emerging adulthood

German version of the Inventory of the Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA) (Reifman, Arnett, & Colwell, 2007)

**subscales:** Identity exploration ( $\alpha = .68$ ), Experimentation/possibilities ( $\alpha = .78$ ), Negativity/instability ( $\alpha = .79$ ), Self-focused ( $\alpha = .54$ ), Other-focused ( $\alpha = .70$ ), Feeling in-between ( $\alpha = .72$ )

4-point scale from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (4)

### critical life events occurring during emerging adulthood

Critical life events (normative as well as non-normative) were assessed based on the "Life Experience Survey" (Sarason, Johnson, and Siegel, 1978)

normative critical life events (e.g. marriage, pregnancy, leaving home)  
 non-normative critical life events (e.g. divorce, death, moving home)

**accumulation scores** (total number, negative impact ratings, positive impact ratings)

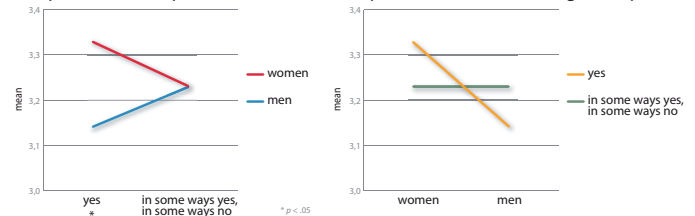
## RESULTS

### Perceptions of the five features of emerging adulthood (perceived adult status x age group x gender)

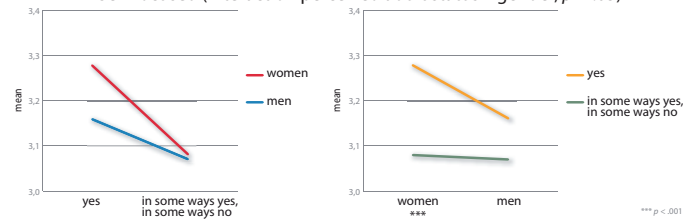
Subscale <sup>1</sup>	yes		in some ways yes, in some ways no		main effect perceived adult status	main effect age group	main effect gender
	M	SD	M	SD			
Identity exploration	3.14	0.50	3.15	0.48			$p < .05$
Experimentation/possibilities <sup>2,3</sup>	3.27	0.52	3.23	0.50		$p < .01$	
Negativity/instability <sup>4</sup>	2.60	0.58	2.77	0.55	$p < .05$		$p < .001$
Self-focused <sup>5</sup>	3.24	0.38	3.08	0.40	$p < .001$		
Other-focused	2.54	0.67	2.28	0.67	$p < .001$		$p < .05$
Feeling in-between	2.83	0.77	3.40	0.52	$p < .001$		$p < .01$

<sup>1</sup> Anovas (perceived adult status x age group x gender); <sup>2</sup> interaction perceived adult status x gender:  $p < .01$ ; <sup>3</sup> perceived adult status x age group x gender:  $p < .05$ ; <sup>4</sup> interaction age group x gender:  $p < .05$ ; <sup>5</sup> interaction perceived adult status x gender:  $p < .05$

#### Experimentation/possibilities (interaction perceived adult status x gender, $p < .01$ )



#### Self-focused (interaction perceived adult status x gender, $p < .05$ )



### Critical life events and the perceptions of the five features of emerging adulthood

Subscale <sup>1,2</sup>	accumulation of normative critical life events			accumulation of non-normative critical life events		
	total number	negative impact ratings	positive impact ratings	total number	negative impact ratings	positive impact ratings
Identity exploration						
Experimentation/possibilities				-.091*	-.151***	.145***
Negativity/instability		.172***	-.171***	.291***	.416***	
Self-focused		-.112*			-.159***	.102*
Other-focused	.150***		.147***	.122***	.132***	
Feeling in-between						

<sup>1</sup> Correlations between the accumulation of critical life events and the perceptions of the five features of emerging adulthood (Spearman  $Rho$ ),  $N = 492$ ; <sup>2</sup> \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

## CONCLUSIONS

There were significant differences regarding the perceptions of the five features of emerging adulthood between the investigated groups with different perceived adult status (yes vs. in some ways yes, in some ways no) for the "negativity/instability", "self-focused", and "feeling in-between" subscales. In interaction with age group (18-24 vs. 25-29) and gender, the results showed more similarities than differences with regard to perceptions of the five features of emerging adulthood between the investigated groups in the study. Our findings indicate significant positive correlations between the accumulation of normative as well as non-normative critical life events and the "negativity/instability" subscale, and significant negative correlations between the accumulation of normative as well as non-normative critical life events and the "self-focused" subscale. In summary, the results of our study support the theoretical understanding of emerging adulthood by integrating the aspect of intracultural heterogeneity. The results speak for the fact that perceived adult status, as well as the accumulation of critical life events, may be factors that influence development in emerging adulthood.

