EMERGING FROM THE BEATEN PATH: TRAJECTORIES TO ADULTHOOD FOLLOWING AN ELITE EDUCATION

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On my honor
I have neither given nor received
unauthorized aid on this thesis.

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ABSTRACT

Over the past century, the normative transition to adulthood has shifted in tandem with marked sociopolitical shifts in American society. Jeffery Arnett's (2000; 2015) Emerging Adulthood theory proposes a new developmental phase in the life course characterized by identity exploration, instability, self-investment, ambiguous identity with adulthood, and optimism regarding the future. Research suggests that Emerging Adulthood reflects more closely the experience of those who attend college than those who do not, but questions remain regarding potential differences in transitional trajectories within highly educated groups. This study seeks to investigate the possibility that Emerging Adulthood is not universal among college students, and collected data from 175 traditional-aged graduating seniors at an elite liberal arts school. The findings indicate that the transitional trajectories experienced and anticipated by wealthy students and white students in this sample were closer to Emerging Adulthood than those of less wealthy students and students of color.

As another school year at Colorado College comes to a close, an air of expectation filters through conversations as seniors ask each other the seemingly all-important question; "So, what are your plans for next year?" The answers feel as varied in content as they are in tone. Some will venture into internships and paid employment in hopes of beginning careers, some will travel the world, seeking adventure, and others reply that they don't have any idea where life will take them two months from now. For many students, it is a loaded question, a dreaded question, while others look upon the future with ease, excitement and even relief.

The diversity of objective and subjective responses to the imminent end to our undergraduate education is compelling and curious. Does true variation actually exist, or is this a false perception based on a few answers that do not align with our own? If such disparities do exist, how can they be explained? The twenties have been called both "The Defining Decade" (Jay 2012) and "The Age of Uncertainty" (Arnett 2015). There is a simultaneous sense that the end of the beaten path is upon us and that the direction we choose next is of the utmost importance. Without a classroom we are expected to return to, it appears that some of our paths forward are focused and direct, while others remain strikingly winding. Who is doing what, and, more importantly, why?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Study of the Life-Course

Although social guidelines for age-appropriate behavior can be somewhat flexible, age operates as a powerful organizational device in all cultures. All societies, even those with comparatively "progressive" age-related ideologies, use age-norms to organize social institutions and to guide people through a structured and largely pre-determined life-course (Settersten 2003). These standards are context specific, as normative life courses are shaped by forces that

vary across time and place, as well as across social statuses *within* a particular time and place. Thus, “the life-course is … seen as an embedding of individual lives in social structures” (Mayer 2004:163).

Despite the constructed nature of the normative life course, the social-scientific community did not begin an extensive exploration of age until the latter half of the twentieth century. The expansion of funding and inquiry in the social sciences, the increasing feasibility of longitudinal research, and the rapid demographic shifts over the course of the 1900’s triggered the conception of the life-course as a pertinent topic of sociological inquiry (Elder et al. 2003). While questions remain about the extent to which life trajectories are shaped by individual agency in addition to social influence (Settersten 2003; Mayer 2004), the academic community has reached consensus on important, if rather broad, theoretical elements of the process by which social forces mold the life course.

Individuals are guided through life by “trajectories of education and work, families and residences,” governed by both formal and informal institutions, that Elder et al. (2003:8) call “social pathways.” These pathways must be understood as products and architects of particular moments in history, shaped by past social contexts while simultaneously constructing the social context of the future (Elder et al. 2003; Settersten 2003; Mayer 2004; Fussel & Furstenberg 2005). While social pathways are accepted as the “normal and natural” routes through life, macro-level shifts such as economic depressions, wars, and radical policy changes can quickly and drastically impact normative trajectories, as they are in constant communication with the larger fabric of society (Elder et al. 2003; Settersten 2003; Mayer 2004). Formal conventions like education, the workplace, and the armed forces use age and seniority to create order and continuity within their institutions, thus helping to form expectations, and even rules, about the

way individuals move through their lives (Elder et al. 2003; Settersten 2003; Mayer 2004; Fussel & Furstenberg 2005). The legal system, too, provides formal guidance for the trajectory of the life-course through the creation and enforcement of age-based restrictions on things like alcohol consumption, marriage, and sexual intercourse (Settersten 2003).

Pathways are also shaped, just as powerfully, by informal social standards (Elder et al. 2003; Mayer 2004; Fussel & Furstenberg 2005), which are created by statistical patterns that populations collectively observe and absorb (Settersten 2003). Informal age norms are enforced by socially accepted "prescriptions for" and "proscriptions against" certain behaviors at certain ages, resulting in social reward for adherence to, and social punishment for divergence from, those age-related expectations (Settersten 2003). Consider the public response to a child smoking a cigarette, or a very old woman dancing at a nightclub. Indeed, research finds that such norms create a perceived "optimal" age-range for behaviors and life transitions, and that alignment with a particular "set of age expectations" is associated with feelings of approval from others (Settersten 2003:87).

Variation within and around prescribed pathways depends largely on social positioning and secondarily on individual autonomy. Social positioning determines the scope of one's life-course possibilities, and individuals navigate their pathways "*within* the opportunities and constraints of social circumstance" (Elder et al. 2003:11 emphasis added; Mayer 2004). The dissimilarities in pathways based on sociodemographic positioning are reinforced by the aggregate, "self-referential" nature of development on both a cross-generational and individual scale (Mayer 2004:166). That is, the experiences of birth cohorts influence the opportunities and constraints of subsequent generations. Meanwhile, individuals make decisions based on prior experience, exposure, and capital, and those decisions and events operate as antecedents for future decisions

and events (Elder et al. 2003; Mayer 2004). The role of personal agency and individualism operates within these socioeconomic influences, as members of a population work to create their own unique life design, determined by personal values, material aims, and tendency towards forethought (Elder et al. 2003; Mayer 2004:173). As we have seen, the range of possibility for life pathways, and thus the role of individual volition, may be wider for privileged groups who have more options to choose from. However, from a sociological standpoint, this range is not wide for individuals of any demographic group, as people tend to follow the social norms and expectations of the groups with which they identify.

Current Context

Presently, the normative life-course of the modern American is shifting in tandem with a cultural and economic context that has changed dramatically in recent decades (Buchmann 1989). This is particularly true as it relates to the transition to adulthood, as more and more young people are delaying ties with institutions of adulthood until later in life. Data show that young people today are staying in school longer, starting careers later, and putting off family formation until at least the late twenties (Settersten 2003; Mayer 2004; Bynner 2005; Settersten, Furstenberg & Rumbaut 2005; Hendry & Kloep 2007). On a related note, there has been both an individualization and a destructuralization of the life course in that pathways to adulthood are becoming increasingly heterogeneous and decreasingly patterned (Settersten 2003; Mayer 2004; Fussel & Furstenberg 2005). Socially imposed rules and expectations regarding the way individuals move from adolescence into adulthood do not exist as rigidly as in past generations, and a slower, seemingly haphazard route to mature personhood is increasingly the norm (Buchmann 1989).

There are several social and economic reasons for the recent change in the way young people exit adolescence and, eventually, enter adulthood. First, the American economy has shifted from a manufacturing base to today's service base, which does not provide the kind of wages, stability and upward mobility sought out by many young people (Fussel & Fuerstenberg 2005; Furstenberg et al. 2005). The rise in technology and globalization has contributed to an "increased premium" for employees regarding their skill-set and training, and, thus, an extended educational path seems logical for those seeking higher-paying, more stable work opportunities (Bynner 2005:380). Thus, to sustain a middle-class lifestyle, most young people must participate in some kind of post-secondary education or training (Furstenberg, Rumbaut & Settersten 2005). Meanwhile, the women's rights movement and subsequent entrance of women into the labor force has contributed to delayed parenthood and changing attitudes about the institution of family (Fussel & Furstenberg 2005). While the average age of first childbirth continues to rise, the idea of a nuclear family formed in the early twenties has become less and less of a necessity for social acceptance. Finally, life expectancy at birth has risen from 47.3 years in 1900 to 77.1 years in 2000, thus drawing out the life course in general and allowing the time for an extended transition out of adolescence (Fussel & Furstenberg 2005:38; Mayer 2004).

Emerging Adulthood

A widely-discussed framework for understanding this delay is Jeffery Arnett's (2000) theory of "Emerging Adulthood." Arnett's framework was inspired by thinkers like Erik Erikson, Daniel Levinson and Kenneth Keniston, all of whom observed a "prolonged adolescence" in the second half of the 20th century during which young people were able to "shop around" for their niche as opposed to following a more traditional and homogenous path (Erikson 1968). Arnett's lens, however, conceives of the period between 18 and 30 not as a "prolonged adolescence" or an

"early adulthood," but as a distinct developmental phase in the life-course that should be considered independent from, though related to, both adolescence and adulthood (Arnett 2000; 2015).

Arnett's Emerging Adulthood is marked by five distinct but interrelated characteristics. The first and most prominent of these elements is the notion that 18 through 30 is "the Age of Identity Explorations" in which young people do not make long-term commitments, but instead experiment with different versions of what is, at that point in the life course, an ambiguous sense of self (Arnett 2015). According to Arnett, the opportunity to hop from one person, job, or doctrine to another without consequence is an element of transitioning to adulthood for most young people in industrialized countries (Arnett 2000; Arnett 2015). What follows is the second element of Emerging Adulthood theory; instability. Arnett (2015) puts forth that young people's "Plan" for this period in the life course is subject to immense change based upon the identity exploration that is simultaneously taking place, which he asserts is well illustrated in the high frequency at which young people switch residences. A third component of Emerging Adulthood is self-focus, as young people reach a sweet-spot for the ego between answering to authority figures and being responsible for others. Arnett describes a period during which commitment to others is secondary to self-investment, and that decisions, be they day-to-day or more substantive in nature, are made with one's own best interest at the forefront of the mind.

While existing between periods of answering to authority and then, eventually, becoming the authority, Arnett claims that Emerging Adults are people who do not identify as children or adults (Arnett 2000). This sense of feeling "in-between," coupled with an alleged social normlessness during these years, is a fourth component of Arnett's proposition for a new life-stage. This mindset works in tandem with a more concrete manifestation in which Emerging

Adults experience partial and incremental autonomy in the realms of financial independence and general decision-making. Indeed, many people in this age group continue to rely on their families or social institutions for housing and financial support while simultaneously adopting more traditionally "adult" roles and habits (Furstenberg, Rumbaut & Settersten 2005). Finally, Emerging Adults feel a distinct sense of optimistic possibility regarding their futures, largely experiencing their transitional pathway as a time of hope and of empowerment (Arnett 2015). The aforementioned elements of Emerging Adulthood allegedly open up a whole range of differing and luminous future possibilities and as one moves through "the most *volitional* years of life" (Arnett 2000:469).

Emerging Adulthood; A Reality for Some

Arnett's Emerging Adulthood theory, which originally purported that this trajectory is nearly ubiquitous in developed nations, was met with some degree of skepticism from the scientific community. While the original theory did leave some room for variation within Emerging Adulthood, it did not explore the possibility that this trajectory is unfamiliar to many young people, and researchers questioned the assertion that it should be seen as the norm. Further research suggests that Arnett's formulation of the transition to adulthood does indeed sound familiar to many young people in America. Social scientists have found Emerging Adulthood theory to ring true, with varying degrees of precision, for many, and especially for white youth from wealthy families (Holmstrom, Karp & Gray 2002; Bynner 2005; Hendry & Kloep 2010; Mitchell & Syed 2015). Examining the proposed phenomenon through an institutional framework, Lee suggests that Emerging Adulthood is made possible, and even encouraged, for those who are able to interact with social institutions, like family or education, in such a way that they are given a safety net during a transitional time of semi-autonomy (Lee

2014). Indeed, participants in a study of college-bound high-school seniors felt the next several years would be a period "halfway between the real world and high-school," with parents and school administrators just a phone call away (Holmstrom et al. 2002:449). Hendry and Kloep (2007) also found that a clear subgroup of their sample of 38 Welsh youths experienced a largely positive "extended moratorium," characterized by living in the natal-home, delaying long-term decisions, and seeking new and heterogeneous opportunities (Hendry & Kloep 2010:174). Large-scale quantitative research, too, finds that transitional pathways similar to Arnett's Emerging Adulthood apply for some young people, especially those with a privileged socioeconomic background (Osgood, Ruth, Eccles, Jacobs, and Barber 2005; Fussell & Furstenberg 2005).

Even the most ardent skeptics of Arnett's Emerging Adulthood agree that, to some extent, this alleged phenomenon represents the lives of some. Bynner (2005), Furstenberg (2004; 2005), and Côté (2014), all of whom have produced several publications dedicated purely to debunking Arnett's formulation, acknowledge that an Emerging Adulthood lens can shed light on the time of exploration, increased agency, delayed family formation and career investment, and extended education that a fraction of young people are experiencing today. Studies indicate that that fraction is rather large, landing between 42 and 58 percent of study participants (Lee 2012:712; Mortimer et. al 2006). However, since his original publication in 2000, even Arnett himself has noted differences between races and classes regarding the experience of Emerging Adulthood (Arnett 2007; Arnett and Brody 2008). The general consensus stands that Emerging Adulthood theory *cannot* be understood as a meta-narrative, a blanket statement to describe an all-inclusive route to adulthood.

While he is sure to point out that his formulation only applies in industrialized nations and that there is some variation in the extent to which young people can experience Emerging

Adulthood, Arnett's original publication adequately addresses neither the wide range of transitional pathways within industrialized nations, nor the determining influence of social positioning and institutional pressure on trajectories to adulthood (Bynner 2005; Côté 2014; Lee 2014; Hendry & Kloep 2010, 2007). Lee (2014) points out that many young people do not have the necessary support from institutions like family or education to experience an extended period of exploration and self-focus. This is particularly true for those who grew up in environments like the foster-care system or juvenile justice system (Furstenberg et al. 2005). In both of these cases, institutional guidance generally terminates abruptly at the age of 18, likely resulting in a transitional experience that is a far cry from the time of possibility and extended youth characteristic of Emerging Adulthood (Furstenberg et al. 2005). For young people who are not so directly under the jurisdiction of such institutions, myriad social and institutional forces remain that can, and do, send them down highly dissimilar transitional paths (Bynner 2005).

Accelerated Adulthood

Researchers have identified several alternative transitional trajectories that should be understood to operate alongside Emerging Adulthood. The first and most commonly cited of these pathways appears in direct opposition to Arnett's extended transition. "Accelerated adulthood" occurs for people who, for one reason or another, must commit to adulthood institutions with little or no period of transition following adolescence (Lee 2014). These young people must adopt one or more, but not necessarily all, adult roles out of necessity, usually "due to limited alternatives and/or insufficient resources" (Lee 2014:712). Mitchell and Syed (2015:2025) found, for example, that the years between 18 and 30 were, for many in their sample of 1139 Minnesotans, "a time of postponing marriage, but not necessarily childbirth…a time of being employed full time, but not necessarily for the first time, as many (people) have worked

quite a bit in high school." Hendry and Kloep (2010), too, found a subgroup of participants who had taken this transitional route, many of whom were employed full-time, financially independent, and cared for younger siblings or children of their own by the age of 20. Two of Osgood et. al's (2005) six observed trajectories were quite accelerated as well. "Fast Starters" had high rates of marriage, home-ownership, and long term employment in their young adulthood, while "Working Singles" were likely to be established on a given career path or have long-term employment (Osgood et al. 2005).

While this trajectory may appear to be indicative of stability, it is often the result of "steeling experiences," such as parental divorce, parental illness, or financial stress (Hendry & Kloep 2010; 2007), and many theorists would argue that accelerated adulthood prevents the beneficial acquisition of various types of capital developed in an extended transition (Lee 2014; Holmstrom et al., 2002). There are, however, also people who commit voluntarily to adulthood institutions, though they have the resources, status, and institutional support to remain in extended transition (Lee 2012). This transitional pathway is associated with young people who identify themselves comfortably as adults and have high levels of self-reported maturity, despite the hardships and obstacles that placed many of them on the fast-track to adulthood (Hendry & Kloep 2010; Lee 2014).

Prevented Adulthood

A third pathway, termed "prevented adulthood" by Hendry and Kloep (2010), can appear deceivingly similar to Emerging Adulthood in that both involve the delay of attachment to institutions of adulthood. The critical difference is that, in the case of prevented adulthood, this delay is not experienced deliberately, but by default (Holmstrom et al. 2002; Hendry & Kloep 2010). In Hendry and Kloep's (2010:174) qualitative study, this subgroup was "disadvantaged by

their lack of resources, skills, and societal opportunities though, superficially, they exhibited a somewhat similar lifestyle to the more affluent subgroup, living with parents, accepting occasional McJobs, or reluctantly taking on one of the few other jobs available to them." Emerging Adulthood, for instance, can be characterized by frequent job changes as young people dabble in myriad fields until making a longer-term commitment. Prevented adulthood, too, may be characterized by multiple jobs in a short period of time, not because of a wish to explore, but in response to "precarious, ambiguous, and exploitative job situations" (Côté 2014). Osgood et al. (2005) labels a parallel group "Slow Starters," and purport that people on this trajectory are either unwilling or unable to use their extended transition time enjoyably and productively.

People experiencing a delayed transition to adulthood by default are not able to experience this time in empowering ways, and are instead faced with an unintentional and often daunting period of limbo (Holmstrom et al. 2002). As the job market becomes more and more competitive, Côté (2006) suggests that this trend of an involuntary moratorium between adolescence and adulthood is becoming quite common, as increasing numbers of less educated young people are being pushed out of the workforce because of their lack of credentials and forced to acquire skills or education before they are able to enter into adulthood institutions. For these young people, the power, opportunity, and freedom described by Arnett is not an option (Hendry & Kloep 2007).

Social Positioning Plotting the Course

Unsurprisingly, there is a strong relationship between socioeconomic status and the aforementioned pathways to adulthood. As Bynner (2005) puts it, "by and large, those who have most to start with will extend their transition the longest," (372) and will, theoretically, use this time to acquire valuable social and cultural capital through a wide range of new experiences.

Meanwhile, people of lower socioeconomic status are more likely to experience an involuntarily accelerated or prevented transition to adulthood (Furstenberg et al. 2005; Fussell & Furstenberg 2005; Hendry & Kloep 2010; Lee 2014). As Lee (2014) points out, marginalized groups do not interact with societal institutions in a way that maximizes personal preference, and are often under circumstances that leave them no choice but to grow up fast. Of course, it must be remembered that sociologists find little room for personal agency in even the most privileged groups, who follow their own set of norms and expectations. Still, adolescents who were raised in environments with limited resources or are members of racial minorities, for example, are not able to exercise agency in terms of the possibility of an Emerging Adulthood (Lee 2014). Consider, for instance, the increased financial burden on families whose children depend on them for almost a decade longer than in past generations, and the way that reality manifests for an upper-class person versus someone who grew up in poverty (Furstenberg et al. 2005). Holmstorm et al. (2002:455) speak to this reality when they say that the parents of their research subjects, middle-class high school seniors on their way to four-year collegiate institutions, were "buying their children a particular trajectory into adulthood,' and, indeed, studies find that prolonged education is concentrated among the groups who can afford it (Bynner 2005).

Though it is evident that, on average, markers of adulthood are obtained later in life today than in the past, there remains significant variation around such averages based on social positioning. While white women are marrying and having children later in life, for instance, black women are having children at around the same time as in past generations, but now are increasingly doing so out of wedlock (Fussell & Furstenberg 2005). While 16-year-olds on average have become increasingly childless, living at home, and attending secondary school, the fact remains that wealthy, white young men are far less likely to have a child, live outside their

home, or stop attending secondary school than any other demographic (Fussell & Furstenberg 2005). Osgood et al. (2005) found that social positioning had a significant correlation with which transitional pathways their participants fell into as well. Nonwhite respondents were overrepresented in the trajectory most comparable to "prevented adulthood," respondents from low-income families were overrepresented in the trajectory most comparable to "accelerated adulthood," and wealthy respondents were overrepresented in the two trajectories most comparable to "Emerging Adulthood" (Fussell & Furstenberg 2005). Both theoretically and statistically speaking, the institutions that are designed to help guide young people into a smooth and empowering transition to adulthood are far more effective for certain demographics than others (Fussell & Furstenberg 2005).

Transitional Trajectories as Social Reproduction

These transitional trajectories help to further reproduce privilege and marginalization. According to Lee (2014:707), "in today's social and economic context, Emerging Adulthood allows individuals time to acquire additional and necessary capital before making deliberate choices about adulthood commitments." However, higher social status, and thus, social and economic capital, is generally required for an extended adolescence in the first place. Accelerated adulthood, for example, is more common among children of lower-income families and is associated with young parenthood and lower income levels down the line, while Emerging Adulthood is experienced by more privileged adolescents and is associated with incomes that continue to grow throughout the twenties (Mitchell & Syed 2015).

Despite the growing body of research (including that of Arnett himself) that suggests the incoherence of Emerging Adulthood as an all-encompassing developmental theory, Arnett's original formulation may be becoming a cultural expectation (Furstenberg et al. 2005; Hendry &

Kloep 2007; Côté 2014; Lee 2014). Thus, social scientists have paid close attention to debunking this pathway as a universal formula out of concern for already-disadvantaged youths of today and tomorrow (Furstenberg et al. 2005; Côté 2010). Côté (2010:178), for example, believes the concept of Emerging Adulthood as a universal formulation has "found (its) way to journalists…who are spreading misinformation among the public, and among policy-makers…who are determining youth policies, or lack thereof." The notion that Emerging Adulthood is the norm does not take into account the social and economic forces that determine one's transitional pathway, and effectively obscures the lived reality of millions of people (Hendry & Kloep 2007, 2010; Côté 2014).

By placing this pathway in a normative position, we are collectively privileging, once again, the affluent Western experience, and treating all other experiences as deviations from that norm, as if these trajectories are developmentally abnormal or deficient (Hendry & Kloep 2010). In order to benefit *all* young people instead of exclusively those who are socioeconomically positioned such that they can and do follow this now-normative transitional trajectory, "convincing youth theory needs to be comprehensive, and effective youth policy needs to be inclusive" (Côté 2010:381). This sentiment paints a "universal" Emerging Adulthood theory as exclusionary, rendering it insufficient.

Higher Education as the Transitional Equalizer

Researchers have made great strides in questioning the universality of Emerging Adulthood and understanding demographic patterns associated with the ability to extend one's transition. Presently, the scientific community equates the experience of "going to college" in large part with the experience of Emerging Adulthood, which harkens back to a parallel equation proposed by Horace Mann in reference to the American public school system. In 1848, Mann

termed public education “The Great Equalizer” and proposed that accessible education would eradicate inequity, a notion that remains the hope, if not the reality, of public education in the U.S. to this day (Growe and Montgomery 2003). Some studies on Emerging Adulthood may suggest that higher education is operating in the way the public school system should, theoretically, work. That is, researchers suggest that going to college has an equalizing impact on transitional trajectories, and leads to an Emerging Adulthood for all who attend.

To some extent, this equation makes sense. College is seen as a time to “maintain, refine, build upon, and elaborate … identities,” to “discover who (one) really (is)” in an environment that provides institutional support should something go wrong (Holmstrom 2002:438). It is supposedly “a delicate balance of independence and dependence, autonomy and reliance on others, distance and closeness, change and stability” (Holmstrom at al. 2002:438). With a wide variety of courses, peer social groups, extracurricular activities, and role models, traditional colleges do appear to provide the ideal environment for identity exploration (Mitchell & Syed 2015). Indeed, studies have found that college students and college graduates *are* far more likely to experience an extended transition that looks similar to Arnett’s (2000) Emerging Adulthood than those who do not ever attend college (Holmstrom et al. 2002; Hendry & Kloep 2010; Zorotovich 2014; Mitchell & Syed 2015).

However, some researchers are so confident in the automatic experience of Emerging Adulthood for college students that they treat it as a given. Bynner (2005), for example, claims that approximately half of the young people in industrial societies are expected to participate in higher education, and thus, the other half still can expect to go down a more traditional path to adulthood (381). In this way, he equates higher education with Arnett’s pathway. In presenting her results, Zorotovich claims that “questions remain regarding whether to not Emerging

Adulthood is a college student phenomenon or if it applies to others with different education statuses" (Zorotovich 2014:37), and many of Arnett's (2000) critics echo this sentiment of assurance regarding the applicability of Emerging Adulthood theory to college students (Côté 2014; Bynner 2005). However, in making the assumption that all college students experience Arnett's Emerging Adulthood, are these studies not making the same mistake they accused Arnett of making in 2000? Are they failing to explore the possibility that higher education might not have an equalizing effect on transitional trajectories after all, or that, for many, this "emergent" phase must terminate promptly upon graduation?

The present study seeks to examine the transitional trajectories of people who *are* college students, and the possible variation in their transitional pathways after graduation. It should be noted that this study does not shed any light on the realities of the growing numbers of nontraditional college students, most of whom are older (National Center for Education Statistics 2017), and perhaps have already transitioned into adulthood. This study explores the realities of traditional, graduating seniors two months before leaving Colorado College, a 2,000 person, elite liberal arts school in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and seeks to investigate which demographic groups experience a continuation or termination of Emerging Adulthood *after* college has ended. Does going to college translate into an enduring exploratory pathway to adulthood, as the current research seems to assume, or is the picture more complicated than that? Following an elite college education, what is the relationship between race, class, gender, and transitional trajectories? Is an elite education "The Great Equalizer" of transitional pathways for traditional college students?

METHODS

The present study examines the current frame of mind and projected post-graduation plans of graduating seniors at Colorado College and analyzes their alignment with Arnett's theory of Emerging Adulthood. Data were collected from 225 Colorado College students. A survey was distributed via email to enrolled students with senior standing, and 39 percent of those contacted participated. The valid responses represented approximately 35 percent (n = 175) of the graduating class.

The survey was brief and began with basic demographic questions. The second part of the survey investigated projected plans for the years immediately following graduation, and the third part of the survey explored participants' feelings around decision-making and adult identity. (See Appendix A for the full survey).

Variables: Independent

The survey inquired about gender and race using standard categories, and dichotomized racial categories for analysis. Three measures of class were included in the analysis; the amount of tuition covered by need-based financial aid, the projected strength of a financial "safety-net" post-graduation, and the amount of loan-debt that the participants themselves would be paying. These variables were dichotomized into those with financial aid versus those without financial aid, those with a financial safety net of some sort versus those without, and those with any amount of loan debt versus those without.

Variables: Dependent

The dependent variables reflected different elements of Jeffrey Arnett's Emerging Adulthood theory. Participants were asked about their level of identification with statements regarding an exploratory mindset, optimism, personal agency, self-focus, commitments, and

feeling "adult." They were also asked if family formation was in their foreseeable futures, how much energy they would spend caregiving next year, how financially independent they would be after college, and what kind of housing and employment situations they anticipated.

T-tests were run to examine the relationship between the dichotomized demographic variables and all interval dependent variables (level of agreement with statements on optimism, personal agency, readiness to explore, self-focus, comfort making commitments, self-knowledge, uncertainty about the future, and adult identity.) T-tests were also run on anticipated amount of energy caregiving and projected financial independence. Due to abnormal distribution and unequal group sizes, Wilcoxon rank sum tests were run to confirm the significance of T-test findings, but were not reported. Effect size was measured with Cohen's d, adjusted for unequal group sizes.

Chi-square tests were run to examine the relationship between demographic variables and likelihood of marriage and children in the next five years, type of residence, and length of stay in participants' housing and employment situations for the year following graduation. Correlation strength was measured with phi for 2x2 tabulations, and Cramer's V for larger tables.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

Sample

While this study gathered data from approximately one third of the population in question, Table 1 illustrates that the sample was not representative of the gender and racial breakdown of Colorado College. Specifically, white people and women were disproportionately represented, while men and people of color were underrepresented. The sample was more representative regarding class, measured by need-based financial aid. Data on the Colorado College student body were retrieved from the Colorado College Office of Financial Aid, and information regarding non-binary people and specific financial aid breaks was not available.

Table 1: Percent(n)s of Survey Respondents and Colorado College Student Body

	Survey Sample	CC Student Body
Race		
White	86.29 (151)	65.74 (1,370)
Asian	13.71 (24)	4.27 (89)
Black	5.71 (10)	2.69 (56)
Hispanic	11.43 (20)	8.97 (187)
Other	1.71 (3)	18.33 (382)
Total	118.85 (208)	100.00 (2084)
Gender		
Female	71.43 (125)	54.08 (1,127)
Male	26.29 (46)	45.92 (957)
Other	2.29 (4)	-
Total	100.00 (175)	100.00 (2,084)
% Financial Aid		
None	64 (112)	67.42 (1,405)
1-25	5.14 (9)	-
26-50	6.29 (11)	-
51-75	5.71 (10)	-
75-100	18.86 (33)	-
Total	100.00 (175)	67.42 (1,405)

Elements of Emerging Adulthood Across the Board

Figure 1 displays that, overall, participants felt optimistic about their futures, looking forward to the next few years as a time of personal agency, trying new things, and exploring who they are and what they want from their lives moving forward. Their responses reflected the general essence of Arnett's Emerging Adulthood as a "volitional" time (Arnett 2000; 2015), and responses did not vary by demographics.

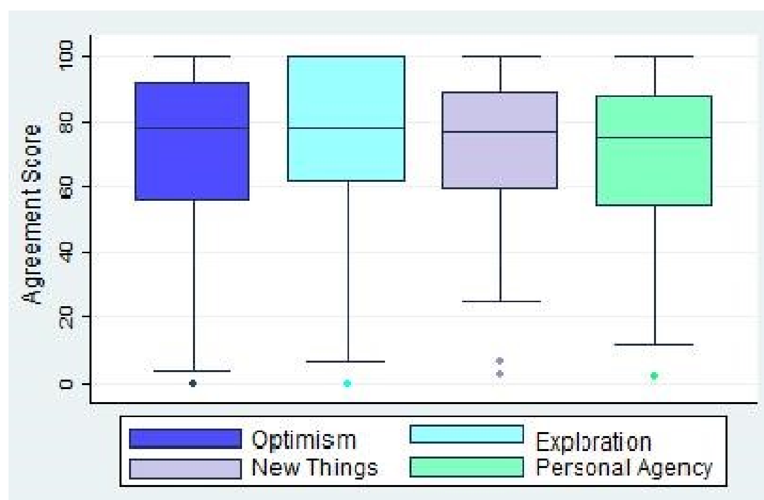

Figure 1: Levels of Self-Identification with Elements of Emerging Adulthood

Respondents from all groups also anticipated a delay in family formation relative to past generations, which operates as a critical precursor to experiencing Emerging Adulthood (Arnett 2015). Just under a quarter of respondents (23.4%) said that they could see themselves getting married in the next five years, and only 5.7 percent of the sample reasoned that they would have children in the next five years. This data is unsurprising based on the *overall* movement towards postponed family formation in present-day America, especially given that educated people are the most likely to get married and have children later in life (Fussel and Furstenberg 2005; Osgood et al. 2005). What is more notable here is that negative and/or uncertain views about family formation in the foreseeable future did not vary by gender, race, or class, making room for a potential Emerging Adulthood for all socioeconomic groups in this sample of highly-educated young people.

Overall, the data show that this sample experiences many other elements of Arnett's theory, namely, an attitude of self-focus, a sense of partial autonomy, discomfort with long-term commitments, and a half-way "adult" mentality. However, identification with the aforementioned aspects vary by race and class, though not by gender.

Self-focus

The notion that this period in the life-course is a time of self-investment was popular among respondents, who, as Table 2 indicates, felt that the years following graduation from college are for focusing on oneself (*M* = 68.92; SD = 24) with no differences between demographic groups.

Despite the lack of significant difference between races and classes on levels of self-focus, differences emerged between groups on a more specific element of self-investment. Projected amount of energy spent caregiving in the year following graduation varied strongly and significantly by both race and class, with people of color and low-income groups expecting to spend more energy caregiving than their more privileged counterparts. Financial safety net status (*d* = 0.88) and race (*d* = 0.80) had strong effects on the projected amount of energy spent caregiving, and financial aid status (*d* = 0.66) and loan debt status (*d* = 0.61) had more moderate practical significance.

Table 2: Means and (n)s Projected Self-Focus and Energy Caregiving by Race and Class

	n	Self-focus Means	Caregiving Means	t-Statistic	Cohen's d
Race					
Nonwhite	24	69.3	1.79	3.64***	0.80
White	151	68.9	1.34		
Financial Aid					
No Aid	112	68.2	1.27	-4.15***	0.66
Aid	63	70.2	1.63		
Fin. Safety Net					
No Safety Net	18	76.6	1.83	3.40***	0.85
Some Safety Net	157	68.0	1.35		
Loan Debt					
No Loan Debt	126	68.0	1.30	-3.57***	0.61
Loan Debt	48	70.7	1.65		

Figure 2 provides a visual representation of group differences in projected energy spent caregiving by race and financial aid status, illustrating the high concentrations of white people

and people without financial aid who reported no anticipated energy caregiving, and the more even distribution of responses in students of color and people receiving financial aid.

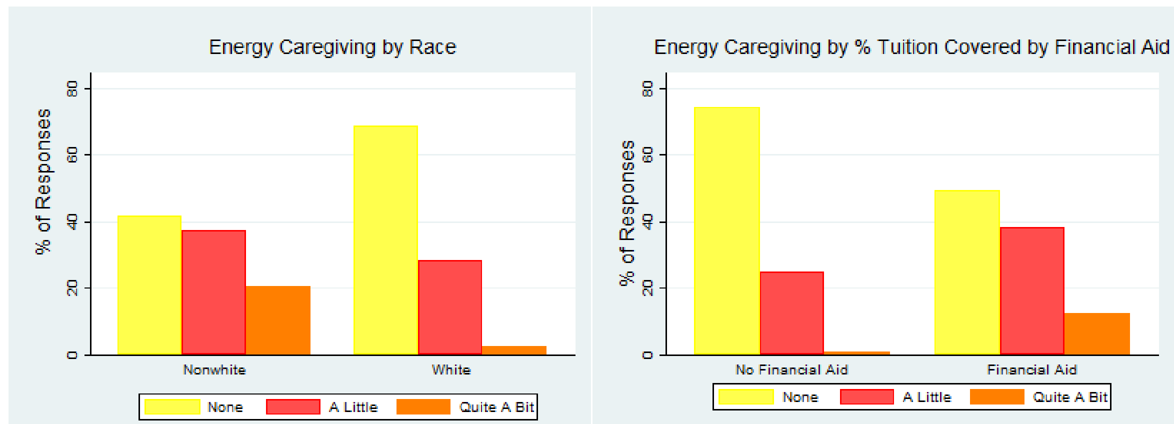

Figure 2: Energy Caregiving by Race and Financial Aid Status

Partial Autonomy

Arnett (2000) describes Emerging Adulthood as a time in which young people remain partially dependent on their families or and social institutions like higher education or the military. Figure 3 illustrates that, indeed, the majority of the sample (61%; *n* = 107) expects more than 10 percent of their living expenses post-graduation to be covered by someone besides themselves.

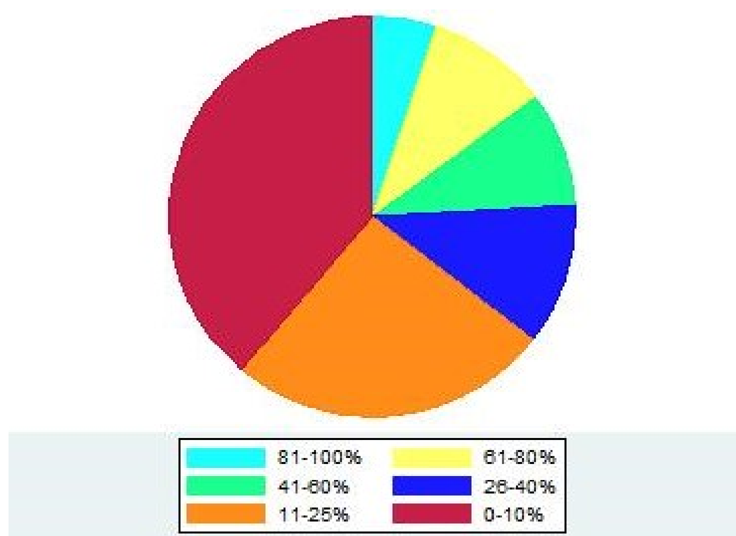

Figure 3; Projected % of Expenses Covered by Someone Else

As Table 3 indicates, financial aid status had a significant effect on financial dependence (*t* = -2.10; *d* =0.33; *p* = 0.02) such that, surprisingly, graduates with no aid (*M* = 4.41) expected less of their living expenses to be covered by someone else than graduates with financial aid (*M* = 4.92) on average.

Table 3: Means and (n)s for Financial Independence by Race and Class

	n	Financial Independence	*t*-Statistic	Cohen's *d*
Race				
Nonwhite	24	4.33		
White	151	4.46		
Financial Aid				
No Aid	112	4.41		
Aid	63	4.92	-2.10*	0.33
Financial Safety Net				
No Safety Net	18	5.11		
Some Safety Net	157	4.53		
Loan Debt				
No Loan Debt	126	4.46		
Loan Debt	48	4.91		

Returning to the natal home post-graduation was considered a mark of partial autonomy, as mentioned by Arnett (2015) in his discussion of a "prolonged adolescence" as an element of Emerging Adulthood. However, in this sample, only 8.7 percent (*n*=15) planned to return home after graduation. The low rates of returning home post-graduation did not vary by class, but a significant relationship (x^2 = 4.13; *p* = 0.04) did emerge between Latinx graduates and non-Latinx graduates. Figure 4 illustrates that, in this sample, a much higher percentage (21.05%; *n* = 4) of Latinx respondents planned to move home than non-Latinx respondents (7.14%; *n* = 11).

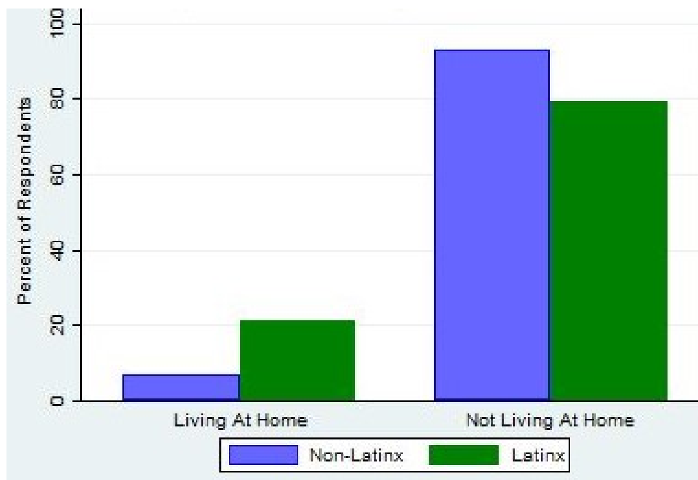

Figure 4: Projected Residence by Latinx Identification

Commitments

A hallmark of Emerging Adulthood theory is an aversion to long-term commitments, which was true to a certain extent in our sample (*M* = 45.69; SD=29.32). Generally speaking, people of color and lower income students were more comfortable making long-term commitments than their more privileged counterparts. As seen in Table 4, financial safety net status (t = 2.12; d = 0.53; p = 0.012), race (t = 2.00; d = 0.45; p = 0.02), and financial aid status (t = -2.70; d = -0.43; p = 0.004) all had moderate effects on comfort making commitments.

Table 4: Means and (n)s for Comfort Making Commitments by Race and Class

	n	Commitment Comfort	*t*-Statistic	Cohen's *d*
Race				
Nonwhite	23	56.9	2.00*	0.45
White	146	43.9		
Financial Aid				
No Aid	106	41.1	2.70**	0.43
Aid	63	53.4		
Financial Safety Net				
No Safety Net	18	59.3	2.12*	0.53
Some Safety Net	157	44.1		
Loan Debt				
No Loan Debt	120	43.1	-1.97	
Loan Debt	48	52.8		

Despite the difference between groups in self-reported comfort making commitments, no significant patterns emerged between groups regarding the projected length of stay with future employers and housing. As Figure 5 illustrates, a minority of respondents planned to make long-term commitments regarding their residence (23.6%) and employment (7.5%) decisions.

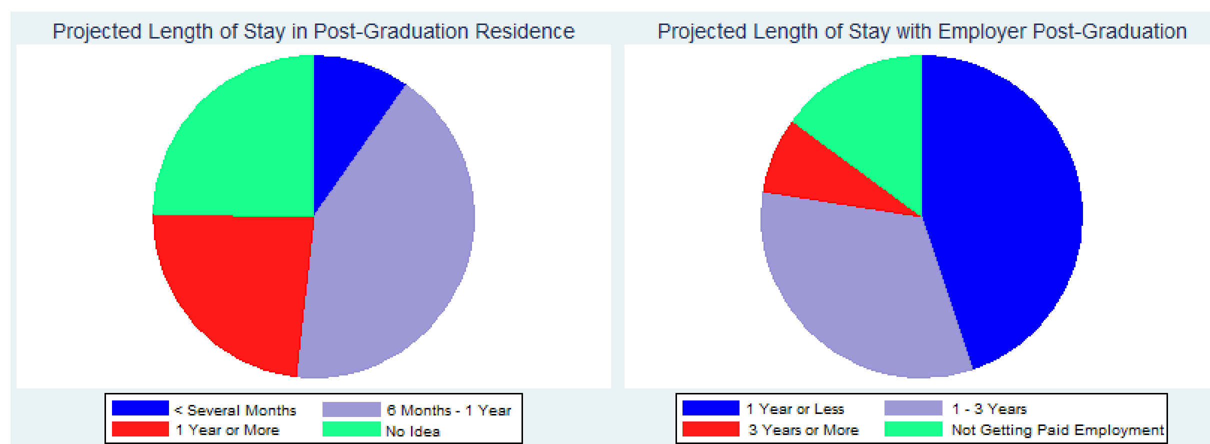

Figure 5: Longevity of Housing and Employment Post-Graduation

"Adult" Mentality

Arnett describes Emerging Adulthood as a time of uncertainty regarding both identity and future realities. Table 6 indicates that race had a significant effect on both self-knowledge (t = 2.02; d = 0.45; p = 0.04) and uncertainty about the future (t = 1.99; d = 0.45; p = 0.01) such that people of color were more sure of their identities and less uncertain of their futures than their white counterparts. The effect of financial safety net status followed the same pattern. Those without a safety net were more comfortable with who they are and what they want (t = 2.44; d = 0.61; p = 0.02) and less uncertain about their futures (t = -2.72; d = 0.68; p = 0.007). In both cases, the presence or absence of a safety net post-graduation had a stronger effect than race. Two measures of class had an effect on identification with "adulthood." Those with financial aid (t = -3.57; d = 0.57; p = 0.0005) and those with without a financial safety net (t = 2.41; d = 0.62; p = 0.02) were more comfortable calling themselves adults than their wealthier peers.

Table 6: Means and (n)s for Self Knowledge, Uncertainty, and Adult Identity by Race and Class

	n	**Self-Knowledge**	*t*	*d*	**Uncertainty**	*t*	*d*	**Adulthood**	*t*	*d*
Race										
Nonwhite	23	66.42			62.13			56.83		
White	148	55.18	2.02*	0.45	76.60	1.99*	0.45	54.07		
Fin. Aid										
No Aid	109	54.59			76.75			48.68		
Aid	62	60.48			70.97			64.56	-3.57***	0.57
Safety Net										
None	17	70.39			59.67			70.29		
Some	154	55.15	2.44*	0.61	76.42	-2.72*	0.68	52.69	2.41**	0.62

DISCUSSION AND CONSLUSION

The transitional trajectories that many seniors in this sample anticipate after graduation aligns, in several important ways, with Arnett's theory of Emerging Adulthood. The data indicate that, in general, these students feel optimistic about their futures, and believe that they can look forward to experiencing myriad new things as they embark on their post-graduate journeys. Their outlooks indicate that many will use their mid-twenties to "clarify their identities, that is, they (will) learn more about who they are and what they want out of life" (Arnett 2015:8), while still remaining partially financially dependent on families, friends, and social institutions. On average, this sample plans to focus the next few years on themselves, and the vast majority will do so without the ties of family formation or long-term housing and employment commitments influencing their decisions.

This study parallels the conclusions of past research in response to the idea of a universal Emerging Adulthood trajectory, while simultaneously contradicting a key point of consensus. The academic community has largely equated a college education with an Emerging Adulthood based on the self-focused nature of higher education and the diverse opportunities offered to college students. They have treated the college experience as "The Grand Equalizer" of trajectories to adulthood, but have not yet explored in depth what happens after graduation. This study suggests that such an equation makes flawed assumptions similar, if more nuanced and less egregious, to the assumption that Emerging Adulthood is inevitable in industrialized nations. That is, assuming that all college graduates experience Emerging Adulthood gives voice to the experience of wealthy, white students, for whom this pathway sounds the most familiar, and does not fully acknowledge the diversity of lived experience that exists even *within* a highly educated group. In this sample, which is certainly privileged in the realms of social and cultural capital

after an elite education, there still exists a notable degree of difference in their outlooks, self-identities, and projected pathways post-graduation.

Two primary differences between socio-economic groups suggest a notable divergence from Arnett's theory for many students and raise intriguing questions for further research. The first, and more concrete, is the anticipated amount of energy spent caregiving post-graduation. Students of color and low-income students on average anticipate spending more energy caregiving than their more privileged counterparts, despite the fact that there was no significant difference between groups in self-reported self-focus. This discrepancy may imply that less privileged students have different expectations and definitions for "self-focus," or perhaps feel that energy caregiving will not impact their ability to invest in themselves. Alternatively, it may be the case that caring for family members *is* a form of self-investment. The latter two points may speak to demographic differences regarding the relationship between family and self. Do less privileged groups feel that caring for family members is unrelated to self-focus? How might this impact a transition to adulthood?

The second difference between race and class groupings is the extent to which graduates have adopted an "adult" mentality. Lower-income students and students of color felt more comfortable in their identities and their knowledge of what they want moving forward than wealthy and white students. They also had higher levels of self-reported comfort making long-term commitments. Financially disadvantaged students identified with being an "adult" more than their wealthier counterparts. These differences are important and beg the question, why? Are disadvantaged college seniors more comfortable with their identities after years of combating harmful stereotypes? Are they more hard-pressed to hold their own against an oppressive system, thus solidifying their identities earlier on? Perhaps these students have fewer

societal opportunities and more obligations and responsibilities than their privileged counterparts, even after obtaining the same degree. Does this result in less choice-induced identity confusion and meandering? These questions are beyond the scope of this study, but provide important leads into future research.

Higher levels of energy caregiving and, for that matter, *any* level of energy caregiving, as well as adult mentalities exist in direct contradiction to Arnett's formulation, and two additional elements of this study may suggest a more complicated picture than a one-size-fits-all pathway. Despite the appearance of a continued Emerging Adulthood post-graduation for much of this sample, this study does not explore in full the possibility of graduates experiencing prevented adulthood, which entails an *in*voluntary delay in commitments to institutions of adulthood. It is possible that some graduating seniors, for example, did not commit to long-term living and employment situations not because they wished to explore, but because they didn't have the opportunity to commit to something. The traditional conception of prevented adulthood does not fully apply in the case of graduating college students, as they have, in theory, already used four of their "emerging" years to acquire valuable social capital. However, given an increasingly competitive job market and the end of the beaten path for many young people, it does seem possible, even probable, that some graduates would become stuck in a pseudo-prevented adulthood. Graduating seniors who seek ties with institutions of adulthood may be unable to do so because of an inability to get a job they find suitable, or because of an overwhelming array of choices as the normative path becomes highly varied or, some may argue, temporarily nonexistent in the years following graduation.

Finally, there was notable variation in the data. High standard deviations in measures of adult mentality, self focus, and comfort making commitments suggest a substantial range of

opinion. Variation also exists in more concrete measures of the extent to which Emerging Adulthood applies. For example, some people *do* plan on getting married and having children in the near future, and *are* committing to a job for three years or more immediately after they leave Colorado College. The averages in this sample are valuable, providing key insight into the experience of most. However, while participants who have already reached traditional adulthood, or who are on a direct transitional pathway to do so, were the minority in this sample, they were not outliers. They are part of a small but notable group of graduates for whom Lee's (2004) "accelerated adulthood" more accurately describes their post-graduation plans than Arnett's Emerging Adulthood theory.

Along with exploring 1.) a potential difference in definitions of self-focus and 2.) the reasons behind a relationship between adult mentality and marginalization, this study presents three other opportunities for further research. The first is in regard to the relationship between returning to the natal home and Latinx identification. What brings about this kind of relationship, and how does this impact the trajectory to adulthood that many young Latinx individuals follow? Does this relationship align with Arnett's theory, or is there something else at play for Latinx people? Second, why is it that financial dependence post-graduation was inversely related to financial privilege? It seems logical that wealthy students would rely on their families for more of their living expenses post-graduation, but that was not the case. Does this have something to do with a potential demographic difference in the relationship between family and self, discussed above? Finally, it is notable that no significant differences arose between genders. One would hope this suggests that gender disparities are subsiding to some extent, at least within a highly-educated group, but such a claim cannot be supported from this data alone, especially with such a low percentage of male respondents.

In conclusion, this study supports the existing literature on Emerging Adulthood as a relevant, but not all-inclusive, transitional trajectory. These findings do not, however, support the notion that all those who attend college experience an Emerging Adulthood. The data suggest that, after graduation, most individuals experience Emerging Adulthood to varying degrees, but that this pathway is a far cry from the lived reality of some, generally less privileged, people. In treating higher education as "The Grand Equalizer" of transitions to adulthood, we are, yet again, privileging the normative experience of those who were already privileged to begin with.

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APPENDIX A

Survey: Transitions to Adulthood

Online Consent Form: You are invited to take part in a research survey about trajectories to adulthood post graduation. Your participation will require approximately 5 minutes and is completed online. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this survey. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to be in the study you can withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with anyone at Colorado College. Your anonymous responses will be kept strictly confidential, and digital data will be stored in secure computer files. Any report of this research that is made available to the public will not include your name or any other individual information by which you could be identified. If you have questions or want a copy or summary of this study's results, you can contact the researcher at the email address above. If you have any questions about whether you have been treated in an illegal or unethical way, contact the Colorado College Institutional Research Board chair, Amanda Udis-Kessler at 719-227-8177 or audiskessler@coloradocollege.edu. Please feel free to print a copy of this consent page to keep for your records. Clicking the "Next" button below indicates that you are 18 years of age or older, and indicates your consent to participate in this survey.

Q1 Are you graduating from Colorado College in May, 2017?

❍ Yes

❍ Unsure

❍ No

Q2 What is your gender identity? Check all that apply.

❑ Female

❑ Male

❑ Non-Binary

❑ Transgender

❑ Write-in below ____________________

Q3 What is your race? Check all that apply.

- ❑ Asian/Asian-American/Pacific Islander
- ❑ Black/African/African-American
- ❑ Native American or Alaska Native
- ❑ White
- ❑ Write-in below ____________________

Q4 Are you Hispanic/Latinx?

- ❍ Yes
- ❍ No

Q5 How old are you?

Q6 What percent of your tuition is covered by NEED-BASED financial aid? (Do not include merit scholarships)

- ❍ None
- ❍ 1-25%
- ❍ 26-50%
- ❍ 51-75%
- ❍ 76-100%

Q7 How much loan money do YOU PERSONALLY plan on paying back?

- ❍ None - I did not take out student loans
- ❍ None - someone else is paying back the entirety of my student loans
- ❍ Up to $10,000
- ❍ $10,001 - $20,000

- $20,001 - $30,000
- $30,001 - $40,000
- More than $40,000

Q8 After graduation, about how much of your living expenses do you expect to be covered by someone besides you? (Remember to include things like phone bills, car payments, health insurance, etc.)

- 0-10%
- 11-25%
- 26-40%
- 41-60%
- 61-80%
- 81-100%

Q9 Is your family willing and able to provide a financial safety net for you post-graduation?

- Yes, definitely
- Yes, to some extent
- Yes, but only in emergency situations
- Not really

Q10 How much energy will you spend being a caregiver for family members next year?

- None
- A little
- Quite a bit
- This will be a primary responsibility for me

Q11 Where do you expect to be living six months after you graduate?

- ❍ In my natal home for free
- ❍ In my natal home paying rent
- ❍ In someone else's home for free
- ❍ Subletting a room, house, or apartment on a month-to-month basis
- ❍ Signing a lease for less than one year on a room, house, or apartment
- ❍ Signing a lease for one year or more on a room, house, or apartment
- ❍ Out of my car/backpack
- ❍ I have no idea
- ❍ Write-in below ____________________

Q12 How long do you intend on staying in that living situation?

- ❍ Less than a few months
- ❍ A few months
- ❍ 6 months - 1 year
- ❍ More than 1 year
- ❍ I don't know

Q13 Are you currently in a committed romantic relationship?

- ❍ Yes
- ❍ Unsure
- ❍ No

Q14 Would you be willing to enter/continue a long-term romantic relationship in the next year?

- ❍ Yes

- ❍ Maybe
- ❍ Probably not

Q15 Could you see yourself getting married in the next five years?

- ❍ Yes
- ❍ Maybe
- ❍ No

Q16 Do you have children or are you actively planning on having children in the next year?

- ❍ Yes
- ❍ No

Q17 Could you see yourself having children in the next five years?

- ❍ Yes
- ❍ Maybe
- ❍ No
- ❍ I don't plan on having children

Q18 Which best describes your primary employment status for next year? (If you have more than one place of employment lined up, pick the job you plan on staying with the longest)

- ❍ I have a job/paid internship lined up
- ❍ I am looking for a job/paid internship
- ❍ I don't plan on having formal, paid employment next year
- ❍ I have no idea if/where I will work next year

Q19 How long do you hope to stay with the primary company/organization you will work for?

- A few months
- 6 months - 1 year
- 1 - 3 years
- More than 3 years
- N/A

Q20 Which of the following will you do next year in addition to or instead of employment? Check all that apply.

- Attend graduate school
- Apply to graduate school
- Unpaid internship
- Obtain vocational training
- Travel - more than one month at a time
- For-profit artistic endeavors
- Consistent volunteering
- Work-trade
- Write-in below ____________________

Q21 How important were/are the following in your employment decision for next year?

______ Career Building (I want/need to start building my career path)

______ Financial Stability (I want/need to make money)

______ Interest (I want/need to really love what I am doing)

______ Pressure (I want/need to satisfy the expectations of my family, peers, and/or professors)

Q22 To what extent to do you agree with the following statements:

(Sliding scale 0-100)

_______ The next few years are a time to focus on myself

_______ I will use the next few years to explore and figure out what I want in life

_______ At this point in time, I feel confident that I know who I am and what I want

_______ I feel optimistic about my future

_______ I am comfortable making long term commitments at this point in my life

_______ I consider myself "an adult"

_______ I feel like there are a lot of question marks about the next few years

_______ I will try a lot of new things in the next few years

_______ In the next few years, I will have a great deal of personal agency