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Flourishing in Emerging Adulthood

*An Understudied Approach to
the Third Decade of Life*

LAURA M. PADILLA-WALKER AND LARRY J. NELSON

There is a growing body of literature that suggests that the third decade of life is anything but a time to foster positive development. Indeed, emerging adulthood has been referred to as a time of arrested development during which young people avoid responsibilities that are thought to be typical of adulthood (Cote, 2000), and instead engage in behaviors they feel they will not be able to enjoy once they become adults (e.g., travel, exploration of substance use and sexual experiences, living a carefree lifestyle; Ravert, 2009). Emerging adults have been referred to as “Generation Me” and are increasingly typified as narcissistic, self-absorbed, and unhappy (Twenge, 2006). In a book focusing on emerging adults, Smith (2011) characterized young people as generally lost in transition, a condition reflected in their moral confusion, risk behaviors, materialism, and disengagement. In sum, the stereotypical emerging adult is one who is experiencing a general failure to launch into the adult world.

Yet despite the focus of research and the popular press on the negative or dark side of emerging adulthood, there is also mounting evidence that this time period, at least for a significant majority, is a unique developmental time period in which positive development is fostered (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2013; Padilla-Walker, 2015). Although it is clear that positive and negative development are not mutually exclusive during any time period, the third decade of life is one in which many opportunities are available for positive development that are not an option during either adolescence or adulthood (e.g., Peace Corps, Teach for America, Study Abroad; Ravert, 2009). Although many of these opportunities seem most applicable to emerging adults in middle-class Western cultures where resources and opportunities make a period of self-exploration more readily available, a growing body of research and practice suggests that positive development is also evident

across cultures and needs to be highlighted in both scholarship and intervention.

Flourishing, or positive human development, has experienced a surge of popularity in the literature since the turn of the 21st century, and it has been particularly salient in the adolescent literature as the study of positive youth development (PYD; Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Lewin-Bizan, 2012). PYD has sought to identify individual aspects of young people that, when paired with social and ecological assets provided by families, schools, and communities, lead to flourishing (or thriving well-being and health). This approach posits that youth who have a sense of competence (e.g., academic, vocational), confidence (e.g., self-worth), connection to people and institutions, character (e.g., values, morality), and caring for others will in turn contribute to their families, communities, and societies (Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, Bowers, & Lewin-Bizan, 2011). Flourishing leads to and is evidenced by both the promotion of positive behaviors and the avoidance of negative behaviors. Although this model has typically been applied to adolescents, it is easily applicable to flourishing during emerging adulthood as well, and it suggests a broad definition of what might constitute flourishing during the third decade of life.

Individual evidences of flourishing have also been organized into dimensions, including emotional, psychological, and social (McEntee, Dy-Liacco, & Haskins, 2013), and flourishing is constituted when these dimensions are elevated in comparison to others (Keyes, 2005). Emotionally, flourishing is often viewed as experiencing feelings of happiness (North, Holahan, Carlson, & Pahl, 2014), optimism (Diener et al., 2010), or general positive affect. Other research defines flourishing as psychological well-being (Diener et al., 2010), the ability to cope, and optimal mental health (Keyes, 2002). Further, successful functioning in social situations is used to describe flourishing, such as comfort in relationship contexts (Diener et al., 2010), taking on leadership roles, helping others, and valuing diversity (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). Research suggests that a range of behaviors and attributes can indicate flourishing, such as displaying self-control, avoiding procrastination, seeking educational attainment (Howell, 2009), and maintaining one's physical health (Scales et al., 2000).

▲ The Current Volume

Although the current volume does not espouse any particular definition of flourishing, it does seek to define flourishing broadly, and to include

diverse ways in which emerging adults might be considered to be experiencing positive development. With that in mind, the purpose of this volume is to highlight the third decade of life as one in which individuals have diverse opportunities for positive development that may set the stage for future adult development. The goal is to highlight the extant work that examines the numerous ways in which young people flourish during the third decade of life, as well as to encourage more research on how young people are flourishing during this time period in ways that contribute to self-enhancement, along with the enhancement of local and global communities. In order to achieve this goal, the volume comprises chapters by leading scholars in diverse disciplines. In addition, most chapters are accompanied by essays from emerging adults that exemplify the aspect of flourishing denoted in that chapter and make note of how choices and experiences helped them (or are currently helping them) transition to adulthood. Taken together, these chapters and essays provide rich examples of how young people are flourishing both as a group and as individuals in a variety of settings and circumstances.

Section 1 of the volume provides a broad overview of flourishing, with particular attention to how key areas of emerging adulthood might be indicative of flourishing during this period of life. Section 2 highlights four unique types of positive engagement that may occur during emerging adulthood, with each chapter providing a more in-depth look at these types of service and how they impact the transition to adulthood. Section 3 recognizes that flourishing may look different as a function of culture; it focuses on some of the ways in which emerging adults are flourishing around the world, including in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and South America. Finally, Section 4 makes a case for resilience as a form of flourishing. It emphasizes situations that might make the transition to adulthood more difficult, but also how, in many cases, these challenges are the very forces that help to propel emerging adults to flourish into adulthood.

▲ Flourishing in Key Areas of Emerging Adulthood

Identity development in the areas of love, work, and worldviews is a central task of the third decade of life. Although Section 1 is not solely about identity development, we know that thinking about, exploring within, and making progress toward goals related to the areas of

love, work, and worldviews are important to emerging adults, and also important, generally, in progressing toward adulthood. Thus, we begin this section with an overview of identity. Lapsley and Hardy (Chapter 2) first discuss identity formation broadly, considering the development of personality, morality, and self-identity as they interconnect during the third decade of life to set individuals on a path for the remainder of adulthood. Bronk and Baumsteiger (Chapter 3) build on the importance of identity by focusing on purpose as a part of identity formation during emerging adulthood. They take a unique approach by highlighting purpose exemplars, or those emerging adults who are driven by a clear sense of purpose that provides direction and leads them to meaningfully contribute to bettering the world around them.

Section 1 then continues to consider developmental tasks in specific areas of love, work, and worldviews. Holmes, Brown, Schafer, and Stoddard (Chapter 4) discuss both the challenges and benefits of dating and sexuality during emerging adulthood, as well as the role of commitment in the building of long-term relationships. They also present original data on the role that growing up in a stepfamily has on later family formation, and provide an overview of the transition to parenthood. The next chapter in this section focuses on obtaining employment or work. Gardner and Chao (Chapter 5) review current statistics on the labor force and job opportunities for emerging adults. They then discuss the centrality of work and the importance of job characteristics based on a survey of over 10,000 individuals between the ages of 18 and 28. Suggestions are also made for how emerging adults can successfully transition to the workforce. The next two chapters in Section 1 capture areas related to young people's worldviews or ideologies, including overviews of civic and political engagement (Hart & van Goethem, Chapter 6) and environmental engagement (Matsuba, Pratt, & Alisat, Chapter 7). Hart and van Goethem review how opportunities during adolescence might set the stage for civic and political engagement during emerging adulthood, and also argue that sometimes being politically engaged during this time period may be, by necessity, somewhat unconventional. Matsuba and colleagues continue this focus on ideology by making important links between environmentalism, morality, political ideology, and generativity, arguing that developmental tasks typical of both late adolescence (identity) and adulthood (generativity) are active during emerging adulthood in influencing environmental engagement.

Flourishing in any of the areas that have been covered to this point (love, work, worldviews) is not an individual endeavor, but rather takes place in and through relationships. Padilla-Walker, Memmott-Elison, and Nelson (Chapter 8) highlight the role of family (e.g., parents, siblings, grandparents) and peers (e.g., spouses, friends) in helping emerging adults to achieve key developmental tasks and to flourish during the third decade of life. The final chapter in this section discusses why there may be multiple trajectories during emerging adulthood, and suggests this may be due to differences in the way young people cognitively approach this period of their lives. Nelson, Jorgenson, and Rogers (Chapter 9) present theory and research depicting the ways in which beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about the present *and* future can shape current behaviors and the paths that young people take through their twenties. Taken together, this section provides a broad overview of flourishing during emerging adulthood by considering positive development within developmentally important areas during the third decade of life.

▲ Unique Opportunities to Flourish in Emerging Adulthood

Because the third decade of life is generally characterized as having fewer relationship demands (most emerging adults are not yet married and few have children), and at least half of emerging adults spend a sizable portion of this decade pursuing higher education, emerging adulthood may be a time when unique opportunities for service present themselves (Ravert, 2009). The second section of this volume focuses on four examples of ways in which emerging adults might become involved and help others that could, in many cases, be more difficult in other decades of life. Faust and Flanagan (Chapter 10) begin this section by highlighting national service opportunities that foster both relational and collective well-being, including programs like AmeriCorps and Teach for America. This chapter provides research on the effectiveness of these programs and highlights important avenues for future research in this area of unique service. Sokol, Donnelly, Vilbig, and Monsky (Chapter 11) emphasize cultural immersion programs and focus on how these experiences promote personal agency and global citizenship. These experiences are primarily available through university

study abroad experiences, and this chapter presents data on two unique immersion experiences (Mexico and Belize) and how these contribute to personal growth for emerging adult college students.

Though understudied as a form of flourishing, Kleykamp, Kelty, and Segal (Chapter 12) provide an overview of military service during emerging adulthood, highlighting how involvement can both detract from and contribute to key aspects of development during emerging adulthood, including family formation, education, employment, and mental health. Similarly, religious service is a form of flourishing during the third decade of life that may be less optimal during other times of life, but can be a means of motivation and transformation. King and Merola (Chapter 13) consider both formal and informal religious service as means by which emerging adults explore, search for meaning, and provide transcendent opportunities. Taken together, this section provides examples of four different ways emerging adults may engage in behavior indicative of flourishing that might be somewhat unique to this developmental time period.

▲ Flourishing in Emerging Adulthood Around the Globe

In the first two sections of the book, the cultural lens for most of the work is the United States and Canada. The authors of these chapters were challenged to consider the role of culture and, where possible, present work from a variety of countries and cultures. However, the work examining flourishing, or positive development, in emerging adulthood is just beginning to grow in the United States and Canada. Unfortunately, there are countries around the world in which work on flourishing in emerging adulthood is very limited. Thus, we not only wanted to underscore cultural differences in what might constitute flourishing by shining a light on the work that has been done in a variety of cultures, but also draw attention to the extensive need for work to be done in examining the positive things that are occurring during the third decade of life around the world.

To do this, Section 3 includes chapters on five different regions of the world. All of the authors who contributed to this section took on the challenging task of trying to address in a single chapter the flourishing of young people from entire continents or regions of the world that include numerous countries, cultures, and belief systems. This was a daunting

task, but the work that emerged shines a light on positive development in emerging adulthood around the globe. Lo-oh (Chapter 14) outlines the numerous challenges facing young people in Africa (e.g., difficult economic, social, political, cultural, health, and psychological conditions) before focusing on the assets that African emerging adults draw upon to make a difference for themselves, their families, and their communities. Examples of the type of assets that are discussed in the chapter include psychological capital and personhood, agency, resilience, social support networks, and life skills development, as well as risk prevention in communities and families. Law, Shek, and Liang (Chapter 15) focus on prosocial development during emerging adulthood in Asia, with a particular focus on volunteerism. The chapter provides rates of volunteering among young people across a number of Asian countries and attempts to explain the practical, cultural, and individual reasons for why young people volunteer in Asia. Barber (Chapter 16) provides an overview of positive development in Australia and New Zealand. The chapter looks at findings from a number of exceptional longitudinal studies that have helped to outline indices of positive development in these countries, including civic action and engagement, trust and tolerance of others, trust in authorities and organizations, social competence, and life satisfaction. The chapter also focuses on the role of activities such as sports and arts in the lives of young people as indices of positive development, but also as contexts for facilitating positive outcomes in the areas of health, personal well-being, social capital, and connection.

Robinson and Zukauskienė (Chapter 17) examine flourishing within Europe by specifically exploring the relationship between variations in national wealth and migration and levels of flourishing among emerging adults across the continent. Also, in light of recent terrorist attacks throughout Europe, the authors provide interesting insight into how the lack of opportunities to flourish may be linked to the acts of terror committed by marginalized European young people. Finally, Facio, Sireix, and Prestofelippo (Chapter 18) provide an overview of features of positive development in Latin American emerging adults, with particular emphasis on the high level of psychological well-being they enjoy, despite the difficult social, political, and economic challenges facing them. Taken together, this section provides an overview of the work that is emerging showing the unique ways that young people flourish in countries around the globe. It also underscores the need for more work on the role of culture in flourishing during emerging adulthood.

▲ Flourishing Despite Challenges: A Case for Resilience

Although the purpose of this volume is to focus on the ways in which young people flourish during the third decade of life, we fully recognize that many young people have to overcome tremendous challenges in order to flourish. Many young people face obstacles such as challenging upbringings, poverty, violence, illness, disabilities, and prejudice and marginalization. The very act of persevering in the face of these obstacles and rising above them constitutes a form of flourishing. The chapters in Section 4 identify some of the obstacles that many young people face in their efforts to flourish, and then address how these challenges can be the very forces that help to propel some emerging adults to flourish into adulthood. Van Dulmen and DeLuca (Chapter 19) outline the challenges (e.g., dealing with a challenging past while facing an uncertain future) young people experience as they transition out of foster care, as well as the components of foster care that predict success. Smith (Chapter 20) provides the sobering realities of life for those young people attempting to come of age amid the violence that makes up life in economically disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. She then provides a general overview of work on post-traumatic growth and resilience, as well as introducing specific interventions aimed at saving, healing, and transforming lives. Rocque, Plummer-Beale, and Serwick (Chapter 21) outline the problems facing young people who come face-to-face with a criminal justice system that is separated along the lines of juvenile and adult systems, with the dividing line being age 18 based on an outdated and legal notion of what it means to be an adult. The authors provide an argument for the need to change how emerging adults are treated within the system so as to obtain the best outcomes, including, but not limited to, lower rates of rearrest. They provide an example of one state's initial attempts to implement just such a program.

Another set of challenges faced by many young people is related to their physical bodies. The next two chapters deal with the obstacles that some emerging adults face in the form of disabilities and health, respectively. Kellems, Rowe, Palmer, and Williams (Chapter 22) demonstrate how, with support, young people with disabilities have opportunities to lead successful lives with an amount of self-determination and personal choice. The chapter outlines the skills and supports that are needed by those with disabilities to facilitate flourishing. Yi, Tian, and Kim (Chapter 23) focus on the challenges facing emerging adults with

major health issues. The authors take the perspective that strengths may develop despite or even because of their illness experiences. The authors examine how progress in significant features of emerging adulthood (e.g., identity exploration) may be facilitated as a result of dealing with health challenges.

For some young people, the challenges they face in successfully navigating the third decade of life come as a result of societal constraints such as discrimination and marginalization. Peter, Toomey, Heinze, and Horn (Chapter 24) examine positive development of queer populations in emerging adulthood. The chapter explicates the adversity that queer young people face because of inequalities and societal norms, but then identifies how the mental and behavioral health disparities among queer emerging adults can be explained by differences in levels of family and peer social support. The chapter highlights the importance of these various forms of support in facilitating flourishing. Finally, immigration provides some young people the chance to flourish by improving financial prospects, providing safety from violence, and obtaining political freedom, but it also comes with numerous risks, especially when done illegally, including the possibility of sexual and economic exploitation, detention, or deportation. Seif and Jenkins (Chapter 25) outline the benefits and risks of immigration and then focus on the factors that make emerging adulthood, compared to other periods of life, a particularly positive time to immigrate. The chapter also highlights factors that promote positive outcomes for immigrants.

Taken together, the final section of the book recognizes the numerous challenges facing many young people as they attempt to navigate a successful path through their twenties, but it also highlights the assets, skills, supports, policies, practices, and interventions that can help young people rise out of the adversity facing them in order to experience high levels of well-being and other indices of flourishing.

▲ Conclusion

It is a common occurrence to hear adults opine about the “glory days” of past generations of young people or to disparage today’s young people with sentences that typically start with “When I was young . . .” or “The problem with today’s young people . . .” Without a doubt, there are many emerging adults who give their age group a bad name with

their egocentric beliefs and behaviors. Unfortunately, these young people often provide the material that receives a lot of attention, including the negative images that often get propagated, such as those of jobless young people playing video games in their parents' basements, or spoiled frat boys participating in nonstop parties and thinking they are above the law. These stories, however, should not define a generation, because they do not reflect the diversity that exists in how young people approach the third decade of life. As readers move from one chapter to another in this book, they will be exposed to research demonstrating the vast and varied ways in which emerging adults are flourishing. For scholars, the chapters will provide an in-depth look into the work that has been done examining various indices of positive development and hopefully inspire them with ways to move the field forward with new questions.

Finally, we believe that the essays accompanying most chapters will introduce the readers to some incredible young people whose voices and stories will put real faces to the research that is presented. In general, we hope that the variety of topics covered, and the theory, research, and narratives presented in the book, will begin to challenge the myth that all emerging adults are part of a narcissistic Peter Pan generation (i.e., they won't grow up) that is floundering. We believe the chapters that follow will provide strong evidence that the third decade of life is one in which many opportunities are available for positive development that are not an option during either adolescence or adulthood, and show that a great number of young people are utilizing this time in their lives to flourish and establish a positive trajectory for their future.

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