

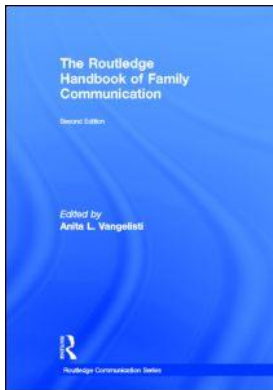
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## **The Routledge Handbook of Family Communication**

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### **Communication During Emerging Adulthood**

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# Communication During Emerging Adulthood

*Brian J. Willoughby and Jeffrey J. Arnett*

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Young adulthood has always held a prominent place in the study of families and family communication. Young adulthood has traditionally been seen as a period of individual transition and union formation that was accompanied by vast changes in family dynamics and communication patterns. Arnett (2000, 2007) has suggested that the phase of life from 18 to 25 represents a new developmental stage for most young adults, a stage he designated as emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood represents a unique moment in the life course, unique in terms of the content, quality and mediums of communication with family, friends, and romantic partners.

In this chapter, we seek to place emerging adulthood in the context of family communication. Since Arnett (2000) formally proposed emerging adulthood as a distinct, developmental period more than a decade ago, scholars have eagerly sought to understand how emerging adulthood and the changes associated with this time period are linked to communication trends with parents, peers, and romantic partners. We first introduce and summarize the scholarship which has outlined how and why emerging adults are a unique developmental population. We then discuss and summarize relevant research on communication patterns during emerging adulthood with three vital systems: parents, friends, and romantic partners. We then overview the unique place technology has on the communication that takes place during emerging adulthood. We then turn our attention to priorities and avenues for future work on emerging adulthood and family communication. We first discuss how two social science theories, social learning theory and family life course theory, might be particularly useful in conceptualizing communication patterns during emerging adulthood across multiple systems. Finally, we highlight several major limitations of current scholarship in this area and suggest directions for future research on communication during emerging adulthood. We note that our discussion (and the research in general) largely centers on communication among emerging adults in Western, industrialized countries and refer the reader to the excellent chapter by Gaines and colleagues (this volume) for an in-depth discussion of ethnic and multicultural issues and differences in relation to family communication.

## Overview of Emerging Adulthood

### *The Historical Context of Emerging Adulthood*

The theory of emerging adulthood proposes that a new life stage has arisen between adolescence and young adulthood over the past half century in industrialized countries. Fifty years ago, most young people in these countries had entered stable adult roles in love and work by their late teens or early twenties. Relatively few people pursued education or training beyond secondary school, and consequently most young men were full-time workers by the end of their teens. Relatively few women worked in occupations outside the home, and the median age of marriage in 1960 was around 20 years old for women in the U.S.A. and most other industrialized countries (Arnett & Taber, 1994). The median marriage age for men was around 22, and married couples usually had their first child about one year after their wedding day. All told, for most young people half a century ago, their teenage adolescence led quickly and directly to stable adult roles in love and work by their late teens or early twenties.

Now all that has changed. A higher proportion of young people than ever before—nearly 70 percent in the U.S.—pursue education and training beyond secondary school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). For most, the early twenties are not a time of entering stable adult work but a time of immense job instability; the average number of job changes from age 20 to 29 in the U.S.A. is seven. The median age of entering marriage in the U.S.A. is now 26 for women and 28 for men (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010). In Europe, median ages of entering marriage are even higher, usually 28–32 (Douglass, 2007). Consequently, a new period of the life course, emerging adulthood, has been created, lasting from the late teens through the mid twenties.

### *The Social and Cultural Context of Emerging Adulthood*

One of the fascinating aspects of the rise of emerging adulthood over the past half century is how the same demographic changes have taken place across the industrialized world: longer and more widespread education, lower birth rates, and later ages of marriage and parenthood (Arnett, 2011a). These changes have occurred in the English-speaking countries of the U.S.A., Canada, the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand; all over Europe; and in the Asian industrialized countries of Japan and South Korea. Similar demographic changes have also taken place in developing countries around the world, although at present post-secondary education is less common in these countries than OECD countries and ages of entering marriage and parenthood are not yet as high.

Within industrialized countries, social class has a substantial influence on the path through emerging adulthood, especially as it influences education (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006). Although participation in post-secondary education has expanded greatly over the past half century, across industrialized countries 5–50 percent do not continue education beyond secondary school (UNdata, 2010). Also, it is well established that educational attainment is the strongest predictor of future earnings throughout adult life (Day & Newburger, 2002). However, we know much less about possible social class differences during emerging adulthood in family relations, romantic relationships, friendships, and plans for the future, among many other areas (Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011).

### *The Developmental Context of Emerging Adulthood*

Emerging adulthood is not merely an “extended adolescence,” because unlike adolescents, emerging adults are not in secondary school, are not going through puberty, and are not legally dependent on their parents (Arnett, 2004). Nor is emerging adulthood merely part of a “young adulthood” stretching from age 18 to 39, because the years 18–25 tend to be far less stable and structured than the period from the late twenties through the thirties (Arnett, 2011b).

Arnett has proposed five features that distinguish emerging adulthood from the adolescence that precedes it or the young adulthood that follows it (Arnett, 2004). Emerging adulthood is the *age of identity explorations*, that is, the period of life when people are moving toward making crucial choices in love and work, based on their judgment of their interests and preferences and how these fit into the possibilities available to them. It is the *age of instability*, because in the course of pursuing their identity explorations emerging adults frequently change love partners, jobs, educational directions, and living arrangements. It is the *self-focused age*, because it is the period of life when people have the fewest daily role obligations and thus the greatest scope for independent decision-making. It is the *age of feeling in-between*, because emerging adulthood is when people are most likely to feel they are neither adolescents nor adults but somewhere in-between, on the way to adulthood but not there yet. Finally, it is the *age of possibilities*, because no matter what their lives are like now, nearly everyone believes in emerging adulthood that eventually life will smile on them and they will achieve the adult life they envision. These features distinguish emerging adulthood from adolescence or young adulthood but are not unique to it. All of them begin in adolescence and continue into young adulthood, but emerging adulthood is when they reach their peak.

### **Systems of Communication During Emerging Adulthood**

Within this historical, cultural, and development context of emerging adulthood, communication plays a vital role in the day-to-day lives of emerging adults. As emerging adults seek to establish their autonomy from parents and begin to take on adult roles, their communication shifts at multiple points of interaction. Three of the most vital systems of interactions during emerging adults are those with parents, with friends, and with romantic partners. In this section, we review the current research findings regarding communication with each of these systems during emerging adulthood.

#### *Communication with the Parental System*

Communication patterns with immediate family members often serve as the basis for communication patterns with others. Although emerging adults are often going through many individual changes regarding work, education, and residential location and have often moved away from their parent’s home, communication with parents and other family members still plays an important role in their lives (MacMillan & Copher, 2005; Thornton, Orbach, & Axinn, 1995). For example, despite the many changes that occur during emerging adulthood, research has suggested that parent–child interactions remain somewhat stable during this period (Thornton, Orbach, & Axinn, 1995) and most emerging adults report that their relationship quality with their parents improved during emerging adulthood (Aquilino, 1997; Arnett, 2004; Lefkowitz, 2005; Thornton, Orbach,

& Axinn, 1995). Despite reporting less contact with parents, many emerging adults report that communication with parents also became more open and of better quality during emerging adulthood (Lefkowitz, 2005).

Research has also found that parents and emerging adults have reciprocal effects on the well-being of each other (Knoester, 2003). Specifically, Knoester found in a national sample of emerging adults that changes in emerging adults' psychological well-being were associated with similar changes in parents' psychological well-being. Additionally, in families where parents have high levels of marital discord and distress, parental disclosure of family and marital issues increases mental health symptoms among emerging adults (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). Despite the potential for decreased communication with parents during emerging adulthood, scholarship has consistently found that this relationship is still an important component of emerging adult development and well-being.

One key to understanding parent-child communication during emerging adulthood is to understand that communication patterns during this time period in the life course are strongly affected by previous interactions and patterns. As is the case with many developmental areas, interactional patterns established in childhood and adolescence influence interactions during emerging adulthood. While communication with parents does change during emerging adulthood, those changes are better viewed as variations of communication patterns established during adolescence than completely new ways of interacting. For example, issues of autonomy have been found to continue to dominate communication between emerging adults and their parents. Jensen and colleagues (2004) found that emerging adults frequently cited lying to parents as a means of asserting autonomy, although the overall frequency of lying decreased from adolescence to emerging adulthood. Although communication with parents is linked to previous interaction, some research suggests important communication shifts do occur during emerging adulthood. Aquilino (1997) found that less than 10 percent of the variance in parent-child relations during emerging adulthood was explained by interactional patterns during childhood, suggesting that communication does alter during the transition to adulthood. Using a national dataset, Aquilino found that most changes during emerging adulthood centered on emerging adults becoming more open and close with their parents as they took on more adult roles like long-term union formation and employment.

If communication with parents continues to be important during emerging adulthood, what are parenting and emerging adults communicating about? One of the goals of parent-child communication during emerging adulthood continues to be the transmission of values, attitudes, and behaviors from parents to their children (Miller & Glass, 1989). As parents are able to implicitly and explicitly communicate their feelings and values, they hope their children will adapt similar values, thus promoting intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991) and promoting relationship quality. Evidence suggests that congruence between parents and children on many values and attitudes remains strong during emerging adulthood (Bucx, Raaijmakers, & Van Wel, 2010; Willoughby, Carroll, Vitas, & Hill, 2011). Although most of this intergenerational transmission likely takes place during childhood and adolescence, scholars have suggested that attitudes and values are still malleable during adulthood (Vollebergh, Iedema, & Raaijmakers, 2001) and communication with parents and other family members likely continues to facilitate this transmission.

Another key content area of parent-child communication centers on sex and dating. Emerging adults tend to increase the amount of conversations with parents that center on sex and dating as they enter emerging adulthood (Jensen et al., 2004; Morgan, Thorne,

& Zurbriggen, 2010). Some of this sexual communication seems to be moderated by the gender of both the parent and the emerging adult. Mothers are more likely to convey sexual information to their children than fathers (Downie & Coates, 1999) and emerging adult women are more likely to receive restrictive sex messages from their parents, whereas young men are more likely to receive permissive sex messages from parents (Morgan et al. 2010).

### *Communication with the Friendship System*

Like interactions with parents, communication with friends and peers during emerging adulthood is also an extension of the trends established during adolescence. Many emerging adults feel more comfortable communicating with peers than parents on certain topics, sex being perhaps the most widely researched example (Dilorio et al., 1999; Lefkowitz, Boone, & Shearer, 2004). Communication with friends is typically centered on strengthening peer support networks and providing an outlet for emerging adults to express concerns, emotions, and successes. Having friends in which emerging adults can confide is an important resource for many emerging adults. This openness enhances the friendship itself, as emerging adults who have higher levels of disclosure to their friends often find those friendship relationships strengthened (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). This closeness and intimacy with friends typically becomes more important during emerging adulthood for most individuals (Montgomery, 2005).

Communication content with peers is also different than with other systems during emerging adulthood. For example, emerging adults report that peers are the most reliable source of information on sex related topics (Kallen et al., 1983) and much of the communication during emerging adulthood among peers is centered on social activities. One of the primary context areas of peer group communication is to coordinate social events such as parties and sporting activities. These shared events are one of the most cited reasons for emerging adult peer interaction (Davis, 2010).

Also like parental communication, gender plays a key role in the content of communication among peers during emerging adulthood. For instance, and possibly counter to conventional wisdom, males tend to discuss sex and dating with their peers less frequently than females (Dilorio et al., 1999; Lefkowitz, Boone, & Shearer, 2004) and female same-sex friendships are often closer than male same-sex friendships (Johnson, 2004). Korobov and Thorne (2006) suggested that discussing intimacy and relationship matters may be viewed as non-normative for most emerging adult men. Scholars have noted that same-sex friendships are characterized by different types of interactions compared to cross-sex friendships (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998) and emerging adults tend to be closer and more committed in general to same-sex friends (Johnson, 2004). Scholars also noted that emerging adults tend to avoid certain topics with cross-sex friends (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985) such as previous relationships with members of the opposite sex and discussing the current state of the friendship.

### *Communication Within Romantic Partnership Systems*

While exploring individual identity and transitioning into educational and vocational settings, emerging adulthood is also a time of developing and changing dating and romantic relationship behavior. Emerging adults are typically exploring and experimenting with relationships and love in ways that are different than relationships during adolescence

(Reifman, 2010). Romantic partners during emerging adulthood often serve as interactional partners that set the foundation for communication patterns in future relational interactions in marriage and other long-term unions.

Emerging adults often utilize communication with romantic partners to evaluate, define, and clarify relationships (Clark & Beck, 2010). As emerging adulthood is typically a time period of multiple romantic partners, emerging adults utilize communication with current and potential partners to evaluate their suitability as long-term partners. This is perhaps best illustrated by first date scripts. First dates represent an important evaluation period for most individuals as they seek to both determine if their date is worthy of a new relationship and seek to be desired by their date as well (Laner & Ventrone, 2000). Communication during first dates is largely evaluative as both partners seek to learn more about their date as they make decisions about behavior on this date and beyond. Emerging adults tend to follow strict scripts in such interactions (Laner & Ventrone, 1998, 2000) and are typically guarded about the type of information they convey in early dating relationships (Clark & Beck, 2010). Early dates with close friends are also marked by more intimate conversations than dates with new acquaintances (Morr & Mongeau, 2004). Being able to have quality conversations with a romantic partner is viewed by many emerging adults as a key marker of good relationship chemistry (Peretti & Abplanalp, 2004). As emerging adulthood is perhaps the time period in the life course associated with more formal dating than any other period, these communication scripts are important for reducing anxiety and helping direct interactions between romantic partners.

Another important component of communication between romantic partners during emerging adulthood centers on the negotiation of sexual and intimate behaviors. In an environment of heightened sexual awareness and behavior, romantic partners must send and decode messages regarding desired and acceptable intimate acts. Research has suggested that much of this communication during emerging adulthood is non-verbal (Henningsen, 2004) and emerging adult women tend to favor this type of indirect communication regarding sexual behaviors (Lindgren et al., 2009). Given this heavy reliance on indirect and non-verbal communication, there is a high likelihood of misinterpretations between romantic partners (Farris, Treat, Viken, & McFall, 2008). In an interview study with college students, Lindgren et al. (2009) found that men were likely to perceive higher sexual intentions than women were trying to convey. These findings have been suggested to be primarily due to emerging adult men's inability to interpret and accurately perceive women's non-verbal cues in a romantic setting (Farris et al., 2008). Men are also more likely to interpret flirting behavior as a sexual invitation compared to women (Henningsen, 2004). The ability of emerging adult couples to openly negotiate sexual intimacy becomes a key factor in determining relational outcomes and even potentially dangerous outcomes such as sexual coercion (Farris et al., 2008).

### *Communication Across Multiple Systems*

Although emerging adult communication and interactions with parents, friends, and romantic partners may each be unique and different, it is important to keep in mind that these interactions operate in tandem and simultaneously on a day-to-day basis. For instance, as emerging adults deepen a commitment to a romantic partner, the frequency of contact with other systems such as parents and peers may change. Recent findings have suggested that emerging adults who transition to long-term unions having less contact with parents (Bucx, Van Wel, Knijn, & Hagendoorn, 2008). Bucx and colleagues also found that the

transition to parenthood during emerging adulthood may likewise shift communication with other systems. Emerging adults who transition to parenthood and begin raising their own children tend to have more frequent contact with both their father and mother (Bucx et al., 2008). Interactions across one system can also influence and predict communication trajectories in other areas of communication. For example, parent-child relationships have been shown to influence relationship quality in young adulthood (Conger, Cui, & Lorenz, 2010). These interactions across multiple systems create complexity and depth to communication structures during emerging adulthood that need to be accounted for in order to understand how communication influences emerging adult development across numerous areas.

### **Technology: A Facilitator and Hindrance to Emerging Adult Communication**

Any discussion of communication during emerging adulthood would be incomplete without an overview of the role that technology plays among this age cohort. Some scholars have suggested that emerging adulthood may be a time period of unique technology use (Axelsson, 2010; Jones, 2002) with emerging adults utilizing technology in their communication more so than any other age group. In a study of Swedish emerging adults, Axelsson (2010) found that 77 percent of emerging adults sent at least one text message a day, with almost 20 percent sending ten or more per day. Eighty-six percent of emerging adults also made at least one cell phone call per day. These usage rates were higher than both younger adolescents and older adults in the sample. American emerging adults use social networking sites, use instant messaging, read blogs and play online games more than older generations (Zickuhr, 2010). Online social communication and blogging has likewise increased exponentially in recent years and over half of all bloggers are under the age of 30 (Lenhart & Fox, 2006).

Technology could have two possible effects on individual and family communication during emerging adulthood (Mikami, Szwedlo, Allen, Evans, & Hare, 2010). On one hand, technology has the potential to enhance communication by making such communication easier, more frequent and removing communication barriers such as distance and cost (Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001). However, some scholars have pointed out that technology may have negative effects on communication during emerging adulthood. For example, excessive use of technology has been linked to negative outcomes on the individual level and less overall communication with family and friends (Kraut et al., 1998). Odaci and Kalkan (2010) also found that high usage of the Internet was linked to loneliness and communication anxiety among emerging adults. These results highlight that most technology has the potential for both positive and negative effects. Here we highlight some of the recent research on how technology may facilitate or hinder healthy communication during emerging adulthood.

As emerging adults move away from adolescent friends and family members, technology can make frequent communication possible despite the possibility of emerging adults being separated from family by long distances. Research suggests that technology may be particularly important in terms of maintaining contact with immediate family members after emerging adults leave home. For example, cell phones are the most common mechanisms for contacting immediate family members during emerging adulthood (Axelsson, 2010).

More recent technology, such as social networking sites, has also become a key resource for maintaining and building friendships during emerging adulthood (Ellison,



Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007). Ellison and colleagues found that college students who utilized Facebook were able to maintain and build peer networks. Valkenburg and Peter (2007) likewise found that frequent instant messaging (IMs) between friends improve relationship quality. In an interview study of emerging adult women, Davis (2010) found that friendship communication was identified as the central purpose of blogging for the women interviewed. Other research, however, has suggested that communication through technology alone does not support strong peer relationships. Online friendships rarely become as close as face-to-face friendships (Mesch & Talmud, 2007; Parks & Roberts, 1998) and some studies have suggested that Internet use may hinder face-to-face relationship quality (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

Despite these potential downfalls, many emerging adults may prefer online communication to face-to-face interaction, believing that online communication is easier. Caplan (2007) argued that socially anxious young adults may prefer technology based communication to face-to-face interaction because it allowed them to exercise more control over social interactions. Caplan found support for this hypothesis after surveying undergraduate students and finding that social anxiety was significantly related to a higher preference for online social interaction. Likewise, two separate studies found that the social and personal benefits of social networking for emerging adults were stronger for emerging adults with low self-esteem and low life satisfaction (Ellison et al., 2007). Some forms of technology can also open up new communication avenues for emerging adults. For example, personal blogs now allow individuals to share their views, opinions and lives with a large audience (Davis, 2010; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005). Often, emerging adults use blogs and personal websites to communicate with others about themselves (Davis, 2010), perhaps facilitating identity exploration and development. Davis (2010) also found that many emerging adult bloggers begin to utilize blog posts to communicate about their opinions of things outside of personal experiences such as political viewpoints. This allows emerging adults to express their new and developing view about the world around them.

Communication via technology can also connect emerging adults with unfamiliar peers or potential romantic partners. A recent study suggested that about 10 percent of college students have attempted to find a romantic partner online (Donn & Sherman, 2002). Limited research has suggested that emerging adults who utilized online communication with unfamiliar persons tended to report having higher self-esteem and lower anxiety (Gross, 2009). Despite this, easy and plentiful connections to new people and existing peer groups may facilitate negative experiences for emerging adults such as increased exposure to sexual predators and a higher likelihood of cyber-bulling.

Beyond influencing existing and new relationships, technology may also help emerging adults achieve better overall communication. Communication facilitated by technology may help emerging adults perceive fewer social cues to limit self-disclosure which may translate to increased open expressions of feelings and thoughts. College students have reported that they feel less shy when communicating online (Knox, Daniels, Sturdivant, & Zusman, 2001) and levels of reported shyness decrease in online interactions compared to face-to-face interactions (Yuen & Lavin, 2004). Conversely, online communication lacks the verbal and other face-to-face cues essential to proper communication and accurate interpretation of communication messages (Antheunis et al., 2010). This leaves open the possibility that interactions online or through other technological media may be interpreted incorrectly and have led some scholars to label online communication media as “impoverished communicative environments” (Whalen, Pexman, & Gill, 2009).

Although much more research is needed to truly understand how technology influences emerging adult communication, we recognize it likely plays a crucial role. While the effect of technology may be positive or negative depending on the context in which it is utilized, scholars should consider the role of technology as an important component of emerging adult communication.

## Moving Forward

### *Applying Theory to Emerging Adult Communication*

A prominent role and goal of social science theory is to provide useful frameworks and terminology in order to understand, analyze, and explain the social world around us. It is helpful then to turn to social science theory in order to frame any discussion of family communication during emerging adulthood. Due to the unique social, cultural, and familial environments encountered by many emerging adults previously discussed, we believe that both a family life course perspective (MacMillan & Copher, 2005) and social learning theories (Bandura, 1977) may be particularly useful frameworks through which to analyze and interpret communication during emerging adulthood. After outlining why the precepts and hypotheses proposed by each theory may be particularly useful in the study of emerging adulthood, we offer a series of foci that each theory would suggest for emerging adult communication scholars in the future.

### Family Life Course Perspective

A family life course perspective (Elder, 1994; MacMillan & Copher, 2005) suggests that we can only understand the family system by understanding the interconnected life trajectories and transitions of those within the family. One of the key aspects of a life course perspective on development is that individuals and families undergo key transitions that impact their behavior, dynamics, and structure. Transitions during the life course help give individuals and families meaning and help them structure and interpret their lives (Elder, 1994). During these key moments of the life course, individuals change and shift their roles, behaviors and relationships and although they may be short in duration, these transitions can often have long-term and long-standing effects on the individuals involved.

Family life course theory may be particularly useful in understanding emerging adult communication due to this focus on transitions, pathways and change. Emerging adulthood is a time period marked by many and varied transitions (Arnett, 2000, 2004) and a family life course perspective argues that these changes that occur to both emerging adults and those they interact with will influence future interactions and communication (Bucx et al., 2008). Family communication roles are altering as emerging adults move out of their parent's home, attend secondary education, or enter the work force. Research has suggested that these transitions are key moments of interactional change. For example, as emerging adults make the transition to marriage, communication with parents becomes less frequent (Bucx et al., 2008). The transition to a university setting has also been linked, many changes in the parent-child relationship such as feelings of closeness, feelings of respect for parents with and feelings of more independence from parents (Lefkowitz, 2005).

Another important notion from family life course theory is the concept of linked lives (Elder, 1994), or the idea that human lives are interdependent and the interactions

between individuals across the life course is central to understanding human behavior. As emerging adults go through the transitions associated with emerging adulthood, their peers, parents, and romantic partners are likewise undergoing normative and non-normative transitions that will influence the context, structure, and content of their communication. There is certainly evidence that emerging adults are influenced by the social relationships around them. As previously discussed, emerging adult development is closely linked to their relationships with parents (Knoester, 2003) and peers (Montgomery, 2005).

These concepts of family life course theory can be used to create scholarly focal points as research on emerging adult communication continues to push forward. A family life course perspective offers several priorities for emerging adult communication scholars. We offer three key areas of potential future scholarly work based on this perspective:

- 1 Investigating how major transitions such as transitions to college, employment, and long-term relationships during emerging adulthood create focal points for understanding communication patterns.
- 2 Investigating if the different family, peer, and romantic roles emerging adults enter or leave influence communication patterns.
- 3 Investigating if communication between emerging adults and those they have close social relationships with influences their individual behavior and developmental trajectories.

### Social Learning Theories

Although social learning theory is often attributed to the work of Bandura (1977), scholars have suggested that a social learning perspective really encompasses a range of theories which have similar underlying premises (Curran, White, & Hansell, 1997). The central premise of most social learning theories is that individuals learn behavior, values, and tendencies by observing both the behaviors and consequences for those behaviors of those around them.

Although social learning perspectives have not been used widely in communication research, other areas of emerging adult scholarship have drawn heavily from their ideas. For example, social learning theories have been used to understand emerging adult binge drinking behavior (Curran et al., 1997) and delinquency (Boeringer, Shehan, & Akers, 1991). This research has focused primarily on how risk behaviors commonly seen during emerging adulthood may be based on previously learned tendencies from important role models such as parents and peers.

Less work has been done linking social learning to family communication. However, the tenets of social learning theories suggest some important ramifications for emerging adult communication. First, we would expect to find strong and consistent links between the communication styles of parents and those of their children. As a primary source of social learning, emerging adults likely model communication styles and patterns from their parents as they observed them growing up.

Second, social learning theories may be particularly useful in the study of emerging adulthood by focusing on how social interactions may influence the specific behaviors of emerging adults. Much attention has been placed on certain behaviors of emerging adults such as risk-taking (Dworkin, 2005) and educational attainment (Lefkowitz, 2005). Social learning theory suggests that communication with others may serve as an important motivator, driving emerging adults toward certain types of behaviors. Utilizing ideas

from social learning theories can help scholars focus on what types of interactions may be the most influential in directing emerging adult behavior and trajectories.

Like family life course theory, social learning theories offer important priorities for future work on emerging adult communication. We offer two additional areas of future study based on the precepts of social learning theories:

- 1 Investigating how communication styles are transmitted and learned during emerging adulthood.
- 2 Investigating how communication changes based on social environment and interaction with others.

### *Limitations of Current Scholarship and Future Directions*

Despite the growing body of scholarship on emerging adult communication, several limitations continue to hamper our understanding of this developmental period. One of the key limitations to this area of scholarship is that emerging adult scholarship is still largely defined by two distinct and separate areas of scholarship. One body of scholarship involves adolescent and developmental scholars who have approached emerging adulthood by extending research lines from adolescent development to emerging adulthood development. These scholars tend to focus on issues of transition, individual behavior and identity formation and tend to ignore or omit emerging adults who make early adult transitions into marriage and parenthood.

On the other hand, a body of research exists, largely from the sociology and family fields, which focuses on family transitions such as parenting and marriage during emerging adulthood. This body of research often lacks any developmental focus. There remains a need to merge the perspectives of both of these lines of research in the future to truly understand emerging adulthood and the interactions that place during this time period. For example, no research currently exists that focuses on communication during the transition to parenthood during emerging adulthood that considers the unique developmental context of this period. Scholars should investigate how developmental trends and trajectories during emerging adulthood work together with family and role transitions to develop a complete conceptual model for the lives of emerging adults. As suggested in this chapter, utilizing both family life course and social learning perspectives can aid in developing some of these questions.

Another ongoing limitation of research on emerging adulthood is its reliance on college student populations, often emerging adults from middle to upper-class families. Most of the research cited and discussed in this chapter relies on college samples and populations. Although most authors are quick to point to this as a limitation of their individual studies, scholars still need to reach out and sample non-college emerging adults. As noted by some of the prominent national studies of emerging adults who do not attend college, emerging adults who live in low income situations or who enter the work force likely differ in important ways compared to college-bound emerging adults (Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011).

Finally, research on emerging adult communication should also branch out and extend the range of communication content areas focused on. Currently, most of the research on emerging adult communication content focuses on sexual or relational behavior and parent-child communication. Although this is likely an artifact of many adolescent scholars interested in sexual and relational behavior moving their lines of scholarship

into emerging adulthood, research is needed in other content areas of emerging adult communication such as interactions centered on employment, education, and recreation. Although a large body of research exists and is growing around parent–child communication during emerging adulthood, a particularly striking gap in our current understanding of emerging adult communication is on sibling interactions (for a recent exception see Conger & Little, 2010). Research has suggested that sibling relationships are an important aspect of an individual’s well-being and behavior (Scharf, Shulman, & Avigad-Spitz, 2005). More research is needed to understand communication between siblings as one or more enter and exit emerging adulthood. Research on communication with other family members, such as grandparents and extended family members is also limited.

As the study of emerging adulthood continues to grow, it will become increasingly important to understand the interactional and communication patterns of emerging adults and how those interactions influence the important development that takes place during emerging adulthood. During the past decade, the scholarship focused on emerging adulthood has boomed, and the next decade surely holds many important innovations and discoveries into the interactions emerging adults have during this important stage in the life course.

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