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Self-Reported Life Events among Deaf Emerging Adults—An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

This study was undertaken to investigate the self-reported life experiences of a national sample of deaf emerging adults (18 to 30 years). Recruitment was completed through deaf computer listserves. Participants (N = 44) rated a variety of life experiences regarding occurrence, impact and valence. A median split was conducted on the age variable yielding 2 groups: younger and older. Results showed a trend with the older group reporting events consistent with later stages of emerging adulthood; the younger group experiencing events consistent with early stages of young adulthood (same progression as hearing peers). Implications of these findings and future directions are discussed.

Keywords: emerging adulthood, deaf, life events, life span development

Within the past decade, developmentalists have identified the transition from adolescence to adulthood as a period with distinct characteristics for young people in post-industrialized societies. Because the transition to adulthood can last from the late teens until at least the mid-20s, scholars have proposed that these years now constitute a potentially new and distinct developmental period labeled *emerging adulthood*. Use of this term has become increasingly widespread (Arnett, 2000; Hagan & Foster, 2003) and a distinct body of literature exists documenting the characteristics common to individuals in this period.

According to Arnett (2000/2004), the researcher who first coined the term emerging adulthood, identity issues are a core feature of this developmental stage. Individuals during this period have not yet assumed the responsibilities of adulthood, but are no longer occupying a position of dependency (Arnett, 2000/2004). Arnett (2004) posited that emerging adulthood is comprised of five distinct phases: 1) the age of identity exploration, 2) the age of instability, 3) the self-focused age, 4) the age of feeling in-between, and 5) the age of possibilities. The progression through these phases goes slowly and results in an individual achieving adulthood. This arrival is demarcated by the

individual's ability to take on responsibility for oneself, make independent decisions and become financially independent (Arnett, 2001/2003; Macek, Bejcek, & Vanickova, 2007). Thus, emerging adulthood involves a process of taking on new roles and adapting or changing existing roles for youth and their families.

Others have portrayed this period of emerging adulthood as revolving around a developmental process of "recentering." According to Tanner (2006), emerging adulthood is a distinct and critical juncture in human development, and is a time when significant marker life events are most likely to happen (Grob, Krings, & Bangerter, 2001; Tanner, 2006). Tanner (2006) posits that recentering is the primary psychosocial task of emerging adulthood and is achieved in 3 stages. First, a teen enters into emerging adulthood. During this time, roles that formerly identified them as dependent dynamically shift towards an orientation where power is shared with those who were previously caring for them (e.g., parents). In Stage 2, a person engages in the developmental experiences of emerging adulthood. At this time, commitments to roles and relationships are transitory in nature. A significant amount of individual exploration is undertaken in order to gain information about various opportunities in school, work and love. In Stage 3, the emerging adult makes commitments to responsibilities of adulthood and enduring responsibility (Tanner, 2006). Emerging adults scaffold recentering by choosing, identifying, and prioritizing life goals. These goals change as one moves from adolescence and through emerging adulthood. Significant tasks during this time include academic, conduct and friendship goals. Over time, these goals give way to occupational and romantic goals as the individual moves out of emerging adulthood into young adulthood (Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, & Tellegen, 2004; Salmela-Aro, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007).

Typical markers of entry into adulthood are the establishment of a stable residence, school completion, career selection and training, and marriage or a long-term commitment with a romantic partner (Salmela-Aro et al., 2007). However, the characteristics that matter most to young people in their subjective sense of attaining adulthood are not these "status" markers. Their essential criteria include accepting responsibility for themselves, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent (Arnett, 2000/2001).

For deaf individuals the accomplishment of the identity development part of emerging adulthood is influenced by factors that may not be salient for their hearing peers' identity development (Bat-Chava, 2000; Leigh, 2009; McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011). Prior research has indicated that the most significant element of this transition for many deaf individuals is that of acquiring a new language (American Sign Language), as well as a new cultural identity (Ladd, 2003; Leigh, 2009). Thus, to understand deaf individuals and their process of emerging adulthood, consideration of diverse contextual issues becomes imperative. (interesting! At the same time, acquiring ASL is not an issue for many deaf individuals who have already acquired this language during childhood. Might be worth pointing this out).

Scholars have described the deaf community as a linguistic minority group with all the attendant discrimination experiences that other minority groups experience (Eckert, 2010; Humphries, 1993; Lane, 2005). Due to their minority status, it is not surprising that deaf youth's experience of the transition to adulthood within a predominantly hearing world may be one of struggle and challenge. Several scholars have posited that, as a linguistic minority, the most significant struggle involves attempts to understand the world around them, to access information to enable them to make their own informed choices, and to control their own lives in the face of the hearing people's stigma of deafness and the professionals and institutions that impose meanings on their experiences (Lane, 1997; Moorhead, 1995; Weisel & Kamara, 2005).

Deaf youth have reported that they have similar aspirations to their hearing counterparts, but there are more obstacles during the transition to adult life. While there may be substantial personal trials such as communicative limitations, environmental barriers often present the most significant challenges for transition (Corker, 1996; Gilman, Easterbrooks, & Frey, 2004). As a result of these difficulties, and the problems youth experience in accessing supports, transitions may be less than optimally successful. These elements may limit the degree to which deaf emerging adults can fully participate in adult life activities (Luft & Huff, 2011).

Independence has no universal meaning or significance, but rather is lived out differently in different social contexts. For example, while deaf young people's transitions to adulthood are impinged upon by the structural constraints of the hearing world, nonetheless they are also characterized by a sense of determination, with many deaf young people successfully attaining

productive, stable and positive lifestyles (Corker, 1996; Valentine & Skelton, 2007). This positive outcome is usually facilitated by the youth learning ASL and/or accessing deaf culture (Luckner & Stewart, 2003; Rogers, Muir, & Evenson, 2003). It is this cultural acquisition that ultimately becomes the "true" marker of independence for many deaf youth as they mature. This shift in cultural focus has been compared to other minority group members' process of affiliation with others like them and can be seen as a transition from a family of origin to a family of choice (Bat-Chava, 1994; Ladd, 2003; Leigh, 2009).

While the transition to an independent deaf identity is powerful and important to many deaf young people, it is often not recognized or understood as such by hearing people not familiar with deafness or deaf culture. Furthermore, traditional ideas of development (e.g., educational attainment, employment status) may not be a marker of deaf young people's level of independence because they may only measure deaf people's participation within the hearing world rather than their self-identity and participation within deaf culture. Therefore, deaf young people's own measures of successful transitions are important to evaluate in order to establish the milestones unique to deaf emerging adulthood (Leigh, 2009).

Present Study

Although there is a fair amount of investigation regarding typical life events among emerging adults within hearing samples, very little research exist examining the experiences of people who are deaf. The purpose of this paper was to fill this gap by exploring a sample of deaf people's perspective on their experiences of emerging adulthood.

Method

Participants

Entrance criteria included individuals between the ages of 18 and 30 years old who became deaf by the age of 2 years. A total of forty-four individuals fully completed the life events questionnaire. A query regarding demographics revealed the following. The mean age of the sample was 22.11 (SD = 2.53). Eight-two percent were female (n = 36). The majority of the sample was Caucasian (n = 36, 82%), followed by Bi-racial (n = 4, 9.1%), African-American (n = 2, 4.5%), Asian (n = 1, 2.3%), and Hispanic (n = 1,

1.4%). The sample was highly educated (4.5% less than high school, 14% high school education, 20% some college, 47.5% college graduates, and 14% graduate school education). At the time of the survey, 40.9% percent were in school full-time (n = 18), 6.8% were in school part-time (n = 3), and 52.3% (n = 23) were not in school. Fifty-eight percent of the sample (n = 25) were employed in either part-time or full-time positions. The annual median income was $5,001-$10,000. All participants were from the United States. Approximately, thirty-two percent of the respondents resided in the Northeast (n = 14), followed by the Midwest (n = 11, 25%), the South (n = 6, 13.6%), and the West (n = 6, 13.6%).

Procedure

An e-mail announcement of the study, including a hypertext link to access the website where the survey was located, was sent to potential participants through multiple deaf listserves (e.g., MODeaf listserve, university based listserves, Yahoo deaf listserves, Facebook, etc.) When potential participants used a hypertext link to access the survey website, they were presented with an informed consent page. After reading this page, participants could click on a link to the online survey. No incentives were offered to study participants. The survey remained open for 6 months. All study procedures were approved by the University of Missouri's Institutional Review Board.

Instrumentation

Participants completed a modified version of the Life Events Questionnaire (LEQ) (Brugha, Corcoran, & Fischer, 2000) in which they responded to a listing of a variety of life events as experienced/not experienced. The content of the life event list was drawn from a number of existing instruments normed on hearing populations (Arnett, 2004; Brugha et al., 2000; Green, Chung, Daroowalla, Kaltman, & Debenedictis, 2006; Oei & Zwart, 1986; Sarason, Johnson, & Siegel, 1978; Zahm et al., 2001). Survey items were selected to cover life events across a broad range of domains including legal (going to jail), community (volunteering), education (getting good grades), family (going to family gatherings), peer relationships (making new friends), romance (falling in love), work (getting a job), and health (being hospitalized, feeling depressed). An additional domain, deaf culture, was added to address issues unique to the population under study. All questions were vetted by a group of experts in deaf culture and lifespan development prior to inclusion in the final survey. These members

included 3 adult members of the deaf community, all of whom resided in a Midwestern city within the United States, 2 clinical psychologists, 1 master's level rehabilitation counselor, and 3 ASL interpreters (do you mean certified deaf interpreters, or CDI's?). The final instrument contained 99 items. Participants were asked to note the occurrence of each event (yes/no), rate the valence of each event endorsed on a 5 point scale ranging from 1 (very bad for me) to 5 (very good for me), and rate the impact of the event from 1 (not at all) to 4 (a lot). The reading level of the tool had a Flesch-Kincaid reading level of 2nd grade (Listman, Rogers, & Hauser, 2011). This was an important element of the questionnaire because the average reading level by age 18 of deaf individuals has remained relatively stable at the third to fourth grade level for more than half a century (Allen, 1994; Karchmer & Mitchell, 2003).

Statistical Analyses

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS Version 20 for Windows (IBM Corp, 2011). Because there is very little knowledge available regarding emerging adulthood among deaf samples an exploratory approach was used. Descriptive analyses were conducted.

Results

Most Strongly Endorsed Items

The top ten life events endorsed most frequently by the deaf emerging adults are shown in Table 1. Examples of items most frequently endorsed by all participants included "having hearing friends," "attending deaf cultural events," "having culturally deaf friends," and "making a major decision about my future." There was no significant variability found across frequently endorsed events regarding impact and valence (See Table 1).

A median split was conducted on the age variable yielding 2 groups of participants: younger (18 - 23 years; n = 22) and older (24 - 28 years; n = 22) to investigate if significant differences existed between the two groups.

Table 1

Rank-Ordered Life Events for Deaf Emerging Adults-Top 10[††] (N=44)

Item Impact (SD)[2]	N (%)	Mean Valence (SD)[1]	Mean
1. Having hearing friends	42 (96%)	4.12 (.97)	2.81 (1.05)
2. Attend Deaf cultural events	39 (89%)	4.15 (1.07)	2.91 (1.11)
3a. Have culturally Deaf friends	38 (86%)	4.21 (.99)	2.82 (1.06)
3b. Major future decision	38 (86%)	4.29 (1.04)	3.38 (.95)
4a. Going to family get-togethers	37 (84%)	3.27 (1.22)	2.65 (.88)
4b. Finding new friends	37 (84%)	3.73 (1.26)	2.91 (1.07)
4c. Using ASL	37 (84%)	4.30 (.88)	3.26 (1.00)
4d. Spending a lot time alone	37 (84%)	2.95 (1.03)	2.69 (1.18)
4e. Major personal achievement	37 (84%)	4.76 (.50)	3.30 (1.08)
5a. Making my own money	35 (80%)	4.12 (.96)	2.82 (1.04)*
5b. Being a part of Deaf culture	35 (80%)	4.09 (1.12)	2.77 (1.19)
5c. Using an interpreter	35 (80%)	4.03 (1.15)	2.83(1.18)

[†]More than 10 due to duplicate percentages; cut off at 80% instituted.
[1]Five point scale, with 1 being very bad and 5 being very good
[2]Four point scale, with 1 being not at all and 4 being a lot

The top ten life events endorsed most frequently by the younger and older deaf emerging adults are shown in Table 2. Table 2 also displays mean item valence and impact divided by age group. An examination of the listings revealed nine similarities between the two groups (though not necessarily in the same rank): "having hearing friends," "attending deaf cultural events," "going to family get-togethers," "having culturally deaf friends," "making a major decision about my future," "having a major personal achievement," "finding a new group of friends," "using ASL," and "spending a lot of time alone." Additionally, an examination of the items revealed that only the younger participants endorsed "going on vacation with my family," "using a sign language interpreter," and "attending a mainstream classroom for five or more periods a day," in their top 10 life events. The older participants exclusively endorsed "arguing with my parents," "being a part of deaf culture," "making my own money," "making a moderate purchase," and "feeling anxious." No significant variability was discovered across frequently endorsed events in subgroups (older vs. younger) regarding impact and valence.

Table 2

Rank-Ordered Top 10† Life Events for Young (18-23) and Old (24-28) Deaf Emerging Adults-(N=44)

ITEM	Young (N=22)				ITEM	Old (N=22)			
	N	%	Mean	SD		N	%	Mean	SD
1. Having hearing friends	22	100			1. Having hearing friends	20	90.9		
Valence:			4.23	.81	Valence:			4.00	1.12
Impact:			2.79	1.08	Impact:			2.83	1.04
2. Going on vacation with my family	19	86.4			2. Attending Deaf cultural events	20	90.9		
Valence:			4.00	1.02	Valence:			4.05	1.13
Impact:			2.33	1.14	Impact:			2.94	.90
3. Going to family get-together	19	86.4			3. Having culturally Deaf friends	20	90.9		
Valence:			3.27	1.16	Valence:			4.14	.94
Impact:			2.71	1.05	Impact:			2.89	.96
4. Attending Deaf cultural events	19	86.4			4. Major decision about my future	20	90.9		
Valence:			4.00	1.02	Valence:			4.36	.90
Impact:			2.88	1.32	Impact:			3.67*	.77
5. Finding a new group of friends	18	81.8			5. Major personal achievement	19	86.4		
Valence:			3.55	1.14	Valence:			4.64	.73
Impact:			2.94	1.12	Impact:			3.47	1.00
6. Using ASL	18	81.8			6. Finding a new group of friends	19	86.4		
Valence:			4.00	.82	Valence:			3.68	1.25
Impact:			3.00	1.20	Impact:			2.88	1.05
7. Having culturally Deaf friends	18	81.8			7. Using ASL	19	86.4		
Valence:			3.95	1.09	Valence:			4.18	1.05
Impact:			2.75	1.18	Impact:			3.50	.73
8. Using an interpreter	18	81.8			8. Spending a lot of time alone	19	86.4		
Valence:			4.11	1.08	Valence:			2.77	.97
Impact:			2.47	1.30	Impact:			2.71	1.31

Table 2
Rank -Ordered Top 10[†] Life Events for Young (18-23) and Old (24-28) Deaf Emerging Adults- (N=44) (continued)

ITEM	Young (N=22)				ITEM	Old (N=22)			
	N	%	Mean	SD		N	%	Mean	SD
9. Spending a lot of time alone Valence: Impact:	18	81.8	3.14 2.67	.89 1.05	9. Arguing with my parents Valence: Impact:	18	81.8	2.23 3.06	.81 .90
10. Attending a mainstream school (5 or more classes) Valence: Impact:	18	81.8	4.22 3.19	.88 1.17	10. Going to family get-togethers Valence: Impact:	18	81.8	3.18 2.59	1.10 .71
11. Major personal achievement Valence: Impact:	18	81.8	4.32 3.13	.84 1.15	11. Being a part of Deaf culture Valence: Impact:	18	81.8	3.82 2.60	.96 1.18
12. Major decision about future Valence: Impact:	18	81.8	3.86 3.06	1.17 1.06	12. Making own money Valence: Impact:	18	81.8	4.32 3.53	1.00 .87
					13. Making moderate purchase Valence: Impact:	18	81.8	4.05 2.88	1.05 .96
					14. Feeling anxious Valence: Impact:	18	81.8	2.05 2.75	.79 .93

[†]More than 10 due to duplicate percentages; cut off at 80% instituted.
[1]Five point scale, with 1 being very bad and 5 being very good
[2]Four point scale, with 1 being not at all and 4 being a lot

Table 3 displays the result of chi-squares conducted on life events to evaluate the group differences between the younger and older group. These results indicated that the older (24 - 28) group experienced "parents arguing a lot" ($p < .05$), "having illness/injury" ($p < .05$), "changing my eating habits" ($p \le .05$), and "feeling anxious" ($p \le .05$), significantly more frequently than the younger cohort.

The chi-square tests also yielded some interesting trends in the data in which it could be observed that the older cohort were reporting experiencing events consistent with later stages of emerging adulthood and early stages of young adulthood (i.e., "becoming engaged," "having trouble with my in-laws," "raising children," "making a major purchase," "having credit rating problems," "going into debt," and "being a victim of violence (assault, kidnapping, robbery)" that were not included by the younger cohort.

Table 3

Chi-Square Comparisons of Rate of Life Events Endorsed for Younger (18-23; N=22) and Older (24-28; N=22) Deaf Emerging Adults- (N=44)

	N	Younger-Older # Endorsed	χ^2	df	Significance Level	Greater Frequency
1. Parents arguing a lot	44	5-12	4.70	1	.03	Older
2. Having illness/injury	44	6-13	4.54	1	.03	Older
3. Changing my eating habits	44	9-16	4.55	1	.04	Older
4. Felt anxious	44	12-18	3.77	1	.05	Older

Critical Clinical Items

An examination of critical mental health events reporting was also undertaken. Of significant clinical importance were those items that raised "red flags." For the present sample these items included: "spending a lot of time alone" ($n = 37, 84\%$), "feeling anxious" ($n = 30, 68\%$), "feeling depressed" ($n = 26, 59\%$), "seeing a mental health counselor/therapist" ($n = 18, 41\%$), "being a victim of violence" ($n = 9, 21\%$), and "being hospitalized for a mental health problem" ($n = 5, 11\%$).

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to complete an *exploratory investigation* into the self-reported life experiences of a national sample of deaf emerging adults ranging in age from 18 to 30 years (N = 44). Due to the fact that deafness is a low incidence disability (2 - 4/1,000 functionally deaf) (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2011), it is not surprising that the number of subjects included were small. The data showed that there is tremendous overlap between the life experiences of deaf and hearing individuals. Similar to their hearing peers, our sample endorsed a variety of events related to the ability to take on responsibility for themselves, make independent decisions and become financially independent. Additionally, they adopted new roles and changed existing roles between themselves and their families (Arnett, 2000/2001/2004; Tanner, 2006). Important between-groups differences also emerged, which were distinct to deaf culture. These included participants embracing elements of deaf culture as some of their top-rated life events such as attending deaf events, having culturally deaf friends, using ASL, and being a part of deaf culture. Such experiences may provide the deaf emerging adult with opportunities to connect with individuals with whom they share a common, cultural identity. In turn, these connections may lay the groundwork for resilient responses to the challenges deaf youth may encounter as being a member of a linguistic minority (Luckner & Stewart, 2003; Rogers et al., 2003). Interestingly, several scholars have argued that this cultural acquisition is the "true" marker of independence for many deaf youth as they mature into adulthood (Corker, 1996; Gilman et al., 2004; Jambor & Elliott, 2005; Leigh, 2009; Padden, 1980; Valentine & Skelton, 2007).

Comparisons between younger and older deaf emerging adults also revealed many similarities. Both groups similarly endorsed nine life events which included: "having hearing friends," "attending deaf cultural events," "going to family get-togethers," "having culturally deaf friends," "making a major decision about my future," "having a major personal achievement," "finding a new group of friends," "using ASL," and "spending a lot of time alone." Important differences were also found, with younger participants endorsing more experiences related to the education process and self exploration (e.g., "going on vacation with my family," "attending a mainstream classroom for five or more periods a day,") in their top 10 events than their older counterparts. Older participants, on the other hand, were more likely to endorse experiences that focused on commitment and adulthood (e.g.,

"raising children," "getting engaged," "making my own money," and "making a moderate purchase."). Although the present study was cross sectional in nature, these findings paralleled the types of events that were reported for hearing emerging adults as they moved through this developmental period (Arnett, 2004).

Interestingly, for the present sample, deaf specific experiences were equal in valence and impact to more general experiences of emerging adulthood. It is possible that both experiences are essential for deaf individuals to move successfully through emerging adulthood. It will be important for future research to investigate variables that facilitate movement through this developmental period for deaf individuals.

While the current investigation provided data on the self-reported life events of a highly under-studied group, deaf individuals proceeding through emerging adulthood, there are several caveats that must be addressed before drawing firm conclusions about these young people. First, caution must be exercised when generalizing findings to the broader population of deaf emerging adults. The present project employed a relatively small sample size ($N = 44$), which was highly educated (4.5% less than high school, 14% high school education, 20% some college, 47.5% college graduates, and 14% graduate school education), and predominantly Caucasian. Future research is needed to replicate and expand our understanding of deaf emerging adults. Such studies should be larger and employ more heterogeneous samples to enable researchers to more fully investigate within group differences, as well as statistically complex interaction patterns among the variables.

Second, it will be important for future research studies to be made accessible to a broad group of individuals. To enhance access to research studies, questions should be available in ASL, spoken language and written language. It is likely that our sample size would have been larger and more diverse if these methods had been employed.

Third, there were some limitations associated with the tool itself. The instrument was composed of 99 questions and this led to a large number of participants abandoning completion and loss of valuable data (i.e., 140 subjects started questionnaire while only 44 completed it). Future studies need to streamline the questions into a smaller tool in order to yield a larger sample size that would allow one to conduct more advanced data analytic techniques.

Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the study prevents any firm conclusions being drawn about the process by which deaf individuals move through emerging adulthood. Longitudinal studies examining a broad range of experiences over time are needed to fill this gap.

A large percentage of the sample reported experiencing anxiety (68%) and/or depression (59%). Forty-one percent stated they were seeing a mental health counselor/therapist and 11% had been hospitalized for a mental health problem. Although we do not know if participants' symptoms met diagnostic threshold for a disorder, we do know that for some deaf individuals the period of emerging adulthood may be stressful, with a substantial minority seeking professional help for mental health problems (Fellinger, Holzinger, & Pollard, 2012). It will be important for future research to identify risk and protective factors of such distress. Undoubtedly, such data can provide important information for prevention and treatment.

Conclusion

The findings of this study are an important addition to the scant literature on deaf emerging adults. Although a growing body of research exists documenting the process of emerging adulthood among hearing individuals (Arnett, 2000/2003/2004; Tanner, 2006), as well as cultural differences (Arnett & Galambos, 2003; Douglass, 2007; Facio, Resett, Micocci, & Mistrorigo, 2007; Galambos & Martinez, 2007; Nelson & Chen, 2007; Rosenberger, 2007), little work has been conducted investigating the range of life events in emerging adulthood for deaf youth. This study begins to fill this gap by providing a starting point for examining the process of emerging adulthood in deaf youth.

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