Emerging Adults' Experiences of Agency in Higher Education Decisions

by

Leah B. Benjamin

B.A. Brandeis University, 2010
M.S. Antioch University New England, 2016

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The undersigned have examined the dissertation entitled:

EMERGING ADULTS' EXPERIENCES OF AGENCY IN HIGHER EDUCATION DECISIONS

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by

Leah B. Benjamin

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Psychology
and hereby certify that it is accepted*.

Dissertation Committee Chairperson:
Roger L. Peterson, PhD, ABPP

Dissertation Committee members:
Dean Hammer, PsyD
Roberta Caplan, PhD

Accepted by the
Department of Clinical Psychology Chairperson
Lorraine Mangione, PhD

on **3/26/19**

* Signatures are on file with the Registrar's Office at Antioch University New England

Dedication

To Rafi – my husband, best friend, and partner in all of life's adventures.

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Abstract

Over the past several decades, there has been a cultural shift impacting the experience of individuals in their late-teens to mid-20s in the United States. These individuals undergo a time of "cultural limbo," during which the lines between adolescence and adulthood are blurred. The term *emerging adulthood* describes this distinct developmental period, which fits within the context of Erikson's preexisting stages of psychosocial development (Arnett, 2014). A challenge for emerging adults is coming to terms with some of their more adult-like responsibilities in life. This requires making complex decisions that will impact their lives for many years to come, such as decisions around higher education enrollment. An integral part of decision-making is one's sense of personal agency—that one has control over decisions, is responsible for outcomes, and can persevere through challenges that might prevent them from progressing along their chosen life course (Côté & Levine, 2002; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Schwartz, 2005). However, little is known about how agency operates in decision-making for emerging adults. This study aimed to increase understanding of agency's role in decision-making for emerging adults using the higher education enrollment decision as a prototypic complex decision. Using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with emerging adults, asking them to share their experiences of agency in their higher education decision. Despite many aspects of this decision-making process that were outside of their control, participants uniformly identified a personal sense of agency in their process. This finding aligns with some of the developmental characteristics of emerging adulthood, such as a self-focused perspective and an overall sense of optimism (Arnett, 2014). Also addressed are implications for ways that we can support emerging adults as they make complex, adult-typical decisions.

Keywords: agency, emerging adulthood, decision-making, higher education

Emerging Adults' Experiences of Agency in Higher Education Decisions

This qualitative study examined the experiences of personal agency for emerging adults as they make decisions around higher education. This section presents a brief overview of the complexities of emerging adulthood and the role of decision-making in this developmental stage. In addition, it addresses some of the known intersections of agency on decision-making, as well as gaps in the literature.

A cultural phenomenon has arisen over the past several decades that has made way for a seemingly new developmental period of life. More recent generations of 18–25 year-olds have differed from their predecessors by delaying many of the adult-typical milestones often associated with this age, such as marriage, procreation, and career establishment (Arnett, 2000). This has allowed new sets of challenges to emerge for individuals as they work through their developmental trajectory to reach early adulthood. Arnett (2000) conceptualized a unique developmental framework for understanding these transitioning youth: "emerging adulthood." One of the pivotal challenges of the emerging adult is coming to terms with some of their more adult-like responsibilities in life, which requires making complex decisions that will impact their lives for many years to come (Arnett, 2011).

Current research on decision-making indicates that acting with agency can play a significant part in an individual's psychosocial functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Agency is related to one's sense of personal choice and psychological freedom and making agentic decisions can increase satisfaction with that choice as well as one's personal sense of self-worth (Bandura, 1997). For emerging adults, a strong sense of agency has also been correlated with increased confidence that they can overcome barriers over the course of their lives (Schwartz, Côte, & Arnett, 2005; Marttinen, Dietrich, Salmela-Aro, 2018). While it is well established that

agency can play a pivotal role in one's decision-making process, little is known about the way agency operates for and is experienced by the emerging adult, especially in the context of decision-making. Given the frequency and complexity of decisions made by emerging adults, this proves to be a significant gap in the current literature.

The Project's Aim

To address this gap, this research further explores the experience of agency for emerging adults during complex decision-making. Currently the degree to which these complex decisions feel agentic to the emerging adult is not fully understood. With this information, we could begin to develop informed approaches regarding how to be supportive of emerging adults when making these decisions. Increasing our understanding of the relationship between agency and decision-making for emerging adults could help to provide a framework for working with emerging adults through this turbulent developmental stage, and to help them make informed decisions that promote a strong sense of self as they embark on early adulthood.

Summary of the Paper

This paper utilizes qualitative methodology, specifically a grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) informed approach to data analysis, to better understand the experiences of agency for emerging adults in their decision-making processes. The decision around higher education enrollment is used as a prototypical complex decision for the purposes of this research. In the following section, I describe emerging adulthood as a stage of psychosocial development (Arnett, 2014). This paper then examines the ways that decision-making is central in emerging adulthood **(**Arnett, 2011; Patterson, 2012), the complexities involved in making adult-typical decisions (Arnett, 2011; Jung, 2013; Viner & Tanner, 2009), and the ways that higher education decisions loom large in this developmental stage (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018; Schoon,

Gutman, & Sabates, 2012). After that, the relationships between agency, decision-making, and emerging adulthood are explored (Bandura, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Galambos, Barker, & Krahn, 2006; Swanson, 2009). This paper then identifies gaps in the literature and proposes an investigation between the concepts of agency, decision-making, and emerging adulthood. Next, a description of the grounded theory methodology used in this study is provided. 10 emerging adults were interviewed. Each interview was analyzed and coded, and seven core categories emerged from each interview. The Results section demonstrates the study's findings, and the Discussion section reviews those findings.

Literature Review

Lines Between Adolescence and Adulthood are Blurred

Americans in their late-teens to mid-20s are choosing romantic partners and starting families later, remaining in school for longer, changing career paths earlier, and relocating more frequently than ever before (Arnett, 2014; Luyckx, De Witte, & Goosens, 2011). The delayed achievement of these once adult-typical milestones has blurred the lines between adolescence and adulthood, creating a time of ambiguity for American youth (Arnett, 2000). This evolution has been influenced by factors such as a more service-focused economy, increased accessibility of postsecondary education, and shifting cultural expectations and beliefs (Arnett, 2014). These factors have contributed to blurred lines around the transition from adolescence into adulthood. In fact, research indicates that heterogeneous samples of American individuals aged 18–25 have difficulty self-identifying as either adolescent or adult (Arnett, 2003; Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011; Nelson & McNamara, 2005).

Transition Between Adolescence and Adulthood is Volatile, Increasingly Complex

While 18–25 year-olds experience this time of life as a sort of developmental limbo, they

face a number of serious challenges, including physical, emotional, and psychological changes that will impact their transition into adulthood (Klimstra, Luyckx, Germeijs, Meeus, & Goossens, 2012). For example, during this stage, relationships with peers, family, and romantic partners are often in flux (Arnett, 2014). In addition, the body is still undergoing many physical changes, as well as the brain, which will not fully develop until the age of 25 (Giedd, 2004).

These youth are also confronted with the psychological challenges of embarking on a world with less structure, which can also be a challenge (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005). For many transition-aged youth, this may be the first time they are without the structure of primary school and the supervision of their parents or guardians (Côté & Bynner, 2008). In fact, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Dey & Pierret, 2014) reported that 90% of individuals have moved out of their parents' house at least once by the age of 27, supporting the idea that most American youth eventually attempt to embark into a world without their parents. This is truly a time of life that is marked by instability, as youth experience changes not only in their residential status and relationships with others, but also their work paths and education status (Layland, Hill, & Nelson, 2018).

For previous generations, this transitional time was associated with adult-typical milestones (i.e., marriage, career establishment, and procreation) and was facilitated by the move to a less structured environment (Schwartz et al., 2005). This is less the case for today's 18–25 year-olds (Schwartz et al., 2005). By staying in school longer—the new norm—these youth have careers that tend to start later, with marriage and procreation often following suit, thereby delaying the rate at which individuals put down roots (Arnett, 2011). Compared to those in earlier generations, individuals today enter a world where ambiguity regarding adult-typical milestones is commonplace, with fewer commitments surrounding adult identity development

(Arnett, 2000).

"Emerging Adulthood" Captures the Experience of This Phase of Development

While individuals in their late teens to mid-20s were previously considered adolescents or young adults, the milestones and conflicts associated with such developmental stages do not seem to be in line with the experiences of this evolving group of American youth (Arnett, 2014). J.J. Arnett, a psychology professor and researcher at Clark University, coined the term "emerging adulthood" to capture the prolonged period between adolescence and early adulthood that is common to the experiences of the American youth. He explains that, "emerging adulthood is defined primarily by its demographic outline: longer and more widespread education, later entry to marriage and parenthood, and a prolonged and erratic transition to stable work" (Arnett, 2014, p. 8).

Emerging adulthood has been distinguished from a period of "extended adolescence" by less parental control and involvement, and more independence and freedom than adolescence typically permits (Arnett, 2014). In addition, emerging adulthood is understood as distinct from a period of "young adulthood," as the typical milestones of adulthood (e.g., union, procreation, career establishment) have often not yet been reached, and individuals do not subjectively identify as adults (Arnett, 2014; Setterson, 2011). Given this, Arnett (2014) has identified five characteristic features of emerging adulthood: (a) identity exploration; (b) instability in terms of relationships, profession, and primary residence; (c) a self-focused perspective; (d) feelings of being in-between; and (e) an overall sense of optimism/a belief that one can direct their life in any number of hoped directions (Layland et al., 2018). Using emerging adulthood as a developmental framework can allow for the unique, volatile experiences of these American youth to be better conceptualized and understood.

Emerging Adulthood Fits Within Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development

The construct of emerging adulthood was established by Arnett as a missing piece to Erikson's (1950) theory of the stages of psychosocial development. Erikson believed individuals follow along the path of eight stages of development, with each stage requiring a crisis resolution to move on to the next stage. He understood a crisis to be "a crucial moment, when development must move one way or another, marshaling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation" (Erikson, 1968, p. 16). The psychosocial developmental crisis is the resolution of syntonic/harmonious tendencies with dystonic/disruptive tendencies (Erikson, 1982). In addition, Erikson (1968) and Erikson (1997) posited that successful balance between these tendencies in each psychosocial stage leads to the development of a unique *virtue*, or inherent character strength, that can help the individual as they navigate future psychosocial crises.

Erikson theorized that the population in question has to first travel through the stage of adolescence, where they must overcome the psychosocial crisis of *identity vs. role confusion* by understanding which of their social roles and environments correspond to their identity (Erikson, 1950). Successful navigation of this psychosocial stage leads to the basic virtue of *fidelity*, enabling the individual to trust themselves and others, as well as "claim to be trustworthy, and to be able to commit one's loyalty" (Erikson & Erikson, 1997, p. 86). Following this, the individual then enters the stage of young adulthood, where they must confront the crisis of *intimacy vs. isolation* (Erikson, 1950). This is done through the establishment of their own identity within their intimate relationships, as "nobody can quite 'know' who he or she 'is' until promising partners in work and love have been encountered and tested" (Erikson & Erikson, 1997, p. 72). The individual who successfully navigates young adulthood gains the basic virtue of *love*, allowing them to offer physical and emotional love, and accept it in return (Erikson, 1968;

Erikson & Erikson, 1997).

While Erikson's stages of psychosocial development have been widely utilized within the world of clinical psychology, Erikson (1982) himself recognized some limitations of his theory, particularly as related to the overlaps between the stages of adolescence and young adulthood. In a way, he defined the concept of emerging adulthood without giving it its own developmental period: "adolescence and the ever more protracted apprenticeship of the later school and college years can, as we saw, be viewed as a psychosocial *moratorium:* a period of sexual and cognitive maturation and yet a sanctioned postponement of definitive commitment" (Erikson, 1997, p. 74–75).

Erikson developed his theory knowing that these later school and college years contain some degree of uncertainty for the individual's development, blurring the lines between these adolescence and young adulthood experiences. *Emerging adulthood* names this psychosocial moratorium, acting as a good candidate to fill this psychosocial developmental gap and increasing clarity when trying to understand individuals of this age (Arnett, 2014). In fact, scholars have gone as far to establish a new psychosocial crisis for the emerging adulthood stage, one in which individuals must overcome *incarnation vs. impudence* (Patterson, 2012). Incarnation is defined by syntonic tendencies that encourage individuals to accept adult responsibilities, take on new roles, set realistic expectations, and establish concrete plans to achieve their goals (Patterson, 2012). Alternatively, impudence is defined by dystonic tendencies that: (a) complicate the development of shame, modesty, and reality testing; (b) reinforce a belief that things in life will work out without concern or the need for intervention; and (c) discourage individuals from taking concrete steps to ensure responsibility and ownership for their life's outcomes (Patterson, 2012). Patterson argued that the developmental task for the emerging adult

is to "accept the obligations of the 'real world,' understand that actions have real and sometimes serious consequences, begin making tangible and realistic goals, and demonstrate an effort to achieve those goals" (p. 41). Patterson also described successful navigation of this psychosocial crisis, stating "In this stage, as they confront the realities of their lives, they learn to accept and embrace what they have, who they are, and an attainable future" (p. 39). Understanding emerging adulthood as part of Erikson's framework of psychosocial development is still a relatively new concept, and as a result a corresponding virtue for this life stage has not yet been identified.

Decision-Making is an Influential Factor of Lifespan Development

Decision-making is incorporated as a normative part of human development in almost every one of Erikson's (1968) psychosocial stages. For example, in early childhood (18 months to 3 years), Erikson believed that as children become more assertive, they make their first attempts at independent decision-making. The degree to which they are able/allowed/encouraged to make decisions on their own impacts their capacity to develop *autonomy*, part of the psychosocial crisis of this stage. Their ability and confidence in decision-making is either reinforced or harmed during the preschool stage (3–5 years), as they work around the crisis of *initiative* and learn to explore and do things on their own. As they move into the school age (5–13 years), they are confronted with the crisis of *industry vs. inferiority*, and must question their competence as they are expected to act with more self-sufficiency, perform, and make day-to-day decisions.

Decision-making is especially seen during the adolescent stage (13–18 years) as individuals are working through their identity. During this time, the individual is confronted with decisions regarding their future—who are they? What do they see for their future? It is at the end

of this stage that they are often confronted with one of the biggest decisions of their lives. For many adolescents, this is the first time they can leave the prescribed nature of formalized education, and all the structure that comes with it. They are at a major decision point and are confronted with a new type of independence.

Decision-Making is a Central Challenge of Emerging Adulthood

As the individual works around the crisis of incarnation vs. impudence, according to Arnett (2000) the central challenge of emerging adulthood is to develop independent decision-making abilities. Emerging adults are confronted with opportunities to make day-to-day decisions about how to spend their time, as they often have fewer daily role obligations than they did in high school. In addition, they are able to make more self-focused decisions (Arnett, 2011). They also come up against more crucial choice points that allow them to explore their post-adolescent identities, such as those regarding work, love, educational directions, and living arrangements (Arnett, 2011). For the purposes of this paper, these types of significant life decisions will be referred to as *complex decisions*, as they (a) must consider multiple factors (social, cultural, familial, financial, etc.); (b) require multiple steps to implement; and (c) act as a starting point for many other future decisions which can have longstanding impacts, particularly as related to their later successful transition into adulthood (Jung, 2013; Viner & Tanner, 2009). As such, a pivotal aspect of the journey through emerging adulthood requires one to navigate complex decisions, discover how to accept adult responsibilities (both big and small), and set realistic, concrete goals (Patterson, 2012).

The Influence of Friends is a Substantial Aspect of Decision-Making for Emerging Adults

Many of the adult-typical decisions emerging adults confront, such as moving out of one's childhood home, pursuing higher education, and engaging in romantic partnerships, result

in changing the support systems available to them (McNamara Barry, Madsen, & DeGrace, 2015). During these times of significant transition, emerging adults turn to their friends as their primary support networks (Allan, 2008; McNamara Barry et al., 2015). For emerging adults, friendships can help them "meet social and sociocognitive needs during a challenging period of development. [They] foster autonomy through acceptance of each other's perspective, providing encouragement, and promoting self-initiation (McNamara Barry et al., 2015, p. 11).

Turning to friends for support in these ways can also facilitate experiences of *social comparison* for the emerging adult. Social comparison is the process of comparing oneself with others as a means to both promote understanding, and conduct a self-evaluation (Festinger, 1954). This allows individuals to look to others to better identify norms and reduce uncertainty about their own opinions and abilities (Festinger, 1954). While this can be an essential tool for emerging adults to learn more about themselves and guide them along their decision-making paths, it also runs the risk of undermining their beliefs about themselves and promoting competition between peer groups (Yang, Holden, Carter, & Webb, 2018). This can, at times, both ease and hinder the decision-making process for emerging adults.

Decisions About Higher Education Loom Large During Emerging Adulthood

One of the more salient complex decisions many emerging adults face is whether to enroll in higher education or directly enter the labor market (Schoon et al., 2012). In recent decades, the pursuit of higher education has increasingly been seen as an essential aspect of success and upward mobility. "In the past, the high school years were considered a period to prepare for adulthood, getting a job, marriage, and parenthood. However, for many teenagers today, high school is considered an institution in which to prepare for college (Park, Wells, & Bills, 2015, p. 562). In fact, approximately two out of every three high school graduates enroll in

some form of post-secondary higher education (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Yet, for students enrolling in four-year bachelor's degree programs, only 34% will finish in four years, and 67.8% within six years (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Clifford, 2008; Shapiro et al., 2018).

The decision of whether or not to enroll in higher education can be complex for the emerging adult. The path of higher education is expensive, requiring a significant investment of both time and money, and individuals can expect an average student debt of $29,400 when they leave college (The Institute for College and Success, 2014; Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). Further, completion of a college degree will not necessarily guarantee preparation for the workforce (Arum & Roksa, 2011). For example, Hart Research Associates (2008) surveyed employers and discovered that only 26% of college graduates were considered well prepared in writing, and only 22% of them were considered well prepared in critical thinking. Enrolling in higher education does not guarantee success in the workforce, and those who do not successfully attain degrees may find that "these unrealized expectations may also produce greater disappointment that results in negative events on the student's life trajectory" (Park, Wells, & Bills, 2015, p. 579).

Yet, those with a bachelor's degree earn, on average, $21,000 more per year than those with a high school diploma (United States Census Bureau, 2010). In fact, one's level of educational attainment impacts the median income at every degree level, with a high school diploma yielding an median weekly income of $668, completion of some college with no degree yielding $741, a bachelor's degree yielding $1,101, and a doctoral degree yielding a median income of $1,591 each week (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). The Georgetown Public Policy Institute has projected that by the year 2020, 65% of all job openings will require some college, an associate's degree, or a bachelor's degree, leaving fewer job opportunities for those without

college degrees (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). The various advantages and challenges of pursuing higher education leave the emerging adult in a position of making a salient, complex decision that can impact their future for many years to come.

Agency Also Plays an Important Role in Decision-Making

An integral part of decision-making is one's sense of personal *agency* (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For the purposes of this paper, agency refers to an individual's perceived sense of responsibility for their life—that one has control over decisions, is responsible for outcomes, and can persevere through challenges that might prevent them from progressing along their chosen life course (Côté & Levine, 2002; Schwartz et al., 2005). This conceptualization of agency overlaps with many related constructs within the field of psychology, such as *self-efficacy* (Bandura, 1978), *locus of control* (Rotter, 1954), and *self-determination* (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Agency also overlaps with Erikson's notion of *ego identity*, which refers to one's sense of self, both in the present moment as well as in the future. Part of ego identity includes an understanding or confidence that this identity will remain stable through any hardships or changes in the future (Erikson, 1968; Munley, 1977). As such, this study draws on relevant scholarship from all of these overlapping constructs.

An individual's sense of agency is related to their beliefs about their own personal abilities (Bandura, 1997). The relative value of one's beliefs about their abilities can impact the effort one puts forth, one's ability to persevere in the face of difficulty, one's experience of stress in a situation, and one's experience of accomplishment when a task is completed (Bandura, 1997). In addition, agency is related to a sense of personal choice and psychological freedom that can release one from feeling obligated to meet external expectations or demands (Van Petegem, Beyers, Vansteenkiste, & Soenens, 2012). One's belief in their abilities and experience of

personal choice can strongly influence decision-making, as individuals are inclined to choose courses of action that will increase their experiences of satisfaction and self-worth, and avoid choices that will leave them feeling distressed and devalued (Bandura, 1997).

Deci and Ryan (1995) argue that in U.S. culture, individuals are motivated to make decisions based on a continuum of the degree to which they experience the choice as originating from the self, versus being controlled and pressured by external forces. One's motivation and belief in such decisions are thus based upon their agentic experience in the decision-making process. Decisions that are more agentic in nature have been linked to higher psychosocial functioning, including self-esteem, well-being, and higher quality relationships (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & LaGuardia, 2006; Van Petegem et al., 2012; Vansteenkiste, Niemiec & Soenens, 2010). For example, in a study of U.S. high school students exploring how the motives behind decision-making were related to various aspects of psychological well-being, independent decisions based upon one's own values were correlated with a higher quality of relational functioning, more adaptive psychosocial functioning, and fewer difficulties with adjustment (Van Petegem et al., 2012).

Agency also impacts one's expectation of outcomes. As Bandura (1997) states, "to claim that people visualize outcomes, and then infer their capabilities is to invoke backward causation ... people do not judge that they will drown if they jump in deep water, and then infer that they must be poor swimmers. Rather, people who judge themselves poor swimmers will visualize themselves drowning if they jump in deep water" (p. 21). These expectations, in turn, impact the decisions one will make—one is more likely to make a decision if they have a strong sense of agency about it, and believe they will be successful (Bandura, 1997). In thinking of agency as related to ego identity, Erikson's theory implies that individuals who have strong sense of trust,

autonomy, and identity are better equipped to withstand threats to the self in their future explorations (Erikson, 1968; Reich & Siegel, 2002).

Agency in Decision-Making is Distinct for Emerging Adults

The relationship between agency and decision-making is particularly important in emerging adulthood. However, it is important to note that the ways agency relates to decision-making for the emerging adult is distinct from the way agency is experienced for the adolescent. For example, when using Erikson's framework of development, agency may seem similar to Marcia's (1966) expanded notion of adolescent identity in regards to the notions of identity diffusion and identity foreclosure. Marcia's concept of identity diffusion posits that the adolescent lacks experiences of having choice in their decisions. While this could be seen as the adolescent lacking agency, it is in fact different. Identity diffusion occurs during a time of life where the brain is still developing, and individuals are not compelled to make the same degree of complex decisions that they will be confronted with when in emerging adulthood. In addition, Marcia's notion of identity foreclosure indicates that when adolescents have made some sort of life decision or commitment, often guided by their parent figures. When an adolescent has made a decision, it does not necessarily hold the same notions of responsibility and self-belief as an agentic decision.

While adolescents do not necessarily have the same opportunities to make agentic decisions, this is not the case for emerging adults. As adolescents enter emerging adulthood, they begin the process of creating their adult identities, which requires that they make decisions based on values and beliefs they have established for themselves (Swanson, 2009). When it comes to making life decisions, this process necessitates relying less on the opinions of their former caretakers, and more on their own beliefs (Galambos, Barker, & Krahn, 2006). In U.S. culture,

emerging adulthood often involves caretakers taking a step back to allow the emerging adulthood to make their own decisions, and thus sets up the emerging adult to experience more control and responsibility for the outcomes of their lives (Swanson, 2009).

We Know Little About How Agency Operates in Decision-Making for Emerging Adults

Given agency's critical role in decision-making, and the significance of decisions made in emerging adulthood, the field could benefit from a deeper understanding how agency is experienced during this developmental stage. With the high percentage of emerging adults who enroll in higher education institutions, exploring the role of agency in the decision regarding enrollment may provide insight into agency's role in decision-making for emerging adults. Higher education decisions are highly visible examples of this sort of independent, potentially agentic functioning in early emerging adulthood (Goossens, 2006; Steinberg, 2002; Van Petegem et al., 2012). There has been some research and development of a decision-making model for higher education decisions (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). However, this existing model is fixed, stage-based, and holds an economic perspective, exploring the costs and benefits of enrollment choices for individuals and the economy. This paper aimed to hold a psychological perspective, understanding decision-making as more fluid and open to change, and focusing on agency and belief in the self. Few studies have looked into the specific higher education decision-making process from the perspective of the motivation and desires of the emerging adult (Jung, 2013), and there is a gap in our understanding of the exact role that agency specifically plays in this process.

Agency in The Higher Education Decisions of Emerging Adults

This study aimed to increase understanding of the role agency plays in decision-making for emerging adults, using higher education enrollment decisions as a prototypic complex

decision. A better understanding of the relationship between agency and decision-making for emerging adults can help provide a map of the decision-making process and can paint a picture of how agency is experienced by the emerging adult. The primary research question was: *What is the role of agency in the higher education decision-making process of emerging adults?*

Based on some of the traits of emerging adulthood, such as a self-focused perspective and an overall sense of optimism (Arnett, 2014), I hypothesized that participants will identify siginficant aspects of subjective agency in their higher education decision-making process. I imagined that this subjective experience might contrast with some of the objective factors that influenced participants' decisions. More specifically, I hypothesized that participants would identify several specific non-agentic factors that impacted their decision, such as the infuence of family, peers, economics, culture, and school systems. I based these hypotheses on research from several studies (Levine and Nidiffer 1996; McDonough 1997; Stanton-Salazar 2001; Stanton-Salazar & Spina 2000) that demonstrate "peers [...] who motivate and share information about college, high school counselors who provide effective college information, and external community organizations and college outreach programs are vital social networks that assist students along the pipeline to college" (Welton & Martinez, 2014, p. 199). However, because of the inherent traits of optimism and self-focus, as well as the psychosocial need to negotiate incarnation versus impudence, I predicted that these non-agentic factors would not necessarily be viewed as the most salient aspects of decision-making to participants when considering their choices around higher education. I hypothesized that participants would identify their experiences of decision-making as agentic, and that they would be hopeful that their decisions will work out for them as planned.

Methods

Design

This study utilized Strauss and Corbin's (1990) model of grounded theory to explore the role that agency played for emerging adults as they made their higher education decisions. I chose to use grounded theory, as this researched approach aims to move past description to a theory or model of a process or action (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This allows the resulting theory to be "grounded" in data from participants who have experienced the process. This application of grounded theory resulted in a model of how agency operates for emerging adults in the context of complex decision-making about higher education.

Participants

Characteristics. This study sought out prospective participants from a pool of emerging adults (ages 18–25) who had made a decision to enroll in higher education. Using the *grounded theory* methodology, I aimed to interview 10–12 participants. It is important to note that this number was an estimate—such flexibility was required, as the goal of data collection in grounded theory is to reach a point of saturation, which occurs when each additional participant does not add new content to the existing data. As such, participants were interviewed until the point of data saturation.

To best attend to the actual decision-making, eligible participants must have elected to enroll in a higher education institution without having begun their studies. Those who had previously taken college-level (online or in-person) or Advanced Placement courses prior to completing high school were eligible to participate, as long as these credits were attempted or completed with the objective of working towards high school graduation. Individuals were only eligible to participate if they had chosen to enroll in a minimum of a four-year program. I chose

this crieteria, as over 70% of 18–24 year-olds enrolled in higher education institutions choose at least four-year programs, and because of the level of commitment required of four-year programs more directly addresses the complexities of decision-making (i.e., financial, time, familial, and social factors), requiring multiple steps to implement and complete; and having longstanding impacts on transition to adulthood (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

To participate, individuals had to have indicated a firm commitment to their higher education instution, which typically was established through payment of an enrollment deposit. If their institution did not require an enrollment deposit, their direct reply of "yes" to their institution sufficed. When selecting participants, I aimed to have an even distribution between a variety of individuals who have decided to enroll in higher education at various points in emerging adulthood. This study was not limited to the stereotypical incoming first-year college students who had recently graduated from college. Instead, it also geared towards emerging adults across the age spectrum of the developmental period—for example, those who had taken gap years, participated in alternative programs, or worked for several years prior to deciding to go to college. Diversity in gender identification, socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity were also considered when selecting participants, and I sought as much diversity on these factors as possible.

Recruitment. This study utilized several recruitment strategies, with word-of-mouth strategies as the primary approach. For example, I asked friends and family to reach out to their own networks to find individuals who might meet eligibility criteria for this study. In doing so, I utilized a uniform script when seeking out participants (Appendix A). Additional strategies involved posting recruitment flyers that briefly explained the purpose of the study, eligiblity

criteria, procedural information, and a way to contact me if interested in participating (Appendix B). Recruitment flyers were posted in community spaces in the New England region, as well as on virtual community and forum webpages (i.e.,www.reddit.com, www.facebook.com, and www.collegeconfidential.com).

Once a potential participant was identified, I performed a brief screening with the individual to ensure that they met eligibility for this study (Appendix C). This brief screening was conducted over the phone or through email, depending on the individual's preference. During the screening, I asked about their age, gender identification, racial identity, and higher education enrollment status (i.e., has a deposit been put down). If an individual met eligibility for this study, they were informed of the purpose and procedure of the study, sent an informed consent document, and invited to formally participate.

Consent and privacy. Prior to recruitment and selection of participants, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was acquired from Antioch University New England. In line with IRB protocol, participants were provided with a written informed consent document that included a section seeking consent for audio recording. This document described the purpose of the study, the data collection procedure, and the voluntary nature of the study. Written consent was required prior to allowing participation in the study. Participants were informed that if at any point they wished to forego or terminate their participation, they would be allowed to do so and their data would be destroyed. The full informed consent document can be found in Appendix D.

Incentive. All participants were offered a $10 virtual gift certificate to www.amazon.com for participation in this study. They were informed that if they chose to forego or terminate their participation once the interview began, they would still be fully compenseated for their time. Participants were also offered the opportunity to receive a copy of their analyzed data and a copy

of the finished dissertation.

Interview Protocol

Data was collected through the use of semi-structured and open-ended interviews. Interview questions were informed by research on agency and aimed to allow participants to expand upon their experiences of some of the empirically supported domains related to agency (i.e., control, responsibility, and belief in the self; Appendix E). Questions attended to the various aspects of agency by exploring participants' experiences in the decision-making process for enrolling in higher education. Prior to data collection, clinical psychology doctoral students also reviewed these questions. The full interview protocol can be found in Appendix E.

I audio recorded each interview using a digital audio recorder, and brought a back-up recording device to each interview in the event of a technological error. All audio recordings were stored in a digital encrypted file, separate from any files including participant-identifying information. Audio recordings from each interview were destroyed once transcribed and checked for accuracy.

Data Analysis

After the semi-structured interview was administered and audio recorded, I followed Strauss and Corbin's (1990) model of grounded theory for data analysis. Their model utilizes three separate phases of coding (open, axial, and selective) that culminate in the establishment of what they call a *conditional matrix*. This conditional matrix is an analytic aid that allows the researcher to "systemically relate conditions, actions/interaction, and consequences" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 161), resulting in a visual model of the phenomena at hand. For the purposes of this study, the qualitative analysis program MAXQDA was also utilized to assist in the coding and analysis process.

Transcription and initial read. All audio recordings were transcribed into text after each individual interview. Transcription occurred throughout the process of data collection. While grounded theory recommends that each interview be transcribed prior to the onset of the next participant interview to best attend to data saturation, due to some interviews taking place on consecutive days, the timing of transcription varied from interview to interview. By looking at the individual interviews while still collecting data, I was able to stay honed in on the status of data saturation. In addition, to maintain privacy and confidentiality for participants, all identifying information was redacted, and participants were assigned a pseudonym.

Open coding. This first phase of analysis involved reading through the transcribed text of each interview with the goal of creating *categories*. Categories are understood as higher-order, abstract collections of concepts that seem to be similar to one another (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In order to establish categories, the data were broken down sentence by sentence. Each sentence was compared for similarities and differences, with similar concepts and sentences being lumped into the same categories and given a name. As categories were discovered and named from each interview, I began to look for saturation of the data. Saturation was achieved when no new categories could be created, at which point further interviews were discontinued.

Axial coding. The purpose of this second phase of coding was to make connections between the existing categories and to indicate some form of relationship between them. This involved reexamining the categories and placing them together in new, meaningful ways through the development of *subcategories*. Subcategories indicated some form of relationship to the categories they fell under, and at times spoke to the *condition* (what led to the category), *strategy* (how the category was carried out), or *consequence* (the outcome or result of the category) of the category (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The categories established during open coding were analyzed

and placed within a subcategory. If a category did not seem to be in relationship to a subcategory, it remained as its own category.

Selective coding. With these categories and subcategories established, the third phase of analysis involved integrating the data into a grounded theory. Selective coding allows for the interrelation of remaining categories to develop a model. This involved systemically relating categories and subcategories to one another and filling in information around the categories that need further development. The categories and subcategories were then reexamined to determine what relationship existed between them, and *core categories* were established. A core category is a "central phenomenon around which all the other categories are integrated" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 116).

Conditional matrix. Once the relationships between categories and subcategories were established as evolving around core categories, I was able to create the final product of grounded theory—the conditional matrix. The conditional matrix is often presented as a diagram, showing the organization and relationships among core categories involved in the phenomenon. For the purposes of this study, the conditional matrix was assembled using a series of circles, boxes, and arrows to demonstrate the interrelationships between core categories, subcategories, and the emerging phenomena.

Quality Control Procedures

Bracketing biases. Prior to collecting data, I acknowledged the need to be both aware and transparent as to how my biases might inform the coding of data. As an alumna of a higher education instute, a current doctoral student, and a clinician at a university counseling center, I acknowledged that I was likely to be biased in my understanding of participants' narratives. The following list summarizes assumptions, baises, and values of my own regarding the role of

agency in higher education decision-making for emerging adults:

1. I believed that emerging adults would have the agentic capacity to make indpendent, informed decisions about higher education.

2. I thought that, due to the typical traits associated with emerging adulthood, emerging adults would often experience agency in their decision-making process, regardless of whether or not true agency existed.

3. I assumed that such experiences of agency would hold more weight in the actual agency of the decision-making process, and could potentially ease this process for the individual.

4. I did not feel there was a prescribed or one-size-fits-all path for all emerging adults regarding their higher education decisions. I believed that education might be right decision for some emerging adults, and not for others.

I attempted to mitigate the potential influences of these biases through reflective journaling after each individual interview.

Procedure

Ten participants were recruited through word-of-mouth and information dispension techniques, and then invited to participate in this sutdy. Participants were provided with written informed consent. I interviewed each participant using a semi-structured interview, which took an estimated one hour to complete. Data was then be anaylzed using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory technique. The resulting categories, subcategories, and core categories were reported and discussed in the Results and Discussion sections, respectively.

Results

In this section, I reviewed data collected from 10 emerging adults who, at the time of their interviews, had made a firm commitment to enroll in a higher education instituion by

putting down a deposit, but had not yet started classes. These emerging adults were guided through a semi-structured interview aimed at learning more about their experiences of deciding to enroll in higher education, as well as the role agency played in the process. Data were interpreted based on grounded theory methodology, using three phases of coding—open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Using this methodology, categories, subcategories, and core categories were established, and a conditional matrix demonstrating the relationship between the emerging phenomena was created. The Results section is organized into four segments: (a) participants, (b) demographics, (c) core categories and their makeup, and (d) the conditional matrix.

Participants

Participants were recruited using word-of-mouth strategies, primarily through networking with United States-based family and friends, and asking them to identify potential participants. In addition, I posted information about my study in local community spaces and on web forums. All participants were recruited through these approaches.

Demographics

Ten emerging adults (ages 18 to 24) were interviewed using a semi-structured interview about their experiences around deciding to enroll in higher education. All of the emerging adults invited to participate chose do to so, and participated without hesitation. The participants varied in their path to higher education, with three participants having taken alternative paths (gap years or professional pursuits), and the remainder having recently graduated from high school. The average age of participants was 18.7 years-old. Seven of the participants identified as White, one identified as Latino/Hispanic/Latinx, one identified as Black/African American, and one identified as Asian/Asian American. In addition, seven of the participants identified as female,

and three identified as male. Table 1 lists the specific demographics of each participant.

Interviews ranged in length, lasting approximately 33–68 minutes in duration. Three interviews were held in local coffee shops, while the remaining seven were conducted over the phone. In-person interviews were on average 17 minutes longer than phone interviews. In addition, during the intial phase of coding, transcripts from in-person interviews had on average 36 more codes assigned than transcripts from phone interviews. All interviews were recorded using an external audio recorder, and were transcribed and kept in encrypted folders.

Core Categories

Core categories are clusters of subcategories and categories that were present in all of the 10 emerging adults' responses. Core categores were generated during the third phase of coding, as a result of looking at similarities and interrelationships between the existing categories and subcategories. In many instances, the narratives provided by participants held significant similarities, which eased the interpretive process and contributed to the establishment of core categories.

Seven core categories emerged from the data: (a) *What it meant for me to decide*; (b) *Going against norms*; (c) *Factors I had to consider*; (d) *Influence of others*; (e) *Wavering control*; (f) *What it is like to have decided*; and (g) *Looking to the future*. The following section explains these seven core categories, incorporating some of the most salient subcategories and categories, as well as excerpts from interviews that highlight the established concepts. Each emerging adult's transcript has been assigned a pseudeonym, and identifying information has been redacted. Core categories are presented in boldface. For full data on how many interviews were coded with each core category, subcategory, and category, see Appendix F.

What it meant for me to decide. All of the participants spoke at lengths about what it

personally meant for them to enroll in a higher education institution. Through reflection on these recent experiences, two salient subcategories were present—the emotional and practical components that factored into making this decision. From an emotional perspective, eight participants shared about the stress and pressure they experienced in having to make their decision. It was not the decision to pursue a higher education degree that was necessarily creating the stress, but rather figuring out the details of which institution to commit to.

These expereinces of pressure were centered around the weight that this decision seemed to hold for the emerging adults. Several of the participants reported feeling unprepared to make a decision like this, and experienced pressure to make the "right choice." The following section of verbatim responses demonstrates some of the ways that participants experienced emotional distress and pressure around making their higher education decisions:

Molly noted:

> It's just such an important decision. Like everybody says that it's the most important time of your life, and it's like, the most fun, and that you'll find yourself there, you'll find your best friends there, you'll get your career there, you'll get the start of your career. So a terrifying idea that I would pick wrong, that I could do something wrong and plummet myself into a terrible future and a spiral of failure was definitely present. I wanted to make the right choice.

Virginia felt similarly, and shared, "It was just such a daunting and terrifying decision because, you know, it's where you're going to spend the next 3–4 years of your life, and it's so expensive." Olivia also had a similar experience, and reflected on the newness of this type of decision:

> People put a lot of pressure on college as the determining factor in your entire future.

> And thinking that it was going to be my entire future and making this decision was just going to change my life. I had had a lot more stress around the whole college decision process, so it was very different in it's magnitude to other decisions I have had to make.

Participants also shared about some of the important, more practical aspects that factored into what it took for them to decide. The emerging adults spoke about needing (a) to be discliplined, (b) balance their time, (c) research options, and (d) compile application materials. Eight participants spoke about the ways that this felt similar to past experiences in which they had to "choose a path," such as deciding on which high school to attend or which extracurricular to focus on. Of these practical aspects, the most frequently noted category was the importance of creating the time to visit campuses. For nine of the 10 participants, this was the component that ultimately was most effective in helping them make their decision. Visting institutions was identified as exciting and fun, but ultimately gave participants the opportunity to consider what their future lives could be like. This played on their imaginations and sense of future selves, and showed the interrelationship between what it meant for them to decide, and some of the factors they had to consider. The following selection of verbatim responses demosntrates both the importance of the campus visit, as well as the ways this helped emerging adults along in their decision-making processes.

Virginia noted:

> I liked learning about different schools and like, imagining myself there, and like just, you know, because college is like such a time of self-exploration and growing and learning. So like I liked probably just, I don't know, thinking about the reality of that.

Jack also spoke about his experiences visting different higher education institutions. During one campus visit, he ended up running into a current student that he knew, and spoke about how this

was a helpful experience for him:

> He'll be a sophomore next year. He's really cool, and so I just talked to him a lot when I was visiting. We sat down and talked for like maybe two hours about just kind of like what life was like there, and if it would be a good place for me, and that was really helpful.

Judy found campus visits helpful as well, and noted:

> It was something to like, throw my energy into. And I definitely enjoyed it because I got to travel around the country to like, go to recruiting things, and like, that part was definitely really fun. And going on college visits and talking to people, I remember part of the reason I chose [redacted university] was because they have like, portfolio days and stuff, and so like, it was exciting to think about. And when I was visiting, I was like talking to professors and I was like this is so cool, you know, I know what I want to do in that like sort of direction is definitely an exciting feeling.

These campus visits helped emerging adults imagine more than their academic lives—it also gave them the opportunity to generate relationships and connect with other current and potential students. This also ultimately informed their decision-making process. Riz shared:

> Visiting [redacted university] was really the breaking point for me. . .There was a group of people near me, and I thought the worst they could say is no, and so I went up to them, and I said hey, can I hang out with you? And that ended up being my group for the entire time. We became pretty good friends, I mean I talked to them as I'm preparing to, as we're all preparing to go across the country to [redacted university]. And that's when I started to like it. I met the people, and I went to more events, and the people at the events were the nicest people I have ever encountered. They were really interested in how we

> were doing and they asked me questions, whether we were having fun, and told us what they loved about the school. They just wanted to interact with us, and they just really wanted to welcome us to campus and show off how much they loved their school, and they really did.

Ultimately, these campus visits were paramount to what it meant for emerging adults to decide on a higher education institution. It provided opportunities to picture what their future lives could be like, help them feel connected with others, and ultimately, as Roxanne noted, give them a sense of direction:

> But like, going to the accepted students days like helped me get over that hump and just go for it. And ultimately, I really like learned to like, rely on just like how I felt and how I feel like I would fit into college. Just like the vibe and gut feeling that I got from the accepted students day. Like there was one college that like seemed perfect on paper, but something just didn't feel right, and I just like I didn't know how to put that into words, but I felt that, so I just trusted myself and didn't go there.

Going against norms. All of the participants spoke about the aspects of their decision-making process that they felt made their journeys unique from others. Many of them reflected on their experineces of the norm being to go straight to a higher education institution following high school, and the ways they considered going against this norm and taking a different path. Categories and subcategories emerged around the need to take a break from an academic setting, wanting to experience more freedom around their choices, and noticing resistance from others when expressing interest in going against norms. However, there were two salient subcategories that emerged across most participants: (a) the process of considering alternative paths, and (b) the ways emerging adults felt like their experiences were unique when

compared to their peers.

Participants spoke about how any non-higher education path was considered to be an alternative or going against a norm, but this was still something they had been interested in exploring. Several emerging adults spoke about pursuing a military path, embarking on a career, or going to trade school. For example, Blake spoke about how, as he prepared for his future, he considered many other options besides enrolling in a higher education institution. In the end, however, he was dissuaded from pursuing these options:

> I considered like trade school. I've considered community college, and I've also considered not going to college. Trade school because there's a predicted labor shortage by like 500,000 jobs, I think, or 500,000 people, so the wages are like predicted to skyrocket in like certain fields. I think plumbers are expected to make like $90–100,000 in the next 10 years, and electricians and stuff too. So that seemed like I guess a lucrative path to go down. But I was kind of also I guess talked out of that by, not my college counselors, but regular guidance counselors that have been with me all four years.

The most frequently considered alternative path was a gap year, which eight out of 10 participants reported considering. Judy spoke about feeling stressed by her experiences in high school, and how a gap year was an attractive option:

> Yeah, this past year especially has me, like, I want to do a gap year and want to travel instead of going to college. I don't know, I'm the type of person who would just like to be outside and wants to see the world. So I kinda had some like doubts about going to college in the sense that like I don't know if I can just like continue going and learning in a classroom setting. After four years of an intense school, it doesn't necessarily sound appealing.

Riz, who did decide to take a gap year, spoke about how she was doing something that felt new and innovative to her community. She spoke about her discovery of the gap year as an option, and the ways it could potentially benefit her.

> And I was reading on the internet, and nobody else really had done this before me that I know of, but I was doing research on the internet, and it was just telling me the benefits of taking a gap year. And Harvard has an article where it says people who take gap years tend to be more mature. I decided just to go for it.

Emerging adults also felt they were going against some social and cultural norms because of the ways they had distinctive decision-making journeys. Most participants identified feeling like they were doing or considering something that their peers were not. For example, Molly's decision-making process was impacted by the extra work and planning required for her desired area of study—theater. She spoke about how her unique experiences created an additional level of challenge for her, noting:

> A huge part of my college experience, like applying for colleges and stuff, was I had to do auditions because I was going mostly for theater. So I didn't have any support from my college advisors. It was really just me who had to find out all the dates while also writing all the essays and writing all the supplements and researching colleges, you know, juggling three AP classes, and going to school.

In contrast to Molly, Jack felt like he had it easier than many of his peers. Due to his feeling like he was in a different place than his peers, he felt like the ways others were looking to help and support him missed the mark:

> A lot of people were kind of surprised when I had it like all figured out. I don't know, maybe it's more the norm nowadays just to like, not know what you're doing. But my

> college counselor said it best, they said like, "I can't believe you're this far," when I was talking to them about, I think it was called career clusters, like what do you like to do. And it had all these like really simple questions that were like really obvious, like what the answers like they're trying to get out of you were. And I was like I already know what I want to do. This is not helpful.

Hannah, who took some time off before college to pursue a career, also reflected on her experiences in feeling like her story was unique. She reflected on what it was like for her when others learned that she was changing paths and going to college:

> I mean it was also by nature of I think people hearing that I was like doing undergrad, I'll be 25 when I start. I feel like a lot of people were like "oh my gosh," and like wanted to hear the story more than like your typical like "yeah, I'm graduating high school, I'm going to this school." That's typically more of like "oh, that's so fun," like I feel like there was more to it in a way, so people were more like inclined to then like ask more questions like "oh really." And I don't have any problem talking about it, so I think that was cool talking to people.

Factors I had to consider. All of the participants reflected on the various factors that ultimately impacted their higher education choice. Subcategories around both concrete and abstract factors emerged, and categories included the physical attributes of a campus (i.e., size, aesthetics, proximity to home, and setting), the institution's values, the different types of activities offered on campus, degree options at the institution, and anticipated classroom experiences.

One of the more salient abstract factors addressed was the ranking, prestige, and reputation of an institution. Seven emerging adults spoke about how this impacted where they

chose to apply, as it held substantial weight in their decision-making process. Olivia spoke about the ways that higher education is valued within her family, and how during her first round of applications, she exclusively applied to schools with strong academic reputations.

> I am part of a family of high achievers, so when I was going throughout the application process, like I applied to three Ivy League schools, and then I also applied to two out-of-state private schools that were very difficult to get into. And then I even applied to Oxford in the U.K.

Jim also prioritized the prestige and ranking of the higher education institutions he was applying to. This resulted in some uncomfortable moments for him, as he came to realize he did not actually like several of the institutions he applied to, but that he would feel compelled to attend the highest ranked program that accepted him. He reflected:

> I was just like oh, well they have this good program. But I wouldn't really like going there. But then I applied there anyway, and then I didn't get in, and I was actually happy I didn't get in there, so I wouldn't have had to . . . because I felt like if I had got in there, just because the program was so good, I would've had to weigh it as an option, even though I didn't really want to.

Hannah felt the pressure to apply to schools with strong reputations and prestige as well. She spoke about how, when she was first applying to higher education institutions, she experienced stigma from her peers around less reputable institutions:

> At my high school, there was a lot of like anti-[state schools], except for [redacted university], like that one was was acceptable, prestige-wise. And so then others were like "oh really, like you didn't even get into like [redacted university], like what are you doing at these other schools?" So I think I just like, not that I felt that necessarily myself,

but that it was just like oh, I shouldn't go there, kind of like an automatic like no-no.

In addition, there was one concrete factor that nine out of 10 participants reported having to consider when making their decision—the financial cost of their potential decision. Some participants had support and aid from their families or from scholarships, and noted that the cost of the insitution mattered, but did not ultimately have the biggest impact on their choice. Almost all participants acknowledged the significant cost of pursuing a higher education degree. Hannah put it best, noting "just like looking at college prices, you're like dang!" For other participants, the cost ended up being a substantial factor to consider. When I asked Blake how he made his decision, he responded "purely finances, honestly." For Judy, finances also played a substantial role, as she noted, "[Redacted university] is giving me the most money, and also has the majors that I would be interested in. So, the combination of that was just like alright, that's it." Virginia was also impacted by finances, and was pressured to change her initial decision because of the cost:

> I ended up deciding on [redacted university], and I like committed there. And then the next day, my parents were like "you can't go there, it's too expensive." And even though like I'm going to be paying for it, they're going to be like cosigning my loans and stuff. So that was that.

Influence of others. It was clear from interviews that for the emerging adults, there were many parties involved in their decision-making process, all of whom had differing degrees of influence. Sometimes the involvement of others felt supportive and helpful, while at others times it felt frustrating and took away from their experiences of agency. For participants, there were a variety of systemic levels of influence on their decision-making process. Subcategories emerged around larger systems such as societal norms and expectations, as well as systems that are more

directly related to the individuals, such as the influence of community members, high schools, family, and friends. The most salient subcategories that emerged were the influence of family, and the influence of peers.

The influence that family had on each emerging adult was unique, and ranged in impact on their decision-making process. Most of the participants had positive things to say about their family's role in their journey, and focused mostly on their parents' involvement in the process. For some, they leaned on their family for support and help in making their choice. Like for Roxanne, who reflected on the day she actually made her decision, noting:

> It was Sunday morning, and my parents were like "okay, we're going to figure this out." And we just sat down and like talked until we all felt really good about the decision. My parents have been a pretty big part of the process, they've been a really helpful support.

Others felt empowered and supported by their family to make their own choice. Judy felt this way, and said, "I was the one, like, when I was researching colleges who would, like, do everything. Like my parents were pretty good about being like 'this is your life, you can make a decision. We don't want to force you to go anywhere.'" Blake also recognized the role his family played on his decision-making process, and highlighted difficulties in figuring out the impetus for his choice. When asked about deciding to pursue higher education in general, he reflected:

> With my family, I think it was just expected, it wasn't like a choice or anything, so I don't think it was much of a factor there. But at the same time, I feel like I'm doing this to make them proud, I guess, but it's still something I wanted.

Jim experienced similar uncertainty around the role his family played with some of the agentic aspects of the decision-making process. He shared:

> It didn't really feel like a choice for me, especially coming from a family that has

> multiple generations on my dad's side that have attended universities. And on my mom's side, my mom was the first one in her family to attend university, but she herself was well-educated and went far into higher education. Even though I know it was a conscious decision, it didn't necessarily feel like one.

Similar to the influence of family members, there were many different ways that peers influenced the emerging adults decision-making process. All 10 participants emphasized specifically the role that social comparison played in their story. Social comparison held weight across many aspects of the decision-making process, and had a particular interrelationship with the core category of what it meant for them to decide. For example, Molly had been sitting with a lot of stress and anxiety during her process, as many of her friends had gotten accepted and decided on institutions before she had. She spoke about what it felt like to finally decide, noting:

> I was excited because I could finally sit down at the lunch table and say I'm going to [redacted university], and my friends would be like "whoo-hoo!" because I'd been like agonizing about it because I didn't know what I was going to choose. And a couple of my friends were in the same boat, but most of them had already chosen. So, it was good, and I felt good about it.

For others, social comparison factored into their overarching decision to pursue higher education. Like for Olivia, who expressed:

> I think the decision to go to school in general was definitely influenced by all of my friends going to school. But I don't know, it never really felt like a decision, it always felt like something that I was supposed to do. And not in way where I was like pressured to go to college, but something that felt right and felt like something that I was going to do in my lifetime. And I'm sure like the fact that all my friends were going only reinforced

that mindset.

Social comparison even impacted certain higher education choices for some of the emerging adults. For Jim, the fact that his friends were attending a school, that he had been accepted to, played a substantial role in his choosing to enroll there:

> Well, so two of my really good friends from home got into [redacted university] as well, and I think that sort of cemented it for me because I went to school with those kids from pre-K through 8th grade and knew them very well. And when I heard that they had gotten in, that was sort of it for me, like that sort of cemented it, and I was like alright, I guess I have to go now.

Wavering control. All participants were asked about their experiences of control and choice throughout their decision-making process. While individual responses varied, there were clearly defined moments of feeling like they had more or less agency. This contributed to two subcategories: (a) times with control, and (b) times without control. Nine participants acknowledged aspects of the process that they felt like they had no agency around, the most frequent of which were related to being rejected by universities, and having to wait to hear about acceptance decisions. For example, Roxanne noted:

> When I was sending in all of the applications, I didn't feel in control at all. And my parents and guidance counselor were like "when you start getting letters back, like they'll all be in your hands, and the tables will have turned," and I didn't really believe it. But that's what happened.

Olivia had a similar expereince to Roxanne, acknowledging that there were moments of less agency, but that eventually she felt like she regained control:

> And after like the lowest point of confidence I think was after my applications were

> submitted, and it was out of my control, because I started to over-think like maybe I shouldn't have said this, maybe I shouldn't have done that, and after like the whole string of rejections, it was pretty low. But then when I realized that I was fortunate enough to have a decision and be able to choose between two really great schools, it kind of shot back up, and I was like look, I can really make this decision myself.

Categories around the societial, social, and familial pressure also faciliated less agentic aspects of the decision-making process, many of which were interrelated within the core category of influence of others. Despite this, when directly asked about their experiences of agency, all 10 participants stated that they were in control of their decision-making process. Most participants had sentiments similar to Hannah, who reflected "it was completely my choice." Some participants, like Virginia, acknowledged that yes, they had control, but maybe not as much as they could have. When asked about her experiences of control in the decision-making process, Virginia said:

> I think I did, but I didn't like take control of the process, and so I like threw that away a little bit. Because if I had not waited to decide, you know, if I had made myself decide earlier, then I probably would've been happier.

Other emerging adults felt more steadfast in their experiences of agency throughout the process. Riz shared:

> I feel like I know a lot of people feel like college admissions is out of their control, and it really is the one thing that is out of their control. But it wasn't college admissions that I was trying to control, it was more myself, my life, and where I was going. And that I was able to control, I want this year off, I'm going to take it, I want to work, I want to leave now, I want to take care of myself, and that I was completely in control of. The college

admissions were just something by the wayside, but I was able to control my life.

What it is like to have decided. All participants reflected on how it felt, in the present moment of the interview, to have made their higher education decision. This core category had significant uniformity in responses from the emerging adults. Responses fell into subcategories of subjectively positive and negative reflections. These subcategoreis included a range of emotional reactions, including feeling nervous, dissappointed, stuck, uncertain, confident, eager, and proud. However, the majority of participants spoke about the subjective negative responses of regret/feeling like they missed out on opportunities; and the subjective positive responses of excitement, relief, and gratitude.

Eight of the 10 participants reflected on the things they wished they could have done differently in their decision-making process. This included things such as preparing differently, starting sooner, talking to different people, or applying to different institutions. When sharing about things she might have done differently, Molly spoke about a missed opportunity to study overseas, and how she realized her opportunities were limited by excluding this as an option. She shared:

> I would look internationally, you know, across the globe. Because I genuinely did forget about it until my friends were saying “I got into St. Andrews in [Scotland]” and I was like wait a minute, that sounds really cool! But there was no support for that, nor really a mention of it from the college guidance department. Yeah, that was kind of awkward, but I would definitely look internationally because there are so many schools around the world I know nothing about.

Experinecing the loss of a missed opportunity also applied to some uncertainty around participants chosen higher education institutes. Several participants spent time wondering “what

if" they had chosen a different school. For example, Riz shared:

> I felt comfortable in my choice. But also when I went to tell [redacted university #1], to fill out the form and say no, I'm not going to your school, I also felt somewhat bad. I knew that if I ended up choosing them over [redacted university #2], I would feel like I didn't make the right decision. But at the same time, I still felt a sense of sadness, like what could've been, I suppose, if I ended up going to [redacted university #1].

Each participant spent substantially more time talking about their positive experiences over their negative experiences in having decided. The most common reaction was a combination of excitement and relief, with nine of the participants reflecting on these emotional moments right after having made their decision. Excited reactions ranged from Jack's, who said "I was freaking out, and playing music really loud and like dancing and stuff because I was so excited," to Jim's, who shared with a smile "I was incredibly excited. It was a pretty surreal feeling." Relief seemed to set in shortly after the excitement for the emerging adults. Blake noted, " I finally knew where I was going. I was just relieved, I guess." Hannah spoke about how deciding "took such a weight off my shoulders." Other participants felt like making the decision was the same as bearing a "weight." Olivia shared:

> It was such a relief because it's just been such a huge part of my life for so long, and not necessarily in a good way. It's just been this huge weight on my shoulders, and being able to finally say like I put down a deposit, I'm going to college, it's been liberating because I feel like I've been working so hard for it for so long.

Most of the participants also sat with significant gratitude for being able to make a decision that resulted in their higher education enrollment. This included recognition of the privilege they held to be able to embark on such a journey, an appreciation for those in their lives

who helped them or are helping them pursue this opportunity, and gratitude around being accepted and having a place to go. Roxanne reflected on the ways her parents had been helpful to her, and shared a glimpse of this sort of gratitude by saying, "I'm so grateful that I have them, and we were like it was a hard process, but obviously thankful that we were able to get through it, because that means I get to go to college." Despite the difficulties of the process, or the ways the emerging adults felt towards their outcome, many of them made a pointed effort to hold this perspective during the interviews. Virginia, who is unhappy with her ultimate college decision, shared:

> The majority of the time, I'm like I feel, you know, those [negative] feelings are like put away because I'm, you know, rationally thinking about how I am so lucky to get to go to college at all, and like I shouldn't be unhappy with wherever I'm going because it's such a privilege.

Looking to the future. All participants spent time not only reflecting on the past, and taking stock of how they felt in the present moment, but also turned their attention towards the future and what they thought was to come. Some of this was anticipating the experiences of being in-between life stages as they prepared to start their higher education career. They also spent time expressing their optimism for their own futures, and their hopes for their future selves.

Jim shared more about the ways that he remains excited about his higher education career, and has started to make plans for his time at school:

> I'm no longer jumping around and screaming about it or anything, but it's definitely still really exciting. Like I spend way too much time looking through like a course catalog trying to figure out what I'm going to do, and I already feel like I've already decided what like exact tracks I want to do and like how I'm going to fulfill the credits.

While Jack is not as preoccupied with making plans, he reflected on the ways his confidence has felt absolute throughout the process. He shared his optimism by noting, "[Redacted] University is great, so I know I made a good decision. All my colleges were good colleges to go to, so I knew I would be happy with whatever I chose." Other participants were more focused on the opportunities they saw for their future selves. They shared about what they imagine they will study, how higher education will help them with their long-term or professional goals, and what their journey will do for them personally. Olivia shared, "I feel stressed. But it's sort of an excited stress, because I'm excited to sort of reinvent myself, I guess." Hannah, on the other hand, is looking forward to experiencing some stability after spending a few years pursuing a career. "I'm just actually excited, and it feels a lot more stable, I think that's the biggest thing, is like I know what I'm doing, and pretty much for the next seven years because that's how long it'll take me to get my [desired] degree."

A few of the emerging adults also spoke passionately about their thoughts on the overarching norms that consitute the higher education decision-making process. For example, Molly reflected on the ways that she feels that high school seniors may be too young to make such a complex decision. She shared:

> I don't necessarily think that I, being 18 years old, am old enough to decide my entire future, since the predicted age for most people in first-world countries is getting to triple digits. Why should we make such an important decision so early in our lives?

Jim also took some issues with the process, and reflected on the ways that U.S. culture has structured an expectation to go to college straight from high school. He noted:

> It's very, like, corporate, in a way, which was . . . you know, I personally didn't find that problematic because it worked out for me, and I ended up at a school that I really wanted

> to go to. And it does work out for a lot of kids, but I think a lot of students that sort of it didn't work out for them, the process didn't work out for them, felt like it was a pretty unhealthy way to approach the college process.

Judy spoke more about the societal pressure she experienced to go to college, and how she is unsure whether or not this is a good expectation to have:

> I feel like there's something to say about like the pressure of going to college, especially now, I feel like there's just an expectation. And it might just be where I live, you know, like there's that expectation, it's probably not everywhere. But I think that definitely plays a huge role in people's choice to go to college, is because it is so expected. And I don't know if that's always a good thing, like I don't know if we need that. Like it's definitely good to further your education, but I don't know if it totally is for everyone, and not everyone needs to get a college degree, I feel like.

Conditional Matrix

The conditional matrix is a diagram that shows the organization and relationships among the core categories involved in the decision-making process. It is represented by the main phenomenon explored, the decision-making process, sitting in a large circle surrounded by the core-categories. The matrix is organized across the scale of time, with sections for the past, present, and future. As this study aimed to investigate the role of agency on this process, the core category of "wavering control," which directly attends to agentic experiences, is not placed on these scales. Instead, it is separate from the other core categories, and acts as a sort of colored legend to demonstrate interrelationships. It depicts a color code for subcategories that were interrelated with experiences of control (blue), and for subcategories that were interrelated to experiences with no control (green). Some subcategories are coded teal, to mark that

participants' responses were mixed along the scale of agency. In addition, for those core categories that fall on the "past" scale, there are a series of light-grey arrows. These are used to demonstrate the interrelationships of experiences among these core categories. The conditional matrix can be found in Appendix G.

Discussion

This study aimed to better understand the role that agency plays in decision-making for emerging adults, as this is a developmental period marked by adult-typical milestones that involve complex decision-making. Using higher education enrollment as prototypical and common complex decision of this life stage, the hope was to see how agentic emerging adults were in their decision-making process. Given the nature of qualitative research, and grounded theory in particular, there were a plethora of codes and themes that could emerge from the data. With the aim of the study in mind, data were coded from the lens of wanting to better understand the relationship between decision-making and agency. General themes surrounding these concepts are comprehensively presented in this Discussion section. Alongside the conditional matrix, conclusions and a map of decision-making are also presented as well as limitations of the current study and future implications.

General Themes

The first general theme I address is the true complexity involved in making the adult-typical decisions that emerging adults face. While this study specifically attended to higher education enrollment, it became clear that the decision-making process for emerging adults involved a substantial number of factors. This complexity is apparent when viewing the conditional matrix, under the *past* sphere, which attends to the actual decision-making process for participants. There were many moving parts in each emerging adult's journey. For all

participants, this decision-making process took place over the course of several months (if not years!), and required substantial planning, research, and consutltation. This is in line with what the literature has to say about complex decisions, as they: (a) must consider multiple factors (social, cultural, familial, financial, etc.); (b) require multiple steps to implement; and (c) act as a starting point for many other future decisions/can have longstanding impacts (Jung, 2013; Viner & Tanner, 2009).

As the emerging adults focused substantial time and energy into planning, they were confronted with weighing the pros and cons of many factors, like setting, size, potential opportunities, and finances. Finances, in particular, played a significant role in the decision-making process for emerging adults. As the cost of higher education continues to rise, emerging adults are presented with whether or not they can financially afford to pursue a degree, based on factors including family supports, socioeconomic status, and government aid (Terriquez & Gurantz, 2015). While emerging adults do not necessarily have control over their family's financial situation, they can still exercise agency within constraint in responding to their economic status as they consider enrolling in higher education (Dwyer, Hodson, & McCloud, 2013; Terriquez & Gurantz, 2015).

While reflecting on the decision-making process, it was also clear that the emerging adults held a great deal of worry about their futures, as they wanted to ensure they made the "right" choice for themselves. This higher education decision was viewed by many participants as one of the most important decisions they have had to make in their lives, and often involved times of re-decision and re-commitment to their choice. While immersed in this process, the complexity of this decision ultimately led to one thing for most emerging adults—stress. In an exploratory review on stress for young adults, Leonard et al. (2015) reported "the pressure to

gain admission to a selective college or university is one of the main factors identified in the popular and empirical literatures as driving the conditions that lead to high rates of chronic stress" (p. 2)

The way that most participants seemed to combat this stress was by seeking out support from others. The reality that this decision-making process involved other people was a profound part of participants' narratives. For one, all participants acknowledged that there was scaffolding in place at their high schools to help them along their journeys. This included things like college prepartory curricula, and meetings with school staff members. While over half the participants (six) identified that these supports did not feel useful or helpful, the reality is that these were conversations that were expected to take place as part of their academic experiences. And schools were not the only location where these types of conversations were taking place—all participants identified that they were engaged in this decision-making process at home with their families, and while socializing with their peers. This brings us back to Marcia's (1966) idea of adolescent identity foreclosure. Given that most participants were making their higher education decision at a time when they were transitioning from adolescence to early adulthood, it would make sense that their decisions and commitments were guided by others in their lives.

While there was structure and feedback coming from many directions, most emerging adults turned to others for support in their decision-making process. Many participants identified mentors within their schools or communities who helped them along the way. In addition, all participants reflected on the influence of family, which in many cases helped empower them to feel equipped to make their ultimate choice. That being said, of all the ways that emerging adults could engage with others in this process, their engagement with their peers seemed to be the most subjectively paramount to their actual task of deciding. This is developmentally expected,

and led to some positive experiences, as some felt their peers best understood their own experiences, and for others, their peers helped them ultimately make their decision. Relying on peers in these ways is typical for emerging adults as, especially during times of significant transition, they tend to turn to friends as primary supports (Allan, 2008; McNamara Barry et al., 2015).

However, the influence of peers also led to some negative experiences for emerging adults. This was the shadowed side of the social comparison that took place throughout their journeys. Emerging adults looked to their peers to determine what was "normal" or "expected" at various points in their journey. This "sizing up" process at times created pride and accomplishment, but for most participants it also left them with feelings of shame or doubt. The social comparison that took place allowed opportunities for self-focus as through this process the emerging adults were able to recognize the ways that their experiences were unique and special to them. Leaning on social comparison in these ways is developmentally expected of emerging adults (McNamara Barry et al., 2015), and understandably held such weight as participants shared their stories.

To use a popular idiom, there were clearly "many cooks in the kitchen" when it came to participants' decision-making processes. Based on participants' stories, it objectively seemed like there were many non-agentic factors at play in their journeys. Between the social and cultural norms, the inidivudal factors, the scaffolding in place, and the influence from mutiple interpersonal spheres, higher education decisions were not made alone. In fact, some participants even stated that there were aspects of the process that were out of their hands, or that they had no control over. This result is in line with research which highlights that there are many people that help prospective college students move along the pipeline to higher education (Levine &

Nidiffer, 1996; McDonough, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000; Welton & Martinez, 2013).

Despite this, when asked about their sense of personal responsibility for their decision—whether or not they had control and were responsible for their outcome—every participant identified feeling agentic in their decision-making process. These agentic experiences were a salient part of their narratives, as well as a point of pride. This finding is also in line with the research, as emerging adulthood is a time of life defined by characteristics like optimism and self-focus (Arnett, 2014), which may account for participants' holding and experiencing agency over non-agentic experiences. In fact, most of Arnett's (2014) five characteristic features of emerging adulthood were present throughout the participants decision-making process. They demonstrated: (a) identity exploration, as they imagined their future selves at particular institutions; (b) instability in terms of relationships and profession, as they started to renegotaite their relationships and experiences from family and peers; (c) a self-focused perpective, as they experienced empowerment, control, and differentiation; (d) feelings of being in-between, as they sat with having made their choice but still being unsure of what would come next; and (e) an overall sense of optimism, as they held distinct beliefs that things would work out, and they held little-to-no regrets over their decision-making processes.

Conclusions and Decision-Making Map

To my knowledge, this study is the first to look at the higher education decision-making process from the persepctive of emerging adults, with the aim to better understand their experiences of agency in the process. The emerging adults I interviewed were representative of the intended stakeholders for this research: those who are confronted with adult-typical decisions for the first time in their lives. As this study directly attended to individuals' stories, the

participants were eager to talk about their unique journeys. I experienced participants as open, willing, and often enthusiastic in sharing their personal stories. It is because of their openness that I was able to glean a few key conclusions.

First and foremost, it is clear that for emerging adults, this decision-making process is complicated. This was due to the substantial number of elements that they had to balance as they made their choice, as well as the ways that making such a consequential decision was novel to them. And understandably, in trudging through their experiences, they also experienced a great deal of stress.

In addition, it was evident that there were many aspects of the decision-making process that were outside of the emerging adults' control. They were highly influenced by others, and in fact some required substantial support to make their decisions. It was during these moments where others were involved—whether it be high school programming, family, peers, or admissions offices—that their experiences of agency fluctuated. The more they turned to or depended on others, the less agency they could exercise. And despite this wavering agency, as they sat with their experiences after having decided (which notably was the time they were interviewed), emerging adults uniformly identified their decision as agentic.

While these conclusions highlight the interterviewed emerging adults' experiences, this study also set out to create a map of the decision-making process for emerging adults, and to highlight the role that agency played throughout. This is what the conditional matrix attempts to portray. However, with the vast amount of data compiled, such a matrix also deserves a more comprehensive guide. As has been noted, the actual decision-making process for these emerging adults was incredibly complex. Given that a developmental task of emerging adulthood is to learn and grow independent decision-making abilities (Arnett, 2011), this process is not expected

to be straightforward. In this study, variables were interrealed with one another, and not everything could be independently defined. The result, instead, is something that is complicated and intertwined. So what does this mean for emerging adults? What can they expect as they embark on developing these skills, and work towards making complex, adult-typical decisions?

Emerging adults can expect that external factors will impact their decision-making process, which might potentially heighten the conflict of incarnation versus impudence. They may find that there are significant structural or social influences at play, whether desired or not, depending on the decision at hand. The more of these variables that exist, the more their agency will be challenged and/or come into question. They can also expect that their decision-making process will, at times, be a stressful experience. Learning some of the new and necessary skills, alongside developing a stronger sense of self, will come with its own set of growing pains. And they may feel alone at times in the process, as their self-focus will enable them to see ways that their personal journey is unique, and as they may have to "break the mold" to find what feels right for them. Being alone in these ways may feel lonely and hard at times, but it can also feel empowering.

Once emerging adults have made their decision, they can expect to experience some relief. As they sit with having made their decision and look to the future, things may begin to feel more clear and defined. This is the point where some of the unique characteristics of emerging adulthood may help them to feel more secure and confident in what has just transpired. While they may still experience uncertainty and doubt about what comes next, it is at this time that the emerging adult's characteristc optimism can become activated. The emerging adult will not be unrealistic about this, but instead will be able to access a true sense of personal agency. During this time, they will have the opportunity to hold on to the ways that they have had control,

identify the ways that they will continue to have control, and embrace the belief they can perservere through challenges that might prevent them from progressing along their chosen life course.

Limitations of Study

Due to the nature of qualitative research, and grounded theory in particular, this study had its limitations. Of note, the sample interviewed does not demonstrate significant generalizability to the greater population. For one, the sample size was small, with only 10 participants. Also, due to who I was able to connect with using word-of-mouth recruitment methods, most participants lived near a large city in New England, or near a large city in the Midwest. This study also did not directly account for diversity across many other sociocultural identities, including ability, national origin, class, and sexual orientation, which also limits the generalizability of the findings.

In addition, interviewees self-selected to participate in this study. They may have been inclined to participate due to overall more positive experienes of control and agency in their decision-making process, facilitating more interest in talking about their experienes. It is also important to note that the data differed between those interviewed in-person versus over the phone. Given that in-person interviews yielded longer conversations and a higher number of codes, participants may have felt more comfortable, connected, and open to the interview process when able to participate in-person.

Another limitation was the age of participants. The majority of participants were early in the emerging adulthood developmental stage, which makes generalizability across the entire developmental period more difficult. In addition, this study did not account for the ways that for most participants, substantial portions of their decision-making process were conducted during

adolescence. It could be useful to conduct interviews with individuals who are further into emerging adulthood to better know what aspects of the data are specific to this developmental stage.

A third limitation was my own biases and beliefs about higher education, emerging adulthood, and the power of subjective agency. This project attempted to address these biases in the Literature Review, and I engaged in reflective journaling after each interview to help attend to potential biases. However, I did not utilize any interrater coding or other validity checks, and these biases could have consciously or unconciously influenced participants's respones, or the coding of responses.

Future Implications

This study has several implications for the future, including future research opportunities. It would be particularly interesting to conduct this study again with some of the following modifications: (a) using a larger sample size, (b) interviewing older emerging adults, and/or (c) looking at a different adult-typical decision. In addition, this study sheds light on some of the ways that emerging adults have complicated feelings about the high school to higher education pipeline. It is clear that expectations for emerging adults are continuing to change, and that there have been shifts around achivement of adult-typical milestones when compared to previous generations. While this generation holds a great deal of gratitude for the opportunities they have been presented with, there also seems to be a level of discontent with the process. It would be interesting to further investigate emerging adults attitudes towards the current U.S. cultural norms and expectations around higher education.

In addition, the data demonstrates the importance of agency in the decision-making process for emerging adults. Given that emerging adults are tasked with making a series of

adult-like decisions as they balance the tendencies of incarnation and impudence, future research might explore if agency is the basic virtue gained from successfully navigating this psychosocial crisis. Continuing to research the role of agency for emerging adults is important, as the more agency one experiences in their decisions, the better equipped they can be to withstand threats to the self in their future explorations and decisions (Bandura, 1997; Erikson, 1968; Reich & Siegel, 2002). Given the findings of this study, there are several things that might provide assistance and help strengthen the emerging adult's experiences of agency throughout their decision-making process, especially during higher education enrollment decisions. Based on the above findings, the following are a series of recommendations that could help families, peers, educators, mental health providers, and community leaders better know how to be supportive to the emerging adults in their lives.

Acknowledge the pressure. The decisions that emerging adults must confront are complex, volatile, and high stakes. For the emerging adult you are trying to support, the decision at hand holds substantial emotional, as well as potentially social and economic, weight. This weight can create significant pressure around feeling the need to make the right decision. While there may not be a truly "right" or "wrong" decision, it is important to acknowledge the real societal and economic pressures inherent in their decision (Lane, 2015). For example, in the decision around higher education, their choice may be the most expensive one they have had to make. The financial cost of higher education is an important factor to consider, and the emerging adult might need support around reconciling the reality of their financial situation, or help in identifying and navigating other financial options (i.e., scholarships, loans, grants, etc.). The emotional pressure is also important to acknowledge, and if the emerging adult is having a hard time managing their emotional response to the decision-making process, a referral to counseling

might be indicated.

Explore ambivalence. Be curious with the emerging adult about their decision, as it is likely they are experiencing some normative ambivalence around what choice to make. In regards to the higher education decision in particular, this ambivalence might range from uncertainty around pursuing higher education, to enrolling at a specific institution. Ask them what choices they are considering, normalize ambivalence as part of decision-making, and be mindful of immediately moving into a problem-solving stance. If you are trained to do so, you might utilize motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2013) techniques to help them explore and resolve their ambivlance. This could help them increase their readiness and motivation to make a decision, as it will elicit their own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs around what to do.

Encourage picturing a future self. Given the stress that the emerging adult could be under as they confront their adult-typical decision, it might be hard for them to move beyond their stress and connect with their hopes, beliefs, and values. Utilizing guided imagery and visualization techniques, you can encourage them to access ideas about their future selves. Guided imagery and visualization techniques may not only help the emerging adult make their decision, but research has also shown that they can reduce physical and emotional stress (Bigham, McDannel, Luciano, & Salgado-Lopez, 2014). Also, having opportunities to truly imagine one's future self can help emerging adults tolerate some of the ambiguity inherent in the process, and listen to their "gut feelings." For example, you might help them to imagine themselves in a particular setting or at a specific instution, and ask them questions such as: What do you notice? What are you doing? How do you feel? How do you look? Who are you with? For the higher education decision in particular, if it is within their ability to do so, encouraging

them to actually visit the campuses they are considering can help with such future self visualizations.

Promote resources and connections with others. For each emerging adult, their unique set of circumstances will impact the resources avaialable to them as they make their decision. It is developmentally normative for parents and family members to provide both concrete and emotional support (Fingerman & Yahirun, 2015), and for friends to provide substantial emotional intimacy, shared experiences, and social support (McNamara Barry et al., 2015). Ask the emerging adult about the resources at their disposal, and whether or not they have been helpful. This is important, as finding supportive spaces or relationships that can faciliate empowerment for the emerging adult can help them to experience more agency. Ask them if there are areas they need more support in, or if there are any avenues that are making things feel harder. If needed, help them identify additional resources or supportive environments, and possibly set boundaries or try something different in unsupportive places. Even if they do not utilize the supports in place, gaining the awareness that these supports exist can on its own be a helpful intervention.

Listen and provide validation. Emerging adulthood is a time shaped by complex decisions that require substantial planning, exploration, and investment on the part of the individual. At various points in a decision-making process, the emerging adult may experience a wide range of emotions, including hope, fear, sadness, discouragement, excitement, and shame. It is especially important to hold a validating stance with the emerging adult, as they are likely undergoing a long-term absence from their home, which is paired with the loss of support and validation from parents, friends, and communities (Wei, Mallinckrodt, Larson, & Zakalik, 2005). If they are sharing with you about their decision-making process, be curious with them about

how they are feeling in the moment before responding. For example, they may have just chosen where to go to college. This could be facilitating a number of emotional responses for them. If this was one of their top choice schools, they may feel excited or relieved. However, if this was a "safety school," or one they feel obligated to attend, then they might feel frustrated, embarassed, or disappointed. Listening before responding, as well as utilizing multiple levels of validation, can ensure that they feel supported in their decision-making process (Linehan, 1997).

Facilitate agency. While all the above recommendations can help promote and foster a sense of personal agency for the emerging adult who is seeking support in an adult-typical decision, it is also important to more directly empower them to act agentically. One way to do this is to coach the emerging adult to listen to their emotions, intuition, and gut feelings. Research has indicated that looking to emotions and intuition (affective decision strategies) can be highly effective when trying to make a complex decision (Mikels, Maglio, Reed, & Kaplowitz, 2011). Utilizing strategies from Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, such as *wise mind*, can help individuals listen to their intuition, and employ both emotional and rational perspectives to feel balanced in their decision-making. In addition, it is expected that the emerging adult might struggle or feel frustrated by the ways that they do not have control and/or cannot act agentically as they make their decision. In trying to support to them, it is important to both normalize these experiences as part of the decision-making process, as well as to help them identfiy the areas in which they do have control. By empowering them to view the ways they can act agentically, you will also help them broaden their perspectives and experience more hope, which can also ultimately help them to make their decision (Snyder, Michael, & Cheavens, 1999).

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Appendix A – Recruitment Script

Recruitment – Script and/or Virtual Posting

I am conducting a research study in which I am interviewing individuals who have recently decided to enroll in a higher education institution for the first time. To participate, an individual must be: 18–25 years old; have paid their security deposit for enrollment, but not yet started classes; and have never enrolled in a higher education institution before. Ideal candidates include those who have recently graduated high school, taken a gap year, held a job in the workforce for several years, started a family, or have taken any "nontraditional" path towards higher education. Participants will be asked to complete a brief email or phone screening prior to participating. If invited to participate, this study will involve a phone or in-person interview that should take 60 to 90 minutes. All participants will receive a $10 giftcard to Amazon.com. Please feel free to email Leah Benjamin at [redacted] if you are interested in participating, or have any questions or thoughts. Thank you!

Appendix B – Recruitment Flyer

Have You Recently Decided To Go To College?

Share about your experience in making this decision, and earn a $10 Amazon gift card!

Recruiting participants for a study on experiences of control in the decision to enroll in a higher education institution. **Both traditional and nontraditional students are wanted for this study.**

Image: Canva

To participate, you must:

- Be 18-25 years old
- Have paid your security deposit for enrollment, but not yet begun classes
- Have never been enrolled in a higher education institution before.

Ideal candidates include those who recently graduated high school, took a gap year, held a job in the workforce for several years, have started a family, or have taken any "nontraditional" paths towards higher education.

Participants will be asked to complete a brief email or phone screening prior to participating. If invited to participate, this study will involve a 60-90 minute interview on the phone or in-person.

Image: Canva

If you are interested in participating, or have any questions, please contact

Appendix C – Screening Tool

Phone Call/Email Screening Tool

1. **What is your age? _____**

2. **What is your gender identity? _____**

3. **What is your race or ethnicity? Indicate all that apply.**

   _____American Indian/Alaskan Native
   _____Asian/Asian-American
   _____Black/African American
   _____Black American
   _____Latino/Hispanic/Latinx
   _____White/White American
   _____Biracial/Multiracial
   _____Other: _____

4. **Have you previously enrolled in a higher education institute?** Please note that this does *not* include having taken college-level (online or in-person) or Advanced Placement courses prior to completing high school, as long as these credits were attempted or completed with the objective of working towards high school graduation.

   _____Yes
   _____No

5. **Have you indicated a firm commitment to enroll in a four-year, higher education institute?** Firm commitment is defined by paying an enrollment deposit. If your institution does not require an enrollment deposit, a direct reply of "yes" to your institution will suffice.

   _____Yes
   _____No

Appendix D – Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

This informed consent document is for individuals (aged 18–25) who have recently decided to enroll in a college or university. I am inviting you to take part in a research study titled "Emerging Adults' Experiences of Agency In Higher Education Decisions."

Name of Principal Investigator: Leah B. Benjamin, M.S.
Name of Advisor: Roger L. Peterson, Ph.D., ABPP
Name of Organization: Antioch University New England (AUNE), PsyD in Clinical Psychology
Name of Study: Emerging Adults' Experiences of Agency In Higher Education Decisions.

You will receive a copy of the full Informed Consent Form.

Introduction
I am Leah Benjamin, a student in the PsyD program for Clinical Psychology at AUNE. As part of my degree, I am completing a study on the role personal control plays in complex decision-making for people ages 18 to 25. I am using college enrollment as a typical example of a complex decision. I am going to give you information about the study and invite you to be part of this research. You may talk to anyone about the research, and take time to reflect on whether you want to take part or not. You may ask questions at any time.

Purpose of the research
The purpose of this study is to better understand of the role personal control plays in complex decision-making for 18 to 25 year-olds. I am using college enrollment as a typical example of a complex decision. This study aims to better understand the relationship between a sense of control and decision-making. It also aims to create a map to help 18–25 year-olds with decision-making. Results may also help people make more informed, self-motivated decisions in the future.

Type of Research
This research will involve your participation in several ways. I will ask you to complete a brief email or phone call screener to determine if you are a good fit for the study. If selected, the study will involve an audio-recorded interview, either in-person or on the phone. This interview will ask you about how you decided to enroll in college. If I have follow-up or clarifying questions, I may also ask you to complete a brief, secondary phone interview. All interviews will be audio recorded for research purposes only. Participants' responses will be de-identified before sharing research results. I will keep these recordings and any other information that may connect you to the study in a locked, secure location.

Participant Selection

You are invited to take part in this research because you have decided to enroll in a four-year college or university. You can take part in this study if you are between the ages of 18 and 25. To take part, you also must have paid your enrollment deposit. If your college or university does not need a deposit, you must have made a firm commitment to enroll. Also, you are eligible if you have not yet started classes. You should not take part in this research if you have before enrolled in a college or university. This does not include college-level and Advanced Placement courses completed as part of your high school degree.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. You will not be penalized for withdrawing.

Risks
There is minimal risk to participating in this study. While I do not anticipate that you will be harmed or distressed during this study, it is possible that it may bring up strong emotions. These strong emotions in and of themselves are not expected to be different than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of psychological examination or tests. You may stop participation in this study at any time if you become uncomfortable. If participation in this study significantly increases your distress, I will take steps to recommend appropriate follow-up care.

Benefits
There will be no direct benefit to you, but your participation may help others in the future. There will be no monetary incentive to take part in this research study.

Compensation
As compensation for participating in this study, you will receive a $10 gift certificate to Amazon.com.

Confidentiality
All information will be de-identified, so that it cannot connect back to you. I will replace your real name with a pseudonym in the write-up of this study. I will be the only one with access to the list connecting your name to the pseudonym. I will keep this list, along with tape recordings of the interviews, in separate digital, encrypted files. I will destroy all data at the completion of the study. I will destroy audio recordings after transcribed and checked for accuracy. I will delete the list of names after my successful dissertation defense. While direct quotations from interviews may be used in the study, I will carefully select them to ensure privacy.

Future Publication
I may publish results of this study in publications and/or communicate results with fellow professionals.

Who to Contact
If you have any questions, you may ask them now or later. If you have questions later, you may contact Leah Benjamin via email at [redacted]. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Kevin Lyness, the AUNE Institutional Review

Board (IRB) chairperson via phone at [redacted]. You can also contact Barbara Andrews, the AUNE Interim Provost via email at [redacted]. If you wish to find out more about the IRB, contact Kevin Lyness.

DO YOU WISH TO BE IN THIS STUDY?
I have read the above information, or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about it, and any questions I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to be a participant in this study.

Print Name of Participant_____
Signature of Participant _____
Date _____
Day/month/year

DO YOU WISH TO BE AUDIOTAPED IN THIS STUDY?
I voluntarily agree to let the researcher audiotape me for this study. I agree to allow the use of my recordings as described in this form.

Print Name of Participant_____
Signature of Participant _____
Date _____
Day/month/year

For the researcher:

I confirm that the participant was able to ask questions about the study, and I have answered all the questions asked to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been provided to the participant.

Print Name of Researcher_____
Signature of Researcher _____
Date _____
Day/month/year

Appendix E – Interview Protocol

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. Tell me the story of how you made your decision about higher education
    a. When did it happen for you?
    b. How did the idea of higher education enter your awareness/where did this idea come from?
    c. How capable did you feel like you were to make your decision?
    d. How confident or prepared did you feel in this decision?
    e. How in control did you feel in the process?
    f. What other options were you weighing, if any?
    g. Did this remind you of any other decisions you have made? Why?

2. Was there anything else going on in your life that impacted your decision-making process?
    a. Who else had an influence on your decision?
    b. Who, if anyone, spoke to you about college? (School, friends, parents, etc)
    c. Did you access any additional resources for making your post-high school decision - if so, who/what/where (books, guidance counselors, etc.)? How were they helpful?
    d. Which of these did you find most helpful in making your decision?
    e. What did that look like?
    f. How did they influence it?

3. How did you feel when you finally made your decision?
    a. Has this fluctuated at all?
    b. Tell me about any instances in which you felt unsure about your decision
    c. Were there times where you felt more or less in control? What impacted these times?
    d. What was best about the decision-making process?
    e. What was worst?
    f. How do you feel about it now?
    g. Do you think you would ever change your mind about this decision? Why or why not?

4. Would you do anything differently in your decision-making process?

5. Is there anything I haven't asked about that might be important for me to know?

Appendix F – Code Frequency

Frequency of Codes Across All 10 Interviews

Core Category	Frequency	Subcategory	Frequency	Category	Frequency
What it Meant For Me to Decide	10	Emotional aspects	9	Stress	8
				Weight, difficulty, and importance of the decision	8
		Practical components	10	Familiarty of the process/of choosing a path	8
				Pushing self/Making it work	7
				Time consuming	7
				Importance of campus visit	9
Going Against Norms	10	Considering alternative paths	9	Nontraditional paths (gap year, career, miltary, trade school)	9
		Resistance from others	3		
		Unique experiences from peers	8		
		The need for something different	6	Freedom to do what i want	2
				Wish to gain confidence and experience	4
				The need to relax and recharge	4
Factors I Had To Consider	10	Concrete elements	10	Cost	9
				Physical attributes of campus (size, location, etc)	6
		Abstract elements	10	Social aspects	6
				Presitge/ranking	6
				Value of the school	3
				Campus opportunities	6

				Degree options	7
Influence Of Others		Societal norms	5	Expectations	5
		Conflicting feedback	4		
		Community members	5	Networking	1
		Family	10	Wanting to involve them	2
				Supportive experiences	6
				Expectations	8
				Seeking approval/making them proud	6
				Balancing their wishes versus own	3
				Values	2
		Peers	10	Feedback	4
				Social comparison	10
				They get it	5
		School (enviroment & staff)	10	Curriculum	5
				Not helpful	6
				Expectation	6
				Assistance	8
				Pressure towards prestige	3
Wavering Control	10	Times with control	10	Do it on my own	8
				Control was given to me	7
				I took control	8
				Perception of control	2
		Times without control	9	Waiting	4
				Depersonalized	2
				Rejection	6
				Trapped	1
What It Is Like To Have Decided	10	Subjective negative responses	10	Doubt and regret	5
				Missed opportunities	8
				Nervous	3
		Subjective positive	10	New opportunities	2

		resposnses			
				Learn more about self	1
				Confident	7
				Excited	9
				Gratitude/recognition of privilige	10
				No regrets	6
				Relief	9
		Uncertainty	8	Re-decision	3
				Wavering confidence	5
				Reassuring self	2
Looking To The Future	10	Being in-between	5	Readiness	4
				Nervous/anxious	3
		Optimism	8	It will work out	4
				Excited	5
				Hopeful	5
		Self-focus	8	Future oriented goals	6
				Opportunity to reinvent self	2
				Looking for stability	1
		Crticial lens on the greater impact	3	Societal expectations/pressures	2
				College pipeline	3

Appendix G - Conditional Matrix

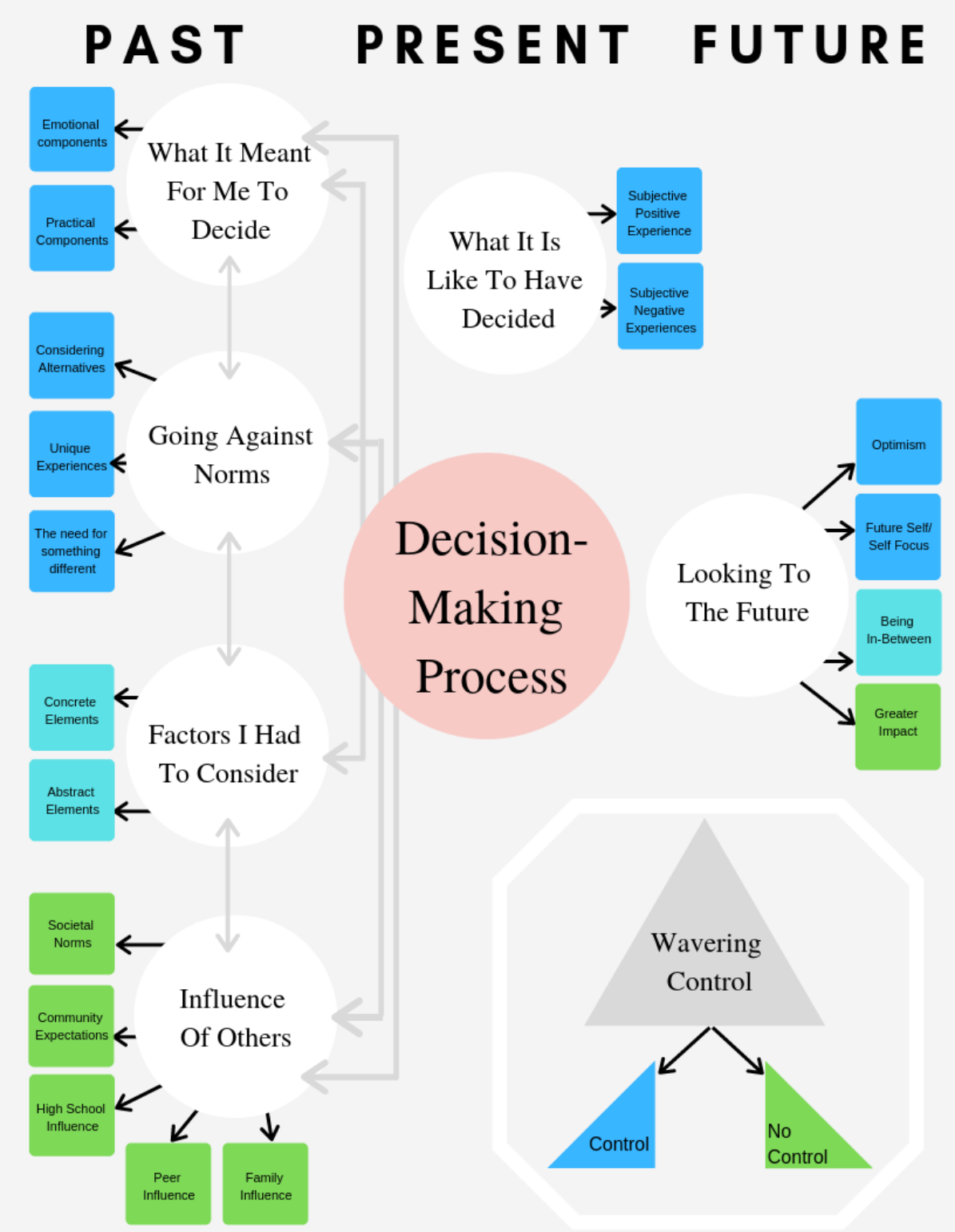

Table 1

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Racial Identity	Financial Status	Path to Higher Education
Blake	18	Male	Black/African American	Somewhat concerned	Direct from high school
Hannah	24	Female	White	Somewhat concerned	Pursued a profession
Olivia	18	Female	Latino/Hispanic/ Latinx	Somewhat concerned	Direct from high school
Judy	18	Female	White	Somewhat concerned	Direct from high school
Riz	19	Female	Asian/Asian American	Somewhat concerned	Gap Year
Jack	18	Male	White	Somewhat concerned	Direct from high school
Jim	18	Male	White	Not concerned	Direct from high school
Roxanne	18	Female	White	Somewhat concerned	Gap Year
Virginia	18	Female	White	Somewhat concerned	Direct from high school
Molly	18	Female	White	Somewhat concerned	Direct from high school