CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The researcher felt ambiguous about her own self-adult status when she considered the subject of her research. At the time of the study, she was over 25 years in age but was not earning nor thinking of marriage, instead she was busy focusing on her doctoral research. The researcher belongs to an upper middle class family in India and her parents had received higher education. At the age of 18 years she left her parental home for further studies, which made her responsible for her well-being and for taking day-to-day decisions. Yet, she needed constant parental guidance, not only in her professional life, but also personal life. She was not ready to take up any social responsibilities especially of marriage. However, she felt competent in her work, dealing with her friends and younger siblings. Based on her own experiences, she felt curious to know how peers of her age felt about such a transition. Whether peers like her need their parents’ support or can they manage things on their own? Were they capable of taking responsibilities and understanding people and society at large or did they also feel less competent for the same? What were their experiences and feelings? Did they consider themselves adult or did they too feel confused about themselves?

The researcher’s own perception is that the impact of globalisation is driving rapid social changes in the Indian society and such changes are significantly impacting youth’s perceptions. Young people are more focused on new opportunities offered by the global world and in turn are challenging certain paradigms of the traditional system. According to Arnett (2000a) the increasing globalisation, will drive the spread of the phase of emerging adulthood across the world. Also Verma and
Saraswathi (2002) have observed that “standing at the crossroads of technological advancement and a global market economy, it is an opportune time to examine how tradition and modernity in socio-political and cultural factors have shaped and continue to influence adolescence in India” (p. 106). Such rapid changes make it interesting to study the perceptions about transition to adulthood among Indian youth.

It has been observed that most American young people in the age range of 18-25 years consider themselves as somewhere in between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2000a). This is mainly due to the recent demographic shifts including the increased focus on higher education and consequently delayed marriage and parenthood that result into a longer transitional stage of adulthood in the United States and other industrialized societies (Arnett, 1998, 2004). This reflects the development of a new and distinct phase of life for young people from late teen through the twenties termed as “emerging adulthood” by Arnett (2000a, 2004). Five distinct characteristics define this period of human development. These characteristics include: identity exploration to understand personal and professional interests; instability in work and residence; being self-focused; feeling in between about their status (having crossed adolescence but not yet ready to take up adult roles), and exploring new possibilities in life (Arnett, 2000a, 2004, 2006a).

Emerging adulthood may not exist universally across all societies of the world. According to Arnett (2000a) “Emerging adulthood is not a universal period of human development, but a period that exists under certain conditions that have occurred only quite recently and only in some cultures” (p.21). Culture plays a significant role in determining and shaping the stage of emerging adulthood (2000a). This has been observed by researchers who have conducted studies in more religious cultures such
as Israel (Mayseless & Scharf, 2003) for instance, where criteria related to norm-abiding behaviour were endorsed more than the U.S. counterparts. The local culture influences the duration of the phase as well. For example, while typically the emerging adulthood phase is observed in youth aged 18-25 years, Chinese college students (Badger, Nelson and Barry, 2006) considered themselves adult indicating a significantly shortened emerging adulthood phase. Additionally, the extent to which various key characteristics of emerging adulthood (e.g., identity exploration, instability, self-focus, etc.) are prevalent is influenced by specific beliefs and practices within local cultures.

Transition to adulthood has been explored in various cultures and nations worldwide (e.g. United States, Arnett, 2003; Czech, Macek, Bejcek, & Vanicková, 2007; Canada, Cheah & Nelson, 2004; Argentina, Facio & Micocci, 2003). It is only recently that attention has been focused on India (e.g. a study conducted in both urban and rural areas within Coimbatore\(^1\)) and results revealed that “emerging adulthood may exist for a segment, at least, of the population in India but there is great variation within India, in how it is experienced” (Seiter & Nelson, 2011, p. 27).

The main purpose of the present study was to find out whether the phase of emerging adulthood exists in select urban contexts of India, specifically the northern and western regions. The study focused on young individuals, 18-26 years to examine (a) if they feel they are adult (i.e., “age of feeling in-between”), (b) the criteria they deem necessary for becoming an adult, and (c) the preferences they give to individualistic or collectivist attributes. Furthermore, the study examined how these aspects of emerging adulthood may vary as a function of gender, city (Delhi and Vadodara) and age group (18-20 years and 21-25 years).

\(^1\) A city in Southern India.