Emerging Adults in America
Coming of Age in the 21st Century

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Emerging Adulthood: Understanding the New Way of Coming of Age

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Not long ago an article appeared on the Internet entitled “Top 10 Things to Do Before You Turn 30” (Brodrick, 2003). The list included the following:

- See the world. It's much easier to do when you're 22 and footloose than 35 with two bawling babies in your backpack.
- If you’re going to drink a lot, do it when you’re young. Get this experimentation out of your system.
- Take risks with your job. Aim for the career you’ve dreamed of doing. Or just have fun for now. Later, when you’ve got the mortgage and 2.3 kids and a time share in Cocoa Beach, fun will be the last thing on your mind.
- Do volunteer work. You may be broke, but you can give your sweat and earnestness to a cause in which you believe.
- Use this decade to go to extremes. Climb the tallest mountain you can find. Learn to sail. Road trip to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. [By age 30] people will really be expecting you to act like a grown up. So, you will need some experiences to teach you how to get there.

The article concluded,

Sounds like your 20s are pretty fun. But don't think this means the rest of your life will be a drag. My point is to take advantage of what you have: energy, idealism, enthusiasm, a willingness to experiment, a lack of encumbrances, a desire to learn and grow. (Brodrick, 2003, ¶ 21)

Forty years ago, by age 22 or 23 the typical person in industrialized societies was married, had at least one child, and was well on the way to a mortgage (and perhaps even a time share in Cocoa Beach). It is clear that a great deal has changed in recent decades in what people expect their lives to be like during their 20s. Of course, it has long been true that some young people have been unencumbered and footloose during their 20s (White, 1993). In Europe during the 19th century, at the height of Romanticism, there was an ideal,
especially in Germany, of young men having a Wanderschaft (traveling period), that is, a period in their late teens or early 20s devoted to travel and self-exploration before they settled into adult commitments. In a similar manner, in Britain many upper-class young men had a "continental tour" or "grand tour" of Europe before entering long-term adult roles. However, these experiences were reserved mainly for the elite and solely for young men (young women would not have been allowed to travel without a chaperone). What is different today is that experiencing the period from the late teens through the mid-20s as a time of exploration and instability is now the norm, something that applies to the majority of young people in industrialized societies, young women as well as young men.

The timing and meaning of coming of age—that is, reaching full adult status—is different today than it was 50 or 100 years ago, different in fact than it has ever been before. The social and institutional structures that once both supported and restricted people in the course of coming of age have weakened, leaving people with greater freedom but less support as they make their way into adulthood. As sociologists have observed, the entry into adulthood has become deinstitutionalized and individualization has increased, meaning that people are required to rely on their own resources and their own sense of agency, for better or worse (Côté, 2000; Heckhausen, 1999; Mayer, 2004). More than ever before, coming of age in the 21st century means learning to stand alone as a self-sufficient person, capable of making choices and decisions independently from among a wide range of possibilities (Arnett, 1998).

In part because the changes in the nature of young people's experiences from their late teens through their mid-20s have happened so recently, this period of life has been little studied by scholars interested in human development. Of course, studies of college students are innumerable, but these studies are usually done without a coherent developmental framework. There have been some notable theoretical efforts by scholars such as Erik Erikson (1950, 1959, 1968), Kenneth Keniston (1971), Gene Bockneck (1986), and James Côté (2000; Côté & Allahar, 1994). However, with the exception of Côté's work, these efforts are decades old and have limited applicability to today's young people.

The theory of emerging adulthood has been offered as a way of conceptualizing the development of today's young people, in American society and in other industrialized societies. It does this in part by recognizing the years from (roughly) 18 to 25 as a distinct period of the life course, different in important ways from the adolescence that precedes it or the young adulthood that follows it. Although numerous articles using the emerging adulthood theory have been published since I first presented an outline of the theory in 2000 (Arnett, 2000a), and I have written a book expanding on the theory and presenting the findings from my own research (Arnett, 2004), this book represents the first attempt to draw together a wide range of scholars in order to provide a comprehensive portrait of development during emerging adulthood.

In this first chapter, I begin by presenting a demographic outline of emerging adulthood. Then I summarize my theory of emerging adulthood by presenting the five features that distinguish it as a developmental period. Finally, I consider the special challenges involved in building a new paradigm of emerging adulthood, given that emerging adults are such a diverse group.
The Demographic Outline of Emerging Adulthood

Fifty years are but a moment in historical terms, so historians of the future will no doubt be amazed when they consider the demographic changes that took place in the last half of the 20th century with respect to the age period from the late teens through the 20s. Especially striking were the changes in the timing of marriage and parenthood, and in participation in higher education.

The median age of marriage rose steeply in every industrialized society from 1960 to the mid-1990s before leveling out. Figure 1.1 shows the pattern for the United States. The pattern for men is parallel to that of women but consistently 2 years later. The pattern for both men and women in other industrialized countries is later than that of the United States, but for them as well marriage usually occurs at some point in the late 20s (Arnett, 2004). Not only has the median age of marriage risen, but the variance has expanded (Modell, 1989). Some people still do get married in their late teens or early 20s, perhaps because of exceptional maturity, conservative religious beliefs, or the spur of an unintended pregnancy, but it is also not unusual for people to marry in their very late 20s or their early 30s, and they are not considered abnormal or even unusual for doing so.

Age at first childbirth has followed a pattern similar to marriage in the United States and other industrialized countries, rising steadily beginning in 1960 and leveling out in the 1990s (Arnett & Taber, 1994). For age at first childbirth as well as for marriage, the variance has expanded as the median age has risen. Some women (although relatively few) still have their first child

![Median U.S. Marriage Age 1950–2000](image)

**Figure 1.1.** Median U.S. marriage age, 1950–2000.
in their late teens or early 20s, but now it is not uncommon for a woman's first birth to take place in her 30s. Furthermore, marriage has ceased to be the nearly exclusive context for childbirth. In the United States, in 1960 only 7% of children were born to an unmarried mother, but by 2000 this figure had risen to 33% (Bianchi & Casper, 2000). In northern European countries, the percentages of children born to unmarried mothers are even higher (Kiernan, 2002).

Another key part of the demographic outline of emerging adulthood is participation in higher education. One reason many people now wait until at least their late 20s to marry and have their first child is that they are focused before that time on obtaining higher education and then finding a desirable occupation. Participation in higher education has risen substantially during the past century, especially over the past 50 years, as Figure 1.2 shows. The rise of women's participation has been especially notable. Early in the 20th century, young women were discouraged from attending college, no matter how smart they were (Kerber, 1997). Even as recently as 1970, substantially more men than women attended college. Since the late 1980s, however, women have exceeded men in entering college following high school, and today 57% of the undergraduates in American higher education are female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). A similar pattern has taken place in other industrialized countries.

One other noteworthy element of the demographic outline of emerging adulthood is the rate of residential change, that is, how often people move from one residence to another. As illustrated in Figure 1.3, the rate of residential change peaks sharply from age 20 to 24, right in the heart of emerging adult-
The Age of Identity Explorations

Psychologists generally think of identity explorations as a developmental task of adolescence. In his theory of the life course, Erik Erikson (1950) proposed a distinctive crisis for each stage, and identity versus role confusion was the crisis of adolescence. However, even 40 years ago Erikson commented on what he called the “prolonged adolescence” typical of industrialized societies, and the psychosocial moratorium granted to young people in such societies, “during which the young adult through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society” (1968, p. 150). Decades later, this description applies to many more young people than when he wrote it. If adolescence is the period from age 10 to 18 and emerging adulthood is the period from (roughly) age 18 to the mid-20s, most identity exploration now takes place in emerging adulthood rather than adolescence.

Emerging adulthood is the age of identity explorations in the sense that it is the period when people are most likely to be exploring various possibilities for their lives in a variety of areas, especially love and work, as a prelude to making the enduring choices that will set the foundation for their adult lives. In the course of exploring possibilities in love and work, emerging adults clarify their identities, that is, they learn more about who they are and what they want out of life. Emerging adulthood offers the best opportunity for such self-exploration. Emerging adults have become more independent of their parents than they were as adolescents and most of them have left home, but they have not yet entered the stable, enduring commitments typical of adult life, such as a long-term job, marriage, and parenthood. During this interval of years when they are neither beholden to their parents nor committed to a web of adult roles, they have an exceptional opportunity to try out different ways of living and different possible choices in love and work.

Until recently, my research on emerging adults did not include questions or measures on identity, because like most psychologists I was used to thinking of identity formation as an issue pertaining mainly to development during adolescence. However, in my interviews with emerging adults, identity issues have come up over and over again in various forms. In seeking a long-term romantic partner, emerging adults inevitably address identity issues, because to know what person they want to commit themselves to, they have to know what kind of person they are—that is, what their likes and dislikes are and what they want their daily lives to be like in adulthood. In deciding what kind of education to pursue and in looking for a desirable job, identity issues also arise for emerging adults, because in order to know what kind of work will suit them, they have to know who they are—that is, what they enjoy doing and what they are good at. In forming a worldview that addresses questions about values and religious beliefs, emerging adults also address identity issues in these areas, because deciding on their values and beliefs also means deciding who they are and how their worldview is similar to and different from the one held by their parents.

Identity issues may be expected to arise in response to questions about love, work, and ideology or worldviews, the three pillars of identity in Erikson’s (1950, 1968) theory, but identity issues come up in response to many other
types of questions as well. For example, here is a portion of a 25-year-old African American woman's response to a question about what makes a person an adult (Arnett, 2004):

Learning about yourself is something that is a really emotional thing because it's like you wake up one day and you think that you're doing this right and you think that you're living the way you want to live, and then the next day you get up and it's like, wait a minute, I'm doing everything wrong. I don't know who I am. And you have to be willing to take that step forward and say, okay, I'm going to get to know myself no matter if it's painful or if it's going to make me happy. I have to dig deep within myself and figure out who I am. And this is a learning process every day. (p. 197)

Identity issues also commonly arise in responses to questions about relationships with parents, expectations for the future, characteristics desired in a romantic partner, and religious beliefs. In short, identity issues are such a salient part of development in emerging adulthood that they arise in response to a wide range of questions, including many that are not directly related to identity.

The Age of Instability

The explorations of emerging adulthood make it not only an exceptionally stimulating and eventful period of life but also an exceptionally unstable one. Figure 1.3, which shows that residential changes in the United States peak during emerging adulthood, illustrates the instability of the age period. Emerging adults' numerous moves reflect their explorations of different possibilities and their frequent changes of direction with respect to love, work, and education.

The high rate of residential change from the late teens through the mid-20s reflects the many profound changes that take place in the lives of emerging adults. For most, the first residential change comes at about age 18 or 19 when they move out of their parents' home, either to go to college or simply to be independent (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999). Other changes soon follow. Those who attend a residential college may move from a dormitory into an apartment after their first year. Many leave college after 1 or 2 years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004), and when they do a residential change is likely. Most American emerging adults cohabit at some point during their 20s, and residential changes may take place when they initiate cohabitation and when it ends (as happens in 9 out of 10 cohabiting relationships within 5 years; Bumpass & Liu, 2000). About 40% of emerging adults move back home at some point in their early 20s (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999), usually for only a temporary period, after which they move out again. Some emerging adults move to a different part of the country or the world to pursue opportunities in education or work, to accompany a romantic partner, or simply to pursue adventure. The statistic on residential changes during the 20s is emblematic of the instability of emerging adults' lives.
The Self-Focused Age

Emerging adults are not selfish or self-centered, by and large. Having interviewed both adolescents and emerging adults in various studies, I have been struck by how much less egocentric emerging adults are, compared with adolescents. Emerging adults are more considerate of other people’s feelings and better at understanding others’ point of view. This quality comes out especially in their relationships with their parents. In emerging adulthood they come to see their parents as persons, not merely parents, and they empathize with them more than they did as adolescents (Arnett, 2004, chap. 3). A change in social cognition seems to take place in the move from adolescence to emerging adulthood that makes people less self-centered.

Nevertheless, emerging adulthood is a distinctly self-focused time of life, which is different than being self-centered. Emerging adults are self-focused in the sense that they have little in the way of social obligations, little in the way of duties and commitments to others, which leaves them with a great deal of autonomy in running their own lives. Children and adolescents typically live with their parents and have to abide by the household rules and routines the parents establish; they spend a substantial proportion of their time in school, where they have to follow the rules and routines set by teachers and school officials. Beyond age 30, most adults have commitments to a spouse, children, and a long-term employer, and all these relationships entail daily requirements and obligations. But in between, during emerging adulthood, most people are relatively free to make independent decisions about their lives (Arnett, 1998).

In one sense, being self-focused is part of the fun of being an emerging adult. They recognize this period as the one time in their lives when they do not have to answer to anyone and can essentially do what they want with their lives, before they enter the permanent (or at least enduring) obligations of adult roles. However, being self-focused has a serious purpose as well. Emerging adults are self-focused with the goal of attaining the self-sufficiency that is at the heart of their view of what it means to be an adult (Arnett, 1998, 2004). Only after attaining self-sufficiency do they feel like they have reached adulthood and begin to view themselves as ready to become more other-focused by entering marriage and parenthood. Identity issues are relevant here; being self-focused allows emerging adults the psychological space to contemplate the “who am I?” questions that are at the heart of identity and to pursue opportunities in love, work, and education that will promote their self-knowledge.

The self-focused quality of emerging adulthood makes it arguably the freest time of life, at least in terms of freedom from social obligations and expectations. However, the flip side of this freedom is that emerging adults spend a considerable amount of time alone during these self-focused years. According to time-use studies across the life span, emerging adults aged 19 to 29 spend more of their leisure time alone than any other persons except the elderly, and more of their time in productive activities (school and work) alone than any age group under 40 (Larson, 1990). Although most people enjoy having the freedom to be self-focused during their emerging adult years, they do not expect or even
desire to be self-focused forever. Rather, they view it as a necessary step before committing themselves to enduring relationships with others, in love and in work.

The Age of Feeling In-Between

One of the reasons I chose the term emerging adulthood is that it seemed to fit the way people in their late teens and early 20s describe themselves, developmentally. One of the questions I have asked from my earliest research on this age period is, “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?” I have found that very few people beyond age 18 consider themselves to be in adolescence, even late adolescence. It is easy to understand why. Unlike adolescents, 18- to 25-year-olds are not in secondary school, they are not going through the biological changes of puberty, and most of them no longer live with their parents. However, most of them do not see themselves as adults, either. In response to the question about whether they feel they have reached adulthood, most 18- to 25-year-olds respond along the lines of “in some ways yes, in some ways no.”

Figure 1.4 shows the age pattern derived from the responses to this question in one of my studies (Arnett, 2001). About 60% of emerging adults aged 18 to 25 responded “in some ways yes, in some ways no” when asked, “Do you

![Bar graph showing the percentage of individuals who feel they have reached adulthood by age group. The graph indicates a peak in the 18-25 age group with a decrease in older age groups.]

Figure 1.4. Responses to “Do you feel like you have reached adulthood?”
feel like you have reached adulthood?" Once they reach their late 20s and early 30s most Americans feel they have definitely reached adulthood, but even then a substantial proportion, about 30%, still feels in-between. It is only past age 35 that this sense of ambiguity has faded for nearly everyone, and the feeling of being adult is well established.

Thus for most people, the feeling of being fully adult takes a long time to attain, and for a substantial period they feel in-between, as if they are emerging into adulthood but not there yet. The explanation for this phenomenon lies in part in the criteria they consider to be most important for becoming an adult. Emerging adults rarely base their feeling of attaining adulthood on transition events such as finishing their education or getting married, milestones that take place at a specific time and that a person clearly either has or has not reached. On the contrary, the criteria most important to them are reached gradually, so their feeling of becoming an adult is gradual, too. In a variety of regions of the United States and other industrialized countries, in a variety of ethnic groups, in studies using both questionnaires and interviews, people consistently state the following as the top criteria for adulthood (Arnett, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2004; Faco & Micocci, 2003; Mayseless & Scharf, 2003; Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004):

- Accept responsibility for yourself.
- Make independent decisions.
- Become financially independent.

All three criteria are gradual rather than transition events. As a consequence, although emerging adults begin to feel adult by the time they reach age 18 or 19, most do not feel completely adult until years later, sometime in their mid- to late-20s. By then they have become confident that they have learned to accept responsibility, make their own decisions, and be financially independent. While they are in the process of developing those qualities they feel as if they are in between adolescence and full adulthood.

In contrast to what many other studies have found, a 2003 study by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) claimed that the top criteria for adulthood were finishing education, obtaining a full-time job, becoming capable of supporting a family, and becoming financially independent (Associated Press, 2003). These results were quite different from other studies on this topic apparently because they gave people only a narrow range of possible choices, mainly transition events (i.e., in addition to finish education were marriage, parenthood, and obtaining a full-time job). If the researchers had given people a broader range of criteria or if they had made the question open-ended, they likely would have found results similar to other studies. I and others have conducted this research numerous times in many parts of the United States with a wide range of ethnic and socioeconomic status (SES) groups, using interviews as well as questionnaires, and the results have been extremely consistent with the pattern I have described here. Finish education has consistently ranked near the bottom, so its primacy in the NORC study may well be an artifact of the restrictive method used.
The Age of Possibilities

Emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities in two ways. One is that emerging adulthood is a time of great optimism, of high hopes for the future. In one national survey of 18- to 24-year-old Americans, nearly all—96%—agreed with the statement "I am very sure that someday I will get to where I want to be in life" (Hornblower, 1997). If this figure seems high, consider that in emerging adulthood high hopes are cheap because they have not yet been firmly tested against reality. Before people get married, it is easy for everyone to believe they are going to end up in a state of permanent marital bliss with their soul mate (Popence & Whitehead, 2001, 2002). Before people settle into a long-term job, it is possible for them to believe they are going to find a job that is both well-paying and personally fulfilling, an expression of their identity rather than simply a way to make a living.

Even emerging adults whose backgrounds and current lives do not seem especially promising believe that eventually, and probably sooner rather than later, they are going to "get where they want to be in life." I have found, in fact, that lower SES emerging adults are even more likely than higher SES emerging adults to believe that their lives will be better than their parents' lives (Arnett, 2000b). In emerging adulthood, virtually no one expects to end up with a dreary, dead-end job or join the nearly 50% of Americans whose marriages end in divorce, or make mistakes that drive life into a ditch. Even if their current lives are a struggle, as is the case for many emerging adults, they continue to believe that they will ultimately prevail. During emerging adulthood, high hopes reign.

The second way that emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities is that it represents a crucial opportunity for young people who have experienced difficult conditions in their family lives to move away from home and to steer their lives in a different and more favorable direction before they enter the commitments in love and work that structure adult life. Children and adolescents are at the mercy of their parents to a large degree. The parents determine where the family lives, and consequently who the children's friends are likely to be and where the children go to school. The parents set the structure for daily life in the household, including household rules and customs and the consequences for violating them. If the parents do a reasonably adequate job of providing healthy conditions for development, the children are likely to reap the benefits. But if the parents are dysfunctional, if life goes wrong for them in any of the myriad ways life can go wrong in adulthood—high marital conflict, a bitter divorce, a substance use problem, a mental illness, a physical illness, difficulty finding a decent job, and so on—then the children suffer the consequences along with the parents. There is nothing the children can do about it; they cannot get away.

Until emerging adulthood, that is. Emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities in part because it represents a chance for young people to transform their lives, to free themselves from an unhealthy family environment, and to turn their lives in a new and better direction. Simply being able to leave home is a big part of it. Children and adolescents are unable to leave a destructive
environment—it is, in fact, usually illegal for them to leave home unless the state assumes control of them—and if they run away from home they usually put themselves at high risk for numerous other problems (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). But emerging adults have the maturity to live independently, and most do take advantage of this opportunity. There is, subsequently, immense diversity in the directions that people take their lives. In terms of well-being and life satisfaction, young people’s lives are more likely to take a turn for the better than for the worse in the course of emerging adulthood (Schulenberg, O’Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 2005). Thus emerging adulthood represents a great opportunity, even arguably a critical period, for the expression of resilience (see chap. 7).

Even for those who have come from relatively happy and healthy families, emerging adulthood provides an opportunity to transform themselves so that they establish an independent identity and make independent decisions about what kind of person they wish to be and how they wish to live. During emerging adulthood they have an exceptionally wide scope for making their own decisions. Virtually all emerging adults eventually will enter new, long-term obligations in love and work, and once they do their new obligations will set them on paths that resist change and that may continue for the rest of their lives. But while emerging adulthood lasts, they have a chance to change their lives in profound ways.

Regardless of their family background, all emerging adults carry their family influences with them when they leave home, which limits the extent to which they can change what they have become by the end of adolescence. Nevertheless, more than any other period of life, emerging adulthood presents the possibility of change. During this time the fulfillment of all hopes seems possible, because the range of their choices for how to live is greater than it has ever been before and greater than it will ever be again.

The Five Features: Empirical Support

How well do these five features of emerging adulthood hold up empirically? Alan Reifman of Texas Tech has developed a scale called the Inventory of Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA; Reifman, Arnett, & Colwell, 2005). There are five subscales based on the features of emerging adulthood presented previously. A sixth subscale, Other-Focused, was created as a counterpoint to the Self-Focused subscale, to test the hypothesis that persons older than emerging adults would be more other-focused than emerging adults are.

In a series of studies (Reifman et al., 2005), exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses supported the coherence of the five features, along with the Other-Focused factor. Internal reliability and test–retest reliability were high. Furthermore, emerging adults were found to be significantly higher on all factors related to the five features (and lower on Other-Focused), compared with older adults, and were also distinct from adolescents (ages 13–17) on most factors. The scale is available at http://www.hs.ttu.edu/IDEA.htm.
The Heterogeneity of Emerging Adulthood

Although I have described what I believe to be common patterns for the emerging adulthood age period as a whole, an understanding of subgroup and individual differences is essential to a complete understanding of emerging adulthood, because young people in this age period are extraordinarily diverse. I have proposed, in fact, that emerging adulthood is in part defined by its heterogeneity, that is, it is perhaps the period of life in which variance is greatest, in many aspects of development (Arnett, 2000a). Some emerging adults are in school and some are not; some are employed and some are not; some combine work and school; some are in a committed relationship and some are not; some live with a romantic partner, some live with friends, some live alone, some live with their parents. These variations in turn have implications for the variance that exists among them in psychological variables such as cognitive functioning, emotional well-being, and relationship satisfaction.

The diversity of emerging adults is in part a reflection of their freedom, that is, the lack of social control and the lack of strict norms for what they should be doing with their lives during these years (Arnett, 2005). Social control and social norms set boundaries for what is acceptable and punish behavior that is outside the boundaries. When the boundaries are broad, as they are in emerging adulthood, a wider range of individual differences is allowed expression, on the basis of a wider range of individual tendencies and preferences (see Arnett, 1995, in press). Thus, for example, adolescents are “supposed to be” not yet in a committed long-term romantic relationship and young adults past age 30 are “supposed to be” in one, but it is acceptable for emerging adults to be in a committed relationship, or not to be in one, or to be semi-committed, or any of a wide range of gradations along this continuum. Because of their freedom from social control and the lack of social norms for the 20s, emerging adulthood is the most volitional period of life, the time when people are most likely to be free to follow their own interests and desires, and those interests and desires lead them in an exceptionally wide range of directions.

An important issue arises from this heterogeneity. Given the diversity that exists during the years from ages 18 to 25, is it possible to call it a distinct developmental period with certain common features, as I have done by calling it emerging adulthood? I think it is both possible and desirable to do so, as long as it is recognized that along with the characteristics that are common to many of them, there is also great diversity among them in nearly every aspect of development. To some degree, diversity exists within every developmental period. We describe adolescents as living with their parents and attending secondary school, but of course some are homeless, some live with persons other than their parents, and some have dropped out of school. We describe young adults in their 30s as being married and having children, but some of them are either unmarried or childless or both unmarried and childless. We describe people at midlife as reaching a settled place in life and preparing for their children to leave home, but some people get divorced at midlife and their lives are anything but settled, and some have children who are nowhere near leaving home. We describe people in late adulthood as entering retirement,
but many of them continue to work well into their 60s and 70s. For emerging adulthood, I think it can be usefully discussed and described as a developmental period, as long as the many exceptions to any generalization about it are kept in mind.

There is value to thinking about emerging adulthood as a separate developmental period despite its heterogeneity. Paradigms matter. They structure how we as researchers think and what we investigate and how we explain what we find in our research. They lead us toward certain research questions and away from others.

I believe it is because we have had no widely shared paradigm of the years from the late teens through the mid-20s as a separate developmental period that we have neglected it in research until recently. Research that has been done on this age period in the past has mainly conceptualized it as the transition to adulthood, and as a result there is a great deal of research on the timing of transition events such as finishing education, entering marriage, and entering parenthood. But the emerging adulthood paradigm results in a much broader agenda for research. It leads us to ask: What is their cognitive development like? How do their relationships with their parents change, compared with adolescence? How much time do they spend alone, and during their time alone, are they lonely? What are their friendships and romantic relationships like? How much do they use media such as TV and recorded music and the Internet, and for what purposes? And many, many other questions that span the whole range of human experience.

What if someone aged 18 to 25 is not engaged in identity explorations, or is not experiencing instability, or is not self-focused, or does not feel in-between, or does not see a future full of possibilities? Can that person still be considered an emerging adult? Yes, because the features I have proposed as developmentally prominent in emerging adulthood were not proposed as universal features of the age period. The heterogeneity of the age period must always be kept in mind. In our research, we should not only look for general patterns but also investigate different patterns among subgroups of emerging adults.

I look forward to other scholars adding ideas to what I have proposed regarding the salient developmental characteristics of emerging adulthood. This book is an important step in that direction, as the following chapters will show. What seems indisputable is that the median age of entering marriage and parenthood has risen dramatically and is now in the late 20s or beyond in the United States and every other industrialized country, that more people obtain at least some higher education than at any time in the past, and that people change jobs and love partners and residences more frequently in their 20s than in any later period of life. In my view, these facts are enough to merit recognition that a separate period of life now exists between adolescence and young adulthood. (I think young adulthood works well for the period following emerging adulthood, lasting until about age 40.) I think emerging adulthood works well as a term for this new period, and I have argued that previously proposed terms—late adolescence, youth, young adulthood, and the transition to adulthood—are all inadequate for various reasons (Arnett, 2004). Early adulthood has also been proposed (e.g., Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005), but it suffers from liabilities similar to those of the other terms, that
is, the lack of a clear meaning that distinguishes it from adolescence or young adulthood. Coming of age in the 21st century is different than it has been in the past, and this new period of life requires a new term with a distinctive meaning, which is why I proposed emerging adulthood.

Using the term emerging adulthood does not mean embracing everything I have proposed about what it contains. I am committed to emerging adulthood as a useful term for 18- to 25-year-olds in industrialized societies, but what precisely this period holds developmentally is an exciting question we have only begun to explore.

Conclusion

Emerging adulthood is a fascinating time of life, full of changes and important decisions that have profound implications for how the rest of the life course will go. It is surprising, then, that it has been given so little attention until now by scholars interested in human development. Fortunately, this neglect has begun to be remedied in recent years, and this book is one reflection of the increased attention and enthusiasm devoted to the study of this age period. What I have put forward in this chapter is intended as one step toward building a new paradigm for emerging adulthood. I hope there will be many more steps to come, as we begin to build this new paradigm together in a community of scholars.

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