

EMERGING ADULTHOOD

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A Longer Road to Adulthood

IN THE PAST FEW DECADES A QUIET revolution has taken place for young people in American society, so quiet that it has been noticed only gradually and incompletely. As recently as 1970 the typical 21-year-old was married or about to be married, caring for a newborn child or expecting one soon, done with education or about to be done, and settled into a long-term job or the role of full-time mother. Young people of that time grew up quickly and made serious enduring choices about their lives at a relatively early age. Today, the life of a typical 21-year-old could hardly be more different. Marriage is at least five years off, often more. Ditto parenthood. Education may last several more years, through an extended undergraduate program—the “four-year degree” in five, six, or more—and perhaps graduate or professional school. Job changes are frequent, as young people look for work that will not only pay well but will also be personally fulfilling.

For today’s young people, the road to adulthood is a long one. They leave home at age 18 or 19, but most do not marry, become parents, and find a long-term job until at least their late twenties. From their late teens to their late twenties they explore the possibilities available to them in love and work, and move gradually toward making enduring choices. Such freedom to explore different options is exciting, and this period is a time of high hopes and big dreams. However, it is also a time of anxiety and uncertainty, because the lives of young people are so unsettled, and many of them have no idea where their explorations will lead. They struggle with uncertainty even as they revel in being freer than they ever were in childhood or ever will be once they take on the full weight of adult responsibilities. To be a young American today is to experience both excitement and uncertainty, wide-open possibility and confusion, new freedoms and new fears.

The rise in the ages of entering marriage and parenthood, the lengthening of higher education, and prolonged job instability during the twen-

ties reflect the development of a new period of life for young people in the United States and other industrialized societies, lasting from the late teens through the mid- to late twenties. This period is not simply an “extended adolescence,” because it is much different from adolescence, much freer from parental control, much more a period of independent exploration. Nor is it really “young adulthood,” since this term implies that an early stage of adulthood has been reached, whereas most young people in their twenties have not made the transitions historically associated with adult status—especially marriage and parenthood—and many of them feel they have not yet reached adulthood. It is a new and historically unprecedented period of the life course, so it requires a new term and a new way of thinking; I call it *emerging adulthood*.

Many Americans have noticed the change in how young people experience their late teens and their twenties. In the 1990s “Generation X” became a widely used term for people in this age period, inspired by Douglas Coupland’s 1991 novel of that title. However, the characteristics of today’s young people are not merely generational. The changes that have created emerging adulthood are here to stay—Generations X, Y, Z, and beyond will experience an extended period of exploration and instability in their late teens and twenties. For this reason I believe emerging adulthood should be recognized as a distinct new period of life that will be around for many generations to come.

In this book I describe the characteristics of emerging adults, based mainly on my research over the past decade, plus a synthesis of other research and theories on the age period. In this opening chapter I provide some historical background on the rise of emerging adulthood and describe the period’s distinctive features. I also explain why the term *emerging adulthood* is preferable to other possible terms.

The Rise of Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood has been created in part by the steep rise in the typical ages of marriage and parenthood that has taken place in the past half century.¹ As you can see in Figure 1.1, in 1950 the median age of marriage in the United States was just 20 for women and 22 for men. Even as recently as 1970, these ages had risen only slightly, to about 21 for women and 23 for men. However, since 1970 there has been a dramatic shift in the ages when Americans typically get married. By the year 2000 the typical age of marriage was 25 for women and 27 for men, a four-year rise for both

sexes in the space of just three decades. Age at entering parenthood has followed a similar pattern. Then as now, couples tend to have their first child about one year after marriage, on average.² So, from 1950 to 1970 most couples had their first child in their very early twenties, whereas today most wait until at least their late twenties before becoming parents.

Why this dramatic rise in the typical ages of entering marriage and parenthood? One reason is that the invention of the birth control pill, in combination with less stringent standards of sexual morality after the sexual revolution of the 1960s and early 1970s, meant that young people no longer had to enter marriage in order to have a regular sexual relationship. Now most young people have a series of sexual relationships before entering marriage,³ and most Americans do not object to this, as long as sex does not begin at an age that is “too early” (whatever that is) and as long as the number of partners does not become “too many” (whatever that is). Although Americans may not be clear, in their own minds, about what the precise rules ought to be for young people’s sexual relationships, there is widespread tolerance now for sexual relations between young people in their late teens and twenties in the context of a committed, loving relationship.

Another important reason for the rise in the typical ages of entering marriage and parenthood is the increase in the years devoted to pursuing higher education. An exceptionally high proportion of young people, about

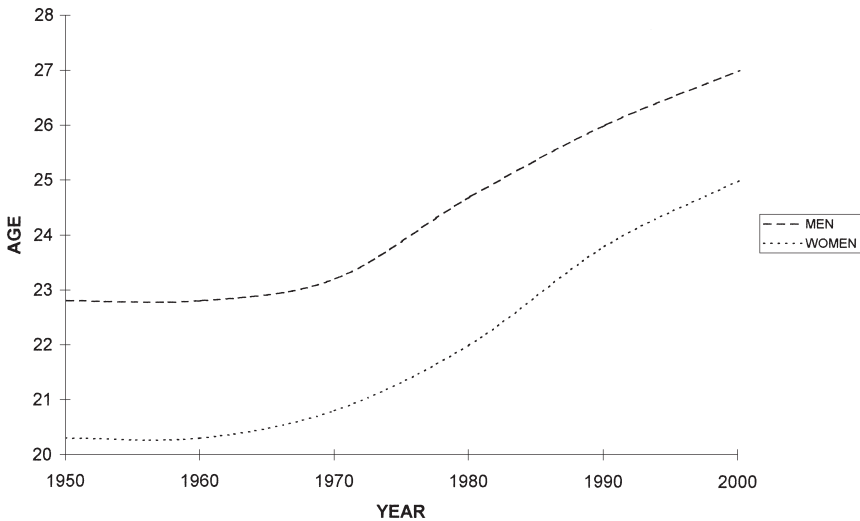


Figure 1.1. Median U.S. Marriage Age, 1950–2000

two thirds, now enter college after graduating from high school.⁴ This is a higher proportion than ever before in American history. Among those who graduate from college, about one third go on to graduate school the following year.⁵ Most young people wait until they have finished school before they start thinking seriously about marriage and parenthood, and for many of them this means postponing these commitments until at least their mid-twenties.

But it may be that the most important reason of all for the rise in the typical ages of entering marriage and parenthood is less tangible than changes in sexual behavior or more years spent in college and graduate school. There has been a profound change in how young people view the meaning and value of becoming an adult and entering the adult roles of spouse and parent. Young people of the 1950s were eager to enter adulthood and “settle down.”⁶ Perhaps because they grew up during the upheavals of the Great Depression and World War II, achieving the stability of marriage, home, and children seemed like a great accomplishment to them. Also, because many of them planned to have three, four, or even five or more children, they had good reason to get started early in order to have all the children they wanted and space them out at reasonable intervals.

The young people of today, in contrast, see adulthood and its obligations in quite a different light. In their late teens and early twenties, marriage, home, and children are seen by most of them not as achievements to be pursued but as perils to be avoided. It is not that they do not want marriage, a home, and (one or two) children—eventually. Most of them do want to take on all of these adult obligations, and most of them will have done so by the time they reach age 30. It is just that, in their late teens and early twenties, they ponder these obligations and think, “Yes, but *not yet*.” Adulthood and its obligations offer security and stability, but they also represent a closing of doors—the end of independence, the end of spontaneity, the end of a sense of wide-open possibilities.

Women’s roles have also changed in ways that make an early entry into adult obligations less desirable for them now compared to 50 years ago. The young women of 1950 were under a great deal of social pressure to catch a man.⁷ Being a single woman was simply not a viable social status for a woman after her early twenties. Relatively few women attended college, and those who did were often there for the purpose of obtaining their “m-r-s” degree (in the joke of the day)—that is, for the purpose of finding a husband. The range of occupations open to young women was severely restricted, as it had been traditionally—secretary, waitress, teacher, nurse, perhaps a

few others. Even these occupations were supposed to be temporary for young women. What they were really supposed to be focusing on was finding a husband and having children. Having no other real options, and facing social limbo if they remained unmarried for long, their yearning for marriage and children—the sooner the better—was sharpened.

For the young women of the 21st century, all this has changed. At every level of education from grade school through graduate school girls now excel over boys.⁸ Fifty-six percent of the undergraduates in America's colleges and universities are women, according to the most recent figures.⁹ Young women's occupational possibilities are now virtually unlimited, and although men still dominate in engineering and some sciences, women are equal to men in obtaining law and business degrees and nearly equal in obtaining medical degrees.¹⁰ With so many options open to them, and with so little pressure on them to marry by their early twenties, the lives of young American women today have changed almost beyond recognition from what they were 50 years ago. And most of them take on their new freedoms with alacrity, making the most of their emerging adult years before they enter marriage and parenthood.

Although the rise of emerging adulthood is partly a consequence of the rising ages of marriage and parenthood, marriage ages were also relatively high early in the 20th century and throughout the 19th century.¹¹ What is different now is that young people are freer than they were in the past to use the intervening years, between the end of secondary school and entry into marriage and parenthood, to explore a wide range of different possible future paths. Young people of the past were constricted in a variety of ways, from gender roles to economics, which prevented them from using their late teens and twenties for exploration. In contrast, today's emerging adults have unprecedented freedom.

Not all of them have an equal portion of it, to be certain. Some live in conditions of deprivation that make any chance of exploring life options severely limited, at best. However, as a group, they have more freedom for exploration than young people in times past. Their society grants them a long moratorium in their late teens and twenties without expecting them to take on adult responsibilities as soon as they are able to do so. Instead, they are allowed to move into adult responsibilities gradually, at their own pace.

What Is Emerging Adulthood?

What are the distinguishing features of emerging adulthood? What makes it distinct from the adolescence that precedes it and the young adulthood

that follows it? We will be considering that question throughout this book, but in this initial chapter I want to present an outline of what emerging adulthood is, in its essential qualities. There are five main features:¹²

1. It is the age of *identity explorations*, of trying out various possibilities, especially in love and work.
2. It is the age of *instability*.
3. It is the most *self-focused* age of life.
4. It is the age of *feeling in-between*, in transition, neither adolescent nor adult.
5. It is the age of *possibilities*, when hopes flourish, when people have an unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives.

Let's look at each of these features in turn.

The Age of Identity Explorations

Perhaps the most central feature of emerging adulthood is that it is the time when young people explore possibilities for their lives in a variety of areas, especially love and work. 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 options for love and work.

Of course, it is adolescence rather than emerging adulthood that has typically been associated with identity formation. A half century ago Erik Erikson¹³ designated identity versus role confusion as the central crisis of the adolescent stage of life, and in the decades since he articulated this idea, the focus of research on identity has been on adolescence. However, Erikson also commented on 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.”¹⁴ Decades later, this applies to many more young people than when he wrote it.¹⁵ If adolescence is the period from age 10 to 18 and emerging adulthood is the period from (roughly) age 18 to the mid-twenties, most identity exploration takes place in emerging adulthood rather than adolescence. Although research on identity formation has focused mainly on adolescence, this research has shown that identity achievement has rarely been reached by the end of high school and that identity development continues through the late teens and the twenties.¹⁶

In both love and work, the process of identity formation begins in adolescence but intensifies in emerging adulthood. With regard to love, adolescent love tends to be tentative and transient.¹⁷ The implicit question is “Who would I enjoy being with, here and now?” In contrast, explorations in love in emerging adulthood tend to involve a deeper level of intimacy, and the implicit question is more identity-focused: “What kind of person am I, and what kind of person would suit me best as a partner through life?” By becoming involved with different people, emerging adults learn about the qualities that are most important to them in another person, both the qualities that attract them and the qualities they find distasteful and annoying. They also see how they are evaluated by others who come to know them well. They learn what others find attractive in them—and perhaps what others find distasteful and annoying!

In work, too, there is a similar contrast between the transient and tentative explorations of adolescence and the more serious and identity-focused explorations of emerging adulthood. Most American adolescents have a part-time job at some point during high school,¹⁸ but most of their jobs last for only a few months at most. They tend to work in service jobs—restaurants, retail stores, and so on—unrelated to the work they expect to be doing in adulthood, and they tend to view their jobs not as occupational preparation but as a way to obtain the money that will support an active leisure life—CDs, concert tickets, restaurant meals, clothes, cars, travel, and so on.¹⁹

In emerging adulthood, work experiences become more focused on laying the groundwork for an adult occupation. In exploring various work possibilities and in exploring the educational possibilities that will prepare them for work, emerging adults explore identity issues as well: “What kind of work am I good at? What kind of work would I find satisfying for the long term? What are my chances of getting a job in the field that seems to suit me best?” As they try out different jobs or college majors, emerging adults learn more about themselves. They learn more about their abilities

and interests. Just as important, they learn what kinds of work they are *not* good at or *do not* want to do. In work as in love, explorations in emerging adulthood commonly include the experience of failure or disappointment. But as in love, the failures and disappointments in work can be illuminating for self-understanding.

Although emerging adults become more focused and serious about their directions in love and work than they were as adolescents, this change takes place gradually. Many of the identity explorations of the emerging adult years are simply for fun, a kind of play, part of gaining a broad range of life experiences before “settling down” and taking on the responsibilities of adult life. Emerging adults realize they are free in ways they will not be during their thirties and beyond. For people who wish to have a variety of romantic and sexual experiences, emerging adulthood is the time for it, when parental surveillance has diminished and there is as yet little normative pressure to enter marriage. Similarly, emerging adulthood is the time for trying out unusual educational and work possibilities. Programs such as AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps find most of their volunteers among emerging adults,²⁰ because emerging adults have both the freedom to pull up stakes quickly in order to go somewhere new and the inclination to do something unusual. Other emerging adults travel on their own to a different part of the country or the world to work or study for a while. This, too, can be part of their identity explorations, part of expanding the range of their personal experiences prior to making the more enduring choices of adulthood.

We will examine identity explorations in relation to love in chapters 4 and 5, college in chapter 6, and work in chapter 7. Ideology, the other aspect of identity in Erikson’s theory, is the subject of chapter 8, on religious beliefs and values.

The Age of Instability

The explorations of emerging adults and their shifting choices in love and work make emerging adulthood an exceptionally full and intense period of life but also an exceptionally unstable one. Emerging adults know they are supposed to have a Plan with a capital *P*, that is, some kind of idea about the route they will be taking from adolescence to adulthood,²¹ and most of them come up with one. However, for almost all of them, their Plan is subject to numerous revisions during the emerging adult years. These revisions are a natural consequence of their explorations. They enter college and choose

a major, then discover the major is not as interesting as it seemed—time to revise the Plan. Or they enter college and find themselves unable to focus on their studies, and their grades sink accordingly—time to revise the Plan. Or they go to work after college but discover after a year or two that they need more education if they ever expect to make decent money—time to revise the Plan. Or they move in with a boyfriend or girlfriend and start to think of the Plan as founded on their future together, only to discover that they have no future together—time to revise the Plan.

With each revision in the Plan, they learn something about themselves and hopefully take a step toward clarifying the kind of future they want. But even if they succeed in doing so, that does not mean the instability of emerging adulthood is easy. Sometimes emerging adults look back wistfully on their high school years. Most of them remember those years as filled with anguish in many ways, but in retrospect at least they knew what they were going to be doing from one day, one week, one month to the next. In emerging adulthood the anxieties of adolescence diminish, but instability replaces them as a new source of disruption. We will examine this issue in detail in chapter 10.

The best illustration of the instability of emerging adulthood is in how often they move from one residence to another. As Figure 1.2 indicates, rates of moving spike upward beginning at age 18, reach their peak in the mid-twenties, then sharply decline.²² This shows that emerging adults rarely know where they will be living from one year to the next. It is easy to imagine the sources of their many moves. Their first move is to leave home, often to go to college but sometimes just to be independent of their parents.²³ Other moves soon follow. If they drop out of college either temporarily or permanently, they may move again. They often live with roommates during emerging adulthood, some of whom they get along with, some of whom they do not—and when they do not, they move again. They may move in with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Sometimes cohabitation leads to marriage, sometimes it does not—and when it does not, they move again. If they graduate from college they move again, perhaps to start a new job or to enter graduate school. For nearly half of emerging adults, at least one of their moves during the years from age 18 to 25 will be back home to live with their parents.²⁴ Moving home will be one of the topics of chapter 3.

All of this moving around makes emerging adulthood an unstable time, but it also reflects the explorations that take place during the emerging adult years. Many of the moves emerging adults make are for the purpose of some

new period of exploration, in love, work, or education. Exploration and instability go hand in hand.

The Self-Focused Age

There is no time of life that is more self-focused than emerging adulthood. Children and adolescents are self-focused in their own way, yes, but they always have parents and teachers to answer to, and usually siblings as well. Nearly all of them live at home with at least one parent. There are household rules and standards to follow, and if they break them they risk the wrath of other family members. Parents keep track, at least to some extent, of where they are and what they are doing. Although adolescents typically grow more independent than they were as children, they remain part of a family system that requires responses from them on a daily basis. In addition, nearly all of them attend school, where teachers set the standards and monitor their behavior and performance.

By age 30, a new web of commitments and obligations is well established, for most people. At that age, 75% of Americans have married and have had at least one child.²⁵ A new household, then, with new rules and

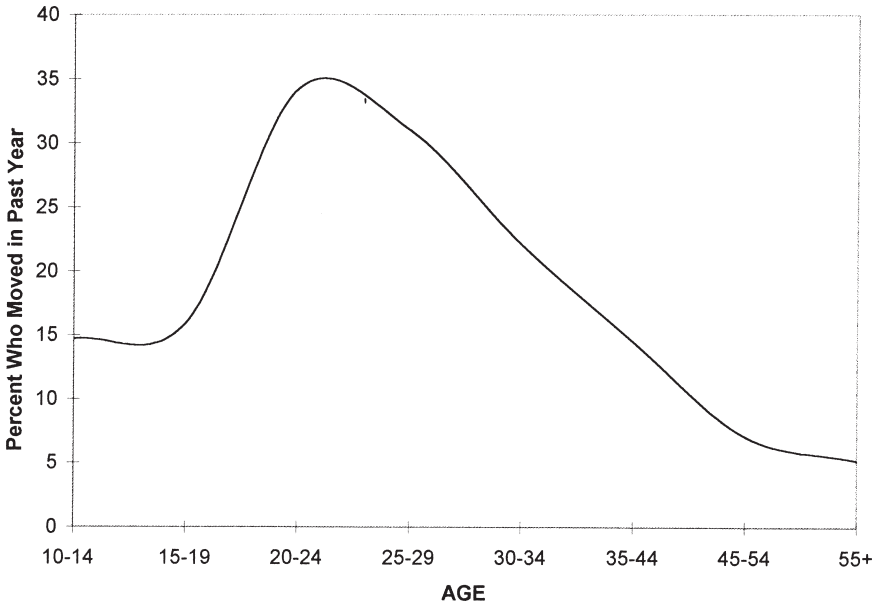
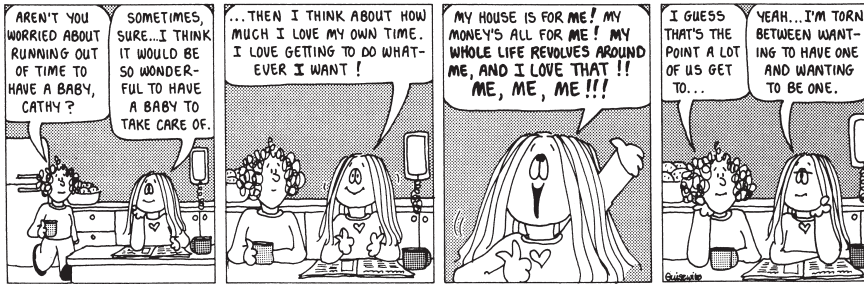


Figure 1.2. Rates of Moving, by Age



Most emerging adults are not quite this self-focused! (CATHY © 1996 Cathy Guisewite. Reprinted with permission of Universal Press Syndicate. All rights reserved.)

standards. A spouse, instead of parents and siblings, with whom they must coordinate activities and negotiate household duties and requirements. A child, to be loved and provided for, who needs time and attention. An employer, in a job and a field they are committed to and want to succeed in, who holds them to standards of progress and achievement.

It is only in between, during emerging adulthood, that there are few ties that entail daily obligations and commitments to others. Most young Americans leave home at age 18 or 19, and moving out means that daily life is much more self-focused. What to have for dinner? You decide. When to do the laundry? You decide. When (or whether) to come home at night? You decide.

So many decisions! And those are the easy ones. They have to decide the hard ones mostly on their own as well. Go to college? Work full time? Try to combine work and college? Stay in college or drop out? Switch majors? Switch colleges? Switch jobs? Switch apartments? Switch roommates? Break up with girlfriend/boyfriend? Move in with girlfriend/boyfriend? Date someone new? Even for emerging adults who remain at home, many of these decisions apply. Counsel may be offered or sought from parents and friends, but many of these decisions mean clarifying in their own minds what they want, and nobody can really tell them what they want but themselves.

To say that emerging adulthood is a self-focused time is not meant pejoratively. There is nothing wrong about being self-focused during emerging adulthood; it is normal, healthy, and temporary. By focusing on themselves, emerging adults develop skills for daily living, gain a better understanding of who they are and what they want from life, and begin to build a foundation for their adult lives. The goal of their self-focusing is

self-sufficiency, learning to stand alone as a self-sufficient person, but they do not see self-sufficiency as a permanent state. Rather, they view it as a necessary step before committing themselves to enduring relationships with others, in love and work.

The Age of Feeling In-Between

The exploration and instability of emerging adulthood give it the quality of an in-between period—between adolescence, when most people live in their parents' home and are required to attend secondary school, and young adulthood, when most people have entered marriage and parenthood and have settled into a stable occupational path. In between the restrictions of adolescence and the responsibilities of adulthood lie the explorations and instability of emerging adulthood.

It feels this way to emerging adults, too—like an age in-between, neither adolescent nor adult, on the way to adulthood but not there yet. When asked whether they feel they have reached adulthood, their responses are often ambiguous, with one foot in *yes* and the other in *no*. For example, Lillian, 25, answered the question this way:

Sometimes I think I've reached adulthood and then I sit down and eat ice cream directly from the box, and I keep thinking, "I'll know I'm an adult when I don't eat ice cream right out of the box any more!" That seems like such a childish thing to do. But I guess in some ways I feel like I'm an adult. I'm a pretty responsible person. I mean, if I say I'm going to do something, I do it. I'm very responsible with my job. Financially, I'm fairly responsible with my money. But sometimes in social circumstances I feel uncomfortable like I don't know what I'm supposed to do, and I still feel like a little kid. So a lot of times I don't really feel like an adult.

As Figure 1.3 demonstrates, about 60% of emerging adults aged 18–25 report this “yes and no” feeling in response to the question “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?”²⁶ Once they reach their late twenties and early thirties most Americans feel they have definitely reached adulthood, but even then a substantial proportion, about 30%, still feels in-between. It is only in their later thirties, their forties, and their fifties that this sense of ambiguity has faded for nearly everyone and the feeling of being adult is well established.

The reason that so many emerging adults feel in-between is evident from the criteria they consider to be most important for becoming an adult. The

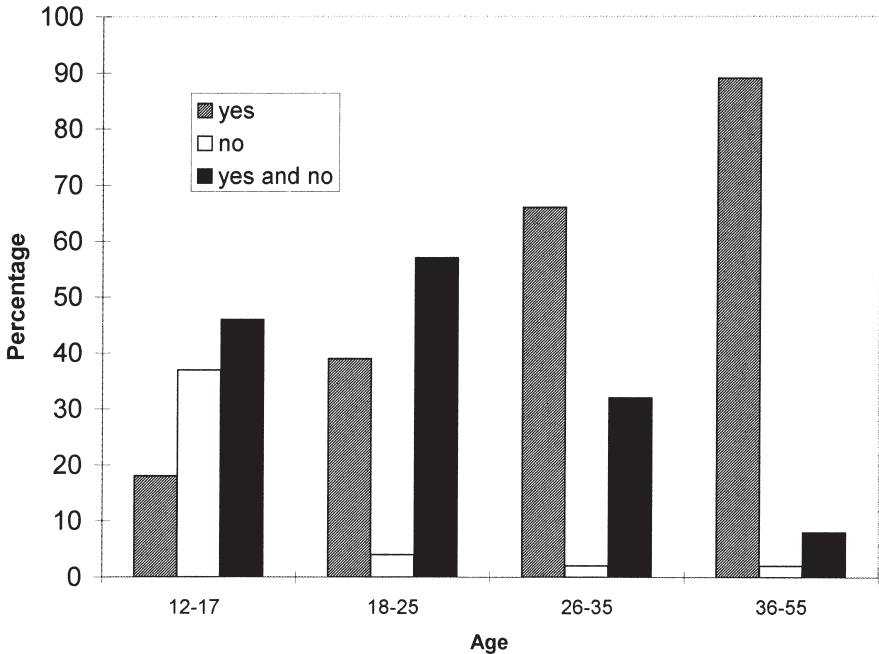


Figure 1.3. "Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?"

criteria most important to them are gradual, so their feeling of becoming an adult is gradual, too. In a variety of regions of the United States, in a variety of ethnic groups, in studies using both questionnaires and interviews, people consistently state the following as the top three criteria for adulthood:²⁷

1. Accept responsibility for yourself.
2. Make independent decisions.
3. Become financially independent.

All three criteria are gradual, incremental, rather than all at once. Consequently, although emerging adults begin to feel adult by the time they reach age 18 or 19, they do not feel completely adult until years later, some time in their mid- to late twenties. By then they have become confident that they have reached a point where they accept responsibility, make their own decisions, and are financially independent. While they are in the process of developing those qualities, they feel in between adolescence and full adulthood. We will explore this issue more in chapter 10.

The Age of Possibilities

Emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities, when many different futures remain open, when little about a person's direction in life has been decided for certain. It tends to be an age of high hopes and great expectations, in part because few of their dreams have been tested in the fires of real life. Emerging adults look to the future and envision a well-paying, satisfying job, a loving, lifelong marriage, and happy children who are above average. In one national survey of 18–24-year-olds, nearly all—96%—agreed with the statement “I am very sure that someday I will get to where I want to be in life.”²⁸ The dreary, dead-end jobs, the bitter divorces, the disappointing and disrespectful children that some of them will find themselves experiencing in the years to come—none of them imagine that this is what the future holds for them.

One feature of emerging adulthood that makes it the age of possibilities is that, typically, emerging adults have left their family of origin but are not yet committed to a new network of relationships and obligations. This is especially important for young people who have grown up in difficult conditions. A chaotic or unhappy family is difficult to rise above for children and adolescents, because they return to that family environment every day and the family's problems are often reflected in problems of their own. If the parents fight a lot, they have to listen to them. If the parents live in poverty, the children live in poverty, too, most likely in dangerous neighborhoods with inferior schools. If a parent is alcoholic, the disruptions from the parent's problems rip through the rest of the family as well. However, with emerging adulthood and departure from the family home, an unparalleled opportunity begins for young people to transform their lives. For those who have come from troubled families, this is their chance to try to straighten the parts of themselves that have become twisted. We will see some examples of dramatic transformations in chapter 9.

Even for those who have come from families they regard as relatively happy and healthy, emerging adulthood is an opportunity to transform themselves so that they are not merely made in their parents' images but have made 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. Eventually, virtually all emerging adults 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 for now,

while emerging adulthood lasts, they have a chance to change their lives in profound ways.²⁹

Regardless of their family background, all emerging adults carry their family influences with them when they leave home, and the extent to which they can change what they have become by the end of adolescence is not unlimited. Still, more than any other period of life, emerging adulthood presents the possibility of change. For this limited window of time—7, perhaps 10, years—the fulfillment of all their hopes seems possible, because for most people 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.

Who Needs Emerging Adulthood?

Who needs emerging adulthood? Why not just call the period from the late teens through the mid-twenties “late adolescence,” if it is true that people in this age group have not yet reached adulthood? Why not call it “young adulthood,” if we concede that they have reached adulthood but wish to distinguish between them and adults of older ages? Maybe we should call it the “transition to adulthood,” if we want to emphasize that it is a transitional period between adolescence and young adulthood. Or maybe we should call it “youth,” like some earlier scholars of this age period did.

I considered each of these alternatives in the course of forming the concept of emerging adulthood. Here is why I concluded each of them was inadequate and why I believe the term *emerging adulthood* is preferable.

Why Emerging Adulthood Is Not “Late Adolescence”

The first time I taught a college course on human development across the lifespan, when I reached the part of the course concerning adolescence I told my students that, by social science terms, nearly all of them were “late adolescents.” Social scientists defined adulthood in terms of discrete transitions such as finishing education, marriage, and parenthood. They were students, so clearly they had not finished their education, and few of them were married, and fewer still had become parents. So, they were late adolescents.

They were outraged! OK, they conceded, they had not really reached adulthood yet, not entirely, but they were *not* adolescents, whatever the social scientists might say.

At the time, I was surprised and bewildered at their objections. Now, I realize they were right. Adolescence, even “late adolescence,” is an entirely

inadequate term for college students or anyone else who is in the age period from the late teens through the mid-twenties that I am calling emerging adulthood. True, adolescents and most emerging adults have in common that they have not yet entered marriage and parenthood. Other than this similarity, however, their lives are much different. Virtually all adolescents (ages 10–18) live at home with one or both parents. In contrast, most emerging adults have moved out of their parents' homes, and their living situations are extremely diverse. Virtually all adolescents are experiencing the dramatic physical changes of puberty. In contrast, emerging adults have reached full reproductive maturity. Virtually all adolescents attend secondary school. In contrast, many emerging adults are enrolled in college, but nowhere near all of them. Unlike adolescents, their educational paths are diverse, from those who go straight through college and then on to graduate or professional school to those who receive no more education after high school, and every combination in between. Adolescents also have in common that they have the legal status of minors, not adults. They cannot vote, they cannot sign legal documents, and they are legally under the authority and responsibility of their parents in a variety of ways. In contrast, from age 18 onward American emerging adults have all the legal rights of adults except for the right to buy alcohol, which comes at age 21.

In all of these ways, emerging adults are different from adolescents. As a result, “late adolescence” is an inadequate term for describing them. The term emerging adulthood is preferable because it distinguishes them from adolescents while recognizing that they are not yet fully adult.

Why Emerging Adulthood Is Not “Young Adulthood”

If not “late adolescence,” how about “young adulthood”? There are a number of reasons why the term “young adulthood” does not work. One is that it implies that adulthood has been reached. However, as we have seen, most people in their late teens through their mid-twenties would disagree that they have reached adulthood. Instead, they tend to see themselves as in between adolescence and adulthood, so emerging adulthood captures better their sense of where they are—on the way to adulthood, but not there yet. *Emerging* is also a better descriptive term for the exploratory, unstable, fluid quality of the period.

An additional problem with “young adulthood” is that it is already used in diverse ways. The “young adult” section of the bookstore contains books aimed at teens and preteens, the “young adult” group at a church might

include people up to age 40, and “young adult” is sometimes applied to college students aged 18–22. Such diverse uses make “young adulthood” confusing and incoherent as a term for describing a specific period of life. Using *emerging adulthood* allows us to ascribe a clear definition to a new term.

To call people from their late teens through their mid-twenties “young adults” would also raise the problem of what to call people who are in their thirties. They are certainly not middle-aged yet. Should we call them “young adults,” too? It makes little sense to lump the late teens, the twenties, and the thirties together and call the entire 22-year period “young adulthood.” The period I am calling emerging adulthood could hardly be more distinct from the thirties. Most emerging adults do not feel they have reached adulthood, but most people in their thirties feel they have. Most emerging adults are still in the process of seeking out the education, training, and job experiences that will prepare them for a long-term occupation, but most people in their thirties have settled into a more stable occupational path. Most emerging adults have not yet married, but most people in their thirties are married. Most emerging adults have not yet had a child, but most people in their thirties have at least one child.

The list could go on. The point should be clear. Emerging adulthood and young adulthood should be distinguished as two separate periods. “Young adulthood” is better applied to those in their thirties, who are still young but are definitely adult in ways those in the late teens through the mid-twenties are not.

Why Emerging Adulthood Is Not the “Transition to Adulthood”

Another possibility would be to call the years from the late teens through the twenties the “transition to adulthood.” It is true that most young people make the transition to adulthood during this period, in terms of their perceptions of their status and in terms of their movement toward stable adult roles in love and work. However, the “transition to adulthood” also proves to be inadequate as a term for this age period. One problem is that thinking of the years from the late teens through the twenties as merely the transition to adulthood leads to a focus on what young people in that age period are *becoming*, at the cost of neglecting what they *are*. This is what has happened in sociological research on this period. There are mountains of research in sociology on the “transition to adulthood,” but virtually all of it focuses on the transitions that sociologists assume are the defining criteria

of adulthood—leaving home, finishing education, entering marriage, and entering parenthood.³⁰ Sociologists examine the factors that influence when young people make these transitions and explain historical trends in the timing of the transitions.

Much of this research is interesting and informative, but it tells us little about what is actually going on in young people's lives from the late teens through the twenties. They leave home at age 18 or 19, and they marry and become parents some time in their late twenties or beyond. But what happens in between? They finish their education? Is that it? No, of course not. There is so much more that takes place during this age period, as we have seen in this chapter and as we will see in the chapters to come. Calling it the “transition to adulthood” narrows our perception and our understanding of it, because that term distracts us from examining all of the changes happening during those years that are unrelated to the timing of transitions such as marriage and parenthood. Research on the transition to adulthood is welcome and is potentially interesting, but it is not the same as research on emerging adulthood.

Another problem with the term “transition to adulthood” is that it implies that the period between adolescence and young adulthood is brief, linking two longer and more notable periods of life, hence better referred to as a “transition” than as a period of life in its own right. This may have been the case 30 or 40 years ago, when most people in industrialized societies finished school, married, and had their first child by their very early twenties. However, today, with school extending longer and longer for more and more people and with the median ages of marriage and parenthood now in the late twenties, referring to the years between adolescence and full adulthood as simply the “transition to adulthood” no longer makes sense. Even if we state conservatively that emerging adulthood lasts from about age 18 to about age 25, that would be a period of seven years—longer than infancy, longer than early or middle childhood, and as long as adolescence. Emerging adulthood *is* a transitional period, yes—and so is every other period of life—but it is not merely a transition, and it should be studied as a separate period of life.

Why Emerging Adulthood Is Not “Youth”

One other possible term that must be mentioned is Kenneth Keniston's “youth,” which has been perhaps the most widely used term in the social sciences for the period from the late teens through the twenties.³¹ There are a

number of reasons why “youth” does not work. First, Keniston wrote at a time when American society and some Western European societies were convulsed with highly visible “youth movements” protesting U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War (among other things). His description of youth as a time of “tension between self and society” and “refusal of socialization” reflects that historical moment rather than any enduring characteristics of the period.³²

The term “youth” is problematic in other ways as well. “Youth” has a long history in the English language as a term for childhood generally and for what later came to be called adolescence, and it continues to be used popularly and by many social scientists for these purposes (as reflected in terms such as “youth organizations”). Keniston’s choice of the ambiguous and confusing term “youth” may explain in part why the idea of the late teens and twenties as a separate period of life never became widely accepted by scholars after his articulation of it.

None of the terms used in the past are adequate to describe what is occurring today among young people from their late teens through their twenties. There is a need for a new term and a new conception of this age period, and I suggest *emerging adulthood* in the hope that it will lead both to greater understanding and to more intensive study of the years from the late teens through the twenties.

The Cultural Context of Emerging Adulthood

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. As we have seen, what is mainly required for emerging adulthood to exist is a relatively high median age of entering marriage and parenthood, in the late twenties or beyond. Postponing marriage and parenthood until the late twenties allows the late teens and most of the twenties to be a time of exploration and instability, a self-focused age, and an age of possibilities.

So, emerging adulthood exists today mainly in the industrialized or “postindustrial” countries of the West, along with Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea. Table 1.1 shows the median marriage age for females in a variety of industrialized countries, contrasted with developing countries.³³ (The marriage age for males is typically about two years older than for females.) In most countries, the entry to parenthood comes about a year after marriage, on average.

Table 1.1. Median Marriage Age of Females in Selected Countries

Industrialized Countries	Age	Developing Countries	Age
United States	25	Nigeria	17
Australia	26	Egypt	19
Canada	26	Ghana	19
France	26	Indonesia	19
Germany	26	India	20
Italy	26	Morocco	20
Japan	27	Brazil	21

Ages of marriage and parenthood are typically calculated on a countrywide basis, but emerging adulthood is a characteristic of cultures rather than countries. Within any given country, there may be some cultures that have a period of emerging adulthood and some that do not, or the length of emerging adulthood may vary among the cultures within a country. For example, in the United States, members of the Mormon church tend to have a shortened and highly structured emerging adulthood.³⁴ Because of cultural beliefs prohibiting premarital sex and emphasizing the desirability of large families, there is considerable social pressure on young Mormons to marry early and begin having children. Consequently, the median ages of entering marriage and parenthood are much lower among Mormons than in the American population as a whole, so they have a briefer period of emerging adulthood before taking on adult roles.³⁵

Variations in socioeconomic status and life circumstances also determine the extent to which a given young person may experience emerging adulthood, even within a country that is affluent overall.³⁶ The young woman who has a child outside of marriage at age 16 and spends her late teens and early twenties alternating between government dependence and low-paying jobs has little chance for the self-focused identity explorations of emerging adulthood, nor does the young man who drops out of school and spends most of his late teens and early twenties unemployed and looking unsuccessfully for a job. Because opportunities tend to be less widely available in minority cultures than in the majority culture in most industrialized countries, members of minority groups may be less likely to experience their late teens and early twenties as a period of emerging adulthood. However, social class may be more important than ethnicity, with young people in the middle class or above having more opportunities for the explorations of

emerging adulthood than young people who are working class or below. And yet, as we will see in chapter 9, for some young people who have grown up in poor or chaotic families, emerging adulthood represents a chance to transform their lives in dramatic ways, because reaching emerging adulthood allows them to leave the family circumstances that may have been the source of their problems.

Currently in economically developing countries, there tends to be a distinct cultural split between urban and rural areas. Young people in urban areas of countries such as China and India are more likely to experience emerging adulthood, because they marry later, have children later, obtain more education, and have a greater range of occupational and recreational opportunities than young people in rural areas.³⁷ In contrast, young people in rural areas of developing countries often receive minimal schooling, marry early, and have little choice of occupations except agricultural work. Thus, in developing countries, emerging adulthood may often be experienced in urban areas but rarely in rural areas.

However, emerging adulthood is likely to become more pervasive worldwide in the decades to come, with the increasing globalization of the world economy.³⁸ Table 1.2 shows an example of how globalization is affecting the lives of young people, by making secondary school a normative experience worldwide.³⁹ Between 1980 and 2000, the proportion of young people in developing countries who attended secondary school rose sharply. The median ages of entering marriage and parenthood rose in these countries as well.

Table 1.2. Changes in Secondary-School Enrollment in Selected Developing Countries, 1980–2000

	% enrolled 1980		% enrolled 2000	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
Argentina	53	62	73	81
China	54	37	74	67
Egypt	66	41	83	73
India	39	20	59	39
Mexico	51	46	64	64
Nigeria	25	13	36	30
Poland	75	80	98	97
Turkey	44	24	68	48

These changes open up the possibility for the spread of emerging adulthood in developing countries. Rising education reflects economic development. Economic development makes possible the period of independent identity exploration that is at the heart of emerging adulthood. As societies become more affluent, they are more likely to grant young people the opportunity for the extended moratorium of emerging adulthood, because their need for young people's labor is less urgent. Thus it seems possible that by the end of the 21st century emerging adulthood will be a normative period for young people worldwide, although it is likely to vary in length and content both within and between countries.

The Plan of This Book

The challenges, uncertainties, and possibilities of emerging adulthood make it a fascinating and eventful time of life. In the chapters to come, my intention is to provide a broad portrait of what it is like to be an emerging adult in American society. We start out in chapter 2 by looking in detail at the lives of four emerging adults, in order to see how the themes described in this first chapter are reflected in individual lives. This is followed in chapter 3 by a look at how relationships with parents change in emerging adulthood. Then there are two chapters on emerging adults' experiences with love: chapter 4 on dating and sexual issues and chapter 5 on finding a marriage partner. Next comes chapter 6 on the diverse paths that emerging adults take through college and chapter 7 on their search for meaningful work. In chapter 8 we examine emerging adults' religious beliefs and values. Then chapter 9 highlights emerging adulthood as the age of possibilities by profiling four young people who have overcome difficult experiences to transform their lives. Finally, in chapter 10 we consider the passage from emerging adulthood to young adulthood, focusing on the question of what it means to become an adult.

The material in the chapters is based mainly on more than 300 in-depth structured interviews that I and my research assistants conducted in Columbia (Missouri), San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New Orleans. We interviewed young people from age 20 to 29 from diverse backgrounds, about half of them White and the other half African American, Latino, and Asian American.⁴⁰ I included people in their late twenties as well as their early to mid-twenties because for many people emerging adulthood lasts through the late twenties. In the lives of those who do leave emerging adulthood by their late twenties we can see what happens in the transition from emerg-

ing adulthood to young adulthood. I also draw upon my college students (mostly ages 18–23) at the University of Missouri, where I taught from 1992 to 1998, and the University of Maryland, where I teach now. In addition, I use statistics and information from national surveys and other studies that include 18–29-year-olds.

I present some statistics on the people we interviewed, but for the most part I present excerpts from the interviews to illustrate my points. The interview approach seemed appropriate to me for exploring a period of life that had not been studied much and about which not much was known. Also, emerging adults are a diverse group in terms of their life situations, and the interview approach allows me to describe their different situations and perspectives rather than simply stating that they are “like this,” based on an overall statistical pattern. Finally, the interview approach is valuable in studying emerging adults because they are often remarkably insightful in describing their experiences. Perhaps because emerging adulthood is a self-focused period of life, the young people we interviewed often possessed a striking capacity for self-reflection, not only the ones who had graduated from college but also—perhaps especially—the ones who had struggled to make it through high school. Presenting excerpts from the interviews allows for a full display of their everyday eloquence. What they have to say about their lives and experiences is illuminating, moving, and often humorous, as you will see in the chapters to come.