

# EMERGING ADULTHOOD

The Winding Road from the Late Teens  
Through the Twenties

**Second Edition**

JEFFREY JENSEN ARNETT

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## CONTENTS

- Preface to the Second Edition vii  
Preface to the First Edition xiii
1. A Longer Road to Adulthood 1
  2. What Is It Like to Be an Emerging Adult? Four Profiles 30
  3. From Conflict to Companionship: A New Relationship with Parents 49
  4. Love and Sex: New Freedoms, New Problems 83
  5. Meandering Toward Marriage 114
  6. The Road Through College: Twists and Turns 142
  7. Work: More Than a Job 169
  8. Digital Natives: Emerging Adults' Many Media Uses 194
  9. Sources of Meaning: Religious Beliefs and Values 211
  10. How Important Is Social Class? 244
  11. Wrong Turns and Dead Ends 266
  12. Sometimes Goodbye Is a Second Chance: Resilience in Emerging Adulthood 291
  13. Beyond Emerging Adulthood: What Does It Mean to Become an Adult? 311

vi • *Contents*

Notes 335

References 363

Index 385

## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

When I first became interested in 18–29-year-olds about 20 years ago, it was a pretty solitary area of research, for a psychologist. Research on human development within psychology has always been skewed toward the early years of life, and psychologists had devoted little attention to 18–29-year-olds. True, there were innumerable studies of college students, but mainly in social psychology studies, based on the dubious assumption that American college students in introductory psychology courses could be taken to represent all humanity. Few of these studies considered how young people in this age group might be distinct from adolescents or from older adults. Sociology devoted more attention to 18–29-year-olds, but mainly in studies looking at the timing and consequences of transition events such as leaving home, finishing education, finding employment, marriage, and parenthood.

I was interested in far more than this—their relations with parents, their love lives, their aspirations for work, their religious beliefs, their views of adulthood, and their hopes for the future. It was solitary work at first, my research on 18–29-year-olds, but that was what had drawn me to it and what made it so exciting. It felt like an uncharted continent, full of surprises and discoveries. For a long time, every time I interviewed people they taught me something I had not known before. It was exhilarating.

In the course of the 1990s I interviewed over 200 18–29-year-olds, in Columbia, Missouri (where I was a junior professor at the University of Missouri) and in San Francisco (where I spent a sabbatical year during 1996–1997). Graduate student research assistants interviewed nearly 100 more, mainly Latinos in Los Angeles and African Americans in New Orleans. We interviewed young people of all socioeconomic backgrounds, from high school dropouts to people with graduate degrees, and from a wide range of ethnic groups, including Whites, African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans.

viii • *Preface to the Second Edition*

For nearly a decade, I published little of it. I was excited about what I was discovering in the interviews with 18–29-year-olds, but it took me years to reach a point where I believed I had learned enough to write about them with authority. Furthermore, I wasn't sure what to call them. Were they “late adolescents”? That is what I assumed going in, because, like adolescents, most had not found stable long-term work or entered marriage and parenthood. However, I soon dropped this assumption, as they were far more mature and insightful than the adolescents I had interviewed previously, and less dependent on their parents. Nor did they seem like “young adults,” because this implied a more settled life stage than most of them were experiencing. It was obvious to me that it made no sense to think of them as being in a stage of “young adulthood” that would stretch from age 18 to age 40.

Eventually I concluded that they were neither adolescents nor young adults but something in-between, something that required a new term and a new conceptualization. They were taking longer to grow up than young people had in the past, as measured by their entry to stable adult roles as well as their own self-perceptions of not-fully-adult status. To understand their development, I decided it would be helpful to propose the addition of a new stage to the normal life span of people in developed countries. After considering (and rejecting) “post-adolescence,” I proposed that we call it *emerging adulthood*.

I presented an outline of the theory of emerging adulthood in 2000, in an article in *American Psychologist*.<sup>1</sup> Although it was a brief article, offering only a sketch of the theory, the term and the idea were quickly embraced by many psychologists and practitioners. I think that there were many people who, like me, had concluded that we needed a new way of understanding 18–29-year-olds, and some way of distinguishing them from adolescents or young adults. As of early 2014, that article has been cited over 4,500 times, according to [google scholar.com](http://google scholar.com).

## The Rise of Emerging Adulthood

One of my goals, or at least hopes, in proposing the theory of emerging adulthood, was that giving a new name to the 18–29-year-old age period would inspire other researchers to devote attention to it. As I stated in that 2000 *American Psychologist* article:

[T]he dearth of studies among young people in their twenties . . . arises from the lack of a clear developmental conception of this age group. Scholars

*Preface to the Second Edition* • ix

have no clearly articulated way of thinking about development from the late teens through the twenties, no paradigm for this age period, so they may not think about young people at these ages as a focus for developmental research. Emerging adulthood is offered as a new paradigm, a new way of thinking about development from the late teens through the twenties, especially ages 18–25, partly in the hope that a definite conception of this period will lead to an increase in scholarly attention to it.<sup>2</sup>

Fourteen years later, this hope has come to fruition. There is now a Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood (SSEA; see [www.ssea.org](http://www.ssea.org)) with over 400 members (as of June 2014). The SSEA sponsors a thriving journal, *Emerging Adulthood* (see <http://eax.sagepub.com/>). Six conferences on emerging adulthood have been held, and a seventh is in the works for 2015. Research on emerging adulthood is taking place all over the world—not just in psychology but in sociology, education, anthropology, and many other fields. Paradigms matter. Proposing a new life stage of emerging adulthood drew attention to the possibilities for research on 18–29-year-olds, and those possibilities are being energetically pursued by a wide range of talented people.

### **My Scholarship Since the First Edition**

In the first edition of this book, I laid out a more fully developed theory of emerging adulthood, proposing that it is characterized by five distinctive features: identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities/optimism. Drawing upon the 300 interviews that I and my students had conducted in the previous decade, I sought to cover all the key aspects of the lives of 18–29-year-olds.

In the decade since the first edition, a substantial part of my scholarship has been devoted to continuing to develop the theory of emerging adulthood and to building up emerging adulthood as field of scholarship. With Jennifer Tanner, I edited a book, published in 2006, that included contributions by eminent scholars from diverse fields, on topics ranging from identity development to sexuality to mental health.<sup>3</sup> I have published book chapters examining the international scope of emerging adulthood.<sup>4</sup> I have defended emerging adulthood theory from its critics, most notably in a 2011 book with Marion Kloep, Leo Hendry, and Jennifer Tanner, *Debating Emerging Adulthood*.<sup>5</sup> I have defended emerging adults, too, from critics who are all too eager to fling unfounded negative stereotypes at them.<sup>6</sup>

x • *Preface to the Second Edition*

In my research over the past decade, I conducted interviews and surveys with emerging adults in Denmark as a Fulbright Scholar during 2005–2006. I also supervised a student, Marie Krog Overgaard, who interviewed Italian emerging adults the next year.<sup>7</sup> With Elizabeth Fishel, I surveyed and interviewed parents of emerging adults for a book we co-authored in 2012, *Getting to 30: A Parent's Guide to the Twentysomething Years*.<sup>8</sup>

Most notably, I have had the opportunity in recent years to direct several national surveys, funded by Clark University, where I am a research professor, and the results of these surveys are abundantly represented in this tenth anniversary edition. In 2012, the Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults surveyed over 1,000 18–29-year-olds across the United States, from diverse regions, ethnic groups, and socioeconomic backgrounds. In this tenth anniversary edition I use the results of this survey to examine national patterns on many of the questions I examined in the first edition, and also to provide national data on new topics, including media use and mental health. In 2013, the Clark University Poll of Parents of Emerging Adults surveyed over 1,000 parents of 18–29-year-olds, again comprising a diverse, nationally representative sample. Results from this poll have added substantial new information to Chapter 3, on relations with parents. Finally, the 2014 Clark University Poll of Established Adults surveyed over 1,000 persons ages 25–39, in order to gain insights into development after emerging adulthood. This survey was conducted just before the publication of this tenth anniversary edition, so few of the findings were available yet for inclusion in this book, but Chapter 1 contains data from this survey regarding features of emerging adulthood. Reports on all three of the Clark polls can be found at <http://www.clarku.edu/clark-poll-emerging-adults/>.

### **New Chapters in the Tenth Anniversary Edition**

Over the 20 years I have been interviewing, thinking about, and writing about emerging adults, I would say there has been more stability than change in what I have found. I began my research in 1993, as the United States was coming out of a recession, and as I publish the tenth anniversary edition of this book, in 2014, we are again coming out of a recession. In-between was the boom of the late 1990s and then the stagnation of the early years of the twenty-first century. Throughout these economic ups and downs, I have found that emerging adults always struggle to find a place in a labor market that is vast, complex, and nearly always rewards people who have



*Preface to the Second Edition • xi*

more experience and expertise than emerging adults have. Those emerging adults who have not obtained education and training beyond high school especially struggle, as the economy moves steadily away from manufacturing and toward services that require higher-level skills and credentials. But even among emerging adults who have obtained a college degree, the transition from school to work is often rough. Across educational levels, emerging adults seek work that will not only pay well but that will be challenging, rewarding, and self-fulfilling. That is an aspiration that is elusive for all.

The biggest change from 20 years ago in the lives of emerging adults is the explosion of media technology and the increasingly prominent place it has in their lives. Twenty years ago, the Internet, e-mail, and cell phones were still a novelty. Even 10 years ago, when the first edition was published, there was no Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. Now, most emerging adults can scarcely imagine life without a constant connection to their electronic worlds. Consequently, it was essential to add a chapter on media use (Chapter 8) to this tenth anniversary edition.

I have added two other chapters to this edition, on social class issues (Chapter 10) and on problems (Chapter 11). The topic of social class has been a contentious one since I first proposed the theory of emerging adulthood. Although I have always included young people from diverse social class backgrounds in my research, and one of my reasons for proposing the theory in 2000 was to draw attention to 18–29-year-olds who were not college students,<sup>9</sup> critics of the theory have nevertheless claimed that it applies only to the college-educated middle class. Consequently, I felt it was essential to address this claim directly in this edition of the book. Fortunately, the 2012 Clark poll allows for a test of claims related to social class, because it was composed of a nationally representative sample of Americans ages 18–29, from all social class backgrounds.

The chapter on problems also seemed like a necessary addition. There are some kinds of problems, such as substance use, that peak during the emerging adult years. Furthermore, emerging adulthood is a complex period with respect to mental health, because feelings of depression and anxiety are strikingly high, even as most people are also optimistic and regard their current time of life as fun and exciting. Those complexities are now explored in Chapter 11.

The focus of the book remains on young Americans, rather than emerging adults worldwide. I consider myself a cultural psychologist, and I always seek to add a cultural context to my observations on development during

xii • *Preface to the Second Edition*

emerging adulthood. However, except for the small studies on Danish and Italian emerging adults mentioned above, all my research has been on young Americans. They are the population I know best. This book contains a number of international comparisons, and mentions research from other countries, but it is mainly on American emerging adults. I am delighted that researchers around the world are now examining the forms that emerging adulthood may take in their countries, and my own perspective will continue to be expanded by their findings.

**Acknowledgments and Dedication**

It has been a pleasure to write the tenth anniversary edition of this book. In the course of updating the previous chapters and adding the three new chapters, I have been amazed to observe how much has been learned over the past 10 years about emerging adults. I am grateful to all the scholars who are working in emerging adulthood research and have enhanced my understanding of this new life stage.

I also wish to thank the people of Oxford University Press, especially Sarah Harrington, who immediately supported the idea of a tenth anniversary edition when I proposed it. In my view, OUP consistently publishes the most compelling, important academic books in the world, and it is an honor to be among their authors.

Finally, I wish to thank all the people who were inspired by the first edition of this book, and have let me know it. This includes not only my fellow scholars, but also therapists, educators, policymakers, parents, and emerging adults themselves. It was your enthusiasm for the first edition that drove me to create the new edition and to make it as good as I could. This tenth anniversary edition is dedicated to you.

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett  
Worcester, Massachusetts

## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

The origin of this book dates from about ten years ago, when I was a junior professor at the University of Missouri. As is often the case for those of us who do research in psychology, my interest in the topic was drawn from my own experience. At that point in my life, after many of years of education, I finally had a job that I expected to be in for a long time to come. After many years of dating, I had finally met and was living with the person I hoped to marry. After years of moving around from one place to another every year or two or three in pursuit of new opportunities and experiences, I was ready to stay in one place for a while and put down some roots. I felt at last that I had reached adulthood.

I began to wonder, how and when do other people feel they have reached adulthood? It occurred to me that there is no social or communal ritual in American society to mark that passage. Instead, it is left to each of us to determine when the threshold to adulthood has been reached, and what signifies it.

I had been doing research on adolescence for several years at the time, so it was easy for me to turn the focus of my research to the question of what it means to move from adolescence to adulthood. I soon learned that there was not much in psychology that had explored the topic, but there was a great deal of research in sociology on what was called “the transition to adulthood.” Sociologists defined the transition to adulthood in terms of distinct transition events, specifically: finishing education, entering full-time work, marriage, and parenthood. This seemed perfectly reasonable to me. My own sense of reaching adulthood had been marked by entering full-time work and, if not marriage, at least feeling ready for marriage.

I was quite surprised, then, when I began to ask college students about what they believed marked the transition to adulthood and found that

xiv • *Preface to the First Edition*

for them entering full-time work and marriage had nothing to do with it. Nor did the other sociological transitions, finishing education and entering parenthood. In fact, all four of the sociological transitions ended up rock bottom when I surveyed college students about possible criteria for adulthood. Instead of the sociological transitions, the most important criteria for adulthood to these college students were more intangible and psychological: accepting responsibility for one's actions, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent.

Well, I thought, maybe that's because they're college students, and being in college leads them to think in more abstract and psychological terms. Maybe people in the same age group who were not in college would see the transition to adulthood more in terms of transition events, like the sociologists did. But when I surveyed and interviewed them, I came up with the same results as I had for the college students, and there were very few differences by educational level or socioeconomic background.

By now I was thoroughly intrigued, and wanted to know more about what was going on in the lives of people experiencing the transition to adulthood. I started a study in Missouri of young people in their twenties, including both college and non-college participants, and asked them a broad range of questions—on their family lives, on love and sex and marriage, on their college and work experiences, on what they value most and what they believe about religious questions, and more. I spent a year in San Francisco and continued my research, focusing on Asian Americans and African Americans. I had graduate students conduct interviews on Latinos in Los Angeles and African Americans in New Orleans.

The more research I did, the more I talked to people in their twenties, the less satisfied I became with describing their development in terms of the transition to adulthood. Yes, the transition to adulthood takes place during this period, but that term does not begin to cover all that is going on in their lives from the time they leave high school to the time they reach full adulthood. Calling it “the transition to adulthood” seemed to diminish it, as if it were merely a transition connecting the two more important periods of adolescence and young adulthood. And it lasts so long, at least from age 18 to 25 and usually longer, as long or longer than any stage of childhood or adolescence, why shouldn't it be regarded as a distinct period of life in its own right?

I looked for existing theories that would provide a framework for understanding the transition to adulthood as a separate developmental period, but could not find anything satisfying. The most commonly discussed idea was

*Preface to the First Edition* • xv

Kenneth Keniston's idea of "youth," but "youth" seemed to me a dubious choice of terms for this age period, because it was already used in so many other ways, to describe people as young as middle childhood and as old as their thirties. Besides, Keniston's ideas on "youth" were based mainly on the college student protesters of the 1960s, an atypical group at an unusual time in American history, and seemed to me to have little application to the present.

So, I decided to create my own theory of development from the late teens through the twenties, and this book is the result of those efforts. Already I have published numerous articles in scholarly journals outlining the theory, but this is my first attempt to present a comprehensive account of it, based on my research over the past decade. I hope scholars will find it compelling and persuasive, but I regard this book as the beginning of forming an understanding of emerging adulthood, not the last word. Already many other scholars are conducting research using the theory of emerging adulthood, and it is a field of study that is growing rapidly. The first scholarly conference was held at Harvard University in November of 2003, and there will certainly be more. A group of scholars has been formed to share information and support in studying emerging adulthood. Now that we are beginning to develop a shared language for talking about this age period, there are surely many exciting discoveries to come.

This is a book not just for scholars but for anyone interested in this topic and this age period. I hope many emerging adults will find it provocative and informative, and their parents as well. It was my goal to write a book that would make an important contribution to scholarship on emerging adulthood but that most people could read and would find engaging whether they were scholars or not. So, there are no complex statistical analyses, and most of the information comparing my results to other studies on the age period can be found in the Notes rather than in the main text of the book. What I have focused on instead is the voices of emerging adults, that is, what they say about their lives on a wide range of topics.

I present some questionnaire results, but mainly I present the results from the interviews, because that is where I learned the most about emerging adults. Questionnaires have a useful place in research, but in my experience as a researcher there is simply no substitute for sitting face-to-face with someone and talking to them about what they have experienced and what it means to them. I believe that in all psychological research it is important to listen to how people describe and interpret their lives—OK,

xvi • *Preface to the First Edition*

except infants—but it may be especially important in emerging adulthood, because it is a highly self-reflective time of life, a time when they think a lot about who they are and what they want out of life. And it's fun to listen to them, as you'll see in the course of this book. No matter what their educational background, they are remarkably articulate, often funny, sometimes moving.

I have many people to thank for their support in making this book possible. Although I did most of the interviews myself, I had assistance from numerous students along the way, including Katie Ramos and Diane Rutledge in Missouri and Los Angeles, Terrolyn Carter in New Orleans, and Gretchen Cooke, Colleen O'Connell, and Megan O'Donnell in San Francisco. Several of my colleagues read part or all of the book before publication and provided comments and suggestions, including Jim Côté, Bill Damon, Wyndol Furman, Steve Hamilton, Hugh McIntosh, Mike Shanahan, Shmuel Shulman, Jennifer Tanner, and Niobe Way. Special thanks goes to my wife Lene Jensen, who read many a draft without complaint and always offered insightful and helpful comments. Thanks also to Catherine Carlin, psychology editor at Oxford University Press, for understanding what I was aiming for in this book and enthusiastically supporting it. Finally, I wish to thank the hundreds of emerging adults who opened up their lives to me in the interviews that are the foundation of this book. You taught me an immense amount, and I am grateful for it.

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett  
University Park, Maryland

# Chapter 1

## A Longer Road to Adulthood

In the past half century 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 1960, 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 a role as 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 and parenthood are at least six years off. 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 not only pays well but will be enjoyable and fulfilling.

For the young Americans of the twenty-first century, the road to adulthood is a long one. They leave home at age 18 or 19, but most do not marry, become parents, or 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 is a time of high hopes and big dreams. However, it is also a time of anxiety, 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 uneasiness, wide-open possibility and confusion, new freedoms and new fears.

The rise in the ages of entering marriage and parenthood, the spread of education and training beyond secondary school, and prolonged job instability

## 2 • EMERGING ADULTHOOD

during the twenties reflect the rise of a new life stage for young people in the United States and other economically developed countries, lasting from the late teens through the mid- to late twenties. This period is not simply an “extended adolescence,” because it is very 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 most of them feel they have not yet reached adulthood. It is a new and historically unprecedented stage of the life course, so it requires a new term and a new way of thinking. I have proposed that we call it *emerging adulthood*.

For some time, 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. More recently, a generation of “Millennials” born in the years before 2000 has been claimed to share certain characteristics, such as an obsession with social media. However, the characteristics of today’s young people are not merely generational. The changes that have created emerging adulthood are here to stay. There seems to be little reason to doubt that the young people of the twenty-first century 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 life stage 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 20 years, 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. At the end of the chapter I discuss cultural variations in emerging adulthood. Because most of my research has taken place in the United States, most of this book focuses on American emerging adults, but emerging adulthood is an international phenomenon.

## **The Rise of Emerging Adulthood: Four Revolutions**

Emerging adulthood has been created in part by the steep rise in the typical ages of marriage and parenthood that has taken place since the middle of

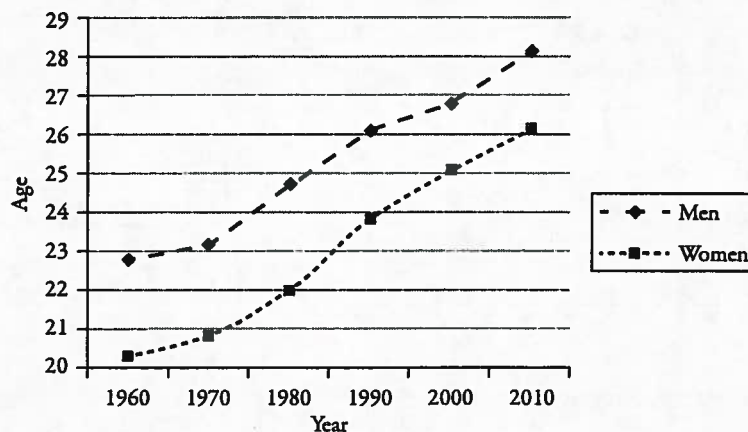


*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 3*

the twentieth century. As you can see in Figure 1.1, in 1960 the median age of marriage in the United States was just 20.3 for women and 22.8 for men. Even as recently as 1970, these ages had risen only slightly. However, since 1970 there has been a dramatic shift in the ages when Americans typically get married. By 2010 the typical age of marriage was over 26 for women and over 28 for men, a six-year rise for both sexes in the span of just four decades—and still rising every year.<sup>1</sup> The age of entering parenthood followed a similar pattern, although far more first births take place outside marriage now (48% as of 2010) than was true in 1960.<sup>2</sup>

Later ages of marriage and parenthood have created a space between the late teens and the late twenties for the new life stage of emerging adulthood. But these later ages were not causes of the new life stage in and of themselves. Rather, they were reflections of other vast changes taking place in modern societies. Four revolutionary changes took place in the 1960s and 1970s that laid the foundation for the world as we know it today, including the new life stage of emerging adulthood: the Technology Revolution, the Sexual Revolution, the Women's Movement, and the Youth Movement.

By the Technology Revolution, I do not mean iPads and iPhones but the manufacturing technologies that transformed the American economy. Because of extraordinary advances in technology, machines became able to perform most of the manufacturing jobs that were once the main source of employment in developed countries. (Manufacturing production in the United States is actually six times higher now that it was in 1950, but



**Figure 1.1** Median Marriage Age, United States, 1960–2010.

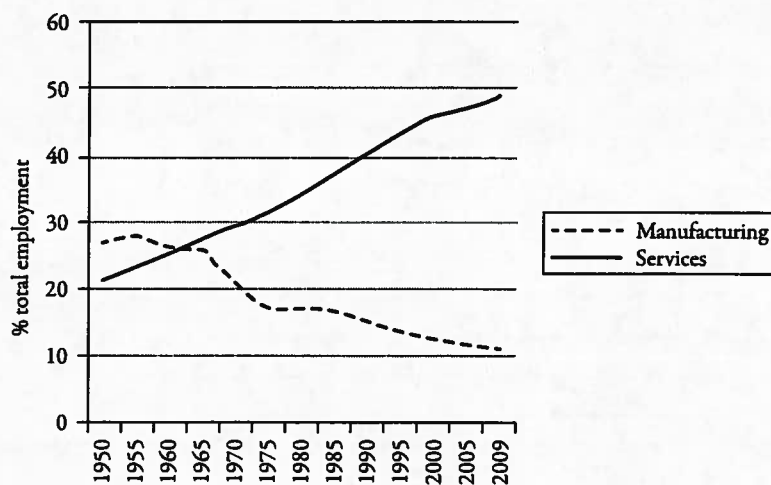
Source: Stritof & Stritof (2014).

## 4 • EMERGING ADULTHOOD

new technologies have made that possible with far fewer jobs.)<sup>3</sup> As a consequence of this revolution, the United States and other developed countries have shifted from a manufacturing economy to a service economy that requires information and technology skills. In the early twentieth century, most work entailed *making things* in factory-based manufacturing jobs. By the early twenty-first century, most work involved *using information* in service-based work such as business, finance, insurance, education, and health. Figure 1.2 shows how the service sector has replaced the manufacturing sector as the primary basis of economic activity in the United States since the mid-twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

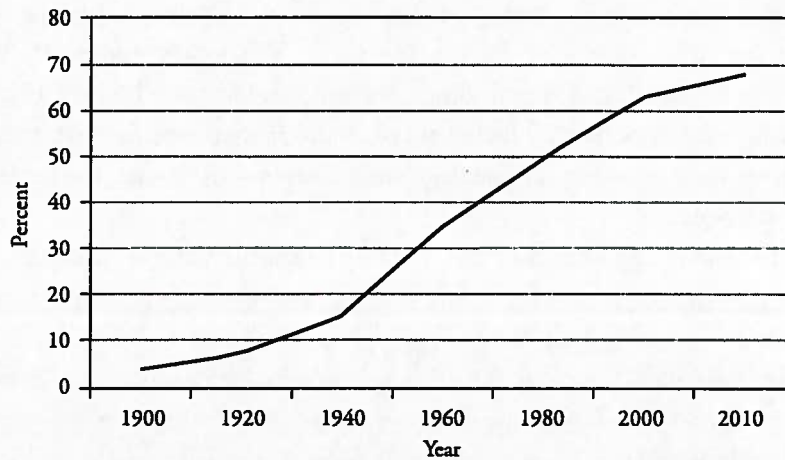
The new service economy emphasizes information and technology, and therefore requires postsecondary education and training for most jobs, especially for the jobs with the highest pay and status. Consequently, an exceptionally high proportion of young Americans, nearly 70%, now continue their education beyond high school. This is a higher proportion than ever before, as Figure 1.3 shows.<sup>5</sup> Most young people wait until they have finished school before they start thinking seriously about making adult commitments such as marriage and parenthood, and for many of them this means postponing those commitments until at least their late twenties.

A second change was the Sexual Revolution, which was sparked by a technological change: the invention of the birth control pill in 1964. The ease and availability of “the Pill” led directly to the Sexual Revolution



**Figure 1.2** The Rise of the Service Economy.

Source: McGill & Bell (2013).

*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 5*

**Figure 1.3** College Enrollment, 1900–2010.

Sources: Arnett & Taber (1994), National Center for Education Statistics (2013).

that began in the late 1960s, including less stringent standards of sexual morality. It became widely (if somewhat grudgingly) accepted that young people no longer had to enter marriage in order to have a regular sexual relationship. Today most young people have a series of sexual relationships before entering marriage,<sup>6</sup> 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 behavior, 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.

The third major change of the 1960s and 1970s that shaped the lives of today’s young people was the Women’s Movement. As a consequence of the Women’s Movement, young women’s options have expanded in ways that make an early entry into adult obligations less desirable for them now, compared to 50 years ago. The young women of 1960 were under a great deal of social pressure to catch a man.<sup>7</sup> Remaining single 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,

## 6 • EMERGING ADULTHOOD

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 twenty-first century, all this has changed. At every level of education, from grade school through graduate school, girls now surpass boys. Fifty-seven percent of the undergraduates in America's colleges and universities are women, according to the most recent figures.<sup>8</sup> 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, business, and medical degrees. 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.

The fourth tectonic shift of the 1960s and 1970s was the Youth Movement, which denigrated adulthood and exalted being, acting, and feeling young. "Never trust anyone over 30" and "I hope I die before I get old" are phrases that remain familiar to anyone who was around during that era. As a consequence of the Youth Movement, 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, parent, and employee. Young people of the 1950s were eager to enter adulthood and "settle down."<sup>9</sup> Perhaps because they grew up during the upheavals of the Great Depression and World War II, attaining the stability of a secure job, marriage, home, and children seemed like a great achievement 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 reject the prospect of marriage, home, and children—eventually. Most of them do want to take on

*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 7*

all of these adult roles, 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 commitments offer security and stability, but also represent a closing of doors—the end of independence, the end of spontaneity, the end of a sense of wide-open possibility.

Emerging adulthood lasts from roughly age 18, when most young people finish secondary school, to age 25, when most people begin to move toward making the commitments that structure adult life: marriage (or a long-term partnership), parenthood, and a long-term job. I sometimes use 18–25 to refer to emerging adulthood and sometimes 18–29, because the end of it is highly variable. Nothing magical happens at age 25 to end it. For most people the late twenties are a time of moving toward a more settled adult life, but there are many, especially the highly educated urban young, who continue their emerging adult lifestyle through their late twenties and into their early thirties. Age 18 to 25 is a conservative range to use when age ranges are required for referring to emerging adulthood, because relatively few 18–25-year-olds have crossed the major thresholds into a stable, established adulthood. However, 18–29 can be legitimately used as well, to include the many people who do not make the transition into established adulthood until closer to age 30. The 18–29 age range also makes most sense internationally, as median ages of entering marriage and parenthood are higher in all other developed countries than they are in the United States, usually around age 30.<sup>10</sup>

Although the rise of emerging adulthood is reflected in rising ages of marriage and parenthood, marriage ages were also relatively high early in the twentieth century and throughout the nineteenth century, especially for young men.<sup>11</sup> 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, that 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.<sup>12</sup> 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. Instead, they are allowed to move into adult responsibilities gradually, at their own pace.

### What Is Emerging Adulthood?

Emerging adulthood is defined primarily by its demographic outline. Longer and more widespread education, later entry to marriage and parenthood, and a prolonged and erratic transition to stable work have opened up a space for a new life stage in between adolescence and young adulthood, and “emerging adulthood” is what I have proposed to call that life stage.<sup>13</sup> These demographic changes have taken place worldwide over the past half century, and so the rise of emerging adulthood is an international phenomenon, true of developed countries across the globe and increasingly of developing countries as well.<sup>14</sup> Wherever there is a substantial number of years between the time young people reach the end of adolescence (around age 18) and the time they enter stable adult roles in love and work, emerging adulthood can be said to be present. However, young people’s experience of emerging adulthood is likely to vary considerably across national, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts. It is best to think of it as one stage, with distinctive demographic characteristics, but with many possible paths through that stage, in terms of how emerging adults experience their education, work, beliefs, self-development, and relationships.

My research has taken place mainly in the context of American society, first in the 300 interviews that were the basis of the first edition of this book, and since then in a variety of other studies. In the course of this research, I have sought to distinguish the features of American emerging adulthood that make it distinct from adolescence or young adulthood, and I will present these features in this section.

I do not claim that these are “universal” features of 18–29-year-olds, regardless of their background. On the contrary, I fully expect that other features will be found to be more important in other cultural and economic contexts around the world. The five features presented here represent my current conclusions as to the distinctive features of American emerging adults, based on my research over the past 20 years. They are proposed as *distinctive* to emerging adulthood but not *unique* to it. That is, they may be experienced in other life stages as well, but I propose that they are more prevalent and prominent in emerging adulthood than in other stages.

*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 9*

So, what are the distinguishing features of emerging adulthood in the United States? What makes it distinct from the adolescence that precedes it and the young adulthood that follows it? There are five main features:

1. *Identity explorations*: answering the question “who am I?” and trying out various life options, especially in love and work;
2. *Instability*, in love, work, and place of residence;
3. *Self-focus*, as obligations to others reach a life-span low point;
4. *Feeling in-between*, in transition, neither adolescent nor adult; and
5. *Possibilities/optimism*, when hopes flourish and people have an unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives.

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

*Identity Explorations*

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of emerging adulthood in the United States is that it is a time when young people explore the available options for their lives in a variety of areas, especially love and work. In the course of these explorations, emerging adults develop an *identity*, that is, they clarify their sense of who they are and what they want out of life. The late teens and early to mid-twenties offer the best opportunity for such identity explorations. 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 an assortment of adult roles, they have an exceptional opportunity to try out different ways of living and different possible choices for love and work.

Of course, it is adolescence rather than emerging adulthood that has typically been associated with identity formation. In 1950, Erik Erikson proposed identity versus role confusion as the central crisis of the adolescent stage of life,<sup>15</sup> and in the decades following his articulation of 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.”<sup>16</sup>

Decades later, this observation applies to many more young people than when he first wrote it. If adolescence is the period from age 10 to 18 and emerging adulthood is the period from (roughly) age 18 to 25, 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> 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:<sup>19</sup> “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, and learn what others find attractive in them—and perhaps 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, but most of their jobs last for only a few months at most.<sup>20</sup> They tend to work in low-skill service jobs—at restaurants, retail stores, and so on—that are 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—concert tickets, restaurant meals, clothes, cars, travel, and so on.

In emerging adulthood, work experiences become more focused on laying the groundwork for an adult occupation. In exploring various work options, and in exploring the educational paths 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 about their abilities and interests. Just as important,



*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 11*

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 choices 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.<sup>21</sup> This is common enough among emerging adults today to have earned a popular acronym, YOLO: You Only Live Once. Emerging adults realize that 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 Teach for America, AmeriCorps, and the Peace Corps find most of their volunteers among emerging adults, 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.

*Instability*

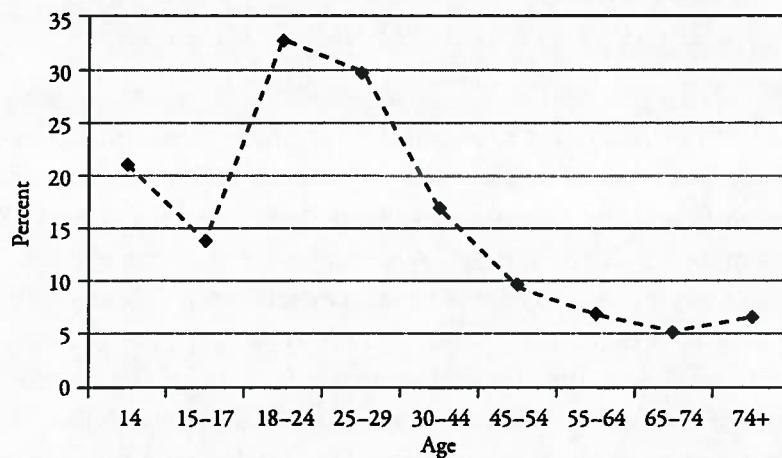
The identity explorations of emerging adults and their shifting choices in love and work make this life stage not only exceptionally full and intense but also exceptionally unstable. Emerging adults know they are supposed to have a Plan with a capital “P,” that is, some kind of idea about the route they will be taking from adolescence to adulthood,<sup>22</sup> 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 high school but discover after

## 12 • EMERGING ADULTHOOD

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 take a step toward clarifying the kind of future they want. But even if they succeed in doing so, this does not mean that 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 insecurities of adolescence diminish, but instability replaces them as a new source of disruption.

The best illustration of the instability of emerging adulthood is in how often they move from one residence to another. As Figure 1.4 indicates, rates of moving spike upward beginning at age 18 and reach their peak in the mid-twenties, then sharply decline. This shows that American 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.<sup>23</sup> Other moves soon follow. If they drop out of college, either temporarily or permanently (as many do), 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



**Figure 1.4** Change of Residence in Past Year, by Age.

Source: US Bureau of the Census (2011).

*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 13*

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 about 40% of American emerging adults, at least one of their moves during the years from age 18–25 will be back home to live with their parents.<sup>24</sup>

All this moving around makes emerging adulthood an unstable time, but it also reflects the identity explorations that take place during the emerging adult years. Many of the moves that 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.

*Self-Focus*

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 (“Who left their towel on the bathroom floor?!”). 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, whether they like it or not, 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 the majority of Americans have married and have had at least one child.<sup>25</sup> A new household, then, with new rules and 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. By age 30, most Americans also have the first job that they will remain in for at least five years.<sup>26</sup> An employer, then, 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? Seek someone new, and if so, how and where? 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 mind what they want, and no one else can really tell them what they want.

To be self-focused is not necessarily to be selfish, and 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 at 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 to learn 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.

### *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 most 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:

*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 15*

“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 anymore!’ 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.”

The reason why so many emerging adults feel in-between is evident from the criteria they consider to be most important for becoming an adult. Their top criteria 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, across social classes, in studies using both questionnaires and interviews, people consistently state these as the top three criteria for adulthood:<sup>27</sup>

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

The “Big 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, most do not feel completely adult until years later, sometime 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. The Big Three have been found to be prevalent not only in the United States but around the world, as we will see in more detail in the final chapter.

*Possibilities/Optimism*

Emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities, when many different futures remain possible, 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

## 16 • EMERGING ADULTHOOD

the fires of real life. Emerging adults look to the future and envision a well-paying, satisfying job, a loving, lifelong marriage to their “soul mate,” and happy children who are above average. 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 imagines that this is what the future holds.

Another aspect of emerging adulthood that makes it the age of possibilities is that it offers the potential for changing dramatically the direction of one’s life. A simple but crucial feature of emerging adulthood in this respect 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 it. If the parents live in poverty, the children live in poverty, too, most likely in dangerous neighborhoods with inferior schools. If a parent is addicted to alcohol or other drugs, the disruptions from the parent’s addiction 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 a troubled family, 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 12.

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.

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

*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 17*

presents the possibility of change. For this limited window of time—seven, perhaps ten 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.

*Research on the Five Features*

How have these five features fared in research since I first proposed them a decade ago? Alan Reifman developed a measure to examine the five features, the Inventory of Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA), and tested it in five studies.<sup>28</sup> Consistent with the theory, participants in their twenties were higher than younger or older participants on the subscales representing the five features: identity explorations, negativity/instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and experimentation/possibilities. Since the publication of the IDEA in 2007, it has been used in many other studies, but usually focusing on a sample in the emerging adult age range rather than comparing participants of different ages.<sup>29</sup>

My own research in the past decade has included a national study in 2012, the Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults, that contained items pertaining to the five features.<sup>30</sup> As shown in Table 1.1, all five features were supported by a majority of 18–29-year-olds. The feature with the lowest level of support, feeling in-between, varied substantially by age, as shown in Figure 1.5. Overall, 50% of the 18–29-year-olds responded “in some ways yes, in some ways no” to the question, “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?” However, in the course of the twenties, feeling fully adult steadily rises, and feeling in-between steadily falls.

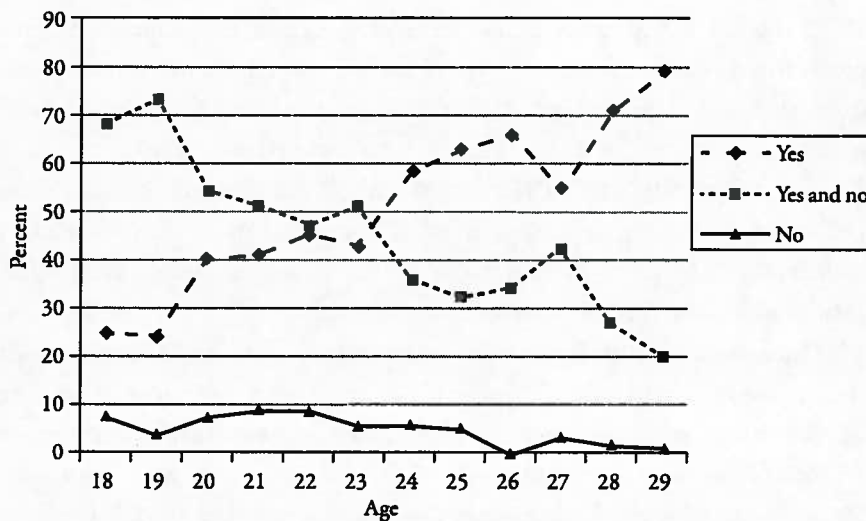
There were age differences on other features as well. The 18–25-year-olds were more likely than 26–29-year-olds to agree with the items pertaining to identity explorations, instability, and self-focus.<sup>31</sup> These findings are important, because, as noted earlier, different age ranges have been used for emerging adulthood, sometimes 18–25 and sometimes 18–29. The findings here suggest that 18–25 is the heart of the age range for emerging adulthood in American society. However, for most people there is nothing about reaching age 25 that results in a sudden and definite transition to adulthood, so, in some ways for some people, emerging adulthood may last through the twenties. Either 18–25 or 18–29 may be an appropriate age range for emerging adulthood, depending on the topic or question being addressed.

18 • EMERGING ADULTHOOD

**Table 1.1** The Five Features of Emerging Adulthood: Percent Agreement in a National (American) Sample

Feature of Emerging Adulthood	%
<b>Identity Explorations</b>	
This is a time of my life for finding out who I really am.	77
<b>Instability</b>	
This time of my life is full of changes.	83
<b>Self-Focus</b>	
This is a time of my life for focusing on myself.	69
<b>Feeling In-Between</b>	
Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?	
No	5
In some ways yes, in some ways no.	45
Yes	50
<b>Possibilities</b>	
At this time of my life, it still seems like anything is possible.	82

Source: Arnett & Walker (2014).



**Figure 1.5** Feeling "In-Between": Changes With Age.

Do the five features vary by gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status (SES)? In the results of the Clark poll, there were few notable differences by gender or ethnicity.<sup>32</sup> The comparisons pertaining to SES are especially worthy of attention, because the most contentious issue surrounding the theory of emerging adulthood since it was proposed is the claim, by critics, that the

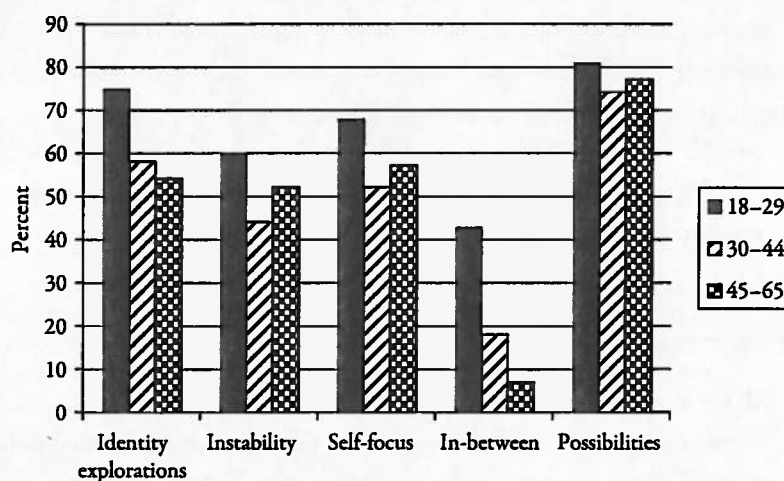


*A Longer Road to Adulthood* • 19

five features apply only to the middle class and above, and do not reflect the harsh realities of life for young people in lower SES levels.<sup>33</sup> In 2011, I devoted an entire book (as co-author) to this question. With Jennifer Tanner, I took the view that emerging adulthood theory applies across SES, whereas Leo Hendry and Marion Kloep disputed this vigorously.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, it is notable that in the 2012 Clark poll, on a representative national sample that included all SES levels, there were no significant differences in any of the five features by SES.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the experience of the emerging adult years differs in many other ways by SES, as we will see throughout the book and especially in Chapter 10.

In 2013 and 2014, I added national samples in Clark polls pertaining to 40–65-year-olds and 25–39-year-olds, respectively, allowing for age comparisons on the five features. For all five features, 18–29-year-olds were more likely than 30–65-year-olds to agree, although agreement was substantial across all age periods.<sup>36</sup> The age patterns are illustrated in Figure 1.6. These results provide support for the theory's proposal that the five features are most prominent during the emerging adult years.

I wish to underscore that, just because the majority of American emerging adults agree that the five features apply to them, and 18–29-year-olds are more likely than older adults to support the five features, this does mean I am in any way claiming that these are universal features of emerging adulthood. They probably do not apply even to all groups within American



**Figure 1.6** The Five Features, by Age Group.

Source: Arnett & Schwab (2014).

society, which is highly diverse, ethnically and economically. Other patterns will surely be found among other groups, nationally and internationally. For example, recent research in China by my student Juan Zhong showed that young women factory workers retained a strong sense of family obligation even after leaving their rural villages for city life, and “learn to care for parents” was their most important marker of reaching adulthood (in contrast to “accept responsibility for one’s self” and other individualistic markers most favored by Americans).<sup>37</sup> Another example of variation is that, within Europe, northern Europeans generally leave home around age 18 or 19, whereas southern Europeans tend to stay home until they enter marriage around age 30, a pattern that suggests less instability in the lives of emerging adults in the south than in the north.<sup>38</sup> The field of emerging adulthood is new, and one of its challenges for the century to come is to chart the diversity of paths within emerging adulthood, among developed countries and also in developing countries as emerging adulthood expands there. “One stage, many paths” should be the guiding principle.

### 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 decide to 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.

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

#### *Why Emerging Adulthood Is Not “Late Adolescence”*

In 1992, the first time I taught a college course on human development across the life span, when I reached the section on adolescence I told my students that, in 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

*A Longer Road to Adulthood* • 21

not finished their education, and few of them were married, and fewer still had become parents. So, they were “late adolescents.”

They were outraged! Okay, 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 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, many emerging adults have moved out of their parents’ home, and their living situations are extremely diverse. Virtually all adolescents are experiencing the dramatic physical changes of puberty. In contrast, emerging adults have reached physical maturity. Virtually all adolescents attend secondary school. In contrast, many emerging adults are enrolled in education or training, but nowhere near all of them. Unlike adolescents, their educational paths are very 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. 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 “young adulthood” does not work.<sup>39</sup> One is that it implies that adulthood has been reached. However, most people in their late teens and early to 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 or synagogue 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 life stage. Using *emerging adulthood* allows us to ascribe a clear definition to a new term and a new life stage.

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? Or “not-so-young adults”? 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 and 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 is superior to young adulthood as a term to refer to young people from the late teens through the twenties.

### *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

*A Longer Road to Adulthood* • 23

of themselves as well 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 age period. There are mountains of research in sociology on “the transition to adulthood,” but most of it focuses on the transitional events that sociologists assume are the defining criteria of adulthood—leaving home, finishing education, entering marriage, and entering parenthood.<sup>40</sup> Sociologists examine the factors that influence the age at which 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 sometime in their late twenties or beyond. But what happens in-between? They finish their education? Is that *all*? 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 of it and our understanding of it, because that term distracts us from examining all 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 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” rather than as a life stage in its own right. This may have been appropriate 50 or 60 years ago, when most people 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 nearly 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 life stage.

### *Why Emerging Adulthood Is Not “Youth”*

One other possible term that must be mentioned is “youth,” which in the late twentieth century was perhaps the most widely used term in the social sciences for the period from the late teens through the twenties.<sup>41</sup> There are a number of reasons why “youth” does not work. “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”). Also, like “young adulthood,” “youth” has been applied to people across a wide age range, from middle childhood through the twenties and thirties. A term that can mean so many things does not really mean anything.

None of the terms used in the past is 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 suggested *emerging adulthood* in the hope that it would 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 part of human development but a life stage that exists under certain conditions that have occurred only quite recently and only in some cultures.<sup>42</sup> The Four Revolutions have been experienced mainly in developed countries, although the consequences are being experienced worldwide.<sup>43</sup> As we have seen, the Four Revolutions have led to the rise of emerging adulthood, reflected in 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 devoted to other purposes.

So, emerging adulthood exists today mainly in the “developed countries” of the West, along with Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea. One reflection of this is in the timing of marriage across countries. Table 1.2 shows the median marriage age for females in a variety of developed countries,

*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 25***Table 1.2** Median Marriage Age (Females) in Selected Countries

Developed Countries	Age	Developing Countries	Age
United States	26	Egypt	21
Canada	28	Ethiopia	17
Germany	30	Ghana	21
France	30	Nigeria	18
Italy	30	India	18
Japan	29	Indonesia	21
Australia	28	Guatemala	19

Source: United Nations (2009).

contrasted with developing countries. (The marriage age for males is typically about two years older than for females.)

Ages of marriage and parenthood are typically calculated on a country-wide 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.<sup>44</sup> 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 whole, so they have a briefer period of emerging adulthood before taking on adult roles.

Variations in socioeconomic status and life circumstances also determine how a young person may experience emerging adulthood, even within a country that is affluent overall.<sup>45</sup> The young woman who has a child outside marriage at age 16 and spends her late teens and early twenties alternating between government dependence and low-paying jobs has little chance for self-focused identity explorations, 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 developed countries, members of minority groups may be less likely to experience their late teens and early twenties as a period of

identity explorations, at least in the domain of work. However, as noted earlier, 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 12, 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.

It may be most useful to think of emerging adulthood as one stage with many possible paths within it. That is, most young people in developed countries experience emerging adulthood, defined as a life stage in-between adolescence and the stable commitments of adulthood, but they experience it in a wide variety of ways depending on their culture, social class, gender, personality, individual life events, and other circumstances. This is the key point: *Emerging adulthood can be said to exist wherever there is a gap of at least several years between the time young people finish secondary school and the time they enter stable adult roles in love and work.* The five features presented in this chapter apply to most American emerging adults, but other features may apply in other cultural contexts. There is not one universal and uniform emerging adulthood, but many emerging adulthoods that vary by cultural, economic, and personal context.<sup>46</sup>

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.<sup>47</sup> 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 be experienced often in urban areas but rarely in rural areas.

However, emerging adulthood is likely to become more pervasive worldwide in the course of the twenty-first century, with the increasing globalization of the world economy. Table 1.3 shows an example of how globalization is affecting the lives of young people, by making tertiary education (that is, education or training beyond secondary school) a more common experience worldwide. Between 1980 and 2010 the proportion of young people in developing



*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 27***Table 1.3** Changes in Tertiary Enrollment in Selected Developing Countries, 1980–present

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

Source: UNESCO (2013).

countries who were enrolled in tertiary education rose sharply. The median ages of entering marriage and parenthood rose in these countries as well.

These changes open up the possibility for the spread of emerging adulthood in developing countries. Rising education reflects economic development. Economic development leads to a rise in the median ages of entering marriage and parenthood. 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 likely that by the end of the twenty-first century, emerging adulthood will be a normative period for young people worldwide. However, even as the service economy rises around the world, and the Technology Revolution spreads as machines continue to replace manufacturing workers, this transition will not necessarily be accompanied by a Sexual Revolution, Women's Movement, or Youth Movement. Consequently, there will continue to be many emerging adulthoods, because 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 following chapters, 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, including Chapter 4 on romantic and sexual issues and Chapter 5 on finding a marriage partner. Chapter 6 discusses the diverse paths that emerging adults take through college, and Chapter 7 examines their search for meaningful work. In Chapter 8 we examine emerging adults' media use, and in Chapter 9 their religious beliefs and values. Chapter 10 focuses on the question of social class in relation to emerging adulthood. Chapter 11 is devoted to the most prominent problems faced by emerging adults. Then Chapter 12 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 13 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 was originally based mainly on over 300 in-depth structured interviews that I and my research assistants conducted in Missouri, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New Orleans during the 1990s (hereafter "my original study"). 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.<sup>48</sup>

Since the first edition of this book was published 10 years ago, I have continued my scholarship on emerging adulthood. In recent years this has included three national surveys: in 2012, the Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults, a survey of 18–29-year-olds (hereafter, "the national Clark poll"); in 2013, a survey of parents of 18–29-year-olds (hereafter, "the Clark parents poll"); and in 2014, a survey of 25–39-year-olds.<sup>49</sup> I have incorporated the results of these new surveys into this edition of the book. In addition, I use statistics and insights from other studies that include 18–29 year olds.

I present a variety of statistics in the course of the book, but I also rely strongly on excerpts from my interviews to illustrate my points.<sup>50</sup> When I first began studying this topic, the interview approach seemed appropriate to me for exploring a period of life that had not been studied much and on 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

*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 29*

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 often a self-focused period of life, the young people we interviewed 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.

# Chapter 2

## What Is It Like to Be an Emerging Adult?

### *Four Profiles*

Douglas Coupland's 1991 novel *Generation X* can be credited with first drawing widespread attention to the fact that something new was happening in the lives of young people in their twenties. The novel follows the lives and musings of Andy, Claire, and Dag as they wander through their late twenties together. None of them has been able yet to find enjoyable work, and they refuse to settle into jobs that may pay well but involve "endless stress" and meaningless work "done grudgingly to little applause." As for love, none of them is close to getting married, but as Andy says, "I *do* at least recognize the fact that I don't want to go through life alone." Their feelings about entering adulthood are summed up in the title of one chapter, "Dead at 30 Buried at 70." As good novels often do, *Generation X* not only describes the lives of individual characters but, in doing so, also provides vivid insights into what it is like to live in a certain place at a certain time.

My aim in this book is different from Coupland's, of course, and not just because it is nonfiction rather than fiction. I want to describe common patterns in the lives of emerging adults, not just individual characters, and to illustrate these patterns I will take quotes from various interviews and weave them together, in addition to presenting survey results. However, there is also much to be gained from describing individuals, so that we can see what a complete life looks like in emerging adulthood. If we only combined isolated parts from the interviews, we would never see how all the parts fit together.

# EMERGING ADULTHOOD

The Winding Road from the Late Teens  
Through the Twenties

**Second Edition**

JEFFREY JENSEN ARNETT

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## CONTENTS

- Preface to the Second Edition vii  
Preface to the First Edition xiii
1. A Longer Road to Adulthood 1
  2. What Is It Like to Be an Emerging Adult? Four Profiles 30
  3. From Conflict to Companionship: A New Relationship with Parents 49
  4. Love and Sex: New Freedoms, New Problems 83
  5. Meandering Toward Marriage 114
  6. The Road Through College: Twists and Turns 142
  7. Work: More Than a Job 169
  8. Digital Natives: Emerging Adults' Many Media Uses 194
  9. Sources of Meaning: Religious Beliefs and Values 211
  10. How Important Is Social Class? 244
  11. Wrong Turns and Dead Ends 266
  12. Sometimes Goodbye Is a Second Chance: Resilience in Emerging Adulthood 291
  13. Beyond Emerging Adulthood: What Does It Mean to Become an Adult? 311

vi • *Contents*

Notes 335

References 363

Index 385



## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

When I first became interested in 18–29-year-olds about 20 years ago, it was a pretty solitary area of research, for a psychologist. Research on human development within psychology has always been skewed toward the early years of life, and psychologists had devoted little attention to 18–29-year-olds. True, there were innumerable studies of college students, but mainly in social psychology studies, based on the dubious assumption that American college students in introductory psychology courses could be taken to represent all humanity. Few of these studies considered how young people in this age group might be distinct from adolescents or from older adults. Sociology devoted more attention to 18–29-year-olds, but mainly in studies looking at the timing and consequences of transition events such as leaving home, finishing education, finding employment, marriage, and parenthood.

I was interested in far more than this—their relations with parents, their love lives, their aspirations for work, their religious beliefs, their views of adulthood, and their hopes for the future. It was solitary work at first, my research on 18–29-year-olds, but that was what had drawn me to it and what made it so exciting. It felt like an uncharted continent, full of surprises and discoveries. For a long time, every time I interviewed people they taught me something I had not known before. It was exhilarating.

In the course of the 1990s I interviewed over 200 18–29-year-olds, in Columbia, Missouri (where I was a junior professor at the University of Missouri) and in San Francisco (where I spent a sabbatical year during 1996–1997). Graduate student research assistants interviewed nearly 100 more, mainly Latinos in Los Angeles and African Americans in New Orleans. We interviewed young people of all socioeconomic backgrounds, from high school dropouts to people with graduate degrees, and from a wide range of ethnic groups, including Whites, African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans.

viii • *Preface to the Second Edition*

For nearly a decade, I published little of it. I was excited about what I was discovering in the interviews with 18–29-year-olds, but it took me years to reach a point where I believed I had learned enough to write about them with authority. Furthermore, I wasn't sure what to call them. Were they “late adolescents”? That is what I assumed going in, because, like adolescents, most had not found stable long-term work or entered marriage and parenthood. However, I soon dropped this assumption, as they were far more mature and insightful than the adolescents I had interviewed previously, and less dependent on their parents. Nor did they seem like “young adults,” because this implied a more settled life stage than most of them were experiencing. It was obvious to me that it made no sense to think of them as being in a stage of “young adulthood” that would stretch from age 18 to age 40.

Eventually I concluded that they were neither adolescents nor young adults but something in-between, something that required a new term and a new conceptualization. They were taking longer to grow up than young people had in the past, as measured by their entry to stable adult roles as well as their own self-perceptions of not-fully-adult status. To understand their development, I decided it would be helpful to propose the addition of a new stage to the normal life span of people in developed countries. After considering (and rejecting) “post-adolescence,” I proposed that we call it *emerging adulthood*.

I presented an outline of the theory of emerging adulthood in 2000, in an article in *American Psychologist*.<sup>1</sup> Although it was a brief article, offering only a sketch of the theory, the term and the idea were quickly embraced by many psychologists and practitioners. I think that there were many people who, like me, had concluded that we needed a new way of understanding 18–29-year-olds, and some way of distinguishing them from adolescents or young adults. As of early 2014, that article has been cited over 4,500 times, according to googlescholar.com.

## The Rise of Emerging Adulthood

One of my goals, or at least hopes, in proposing the theory of emerging adulthood, was that giving a new name to the 18–29-year-old age period would inspire other researchers to devote attention to it. As I stated in that 2000 *American Psychologist* article:

[T]he dearth of studies among young people in their twenties . . . arises from the lack of a clear developmental conception of this age group. Scholars

*Preface to the Second Edition* • ix

have no clearly articulated way of thinking about development from the late teens through the twenties, no paradigm for this age period, so they may not think about young people at these ages as a focus for developmental research. Emerging adulthood is offered as a new paradigm, a new way of thinking about development from the late teens through the twenties, especially ages 18–25, partly in the hope that a definite conception of this period will lead to an increase in scholarly attention to it.<sup>2</sup>

Fourteen years later, this hope has come to fruition. There is now a Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood (SSEA; see [www.ssea.org](http://www.ssea.org)) with over 400 members (as of June 2014). The SSEA sponsors a thriving journal, *Emerging Adulthood* (see <http://eax.sagepub.com/>). Six conferences on emerging adulthood have been held, and a seventh is in the works for 2015. Research on emerging adulthood is taking place all over the world—not just in psychology but in sociology, education, anthropology, and many other fields. Paradigms matter. Proposing a new life stage of emerging adulthood drew attention to the possibilities for research on 18–29-year-olds, and those possibilities are being energetically pursued by a wide range of talented people.

### **My Scholarship Since the First Edition**

In the first edition of this book, I laid out a more fully developed theory of emerging adulthood, proposing that it is characterized by five distinctive features: identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities/optimism. Drawing upon the 300 interviews that I and my students had conducted in the previous decade, I sought to cover all the key aspects of the lives of 18–29-year-olds.

In the decade since the first edition, a substantial part of my scholarship has been devoted to continuing to develop the theory of emerging adulthood and to building up emerging adulthood as field of scholarship. With Jennifer Tanner, I edited a book, published in 2006, that included contributions by eminent scholars from diverse fields, on topics ranging from identity development to sexuality to mental health.<sup>3</sup> I have published book chapters examining the international scope of emerging adulthood.<sup>4</sup> I have defended emerging adulthood theory from its critics, most notably in a 2011 book with Marion Kloep, Leo Hendry, and Jennifer Tanner, *Debating Emerging Adulthood*.<sup>5</sup> I have defended emerging adults, too, from critics who are all too eager to fling unfounded negative stereotypes at them.<sup>6</sup>

x • *Preface to the Second Edition*

In my research over the past decade, I conducted interviews and surveys with emerging adults in Denmark as a Fulbright Scholar during 2005–2006. I also supervised a student, Marie Krog Overgaard, who interviewed Italian emerging adults the next year.<sup>7</sup> With Elizabeth Fishel, I surveyed and interviewed parents of emerging adults for a book we co-authored in 2012, *Getting to 30: A Parent's Guide to the Twentysomething Years*.<sup>8</sup>

Most notably, I have had the opportunity in recent years to direct several national surveys, funded by Clark University, where I am a research professor, and the results of these surveys are abundantly represented in this tenth anniversary edition. In 2012, the Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults surveyed over 1,000 18–29-year-olds across the United States, from diverse regions, ethnic groups, and socioeconomic backgrounds. In this tenth anniversary edition I use the results of this survey to examine national patterns on many of the questions I examined in the first edition, and also to provide national data on new topics, including media use and mental health. In 2013, the Clark University Poll of Parents of Emerging Adults surveyed over 1,000 parents of 18–29-year-olds, again comprising a diverse, nationally representative sample. Results from this poll have added substantial new information to Chapter 3, on relations with parents. Finally, the 2014 Clark University Poll of Established Adults surveyed over 1,000 persons ages 25–39, in order to gain insights into development after emerging adulthood. This survey was conducted just before the publication of this tenth anniversary edition, so few of the findings were available yet for inclusion in this book, but Chapter 1 contains data from this survey regarding features of emerging adulthood. Reports on all three of the Clark polls can be found at <http://www.clarku.edu/clark-poll-emerging-adults/>.

### **New Chapters in the Tenth Anniversary Edition**

Over the 20 years I have been interviewing, thinking about, and writing about emerging adults, I would say there has been more stability than change in what I have found. I began my research in 1993, as the United States was coming out of a recession, and as I publish the tenth anniversary edition of this book, in 2014, we are again coming out of a recession. In-between was the boom of the late 1990s and then the stagnation of the early years of the twenty-first century. Throughout these economic ups and downs, I have found that emerging adults always struggle to find a place in a labor market that is vast, complex, and nearly always rewards people who have

*Preface to the Second Edition* • xi

more experience and expertise than emerging adults have. Those emerging adults who have not obtained education and training beyond high school especially struggle, as the economy moves steadily away from manufacturing and toward services that require higher-level skills and credentials. But even among emerging adults who have obtained a college degree, the transition from school to work is often rough. Across educational levels, emerging adults seek work that will not only pay well but that will be challenging, rewarding, and self-fulfilling. That is an aspiration that is elusive for all.

The biggest change from 20 years ago in the lives of emerging adults is the explosion of media technology and the increasingly prominent place it has in their lives. Twenty years ago, the Internet, e-mail, and cell phones were still a novelty. Even 10 years ago, when the first edition was published, there was no Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. Now, most emerging adults can scarcely imagine life without a constant connection to their electronic worlds. Consequently, it was essential to add a chapter on media use (Chapter 8) to this tenth anniversary edition.

I have added two other chapters to this edition, on social class issues (Chapter 10) and on problems (Chapter 11). The topic of social class has been a contentious one since I first proposed the theory of emerging adulthood. Although I have always included young people from diverse social class backgrounds in my research, and one of my reasons for proposing the theory in 2000 was to draw attention to 18–29-year-olds who were not college students,<sup>9</sup> critics of the theory have nevertheless claimed that it applies only to the college-educated middle class. Consequently, I felt it was essential to address this claim directly in this edition of the book. Fortunately, the 2012 Clark poll allows for a test of claims related to social class, because it was composed of a nationally representative sample of Americans ages 18–29, from all social class backgrounds.

The chapter on problems also seemed like a necessary addition. There are some kinds of problems, such as substance use, that peak during the emerging adult years. Furthermore, emerging adulthood is a complex period with respect to mental health, because feelings of depression and anxiety are strikingly high, even as most people are also optimistic and regard their current time of life as fun and exciting. Those complexities are now explored in Chapter 11.

The focus of the book remains on young Americans, rather than emerging adults worldwide. I consider myself a cultural psychologist, and I always seek to add a cultural context to my observations on development during

*xii • Preface to the Second Edition*

emerging adulthood. However, except for the small studies on Danish and Italian emerging adults mentioned above, all my research has been on young Americans. They are the population I know best. This book contains a number of international comparisons, and mentions research from other countries, but it is mainly on American emerging adults. I am delighted that researchers around the world are now examining the forms that emerging adulthood may take in their countries, and my own perspective will continue to be expanded by their findings.

**Acknowledgments and Dedication**

It has been a pleasure to write the tenth anniversary edition of this book. In the course of updating the previous chapters and adding the three new chapters, I have been amazed to observe how much has been learned over the past 10 years about emerging adults. I am grateful to all the scholars who are working in emerging adulthood research and have enhanced my understanding of this new life stage.

I also wish to thank the people of Oxford University Press, especially Sarah Harrington, who immediately supported the idea of a tenth anniversary edition when I proposed it. In my view, OUP consistently publishes the most compelling, important academic books in the world, and it is an honor to be among their authors.

Finally, I wish to thank all the people who were inspired by the first edition of this book, and have let me know it. This includes not only my fellow scholars, but also therapists, educators, policymakers, parents, and emerging adults themselves. It was your enthusiasm for the first edition that drove me to create the new edition and to make it as good as I could. This tenth anniversary edition is dedicated to you.

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett  
Worcester, Massachusetts

## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

The origin of this book dates from about ten years ago, when I was a junior professor at the University of Missouri. As is often the case for those of us who do research in psychology, my interest in the topic was drawn from my own experience. At that point in my life, after many of years of education, I finally had a job that I expected to be in for a long time to come. After many years of dating, I had finally met and was living with the person I hoped to marry. After years of moving around from one place to another every year or two or three in pursuit of new opportunities and experiences, I was ready to stay in one place for a while and put down some roots. I felt at last that I had reached adulthood.

I began to wonder, how and when do other people feel they have reached adulthood? It occurred to me that there is no social or communal ritual in American society to mark that passage. Instead, it is left to each of us to determine when the threshold to adulthood has been reached, and what signifies it.

I had been doing research on adolescence for several years at the time, so it was easy for me to turn the focus of my research to the question of what it means to move from adolescence to adulthood. I soon learned that there was not much in psychology that had explored the topic, but there was a great deal of research in sociology on what was called “the transition to adulthood.” Sociologists defined the transition to adulthood in terms of distinct transition events, specifically: finishing education, entering full-time work, marriage, and parenthood. This seemed perfectly reasonable to me. My own sense of reaching adulthood had been marked by entering full-time work and, if not marriage, at least feeling ready for marriage.

I was quite surprised, then, when I began to ask college students about what they believed marked the transition to adulthood and found that

xiv • *Preface to the First Edition*

for them entering full-time work and marriage had nothing to do with it. Nor did the other sociological transitions, finishing education and entering parenthood. In fact, all four of the sociological transitions ended up rock bottom when I surveyed college students about possible criteria for adulthood. Instead of the sociological transitions, the most important criteria for adulthood to these college students were more intangible and psychological: accepting responsibility for one's actions, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent.

Well, I thought, maybe that's because they're college students, and being in college leads them to think in more abstract and psychological terms. Maybe people in the same age group who were not in college would see the transition to adulthood more in terms of transition events, like the sociologists did. But when I surveyed and interviewed them, I came up with the same results as I had for the college students, and there were very few differences by educational level or socioeconomic background.

By now I was thoroughly intrigued, and wanted to know more about what was going on in the lives of people experiencing the transition to adulthood. I started a study in Missouri of young people in their twenties, including both college and non-college participants, and asked them a broad range of questions—on their family lives, on love and sex and marriage, on their college and work experiences, on what they value most and what they believe about religious questions, and more. I spent a year in San Francisco and continued my research, focusing on Asian Americans and African Americans. I had graduate students conduct interviews on Latinos in Los Angeles and African Americans in New Orleans.

The more research I did, the more I talked to people in their twenties, the less satisfied I became with describing their development in terms of the transition to adulthood. Yes, the transition to adulthood takes place during this period, but that term does not begin to cover all that is going on in their lives from the time they leave high school to the time they reach full adulthood. Calling it "the transition to adulthood" seemed to diminish it, as if it were merely a transition connecting the two more important periods of adolescence and young adulthood. And it lasts so long, at least from age 18 to 25 and usually longer, as long or longer than any stage of childhood or adolescence, why shouldn't it be regarded as a distinct period of life in its own right?

I looked for existing theories that would provide a framework for understanding the transition to adulthood as a separate developmental period, but could not find anything satisfying. The most commonly discussed idea was



*Preface to the First Edition • xv*

Kenneth Keniston's idea of "youth," but "youth" seemed to me a dubious choice of terms for this age period, because it was already used in so many other ways, to describe people as young as middle childhood and as old as their thirties. Besides, Keniston's ideas on "youth" were based mainly on the college student protesters of the 1960s, an atypical group at an unusual time in American history, and seemed to me to have little application to the present.

So, I decided to create my own theory of development from the late teens through the twenties, and this book is the result of those efforts. Already I have published numerous articles in scholarly journals outlining the theory, but this is my first attempt to present a comprehensive account of it, based on my research over the past decade. I hope scholars will find it compelling and persuasive, but I regard this book as the beginning of forming an understanding of emerging adulthood, not the last word. Already many other scholars are conducting research using the theory of emerging adulthood, and it is a field of study that is growing rapidly. The first scholarly conference was held at Harvard University in November of 2003, and there will certainly be more. A group of scholars has been formed to share information and support in studying emerging adulthood. Now that we are beginning to develop a shared language for talking about this age period, there are surely many exciting discoveries to come.

This is a book not just for scholars but for anyone interested in this topic and this age period. I hope many emerging adults will find it provocative and informative, and their parents as well. It was my goal to write a book that would make an important contribution to scholarship on emerging adulthood but that most people could read and would find engaging whether they were scholars or not. So, there are no complex statistical analyses, and most of the information comparing my results to other studies on the age period can be found in the Notes rather than in the main text of the book. What I have focused on instead is the voices of emerging adults, that is, what they say about their lives on a wide range of topics.

I present some questionnaire results, but mainly I present the results from the interviews, because that is where I learned the most about emerging adults. Questionnaires have a useful place in research, but in my experience as a researcher there is simply no substitute for sitting face-to-face with someone and talking to them about what they have experienced and what it means to them. I believe that in all psychological research it is important to listen to how people describe and interpret their lives—OK,

xvi • *Preface to the First Edition*

except infants—but it may be especially important in emerging adulthood, because it is a highly self-reflective time of life, a time when they think a lot about who they are and what they want out of life. And it's fun to listen to them, as you'll see in the course of this book. No matter what their educational background, they are remarkably articulate, often funny, sometimes moving.

I have many people to thank for their support in making this book possible. Although I did most of the interviews myself, I had assistance from numerous students along the way, including Katie Ramos and Diane Rutledge in Missouri and Los Angeles, Terrolyn Carter in New Orleans, and Gretchen Cooke, Colleen O'Connell, and Megan O'Donnell in San Francisco. Several of my colleagues read part or all of the book before publication and provided comments and suggestions, including Jim Côté, Bill Damon, Wyndol Furman, Steve Hamilton, Hugh McIntosh, Mike Shanahan, Shmuel Shulman, Jennifer Tanner, and Niobe Way. Special thanks goes to my wife Lene Jensen, who read many a draft without complaint and always offered insightful and helpful comments. Thanks also to Catherine Carlin, psychology editor at Oxford University Press, for understanding what I was aiming for in this book and enthusiastically supporting it. Finally, I wish to thank the hundreds of emerging adults who opened up their lives to me in the interviews that are the foundation of this book. You taught me an immense amount, and I am grateful for it.

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett  
University Park, Maryland

# Chapter 1

## A Longer Road to Adulthood

In the past half century 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 1960, 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 a role as 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 and parenthood are at least six years off. 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 not only pays well but will be enjoyable and fulfilling.

For the young Americans of the twenty-first century, the road to adulthood is a long one. They leave home at age 18 or 19, but most do not marry, become parents, or 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 is a time of high hopes and big dreams. However, it is also a time of anxiety, 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 uneasiness, wide-open possibility and confusion, new freedoms and new fears.

The rise in the ages of entering marriage and parenthood, the spread of education and training beyond secondary school, and prolonged job instability

during the twenties reflect the rise of a new life stage for young people in the United States and other economically developed countries, lasting from the late teens through the mid- to late twenties. This period is not simply an “extended adolescence,” because it is very 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 most of them feel they have not yet reached adulthood. It is a new and historically unprecedented stage of the life course, so it requires a new term and a new way of thinking. I have proposed that we call it *emerging adulthood*.

For some time, 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. More recently, a generation of “Millennials” born in the years before 2000 has been claimed to share certain characteristics, such as an obsession with social media. However, the characteristics of today’s young people are not merely generational. The changes that have created emerging adulthood are here to stay. There seems to be little reason to doubt that the young people of the twenty-first century 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 life stage 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 20 years, 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. At the end of the chapter I discuss cultural variations in emerging adulthood. Because most of my research has taken place in the United States, most of this book focuses on American emerging adults, but emerging adulthood is an international phenomenon.

## **The Rise of Emerging Adulthood: Four Revolutions**

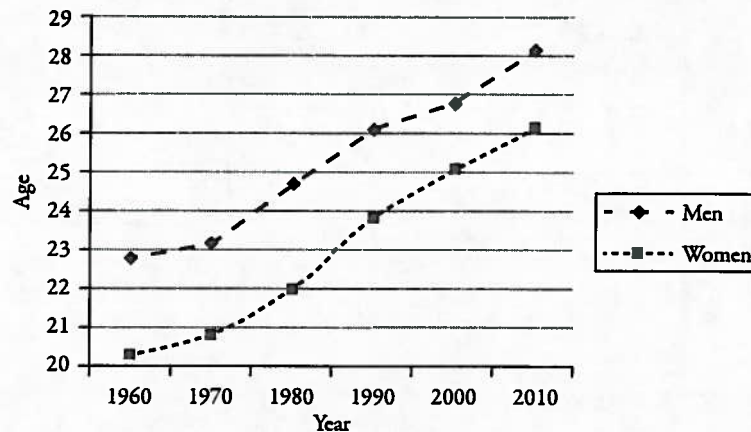
Emerging adulthood has been created in part by the steep rise in the typical ages of marriage and parenthood that has taken place since the middle of

*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 3*

the twentieth century. As you can see in Figure 1.1, in 1960 the median age of marriage in the United States was just 20.3 for women and 22.8 for men. Even as recently as 1970, these ages had risen only slightly. However, since 1970 there has been a dramatic shift in the ages when Americans typically get married. By 2010 the typical age of marriage was over 26 for women and over 28 for men, a six-year rise for both sexes in the span of just four decades—and still rising every year.<sup>1</sup> The age of entering parenthood followed a similar pattern, although far more first births take place outside marriage now (48% as of 2010) than was true in 1960.<sup>2</sup>

Later ages of marriage and parenthood have created a space between the late teens and the late twenties for the new life stage of emerging adulthood. But these later ages were not causes of the new life stage in and of themselves. Rather, they were reflections of other vast changes taking place in modern societies. Four revolutionary changes took place in the 1960s and 1970s that laid the foundation for the world as we know it today, including the new life stage of emerging adulthood: the Technology Revolution, the Sexual Revolution, the Women's Movement, and the Youth Movement.

By the Technology Revolution, I do not mean iPads and iPhones but the manufacturing technologies that transformed the American economy. Because of extraordinary advances in technology, machines became able to perform most of the manufacturing jobs that were once the main source of employment in developed countries. (Manufacturing production in the United States is actually six times higher now than it was in 1950, but



**Figure 1.1** Median Marriage Age, United States, 1960–2010.

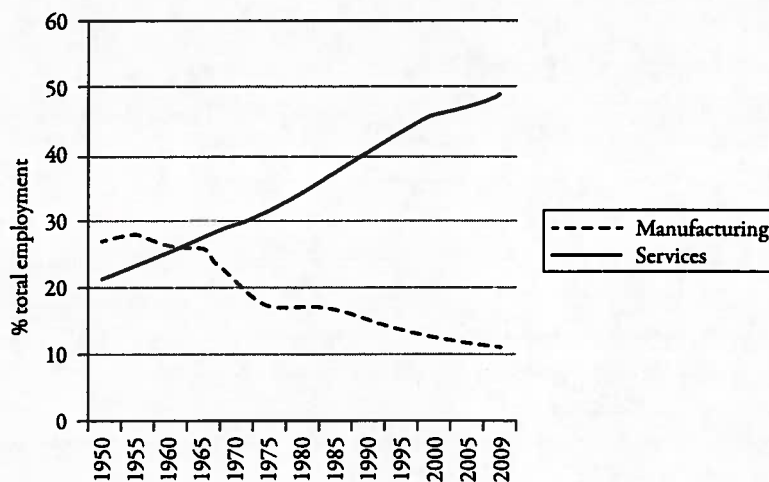
Source: Stritof & Stritof (2014).

## 4 • EMERGING ADULthood

new technologies have made that possible with far fewer jobs.)<sup>3</sup> As a consequence of this revolution, the United States and other developed countries have shifted from a manufacturing economy to a service economy that requires information and technology skills. In the early twentieth century, most work entailed *making things* in factory-based manufacturing jobs. By the early twenty-first century, most work involved *using information* in service-based work such as business, finance, insurance, education, and health. Figure 1.2 shows how the service sector has replaced the manufacturing sector as the primary basis of economic activity in the United States since the mid-twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

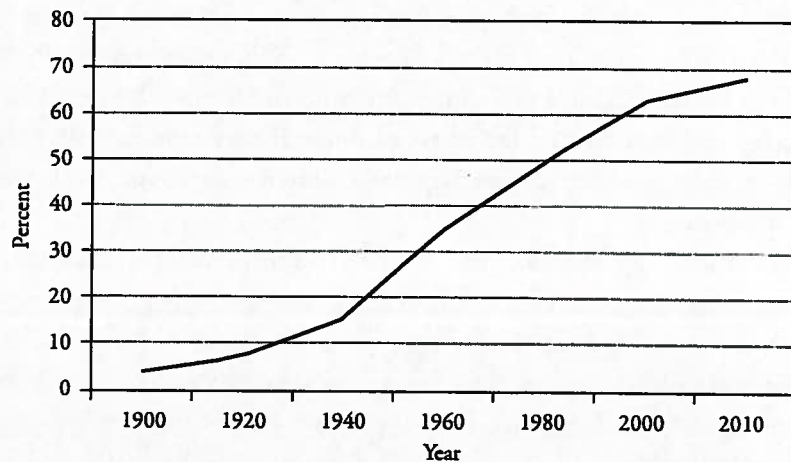
The new service economy emphasizes information and technology, and therefore requires postsecondary education and training for most jobs, especially for the jobs with the highest pay and status. Consequently, an exceptionally high proportion of young Americans, nearly 70%, now continue their education beyond high school. This is a higher proportion than ever before, as Figure 1.3 shows.<sup>5</sup> Most young people wait until they have finished school before they start thinking seriously about making adult commitments such as marriage and parenthood, and for many of them this means postponing those commitments until at least their late twenties.

A second change was the Sexual Revolution, which was sparked by a technological change: the invention of the birth control pill in 1964. The ease and availability of “the Pill” led directly to the Sexual Revolution



**Figure 1.2** The Rise of the Service Economy.

Source: McGill & Bell (2013).

*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 5*

**Figure 1.3** College Enrollment, 1900–2010.

Sources: Arnett & Taber (1994), National Center for Education Statistics (2013).

that began in the late 1960s, including less stringent standards of sexual morality. It became widely (if somewhat grudgingly) accepted that young people no longer had to enter marriage in order to have a regular sexual relationship. Today most young people have a series of sexual relationships before entering marriage,<sup>6</sup> 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 behavior, 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.

The third major change of the 1960s and 1970s that shaped the lives of today’s young people was the Women’s Movement. As a consequence of the Women’s Movement, young women’s options have expanded in ways that make an early entry into adult obligations less desirable for them now, compared to 50 years ago. The young women of 1960 were under a great deal of social pressure to catch a man.<sup>7</sup> Remaining single 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,

## 6 • EMERGING ADULthood

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 twenty-first century, all this has changed. At every level of education, from grade school through graduate school, girls now surpass boys. Fifty-seven percent of the undergraduates in America's colleges and universities are women, according to the most recent figures.<sup>8</sup> 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, business, and medical degrees. 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.

The fourth tectonic shift of the 1960s and 1970s was the Youth Movement, which denigrated adulthood and exalted being, acting, and feeling young. "Never trust anyone over 30" and "I hope I die before I get old" are phrases that remain familiar to anyone who was around during that era. As a consequence of the Youth Movement, 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, parent, and employee. Young people of the 1950s were eager to enter adulthood and "settle down."<sup>9</sup> Perhaps because they grew up during the upheavals of the Great Depression and World War II, attaining the stability of a secure job, marriage, home, and children seemed like a great achievement 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 reject the prospect of marriage, home, and children—eventually. Most of them do want to take on



*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 7*

all of these adult roles, 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 commitments offer security and stability, but also represent a closing of doors—the end of independence, the end of spontaneity, the end of a sense of wide-open possibility.

Emerging adulthood lasts from roughly age 18, when most young people finish secondary school, to age 25, when most people begin to move toward making the commitments that structure adult life: marriage (or a long-term partnership), parenthood, and a long-term job. I sometimes use 18–25 to refer to emerging adulthood and sometimes 18–29, because the end of it is highly variable. Nothing magical happens at age 25 to end it. For most people the late twenties are a time of moving toward a more settled adult life, but there are many, especially the highly educated urban young, who continue their emerging adult lifestyle through their late twenties and into their early thirties. Age 18 to 25 is a conservative range to use when age ranges are required for referring to emerging adulthood, because relatively few 18–25-year-olds have crossed the major thresholds into a stable, established adulthood. However, 18–29 can be legitimately used as well, to include the many people who do not make the transition into established adulthood until closer to age 30. The 18–29 age range also makes most sense internationally, as median ages of entering marriage and parenthood are higher in all other developed countries than they are in the United States, usually around age 30.<sup>10</sup>

Although the rise of emerging adulthood is reflected in rising ages of marriage and parenthood, marriage ages were also relatively high early in the twentieth century and throughout the nineteenth century, especially for young men.<sup>11</sup> 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, that 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.<sup>12</sup> 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. Instead, they are allowed to move into adult responsibilities gradually, at their own pace.

### What Is Emerging Adulthood?

Emerging adulthood is defined primarily by its demographic outline. Longer and more widespread education, later entry to marriage and parenthood, and a prolonged and erratic transition to stable work have opened up a space for a new life stage in between adolescence and young adulthood, and “emerging adulthood” is what I have proposed to call that life stage.<sup>13</sup> These demographic changes have taken place worldwide over the past half century, and so the rise of emerging adulthood is an international phenomenon, true of developed countries across the globe and increasingly of developing countries as well.<sup>14</sup> Wherever there is a substantial number of years between the time young people reach the end of adolescence (around age 18) and the time they enter stable adult roles in love and work, emerging adulthood can be said to be present. However, young people’s experience of emerging adulthood is likely to vary considerably across national, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts. It is best to think of it as one stage, with distinctive demographic characteristics, but with many possible paths through that stage, in terms of how emerging adults experience their education, work, beliefs, self-development, and relationships.

My research has taken place mainly in the context of American society, first in the 300 interviews that were the basis of the first edition of this book, and since then in a variety of other studies. In the course of this research, I have sought to distinguish the features of American emerging adulthood that make it distinct from adolescence or young adulthood, and I will present these features in this section.

I do not claim that these are “universal” features of 18–29-year-olds, regardless of their background. On the contrary, I fully expect that other features will be found to be more important in other cultural and economic contexts around the world. The five features presented here represent my current conclusions as to the distinctive features of American emerging adults, based on my research over the past 20 years. They are proposed as *distinctive* to emerging adulthood but not *unique* to it. That is, they may be experienced in other life stages as well, but I propose that they are more prevalent and prominent in emerging adulthood than in other stages.

*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 9*

So, what are the distinguishing features of emerging adulthood in the United States? What makes it distinct from the adolescence that precedes it and the young adulthood that follows it? There are five main features:

1. *Identity explorations*: answering the question “who am I?” and trying out various life options, especially in love and work;
2. *Instability*, in love, work, and place of residence;
3. *Self-focus*, as obligations to others reach a life-span low point;
4. *Feeling in-between*, in transition, neither adolescent nor adult; and
5. *Possibilities/optimism*, when hopes flourish and people have an unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives.

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

*Identity Explorations*

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of emerging adulthood in the United States is that it is a time when young people explore the available options for their lives in a variety of areas, especially love and work. In the course of these explorations, emerging adults develop an *identity*, that is, they clarify their sense of who they are and what they want out of life. The late teens and early to mid-twenties offer the best opportunity for such identity explorations. 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 an assortment of adult roles, they have an exceptional opportunity to try out different ways of living and different possible choices for love and work.

Of course, it is adolescence rather than emerging adulthood that has typically been associated with identity formation. In 1950, Erik Erikson proposed identity versus role confusion as the central crisis of the adolescent stage of life,<sup>15</sup> and in the decades following his articulation of 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,

## 10 • EMERGING ADULTHOOD

“during which the young adult through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society.”<sup>16</sup>

Decades later, this observation applies to many more young people than when he first wrote it. If adolescence is the period from age 10 to 18 and emerging adulthood is the period from (roughly) age 18 to 25, 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> 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:<sup>19</sup> “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, and learn what others find attractive in them—and perhaps 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, but most of their jobs last for only a few months at most.<sup>20</sup> They tend to work in low-skill service jobs—at restaurants, retail stores, and so on—that are 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—concert tickets, restaurant meals, clothes, cars, travel, and so on.

In emerging adulthood, work experiences become more focused on laying the groundwork for an adult occupation. In exploring various work options, and in exploring the educational paths 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 about their abilities and interests. Just as important,

*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 11*

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 choices 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.<sup>21</sup> This is common enough among emerging adults today to have earned a popular acronym, YOLO: You Only Live Once. Emerging adults realize that 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 Teach for America, AmeriCorps, and the Peace Corps find most of their volunteers among emerging adults, 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.

*Instability*

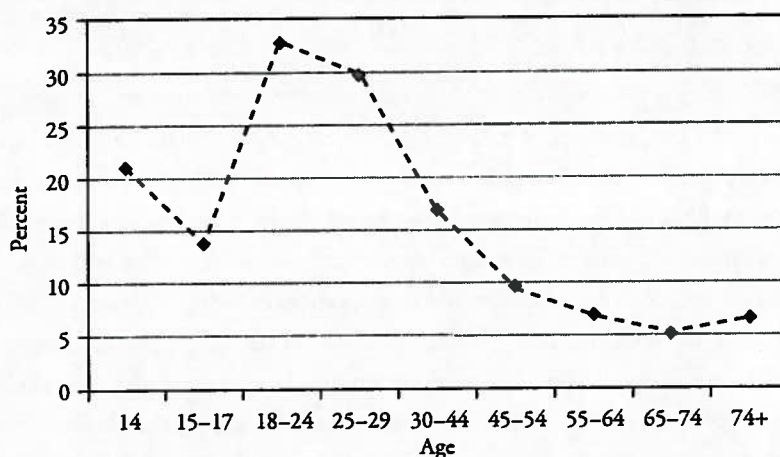
The identity explorations of emerging adults and their shifting choices in love and work make this life stage not only exceptionally full and intense but also exceptionally unstable. Emerging adults know they are supposed to have a Plan with a capital “P,” that is, some kind of idea about the route they will be taking from adolescence to adulthood,<sup>22</sup> 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 high school but discover after

## 12 • EMERGING ADULthood

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 take a step toward clarifying the kind of future they want. But even if they succeed in doing so, this does not mean that 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 insecurities of adolescence diminish, but instability replaces them as a new source of disruption.

The best illustration of the instability of emerging adulthood is in how often they move from one residence to another. As Figure 1.4 indicates, rates of moving spike upward beginning at age 18 and reach their peak in the mid-twenties, then sharply decline. This shows that American 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.<sup>23</sup> Other moves soon follow. If they drop out of college, either temporarily or permanently (as many do), 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



**Figure 1.4** Change of Residence in Past Year, by Age.

Source: US Bureau of the Census (2011).

*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 13*

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 about 40% of American emerging adults, at least one of their moves during the years from age 18–25 will be back home to live with their parents.<sup>24</sup>

All this moving around makes emerging adulthood an unstable time, but it also reflects the identity explorations that take place during the emerging adult years. Many of the moves that 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.

*Self-Focus*

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 (“Who left their towel on the bathroom floor?!”). 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, whether they like it or not, 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 the majority of Americans have married and have had at least one child.<sup>25</sup> A new household, then, with new rules and 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. By age 30, most Americans also have the first job that they will remain in for at least five years.<sup>26</sup> An employer, then, 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? Seek someone new, and if so, how and where? 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 mind what they want, and no one else can really tell them what they want.

To be self-focused is not necessarily to be selfish, and 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 at 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 to learn 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.

### *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 most 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:



*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 15*

“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 anymore!’ 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.”

The reason why so many emerging adults feel in-between is evident from the criteria they consider to be most important for becoming an adult. Their top criteria 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, across social classes, in studies using both questionnaires and interviews, people consistently state these as the top three criteria for adulthood:<sup>27</sup>

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

The “Big 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, most do not feel completely adult until years later, sometime 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. The Big Three have been found to be prevalent not only in the United States but around the world, as we will see in more detail in the final chapter.

*Possibilities/Optimism*

Emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities, when many different futures remain possible, 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 to their “soul mate,” and happy children who are above average. 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 imagines that this is what the future holds.

Another aspect of emerging adulthood that makes it the age of possibilities is that it offers the potential for changing dramatically the direction of one’s life. A simple but crucial feature of emerging adulthood in this respect 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 it. If the parents live in poverty, the children live in poverty, too, most likely in dangerous neighborhoods with inferior schools. If a parent is addicted to alcohol or other drugs, the disruptions from the parent’s addiction 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 a troubled family, 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 12.

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.

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

*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 17*

presents the possibility of change. For this limited window of time—seven, perhaps ten 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.

*Research on the Five Features*

How have these five features fared in research since I first proposed them a decade ago? Alan Reifman developed a measure to examine the five features, the Inventory of Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA), and tested it in five studies.<sup>28</sup> Consistent with the theory, participants in their twenties were higher than younger or older participants on the subscales representing the five features: identity explorations, negativity/instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and experimentation/possibilities. Since the publication of the IDEA in 2007, it has been used in many other studies, but usually focusing on a sample in the emerging adult age range rather than comparing participants of different ages.<sup>29</sup>

My own research in the past decade has included a national study in 2012, the Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults, that contained items pertaining to the five features.<sup>30</sup> As shown in Table 1.1, all five features were supported by a majority of 18–29-year-olds. The feature with the lowest level of support, feeling in-between, varied substantially by age, as shown in Figure 1.5. Overall, 50% of the 18–29-year-olds responded “in some ways yes, in some ways no” to the question, “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?” However, in the course of the twenties, feeling fully adult steadily rises, and feeling in-between steadily falls.

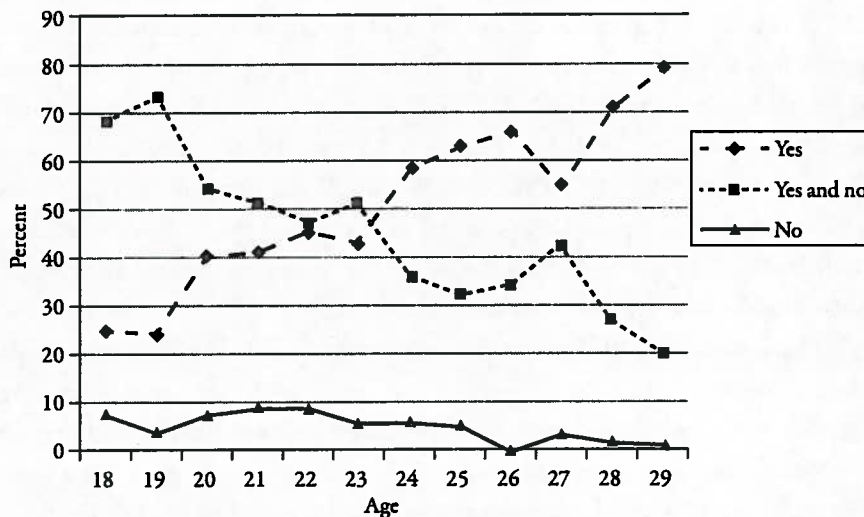
There were age differences on other features as well. The 18–25-year-olds were more likely than 26–29-year-olds to agree with the items pertaining to identity explorations, instability, and self-focus.<sup>31</sup> These findings are important, because, as noted earlier, different age ranges have been used for emerging adulthood, sometimes 18–25 and sometimes 18–29. The findings here suggest that 18–25 is the heart of the age range for emerging adulthood in American society. However, for most people there is nothing about reaching age 25 that results in a sudden and definite transition to adulthood, so, in some ways for some people, emerging adulthood may last through the twenties. Either 18–25 or 18–29 may be an appropriate age range for emerging adulthood, depending on the topic or question being addressed.

## 18 • EMERGING ADULthood

**Table 1.1** The Five Features of Emerging Adulthood: Percent Agreement in a National (American) Sample

Feature of Emerging Adulthood	%
<b>Identity Explorations</b>	
This is a time of my life for finding out who I really am.	77
<b>Instability</b>	
This time of my life is full of changes.	83
<b>Self-Focus</b>	
This is a time of my life for focusing on myself.	69
<b>Feeling In-Between</b>	
Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?	
No	5
In some ways yes, in some ways no.	45
Yes	50
<b>Possibilities</b>	
At this time of my life, it still seems like anything is possible.	82

Source: Arnett &amp; Walker (2014).

**Figure 1.5** Feeling "In-Between": Changes With Age.

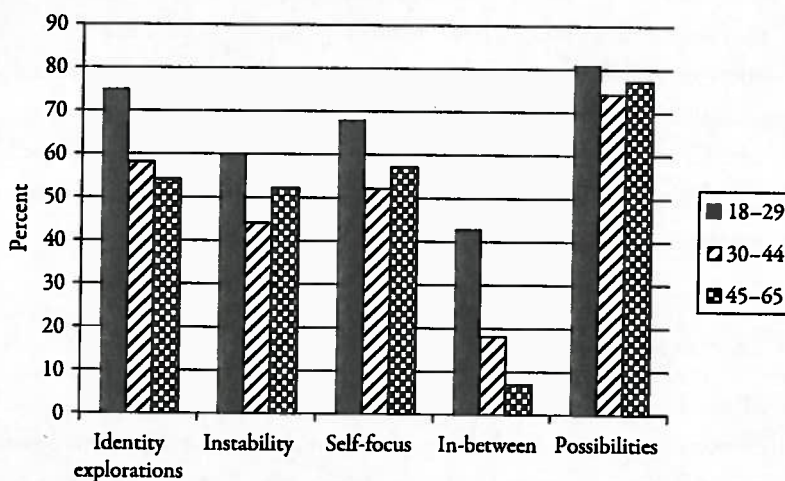
Do the five features vary by gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status (SES)? In the results of the Clark poll, there were few notable differences by gender or ethnicity.<sup>32</sup> The comparisons pertaining to SES are especially worthy of attention, because the most contentious issue surrounding the theory of emerging adulthood since it was proposed is the claim, by critics, that the

*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 19*

five features apply only to the middle class and above, and do not reflect the harsh realities of life for young people in lower SES levels.<sup>33</sup> In 2011, I devoted an entire book (as co-author) to this question. With Jennifer Tanner, I took the view that emerging adulthood theory applies across SES, whereas Leo Hendry and Marion Kloep disputed this vigorously.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, it is notable that in the 2012 Clark poll, on a representative national sample that included all SES levels, there were no significant differences in any of the five features by SES.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the experience of the emerging adult years differs in many other ways by SES, as we will see throughout the book and especially in Chapter 10.

In 2013 and 2014, I added national samples in Clark polls pertaining to 40–65-year-olds and 25–39-year-olds, respectively, allowing for age comparisons on the five features. For all five features, 18–29-year-olds were more likely than 30–65-year-olds to agree, although agreement was substantial across all age periods.<sup>36</sup> The age patterns are illustrated in Figure 1.6. These results provide support for the theory’s proposal that the five features are most prominent during the emerging adult years.

I wish to underscore that, just because the majority of American emerging adults agree that the five features apply to them, and 18–29-year-olds are more likely than older adults to support the five features, this does mean I am in any way claiming that these are universal features of emerging adulthood. They probably do not apply even to all groups within American



**Figure 1.6** The Five Features, by Age Group.

Source: Arnett & Schwab (2014).

society, which is highly diverse, ethnically and economically. Other patterns will surely be found among other groups, nationally and internationally. For example, recent research in China by my student Juan Zhong showed that young women factory workers retained a strong sense of family obligation even after leaving their rural villages for city life, and “learn to care for parents” was their most important marker of reaching adulthood (in contrast to “accept responsibility for one’s self” and other individualistic markers most favored by Americans).<sup>37</sup> Another example of variation is that, within Europe, northern Europeans generally leave home around age 18 or 19, whereas southern Europeans tend to stay home until they enter marriage around age 30, a pattern that suggests less instability in the lives of emerging adults in the south than in the north.<sup>38</sup> The field of emerging adulthood is new, and one of its challenges for the century to come is to chart the diversity of paths within emerging adulthood, among developed countries and also in developing countries as emerging adulthood expands there. “One stage, many paths” should be the guiding principle.

### 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 decide to 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.

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

#### *Why Emerging Adulthood Is Not “Late Adolescence”*

In 1992, the first time I taught a college course on human development across the life span, when I reached the section on adolescence I told my students that, in 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

*A Longer Road to Adulthood* • 21

not finished their education, and few of them were married, and fewer still had become parents. So, they were “late adolescents.”

They were outraged! Okay, 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 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, many emerging adults have moved out of their parents’ home, and their living situations are extremely diverse. Virtually all adolescents are experiencing the dramatic physical changes of puberty. In contrast, emerging adults have reached physical maturity. Virtually all adolescents attend secondary school. In contrast, many emerging adults are enrolled in education or training, but nowhere near all of them. Unlike adolescents, their educational paths are very 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. 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 “young adulthood” does not work.<sup>39</sup> One is that it implies that adulthood has been reached. However, most people in their late teens and early to 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 or synagogue 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 life stage. Using *emerging adulthood* allows us to ascribe a clear definition to a new term and a new life stage.

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? Or “not-so-young adults”? 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 and 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 is superior to young adulthood as a term to refer to young people from the late teens through the twenties.

### *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



*A Longer Road to Adulthood* • 23

of themselves as well 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 age period. There are mountains of research in sociology on “the transition to adulthood,” but most of it focuses on the transitional events that sociologists assume are the defining criteria of adulthood—leaving home, finishing education, entering marriage, and entering parenthood.<sup>40</sup> Sociologists examine the factors that influence the age at which 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 sometime in their late twenties or beyond. But what happens in-between? They finish their education? Is that *all*? 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 of it and our understanding of it, because that term distracts us from examining all 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 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” rather than as a life stage in its own right. This may have been appropriate 50 or 60 years ago, when most people 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 nearly 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 life stage.

### *Why Emerging Adulthood Is Not “Youth”*

One other possible term that must be mentioned is “youth,” which in the late twentieth century was perhaps the most widely used term in the social sciences for the period from the late teens through the twenties.<sup>41</sup> There are a number of reasons why “youth” does not work. “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”). Also, like “young adulthood,” “youth” has been applied to people across a wide age range, from middle childhood through the twenties and thirties. A term that can mean so many things does not really mean anything.

None of the terms used in the past is 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 suggested *emerging adulthood* in the hope that it would 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 part of human development but a life stage that exists under certain conditions that have occurred only quite recently and only in some cultures.<sup>42</sup> The Four Revolutions have been experienced mainly in developed countries, although the consequences are being experienced worldwide.<sup>43</sup> As we have seen, the Four Revolutions have led to the rise of emerging adulthood, reflected in 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 devoted to other purposes.

So, emerging adulthood exists today mainly in the “developed countries” of the West, along with Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea. One reflection of this is in the timing of marriage across countries. Table 1.2 shows the median marriage age for females in a variety of developed countries,

*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 25***Table 1.2** Median Marriage Age (Females) in Selected Countries

Developed Countries	Age	Developing Countries	Age
United States	26	Egypt	21
Canada	28	Ethiopia	17
Germany	30	Ghana	21
France	30	Nigeria	18
Italy	30	India	18
Japan	29	Indonesia	21
Australia	28	Guatemala	19

Source: United Nations (2009).

contrasted with developing countries. (The marriage age for males is typically about two years older than for females.)

Ages of marriage and parenthood are typically calculated on a country-wide 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.<sup>44</sup> 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 whole, so they have a briefer period of emerging adulthood before taking on adult roles.

Variations in socioeconomic status and life circumstances also determine how a young person may experience emerging adulthood, even within a country that is affluent overall.<sup>45</sup> The young woman who has a child outside marriage at age 16 and spends her late teens and early twenties alternating between government dependence and low-paying jobs has little chance for self-focused identity explorations, 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 developed countries, members of minority groups may be less likely to experience their late teens and early twenties as a period of

identity explorations, at least in the domain of work. However, as noted earlier, 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 12, 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.

It may be most useful to think of emerging adulthood as one stage with many possible paths within it. That is, most young people in developed countries experience emerging adulthood, defined as a life stage in-between adolescence and the stable commitments of adulthood, but they experience it in a wide variety of ways depending on their culture, social class, gender, personality, individual life events, and other circumstances. This is the key point: *Emerging adulthood can be said to exist wherever there is a gap of at least several years between the time young people finish secondary school and the time they enter stable adult roles in love and work.* The five features presented in this chapter apply to most American emerging adults, but other features may apply in other cultural contexts. There is not one universal and uniform emerging adulthood, but many emerging adulthoods that vary by cultural, economic, and personal context.<sup>46</sup>

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.<sup>47</sup> 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 be experienced often in urban areas but rarely in rural areas.

However, emerging adulthood is likely to become more pervasive worldwide in the course of the twenty-first century, with the increasing globalization of the world economy. Table 1.3 shows an example of how globalization is affecting the lives of young people, by making tertiary education (that is, education or training beyond secondary school) a more common experience worldwide. Between 1980 and 2010 the proportion of young people in developing

*A Longer Road to Adulthood • 27***Table 1.3** Changes in Tertiary Enrollment in Selected Developing Countries, 1980–present

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

Source: UNESCO (2013).

countries who were enrolled in tertiary education rose sharply. The median ages of entering marriage and parenthood rose in these countries as well.

These changes open up the possibility for the spread of emerging adulthood in developing countries. Rising education reflects economic development. Economic development leads to a rise in the median ages of entering marriage and parenthood. 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 likely that by the end of the twenty-first century, emerging adulthood will be a normative period for young people worldwide. However, even as the service economy rises around the world, and the Technology Revolution spreads as machines continue to replace manufacturing workers, this transition will not necessarily be accompanied by a Sexual Revolution, Women's Movement, or Youth Movement. Consequently, there will continue to be many emerging adulthoods, because 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 following chapters, 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, including Chapter 4 on romantic and sexual issues and Chapter 5 on finding a marriage partner. Chapter 6 discusses the diverse paths that emerging adults take through college, and Chapter 7 examines their search for meaningful work. In Chapter 8 we examine emerging adults' media use, and in Chapter 9 their religious beliefs and values. Chapter 10 focuses on the question of social class in relation to emerging adulthood. Chapter 11 is devoted to the most prominent problems faced by emerging adults. Then Chapter 12 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 13 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 was originally based mainly on over 300 in-depth structured interviews that I and my research assistants conducted in Missouri, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New Orleans during the 1990s (hereafter "my original study"). 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.<sup>48</sup>

Since the first edition of this book was published 10 years ago, I have continued my scholarship on emerging adulthood. In recent years this has included three national surveys: in 2012, the Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults, a survey of 18–29-year-olds (hereafter, "the national Clark poll"); in 2013, a survey of parents of 18–29-year-olds (hereafter, "the Clark parents poll"); and in 2014, a survey of 25–39-year-olds.<sup>49</sup> I have incorporated the results of these new surveys into this edition of the book. In addition, I use statistics and insights from other studies that include 18–29 year olds.

I present a variety of statistics in the course of the book, but I also rely strongly on excerpts from my interviews to illustrate my points.<sup>50</sup> When I first began studying this topic, the interview approach seemed appropriate to me for exploring a period of life that had not been studied much and on 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

*A Longer Road to Adulthood* • 29

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 often a self-focused period of life, the young people we interviewed 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.

## Chapter 2

### What Is It Like to Be an Emerging Adult?

#### *Four Profiles*

Douglas Coupland's 1991 novel *Generation X* can be credited with first drawing widespread attention to the fact that something new was happening in the lives of young people in their twenties. The novel follows the lives and musings of Andy, Claire, and Dag as they wander through their late twenties together. None of them has been able yet to find enjoyable work, and they refuse to settle into jobs that may pay well but involve "endless stress" and meaningless work "done grudgingly to little applause." As for love, none of them is close to getting married, but as Andy says, "I *do* at least recognize the fact that I don't want to go through life alone." Their feelings about entering adulthood are summed up in the title of one chapter, "Dead at 30 Buried at 70." As good novels often do, *Generation X* not only describes the lives of individual characters but, in doing so, also provides vivid insights into what it is like to live in a certain place at a certain time.

My aim in this book is different from Coupland's, of course, and not just because it is nonfiction rather than fiction. I want to describe common patterns in the lives of emerging adults, not just individual characters, and to illustrate these patterns I will take quotes from various interviews and weave them together, in addition to presenting survey results. However, there is also much to be gained from describing individuals, so that we can see what a complete life looks like in emerging adulthood. If we only combined isolated parts from the interviews, we would never see how all the parts fit together.