
Includes: Preface (v-viii); Ch. 1 “A Longer Road to Adulthood” (3-25); Ch. 2 “What Is It Like to Be an Emerging Adult? Four Profiles” (27-46); Related Notes and References.

**COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA**

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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 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 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 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 are 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 noncollege 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 with Latinos in Los Angeles and with 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 brief passage connecting the two more important periods of adolescence and young adulthood. And it lasts so long, at least from age 18 to 25 for most people and usually beyond, 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 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. Many other scholars are now 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 2003, and there will certainly be more. A group of scholars has been formed to share information and support in studying emerging adulthood (see www.s-r-a.org/easig.html). 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 I hope their parents will 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 find engaging whether they are scholars or not. 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. What I have focused on instead are 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 there is simply no substitute for sitting face to face with people 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—except infants, of course—but it may be especially important in emerging adulthood, because it is a
highly self-reflective time of life, a period 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 Jack Brunner, Jim Côté, Bill Damon, Wyndol Furman, Steve Hamilton, Hugh McIntosh, Shmuel Shulman, Jennifer Tanner, and Niobe Way. Special thanks go to my wife, Lene Jensen, who read many a draft without complaint and always offered insightful and helpful comments. Thanks also to Catharine 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.
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A Longer Road to Adulthood

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

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

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

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

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

The Rise of Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood has been created in part by the steep rise in the typical ages of marriage and parenthood that has taken place in the past half century. As you can see in Figure 1.1, in 1950 the median age of marriage in the United States was just 20 for women and 22 for men. Even as recently as 1970, these ages had risen only slightly, to about 21 for women and 23 for men. However, since 1970 there has been a dramatic shift in the ages when Americans typically get married. By the year 2000 the typical age of marriage was 25 for women and 27 for men, a four-year rise for both
exes in the space of just three decades. Age at entering parenthood has followed a similar pattern. Then as now, couples tend to have their first child about one year after marriage, on average. So, from 1950 to 1970 most couples had their first child in their very early twenties, whereas today most wait until at least their late twenties before becoming parents.

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

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

![Figure 1.1. Median U.S. Marriage Age, 1950–2000](image-url)
two thirds, now enter college after graduating from high school.\textsuperscript{4} This is a higher proportion than ever before in American history. Among those who graduate from college, about one third go on to graduate school the following year.\textsuperscript{5} Most young people wait until they have finished school before they start thinking seriously about marriage and parenthood, and for many of them this means postponing these commitments until at least their mid-twenties.

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

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

Women's roles have also changed in ways that make an early entry into adult obligations less desirable for them now compared to 50 years ago. The young women of 1950 were under a great deal of social pressure to catch a man.\textsuperscript{7} Being a single woman was simply not a viable social status for a woman after her early twenties. Relatively few women attended college, and those who did were often there for the purpose of obtaining their "m-r-s" degree (in the joke of the day)—that is, for the purpose of finding a husband. The range of occupations open to young women was severely restricted, as it had been traditionally—secretary, waitress, teacher, nurse, perhaps a
few others. Even these occupations were supposed to be temporary for young women. What they were really supposed to be focusing on was finding a husband and having children. Having no other real options, and facing social limbo if they remained unmarried for long, their yearning for marriage and children—the sooner the better—was sharpened.

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

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

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

**What Is Emerging Adulthood?**

What are the distinguishing features of emerging adulthood? What makes it distinct from the adolescence that precedes it and the young adulthood
that follows it? We will be considering that question throughout this book, but in this initial chapter I want to present an outline of what emerging adulthood is, in its essential qualities. There are five main features:\textsuperscript{12}

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

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

\textit{The Age of Identity Explorations}

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

Of course, it is adolescence rather than emerging adulthood that has typically been associated with identity formation. A half century ago Erik Erikson\textsuperscript{13} designated identity versus role confusion as the central crisis of the adolescent stage of life, and in the decades since he articulated this idea, the focus of research on identity has been on adolescence. However, Erikson also commented on the "prolonged adolescence" typical of industrialized societies and the \textit{psychosocial moratorium} granted to young people in such societies, "during which the young adult through free role experimentation may find a niche in
some section of his society. "14 Decades later, this applies to many more young people than when he wrote it. 15 If adolescence is the period from age 10 to 18 and emerging adulthood is the period from (roughly) age 18 to the mid-twenties, most identity exploration takes place in emerging adulthood rather than adolescence. Although research on identity formation has focused mainly on adolescence, this research has shown that identity achievement has rarely been reached by the end of high school and that identity development continues through the late teens and the twenties. 16

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

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

In emerging adulthood, work experiences become more focused on laying the groundwork for an adult occupation. In exploring various work possibilities and in exploring the educational possibilities that will prepare them for work, emerging adults explore identity issues as well: "What kind of work am I good at? What kind of work would I find satisfying for the long term? What are my chances of getting a job in the field that seems to suit me best?" As they try out different jobs or college majors, emerging adults learn more about themselves. They learn more about their abilities
and interests. Just as important, they learn what kinds of work they are not
good at or do not want to do. In work as in love, explorations in emerging
adulthood commonly include the experience of failure or disappointment.
But as in love, the failures and disappointments in work can be illuminat­
ing for self-understanding.

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

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

The Age of Instability

The explorations of emerging adults and their shifting choices in love and
work make emerging adulthood an exceptionally full and intense period of
life but also an exceptionally unstable one. Emerging adults know they are
supposed to have a Plan with a capital P, that is, some kind of idea about
the route they will be taking from adolescence to adulthood,21 and most of
them come up with one. However, for almost all of them, their Plan is sub­
ject to numerous revisions during the emerging adult years. These revisions
are a natural consequence of their explorations. They enter college and choose
a major, then discover the major is not as interesting as it seemed—time to revise the Plan. Or they enter college and find themselves unable to focus on their studies, and their grades sink accordingly—time to revise the Plan. Or they go to work after college but discover after a year or two that they need more education if they ever expect to make decent money—time to revise the Plan. Or they move in with a boyfriend or girlfriend and start to think of the Plan as founded on their future together, only to discover that they have no future together—time to revise the Plan.

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

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

All of this moving around makes emerging adulthood an unstable time, but it also reflects the explorations that take place during the emerging adult years. Many of the moves emerging adults make are for the purpose of some
new period of exploration, in love, work, or education. Exploration and instability go hand in hand.

*The Self-Focused Age*

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

By age 30, a new web of commitments and obligations is well established, for most people. At that age, 75% of Americans have married and have had at least one child. A new household, then, with new rules and
Most emerging adults are not quite this self-focused! (CATHY © 1996 Cathy Guisewite. Reprinted with permission of Universal Press Syndicate. All rights reserved.)

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

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

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

To say that emerging adulthood is a self-focused time is not meant pejoratively. There is nothing wrong about being self-focused during emerging adulthood; it is normal, healthy, and temporary. By focusing on themselves, emerging adults develop skills for daily living, gain a better understanding of who they are and what they want from life, and begin to build a foundation for their adult lives. The goal of their self-focusing is
self-sufficiency, learning to stand alone as a self-sufficient person, but they do not see self-sufficiency as a permanent state. Rather, they view it as a necessary step before committing themselves to enduring relationships with others, in love and work.

The Age of Feeling In-Between

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Even for those who have come from families they regard as relatively happy and healthy, emerging adulthood is an opportunity to transform themselves so that they are not merely made in their parents' images but have made independent decisions about what kind of person they wish to be and how they wish to live. During emerging adulthood they have an exceptionally wide scope for making their own decisions. Eventually, virtually all emerging adults will enter new, long-term obligations in love and work, and once they do their new obligations will set them on paths that resist change and that may continue for the rest of their lives. But for now,
A Longer Road to Adulthood

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

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

Who Needs Emerging Adulthood?

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

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

Why Emerging Adulthood Is Not “Late Adolescence”

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

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

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

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

**Why Emerging Adulthood Is Not “Young Adulthood”**

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

An additional problem with “young adulthood” is that it is already used in diverse ways. The “young adult” section of the bookstore contains books aimed at teens and preteens, the “young adult” group at a church might
include people up to age 40, and "young adult" is sometimes applied to college students aged 18–22. Such diverse uses make "young adulthood" confusing and incoherent as a term for describing a specific period of life. Using emerging adulthood allows us to ascribe a clear definition to a new term.

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

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

**Why Emerging Adulthood Is Not the "Transition to Adulthood"**

Another possibility would be to call the years from the late teens through the twenties the "transition to adulthood." It is true that most young people make the transition to adulthood during this period, in terms of their perceptions of their status and in terms of their movement toward stable adult roles in love and work. However, the "transition to adulthood" also proves to be inadequate as a term for this age period. One problem is that thinking of the years from the late teens through the twenties as merely the transition to adulthood leads to a focus on what young people in that age period are becoming, at the cost of neglecting what they are. This is what has happened in sociological research on this period. There are mountains of research in sociology on the "transition to adulthood," but virtually all of it focuses on the transitions that sociologists assume are the defining criteria
of adulthood—leaving home, finishing education, entering marriage, and entering parenthood. Sociologists examine the factors that influence when young people make these transitions and explain historical trends in the timing of the transitions.

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

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

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

One other possible term that must be mentioned is Kenneth Keniston’s “youth,” which has been perhaps the most widely used term in the social sciences for the period from the late teens through the twenties. There are a
number of reasons why “youth” does not work. First, Keniston wrote at a time when American society and some Western European societies were convulsed with highly visible “youth movements” protesting U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War (among other things). His description of youth as a time of “tension between self and society” and “refusal of socialization” reflects that historical moment rather than any enduring characteristics of the period.32

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

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

The Cultural Context of Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood is not a universal period of human development but a period that exists under certain conditions that have occurred only quite recently and only in some cultures. As we have seen, what is mainly required for emerging adulthood to exist is a relatively high median age of entering marriage and parenthood, in the late twenties or beyond. Postponing marriage and parenthood until the late twenties allows the late teens and most of the twenties to be a time of exploration and instability, a self-focused age, and an age of possibilities.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industrialized Countries</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Developing Countries</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Variations in socioeconomic status and life circumstances also determine the extent to which a given young person may experience emerging adulthood, even within a country that is affluent overall. The young woman who has a child outside of marriage at age 16 and spends her late teens and early twenties alternating between government dependence and low-paying jobs has little chance for the self-focused identity explorations of emerging adulthood, nor does the young man who drops out of school and spends most of his late teens and early twenties unemployed and looking unsuccessfully for a job. Because opportunities tend to be less widely available in minority cultures than in the majority culture in most industrialized countries, members of minority groups may be less likely to experience their late teens and early twenties as a period of emerging adulthood. However, social class may be more important than ethnicity, with young people in the middle class or above having more opportunities for the explorations of
emerging adulthood than young people who are working class or below. And yet, as we will see in chapter 9, for some young people who have grown up in poor or chaotic families, emerging adulthood represents a chance to transform their lives in dramatic ways, because reaching emerging adulthood allows them to leave the family circumstances that may have been the source of their problems.

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

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

<p>| Table 1.2. Changes in Secondary-School Enrollment in Selected Developing Countries, 1980–2000 |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| % enrolled 1980 | % enrolled 2000 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These changes open up the possibility for the spread of emerging adulthood in developing countries. Rising education reflects economic development. Economic development makes possible the period of independent identity exploration that is at the heart of emerging adulthood. As societies become more affluent, they are more likely to grant young people the opportunity for the extended moratorium of emerging adulthood, because their need for young people's labor is less urgent. Thus it seems possible that by the end of the 21st century emerging adulthood will be a normative period for young people worldwide, although it is likely to vary in length and content both within and between countries.

The Plan of This Book

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

The material in the chapters is based mainly on more than 300 in-depth structured interviews that I and my research assistants conducted in Columbia (Missouri), San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New Orleans. We interviewed young people from age 20 to 29 from diverse backgrounds, about half of them White and the other half African American, Latino, and Asian American. I included people in their late twenties as well as their early to mid-twenties because for many people emerging adulthood lasts through the late twenties. In the lives of those who do leave emerging adulthood by their late twenties we can see what happens in the transition from emerg-
ing adulthood to young adulthood. I also draw upon my college students (mostly ages 18–23) at the University of Missouri, where I taught from 1992 to 1998, and the University of Maryland, where I teach now. In addition, I use statistics and information from national surveys and other studies that include 18–29-year-olds.

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

Most emerging adults I talk to about Generation X dislike the book, even if—especially if—they have not read it. Who can blame them, given that Generation X is responsible for the construction of a rather unflattering stereotype of young people in their twenties as "slackers"—aimless, apathetic, and cynical. Nevertheless, although Coupland's depiction of young people in their twenties was extreme in some ways, in the lives of Andy, Claire, and Dag can be seen many of the features that I described in chapter 1 as defining emerging adulthood. They are exploring (if rather aimlessly); their lives are unstable; they have a sense of being in between adolescence and adulthood (and they are assiduously avoiding adult responsibilities);
and they are self-focused (to an extreme). *Generation X* is also original and funny, and I recommend it to anyone interested in emerging adulthood.

My aim in this book is different than 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. 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 of the parts fit together. By describing several people in detail, we can get a full sense of what it is like to be an emerging adult, in all of its complexity.

In this chapter we will look at the lives of four emerging adults. I chose the persons for these profiles so that they would represent a broad range of backgrounds and experiences in emerging adulthood. Two are male and two are female; two are White and two are members of ethnic minorities; two are college graduates and two are not; and the four of them grew up in several different parts of the United States. They range in age from 21 to 27. Together they provide a taste of the diversity that exists among emerging adults, as well as some of the qualities that are common to many of them.

Although the persons in the profiles are diverse, they were not chosen to be representative of all persons in my study, much less all persons in their twenties. None of them are married, and none of them have children. None of them are firmly settled into a career path. Rather, the persons in the profiles were chosen because they exemplify the characteristics that define emerging adulthood as a distinct period of life: the age of explorations, the age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feeling in-between, and the age of possibilities. The profiles presented in this chapter will serve to illustrate the essential characteristics of emerging adulthood described in chapter 1, by connecting them to the real lives of emerging adults. The profiles also preview many of the themes of the chapters to come.

Rosa: "Choking Life for All It's Got"

I arranged to meet Rosa, 24, at a coffee shop near the University of San Francisco, and I had no trouble spotting her when she walked in. She had told me over the phone that her mother was Chinese and her father was Mexican, and in her face I could see clearly the unusual, striking blend of features from both sides of her family. She had just come from her job at an
Internet software start-up company, and she was dressed in casual professional clothes, white slacks and a sweater that matched the jet black of her shoulder-length hair.

We started by talking about her work. Her current job for the Internet start-up requires a variety of skills, including editing, accounting, and human resources management, because it is a small company, only 17 employees. She likes the variety, because it gives her a chance to increase her knowledge and explore possibilities for where she might want to focus her efforts. "I want to be able just to bounce around and learn as much as I can from each of the departments, so I just started doing editing. I want to kind of touch the marketing side, too. Just to see what I want to do."

Working for an Internet company was not what she had in mind when she graduated from the University of California at Berkeley two years ago. An English major in college, she planned to become a teacher in the Oakland school system she had attended as a child. "I really thought I wanted to go into education," she said. "I graduated from college and I started running an after-school program at a very low-income school because I thought if I was going to teach, I was going to teach where I was needed the most. I didn't want to teach in any district but Oakland, because I grew up in Oakland and I wanted to give back to the city."

However, she soon became disillusioned and depressed with what she witnessed in the schools. "Some of the kids didn't eat all day. A lot of their parents were on crack. A lot of them just lived with their grandmother one week, their aunt the next week; they really just floated. They were cruel to themselves and cruel to each other, just because they needed the attention."

Her grim experiences at work seeped into the rest of her life. "I really got attached to my kids, and I couldn't snap out of it when I left the school. Like, I would still be in that zone when I got home, and I'd take it out on my boyfriend."

So she sent out resumes and soon left the school for her current job. But she doesn't see this job as permanent. "I still don't think I'm a businessperson. Eventually I think I'm just going to open my own bakery. That's what I really want to do." She is also considering other possibilities. "I will probably end up taking a career more in editing. I can see myself in front of a computer, writing whatever, because I love to write. But I can also see myself in hard-core marketing for a big corporation, because I do like to work with people and I do like fast-paced stressful work." For now, she is happy to do some temporary exploring during her emerging adult years. "I mean, this is cool for now. I'm just going to hop around for a while."
She is more settled in love than she is in work. She has been seeing her current boyfriend, Mark, for three years, and she expects they will marry, although she is not sure when. "I know that if he proposed to me today, I would say yes. Oh, I love him to death. We've been through so much. I know we can get through anything that came in our way. We communicate really well."

Before Mark, she had another boyfriend for four years. Like many emerging adults with immigrant parents from Asia or Latin America, she never embraced the American way of dating casually in adolescence and emerging adulthood before settling down. Still, now that she is in a relationship that may lead to marriage, she finds herself wondering if she shouldn't explore her options a bit more. As much as she loves her boyfriend, there are also what she calls her "distractions," other men she feels attracted to. "Sometimes there's these little things that happen on the side, or people you meet, and you just kind of wonder, 'God, would this be cool for now?' Because I haven't had very much experience with other people. And sometimes I question if I really want to be in a relationship right now."

She also feels a need to develop her own identity more clearly before she enters marriage, by having a period of being self-focused. "I think I want to get more in touch with myself. I want to be a little selfish for a while, and selfishness and marriage don't seem to go hand in hand. I'd like to be able to experience as much as I can before I get married, just so I can be well-rounded."

This sense of not being ready to commit to marriage, being "wishy-washy," as she puts it, makes her feel that she has not yet fully reached adulthood. But in other ways, she does feel like an adult. "I think the way that I care about people is very adult. The way I express myself is very adult. For the most part I think I'm adult. It's just the wishy-washy part that I don't know about." Overall, then, like so many emerging adults she feels in-between, on the way to adulthood but not there yet. "Maybe I am an adult. I don't know. I'm a kid a lot of the times."

Becoming independent from her parents has not been a big issue for her in marking her progress to adulthood. She lived with her parents all the way through college, and enjoyed it. She has always gotten along well with her parents, except for a brief period in her early adolescence when she tangled often with her mom. "I think I had it bad with her probably sixth, seventh, and eighth grade[s]. But I went through it early, and then after that I was cake."
Her father travels around the world doing maintenance and repair on large ships and her mother is an optician. Solid middle-class jobs by most standards, yet Rosa sees their career paths as examples to avoid.

I knew I wanted to be somewhere that I would grow as a person, and I don't see them growing as individuals. I mean, my mom is an optician, and you don't grow doing those things. That's why I kind of chose the high-tech path, because there's always new software to learn. And with my dad, I didn't want to have a job that beat up my body. I knew I wanted to be able to grow, and I didn't want to be broken by the time I was 40, you know. I think that's what I took from their jobs.

Although she has always had a good relationship with her parents, family life in their household has not always been easy. Rosa said her parents "almost divorced a few times" during her childhood. Her father resented her mother for working long hours and for making more money than he did; her mother complained that he drank too much. They get along somewhat better now, but it is hardly an ideal marriage.

There was additional tension in the household because of the problems of Rosa's brother, who is 18 months older than she is. "My brother and I have always hated each other," she said bluntly. "We don't really talk. We don't talk at all actually." He had various problems in childhood, then in high school "he went into the drug thing," she says. "I don't know. He got bent somewhere." She gets along much better with her sister, who is 8 years younger than she is. "My sister and I were never close until I moved out. Now I love her to death. She's 16 and she acts like it, but I love to be there for her. She's my baby sister."

Rosa sees the problems her parents and her brother have had as rooted partly in the unusual ethnic mix of Chinese and Mexican in the family. Each side of her parents' families regarded the other with suspicion and hostility, which generated conflict between her parents. Her brother was often ridiculed and beat up by other kids simply for looking Asian. Rosa has felt her own share of ethnic prejudice. When she goes to the mostly White suburbs, "I feel sometimes that we're looked at like, 'Why are you here?' Definitely like, 'There are too many of you here.'" It's not only Whites who look at her that way. "The Blacks too. And I sense a lot of hostility from Mexican people. I just don't have the connection. And I am Mexican! But I don't look like it."
Nevertheless, she has embraced her ethnicity with enthusiasm, especially her Chinese side. When she was young, her mother immersed her in Chinese culture, whereas her dad showed little interest in making her familiar with Mexican culture. "I grew up very Chinese. I grew up going to my grandma's sweat shop after school, I hung out in Chinatown, and I always saw my mom's family every weekend. My mom spoke Chinese to us." Rosa has always had mostly Asian friends, and her only two boyfriends have been Asian.

Now that she is in emerging adulthood, Rosa feels bad about letting the Mexican side of her background lapse. "I feel it's really unfair to my father. The only thing I know about my Mexican culture is that I'm Catholic, and I can cook the food. I'd like to learn more because I love my father to death." Her hope is that her children will have more of a Mexican identity than she does.

I don't really know that much about my Mexican side and hopefully I'll learn, but I'm going to have my dad teach them their Mexican side. My dad already said, "When you have kids, they're going to call me 'Buppa,'" which is grandpa in Spanish. So hopefully he'll be able to pass on a lot to them. I just think it's a nice thing to know. You know, you're not just "an American." You have a beautiful, long history to your name.

However, the Catholic faith is one part of her Mexican heritage Rosa does not want to pass on to her children. Although she was raised "strictly Catholic," she now says, "I don't like Catholicism. I don't care for it at all. I don't think it applies to modern-day society at all. I'm not going to raise my kids Catholic." As an emerging adult she has become a deist, a person who believes in God in a general way, unattached to any specific religion. "I don't think my god has a religion—it's just God. There's just God. And that's the only thing I don't question. I know there's a God. I think it's the same God that Jews have, that Muslims have, they just all have a different name."

Perhaps influenced by her mother's Buddhist beliefs, she is inclined to believe in reincarnation. "I believe I was a cat before because I love to lay in the sun. Seriously! Every time I go home, I have my mom scratch my head or scratch my back." However, she adds that her focus is on this life, not the past ones or the next one. "I don't really give an afterlife much thought because it's not really that important to me. When I'm gone, I'm gone—I don't really care what happens to me when I'm gone."
For the future, Rosa has many dreams, of opening a bakery with her mother, of marrying Mark and having two children, of a lifetime of learning.

If I was rich, I’d be a lifetime student. I love to learn. I wouldn’t go back to school because I would require it for my future, I would just go back because I want it for myself. Like, I wouldn’t mind going to law school, even though I don’t see myself practicing law at all. Just for the fun of learning. I can really see myself going back for a Ph.D. in literature or something. I love to read, I love to write.

By the end of her life, she would like to be able to say:

I experienced as much as I possibly could, and I spent as much time with my friends and my family as possible. And that people know how I feel about them. I tell my mom I love her every time I talk to her. And my dad. Just that I was happy and I tried to make the people around me happy. Those are the most important things. I just want to know that I made the most of my time. I can’t just sit and watch TV. I believe in just taking life and choking it for all it’s got.

Steve: “Who Knows What’s Going to Happen?”

Steve, 23, flashes his ironic smile often, as if he wants to make sure you can see that he doesn’t take himself too seriously. His brown eyes peer out from underneath dark eyebrows, which contrast with his short light-brown hair. When I met him for our interview in my office at the University of Missouri, he was wearing a green and maroon rugby shirt and casual light slacks.

Although he currently lives in Missouri, he lived in a variety of places in the course of growing up. His family moved often to follow his father’s work as a contract engineer; every time his father got a new contract, they moved. He grew to dislike moving and vowed that he would put down roots somewhere once he left his parents’ household. But as it turned out, he has moved around during emerging adulthood even more than he did with his family. “I always said that once I get out of high school and move away I’m going to stay in one place, but I’ve probably moved 15 times since I left home.”

Missouri was one of the places his family lived for a while during his childhood, and he moved back there to go to the University of Missouri. However, he dropped out of school after a few semesters, feeling “kind of burnt out on it.” Now, he waits on tables at a local restaurant. He is content with the money he is making. “I average about $16 an hour, so I mean,
where else can I go right now and make that much money?" Nevertheless, he views his job, like he views many things in his life right now, as temporary. "I'm just kind of lazy right now. I'm just taking it easy."

While he was in college, Steve majored in fine arts because of his love of drawing. He continues now to do sketches and portraits, to make money in addition to his waiter job and because he enjoys it. However, he is doubtful that he could successfully make a career out of his artistic talents. "If I could wing it and be an artist I'd do it, but it's one of those things where you have to be great or you're working in advertising," and advertising does not appeal to him. "I'll probably end up doing art as a hobby," he says.

What course will he take, then, in terms of work? It's pretty clear that he doesn't know at this point. One moment he says, "I'll probably end up being an engineer. My dad's an engineer, so I'll probably end up doing that. I'm really good at math, and I know I could pick up on it real easy." Yet when I ask him a few minutes later what he sees himself doing 10 years from now, engineering has nothing to do with it.

I'll probably be living in Colorado. I would want to say owning a restaurant, but probably in some kind of management position because I've been in the restaurant business for eight years so I know a lot about it. I cook, I've waited tables, I've bartended. I've pretty much done it all and that's what the criteria is to be a manager. I'm sure I could get a job, and just to be able to ski all the time would be great.

But right now he is doing little to bring this dream to fruition, unless you count the job as a waiter. "I'm just kind of 'treading water,' as my mom says."

With regard to love, Steve has been involved for about two months with Sandy, who is a waitress at the restaurant where he works. They get along well and spend most of their time together. They would like to live together but hesitate because of the objections of her parents, especially her father. "That's like his last little grip before he lets her go," Steve says resentfully. He'd like to move in with her for practical reasons, not because he feels nearly ready to marry her. "It would totally cut our expenses in half."

He is in no hurry to get married, to Sandy or anyone else. In his view, there is a lot less pressure to get married by a certain age today than in the past. "Nowadays, it's not even really an issue. If it happens it happens and if not, not. It's not as big of an issue as it was like in the '50s." He's still not
sure what qualities he would like to find in the person he marries. "I haven't really narrowed it down yet. I guess when I find her, I'll know."

Steve is as uncertain and unsettled in his beliefs as he is in love and work. As he was growing up, his parents made little attempt to teach him a set of religious beliefs. He says they told him, "If you want to believe it, fine. But if you don't, that's fine too. We'll support you either way." Now, at age 23, he seems to have reached a few conclusions. "I believe in a Creator. Obviously, we couldn't have just sprouted from the earth." Reincarnation also seems plausible to him. "I always thought that there was obviously reincarnation." But as he talks further, it turns out that none of his beliefs are really so "obvious" after all. "I mean, none of us really know. There's no proof-positive to any of it. You have to have the facts and really I have none so I can't really make an educated guess yet."

Given his uncertainties about love, work, and beliefs, it's not surprising that he does not feel like he has entirely reached adulthood. "Mentally, I'm still trying to grab ahold of it," he says. He explains that what he means by this is that he doesn't yet accept the adulthood requirement of having to decide where his life is going. "I just don't look at it [from] an adult point of view. I just don't really buy into the whole system, you know. I'm like, 'I'm confused right now,' and everybody's like, 'You've got to make a decision,' and I'm like, 'Well, no, I don't.'"

Another thing that makes him feel he has not entirely reached adulthood is that he drinks more alcohol than he thinks an adult should. "I'm still in the party mode," he says. Still, his alcohol use has gone down from what it was a year or two earlier. "I don't really necessarily drink as much as I used to. Most of all it's because it's expensive to go out." He has grown tired of the local bar scene. "You can only go out to so many bars without them getting kind of boring." He has also grown tired of the effects of heavy drinking. "I don't like puking, and I don't like being hungover." Not to mention the insurance bills. "I got a DWI [Driving While Intoxicated], and I had a couple of rear-ends where I wasn't watching. I mean, my insurance is like $1,800 a year. Outrageous. That's why I kind of stopped drinking so much." But he still drinks enough to see it as a reason why he has not become an adult.

Nor do Steve's parents view him as having reached adulthood. "When I get a job, they will," he says. A job other than waiting on tables, that is. "We call it a 'real job.' 'When you get a real job.'" Nevertheless, his relationship with his parents has changed in recent years, to more of a relationship between equals. Now he is "a little more open with them, I guess. The way I talk to them and the way they talk to me, it's more on an adult level."
His parents have been successful in both their professional and personal lives. His dad has been successful as an engineer, and his mom, after devoting herself to raising Steve and his brother when they were young, now owns an antique store. Their marriage has been a relatively happy one. “I can’t even remember them ever fighting once,” Steve says. “They’ve got a pretty good sense of humor with each other, and they know how to communicate in kind of a funny way and still get the point across.” They seem to have good relationships with their children as well. Steve says he was “very close” to his parents growing up, and it is clear that he remains fond of them.

Yet despite their success, and despite the unsettled quality of his life at age 23, Steve believes that his life will be better than his parents’ lives have been. The reason for this is that he has been allowed to have an emerging adulthood with years of freedom to try out different possible paths, whereas his parents did not. “My dad, when he was 15, moved out and basically had to find a way to support himself and eventually his family, and I’m not having to go through that. My dad is in a position where he can help me out more than he got helped.”

Eventually, Steve expects to have everything his parents have and more, all the best that adult life has to offer: satisfying and well-paying work, a happy marriage, a couple of children, living in an area he loves. For now, however, he is happy being “very nomadic. I’ve got so little stuff I can just move it around. I don’t like to sign a lease, so usually I just try to do it month by month.” He wants to be ready to hit the road in case a promising opportunity comes along. “Who knows when I’ll find a job in Colorado? I’ve got to be ready to go! I don’t want to owe anybody $1,000 on a lease when I’m not going to be living there. Who knows what’s going to happen?”

Charles: “I’m Highly Portable”

You could tell by looking at Charles, 27, that there was something different about him, something out of the ordinary, even by San Francisco standards. His hair was in dreadlocks, and his black beard was trimmed short and looked striking against his brown skin. He wore a black T-shirt under a brown leather vest, and a silver earring. A black necklace with a gold pendant shone from his neck. But what was most striking about him were his eyes—large, alert, and intense, shining with energy.

He looked like he might be in the arts, and he is, a musician, songwriter, and singer, part of an a cappella band called the Jump Cats, which he described as “a rock band without instruments.” He also works for an adver-
Charles graduated from Princeton, an elite Ivy League college, having majored in psychology, and he thought seriously about becoming either a psychologist or a lawyer. By then, however, he realized that "music is where my heart is," and he decided, "I didn't want to regret not going for something that would ultimately bring me more satisfaction" than psychology or law. His unfettered situation as an emerging adult has given him the opportunity to pursue his dream of devoting himself to music. "I'm single. I don't have a car or a house or a mortgage or a significant other that's pulling me in another direction, or kids or anything. I'm highly portable, and I can basically do whatever I want as long as I can support myself."

In the future, Charles sees himself pursuing other avenues of creative expression in addition to his music. Writing novels, plays, and perhaps screenplays. Designing games, like the card game he recently invented that has special cards specific to the game. He expects to have a full life and sees no reason why he should not be able to fit many different things into it. "I would basically like to set up my life in such a way that the things that I wish to do are the things that I'm doing and that they are not mutually exclusive. Now obviously, you can't do everything you want to do all the time, but you can work in ways so that you're able to consistently do pieces of things that you want to do."

Charles grew up in Shaker Heights, Ohio, a well-to-do suburb of Cleveland. His parents are attorneys, his mother in labor law and his father in personal injury. He got along well with them during childhood and adolescence, and he still does. Once or twice a year they "whisk me away," he says, for an exotic vacation—southern Spain, Belize, St. Martin.

Still, the privileges of his upbringing have not protected him from the wounds inherent in being an African American growing up in American society. He recalls, "The first day of first grade, a White kid hit me in the nose and gave me a bloody nose all over my new shirt." When Charles returned to school the next day, he gave the offending boy a bloody nose of his own, "with my parents' blessing. I told them about it, and my dad said, 'You can't let him do that to you.'" The following year, he heard
for the first time the epithet that all Black children have thrown at them eventually.

I was at a sports camp in the summer and a kid called me a nigger. I'd never heard the word before, so I went home and asked my parents, "What does this mean?" And they said, "He called you that?" And I said, "Yeah." My dad said, "If he calls you that again, hit him." So within two or three days, we were in tennis class, and he said it to me again, "Nigger." So I hit him in the head with the tennis racket, and he never called me a nigger again.

In adolescence, several times, Charles had the experience shared by many young Black men, of being pulled over for "Driving While Black." "My parents always had reasonably nice cars since I've been able to drive. And seeing a Black youth driving a nice car at night is grounds enough for many a police officer to pull that person over, regardless of whether or not there's any sort of violation."

However, these experiences have not prevented Charles from having many good relationships with Whites. His friends in high school were the smart kids, White as well as Black. Many of his friends at Princeton were White. He has dated Whites as well as Blacks and Asian Americans. The person at Princeton who persuaded him to be the leader of the a cappella group there that sparked his enthusiasm for music was an older White student who "took me under his wing," Charles recalls. And the Jump Cats are two Black guys and four White guys.

As an emerging adult, being African American is definitely part of his identity. "I'd be silly to try and say that none of my experiences have been at least somewhat based on or influenced by the color of my skin." He believes that opportunities in American society are restricted in some ways for African Americans. "It will be a hell of a long time before a Black person is ever president in this country," for example. "My parents told me at an early age that 'you're a Black kid, and you're going to be Black all your life. And that means you're going to have to work twice as hard to get half as much.'" Nevertheless, he believes that his talents and the advantages of his background will allow him to succeed at whatever he tries. Opportunities may not be entirely equal in American society, but "I think it's getting closer."

His parents, highly educated themselves, always encouraged him to excel academically. He says the message they gave to him was:
You are gifted with good genes and good brains because we gave them to you, and we know that you’re bright. We know that you can make straight A’s. We’re not going to try and ride you and make you get straight A’s because we don’t think that’s necessarily best for you. But we don’t ever want you to think in any course you take that you can’t get an A because that is bullshit.

The messages from his peers were more mixed. His best friends all did well in school themselves and supported each other in doing well. But he was aware that there were some Black kids who believed that “if you were in AP [Advanced Placement] classes, that was a strike against you” because most of the students in those classes were White. “Who you were in classes with determined who you would become friends with, so if you were in AP classes with almost all White kids and you were friends with almost all White kids, then they would say you’re stuck-up.” He also recalls that when he was accepted at Princeton, the reaction of one of his Black acquaintances was not “congratulations” but “I can’t believe that, man. What the fuck is a nigger doing in the Ivy League?” However, Charles always easily shrugged off such views and never allowed his own pursuit of educational success to be affected by them.

He feels he has “definitely” reached adulthood, ever since he moved out to the Bay Area after college. He was alone, with no one to rely on but himself, and that made him feel adult.

I had found my own living space, using my own contacts and my own initiative, and had gotten two jobs out here and was paying rent, you know, doing that whole thing. I felt that I had gotten off the ground in terms of starting a life out here. Not that it was my ideal life of what I wanted to be doing. I was working for a financial software company in a non-exciting capacity, and I was working at a nice restaurant in Berkeley, busing tables. But I felt that I had set my foot on the road, you know, “OK, I’m an adult now, and I’m walking.”

Even though Charles is confident he has reached adulthood, his life shows a substantial amount of the exploration and instability that are two of the defining characteristics of emerging adulthood. In work, he has made a clear choice of pursuing a career in music, but the nature of that pursuit is still very much up in the air. He says that in 10 years, “I think I will still be doing music in some way, shape or form,” but he adds, “I couldn’t say exactly how.” Perhaps with his current group, if they are successful, but
perhaps as a guitarist or bass player, perhaps as a record producer, perhaps as a songwriter, perhaps some combination of these possibilities. Of course, there is also the writing of novels and plays to fit in, and the game designing. And then there is that Princeton degree to fall back on, perhaps leading to further education and a career in psychology or law. So, at this point, Charles is a young man full of possibilities, but it is difficult to predict which ones will be fulfilled in his future.

In love his future is even more wide open. He has been seeing his current girlfriend for three years. She is half Asian and half White. They share a love for music—they met at a singing competition—and a high level of education (she is currently a Ph.D. student in language and literature). Yet he says they both see marriage as something that is “not a realistic possibility any time soon.” His musical career is likely to take him on the road for extended periods. She has at least two more years of graduate school, and after that there is no telling where her career opportunities might take her.

His beliefs about religious issues also seem not yet settled, still in the process of forming. Although he grew up going to an Episcopal church with his parents, by adolescence he was “bored with Sunday school and bored with the service.” Also about that time, he said, he “realized that I was not being encouraged to think for myself.” Even though the Episcopal church is relatively liberal in its doctrine, relatively tolerant of departures from orthodoxy, for Charles any organized religion is objectionable because it tells people what to believe rather than having them find out for themselves.

Now, he believes generally in a deity. “There’s got to be something better than mankind in our universe, because we’re too screwed up to be the best thing.” However, he is more definite about what this deity is not than what it is. “I don’t believe in a bearded White God or a bearded Black God or a nonbearded Black or White or Asian or Indian or Latino god or goddess sitting someplace, watching everybody.” Buddhism appeals to him, especially the Buddhist belief in reincarnation.

I like the Buddhist idea of rebirth and that in each subsequent life you make mistakes, but you’re approaching perfection at which point you can achieve nirvana. There is something that really appeals to me about the idea that you get another chance because everybody makes tons of mistakes in their life. It’d be nice to have another shot with some benefit from the experience[s] you’ve been through.

However, he hastens to add, “I am not a Buddhist.”
He is more certain about what he believes about this world, here and now, and the values he wants to live by. "In terms of how I conduct myself with friends and with people who aren't even friends, I try to treat them the way that I would want to be treated. To a certain extent that boils down to the Golden Rule, 'Do unto others . . . '" He also believes in being true to himself, following his heart and doing what he really wants to do with his life.

It concerns me that of the many gifted people that I went to school with, so few of them are actually doing what they really want to do. And so many people say to me, "You are an inspiration to me because you are doing what you want to do. You have not yet sold out and said, 'I got a fancy degree from a liberal arts school. I'm just gonna go to business school or law school and get a degree and make lots of money.'"

Although Charles is 27 years old, an age when many of his peers are moving out of emerging adulthood into more settled lives, he has maintained his zeal for exploration, and he easily tolerates the instability that goes along with it.

Angela: "I Want to Get My Life in Order"

Angela, 21, has a job in landscaping, and you might have guessed that from looking at her. She is deeply tanned and her long hair is sun-bleached to a blondish light brown. She is quite tall, probably six feet, and quite slender. Her face is attractive and cheerful; she smiles a lot. You can see both vulnerability and hope in that smile, especially after you have talked to her for a while.

She returned to Missouri a year ago after spending two years at Michigan State, where she was majoring in horticulture therapy, which entails teaching people to cultivate plants as a way of dealing with their psychological problems. Going away to college was a key event in making her feel like she was reaching adulthood, because it meant "being away from my parents and everything and being independent." She loved being on her own, and she would have liked to finish her bachelor's degree at Michigan State. However, she decided she wanted to change her major from horticulture therapy to "just plain horticulture," and when university officials resisted she dropped out. She plans to finish her degree gradually at a local college. Meanwhile, she is working at her landscaping job.

Angela has known since high school that she wanted to pursue a career in horticulture. "I've always been an outdoors person, and I took a class in
high school in horticulture. They had a greenhouse and stuff, and my teacher, I really liked her and she kind of showed me where some schools were and stuff, and that's why I went over there to Michigan State." She feels "a little bit disappointed" that she didn't graduate when she had intended, but she knows she is not alone. "It sounds like a lot of my friends aren't going to graduate, either. A lot of them have dropped out."

Toward the end of her time at Michigan State she was feeling exhausted from working full time in addition to carrying a full load of classes. "I was burnt out on school I think, so I'm kind of glad I took some time off." Now she can finish school gradually as she works in a job in her field. She is learning a lot about landscaping through her job. "We do all the planting and design of flowers and shrubs, and we do irrigation, we mulch, we cultivate, fertilize, all kinds of stuff. I enjoy it."

Although Angela is glad she chose horticulture and glad she went to Michigan State for two years, she is concerned about the debt she has taken on in order to finance her education. "I've got loans, and I'm worried about that. How am I going to pay off my loans? I'm in debt probably about $15,000 now." Her mother and father are both well-off financially, but neither of them supported her college education. "My parents could have helped me pay, you know. They say they can't afford it or something, but I mean, they both have nice houses and my mom has a condo down in Florida and on and on and on, and they didn't help me at all." Why didn't they? "I don't know why. I don't know if they were trying to teach us responsibility or whether they're just selfish or what. I don't know what the deal is." She feels burdened by her debts. "It's kind of depressing. I wish I could win the lottery!"

Angela's parents divorced when she was 4, and her mother remarried two years later, so she mostly grew up in the household of her mother and stepfather along with her older brother (now 24) and younger sister (now 16). Her mother is a medical technician; her stepfather is a professor of astronomy. She has always gotten along well with her mother, but she has never liked her stepfather. "I stayed away from him basically. He was just a jerk." His alcohol use was a source of conflict between him and her mother, and still is. "He gets to drinking and she says, 'Don't drink a lot,' and they start bickering back and forth. It's ridiculous." All the conflict made for a difficult environment to grow up in. "When I look back, it wasn't the best childhood, I think."

As for her father, he is a professor of medicine at a college in South Carolina, where he remained after her parents divorced, and Angela has seen
him rarely since then. In fact, she hasn’t seen him at all for the past seven years. Her reasons for why she hasn’t seen him in so long sound more persuasive for explaining seven weeks than seven years. “It seems like there’s never any time because he’s busy all the time, and with me going to school and working I don’t know when is the last time I had a vacation.” But she talks to him a couple of times a month on the phone. “I don’t know him as well as I would like to, but we talk about a lot of stuff.”

With regard to her own love relationships, Angela got a late start because she was taller than virtually all of the boys. In high school, she says, “I went out with a few people but never dated anybody for a long period of time because I was tall and the guys were all short and they didn’t want to ask me out. They were really intimidated. I was kind of paranoid about it.” She still finds that some men are intimidated by her height, but her own view of it has changed in emerging adulthood. “It doesn’t bother me now. It meant more what your friends thought then and it was more the peer thing that was so big, and you had to fit in.”

At Michigan State, she dated a young man for two years. They shared a love for sports and the outdoors, and they got along well. But they broke up a year ago, shortly after he graduated. “He was wanting to get married, and I think that scared me off. I think that’s why we broke up.” At age 21, she doesn’t feel anywhere near ready for marriage. “I just can’t get married until I’m about 26 or so, because I want to get my life in order, like have a good job, be set financially. I don’t want to depend on a man.”

Angela met her current boyfriend shortly after returning to Missouri last year. It is clear she has a lot of reservations about their relationship. He drinks too much. “He’s got a drinking problem, and I just don’t want to deal with it.” The difference in their educational levels makes it hard for them to understand each other. “Tom doesn’t have a degree, so he does construction, and I think we just have two levels of thinking that just kind of conflict.” He is older, 29, divorced, and has a son, and Angela thinks he is a poor father. “He has no patience. He just can’t handle him, basically.” Her boyfriend expects her to take over the childcare when the boy visits, which she resents. “I’m 21 years old. I don’t want to be a mother right now.”

How did she get herself into such an unpromising relationship? That’s what she wonders. “I think I’ve been insane here for the last year. I lost my mind.” She has noticed that her relationship with her boyfriend bears a disturbing resemblance to her mother’s relationship with her stepfather, which alarms her. “My mom puts up with a lot of crap, and I don’t know why she does, so I’m looking at my relationship now and I’m like ‘Boy, this is the
exact relationship as they have' and I'm going, 'What is going on?' I don't know how I got myself into this situation, but I need to get out of it!"

Despite Angela's concerns about her boyfriend, they are currently living together. "That's another thing I can't believe I did," she says regretfully. She moved in with him strictly for practical reasons. "I didn't want to live at home any more because they drove me nuts, and everybody else already had apartments, and some of my friends were living at home, and they didn't want to move out because they couldn't afford it. So I figured I might as well try it." But she doesn't plan to try it for much longer. "The lease is up here at the end of July and I think I'm going to say 'see you later' then."

Angela hopes to marry someone who shares her interest in the outdoors, as her former boyfriend did, but even more important is finding someone with the right personal qualities. "Someone sweet, honest, who can be my friend, who's not temperamental all the time, who can be happy. Because I'm a happy person, and I just want to have fun and have a good time and not worry."

She also looks forward to having children, eventually. "I think it'll be neat having a kid." She hopes that by waiting until at least her late twenties to marry, she'll improve her chances of having a successful marriage, unlike her parents. "I don't want to have kids until my upper twenties and I really don't want to be married until after 25 or 26. No hurry. Because my parents are divorced and it's just a pain in the butt."

If you look at Angela's life right now, as it is, you might not see much in her favor. She has dropped out of college, and she is working at a job she enjoys but that doesn't pay well and doesn't offer much in the way of long-term prospects. She is living with a boyfriend she doesn't respect and certainly doesn't want to marry. Yet she is reasonably happy with her life, less for what it is now than for what she believes it will be in the future. Ten years from now, she sees herself in a successful career doing something she enjoys. Ten years from now, she sees herself married to a man she loves, raising happy children with him. Although the fulfillment of these goals is far from imminent, she is confident that eventually she will be successful and happy. At age 21, even if she is currently adrift in many ways, all of her hopes are alive and well.

Conclusion: Themes and Variations

Four lives, each of them unique, each with its own history and its own prospects. Yet they share certain common characteristics as well, characteris-
tics that are also common to many of their peers in this age period. In each of their lives we can see the themes laid out in the first chapter: emerging adulthood as the age of identity explorations, the age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feeling in-between, and the age of possibilities.

All four of them are engaged in identity explorations in love and work. All have ideas about what they would like to do in their future work, although their ideas range in clarity from Charles's devotion to music to Steve's vague hopes of managing a restaurant. But none of them has settled into a definite work pattern yet. Rosa likes her job in the Internet company, but she views it only as a way of gaining a broad range of experience on the way to something else, although she is not sure what. Steve's position as a waiter is a long way from ownership of a restaurant, and he concedes that he is only "treading water" right now. Charles is committed to a career in music, but the precise form of that career remains to be determined. Angela loves horticulture, but she has not decided yet how this love will translate into a career. All of them are still exploring different career possibilities to see which ones appeal to them most and which ones will work out for them. All of them are still in the process of answering the questions "What do I enjoy most? What am I best at? How does that fit with the options available to me?"

In their love lives, the same process of exploration is evident. Steve, Charles, and Angela are all in relationships that seem unlikely to last. None of them has any desire to marry any time soon. Charles's first priority is his music, Angela and her boyfriend seem poorly matched, and Steve's life is too much up in the air to include commitment to anything right now, including his girlfriend. Rosa is the most settled of the four in terms of love, but even she wants to wait a while before entering marriage, and she wonders if it wouldn't be a good idea for her to explore her options a bit more. All of them are still pondering the question of who they should commit themselves to for life.

For all of them, the explorations of emerging adulthood go in tandem with instability. Exploring in love and work means that they may change direction at any time, as new possibilities come along. Steve is the extreme example of this, with his determination to sign only month-to-month leases so that he can take off on short notice. But none of them knows exactly what he or she will be doing a year from now, much less 10 or 20 years from now. With the possible exception of Rosa, none of them know who their intimate partner will be a year from now, much less 10 or 20 years from now. But instability doesn't trouble them much. They accept it as part of the
process of exploring, as a reflection of the fact that they are still in the pro-
cess of deciding what form they want their adult lives to take.

Their concentration on identity explorations makes emerging adult-
hood a self-focused time of their lives. Rosa is the most explicit about this,
when she says, "I want to be a little selfish for a while," but it is an under-
current for all of them. Steve and Charles don't want to commit themselves
to love relationships because they want to be free to go where their wishes
take them, on their own. Angela doesn't feel ready for marriage or children
for many years yet, not until she has had enough time to focus on her own
life and achieve self-sufficiency. All of them want to commit themselves to
others eventually, but for now, during their emerging adult years, they want
to focus on personal goals and self-development.

They are aware of being in a period of exploration, of not yet having
made the choices that will provide the foundation for their adult lives, and
this awareness makes them feel in-between, no longer in adolescence but
not yet fully adult. They feel like they have reached adulthood in some ways,
but in other ways they feel like they are "still trying to grab ahold of it," as
Steve said. Of the four, only Charles feels he has definitely reached adult-
hood, and Charles also realizes that he is in a temporary period of being
"highly portable," prior to taking on the responsibilities of adult life.

Although there is a lot of exploration and instability in their lives right
now, all four of them are confident they will get what they want out of life.
Everything seems possible for them, and their hopes are high. They expect to
have happy marriages, and they expect to find meaningful work and to be
successful in it. At this age, there is nothing to impede their dreams. Angela
may have her career in horticulture, Steve may have his restaurant, Rosa may
have her bakery, Charles may turn his musical ambitions into reality. All of
them may find a lifelong love. Or maybe not. But here in emerging adult-
hood, no dreams have been permanently dashed, no doors have been firmly
closed, every possibility for happiness is still alive. This is the glory of emerg-
ing adulthood, that it is the age of possibilities, the age of unvanquished hopes.

Not all emerging adults are like the ones profiled in this chapter. Some
make enduring decisions relatively early and have settled lives by their mid-
twenties. Others find their opportunities for exploration restricted by pov-
erty, poor schooling, or family chaos. We will explore their stories, too, in
the chapters to come. However, we will see that most emerging adults re-
semble Rosa, Steve, Charles, and Angela in having lives characterized by
exploration and instability and in focusing on self-development as they seek
to translate their possibilities into real life.
Chapter 1

1. Arnett (2000a); Arnett & Taber (1994).

2. Arnett & Taber (1994). This applies to couples who marry. However, since the early 1970s, the rate of single parenthood has grown dramatically, to a current rate of about 25% of all American births. Consequently, the median age of entering parenthood used to be a year or so after marriage, whereas today the median ages of marriage and parenthood are very similar. Nevertheless, the point here remains valid, that the median ages of both marriage and parenthood have risen steeply over the past half century.


5. Mogelonsky (1996). This is perhaps not as large a proportion as it sounds from this statistic. Because only about one fourth of young Americans obtain a four-year degree (the rest drop out or attend only two-year schools), one third of this one quarter is only about 8%. Nevertheless, this percentage has risen steadily over recent decades. Also, there is an additional percentage who attend graduate or professional school not immediately after graduating with a four-degree but after spending some time out of higher education.

6. Modell (1989). There are no statistical data to confirm this, but this is the conclusion Modell draws on the basis of his insightful historical analysis.


8. Sommers (2001). The rise in participation in higher education has been especially dramatic for young women. Traditionally men were much more likely than women to obtain higher education—women were, in fact, barred from most colleges and universities—but young women surpassed young men in the 1980s, and in the past decade the gender gap favoring women has been persistent. See National Center for Education Statistics (2002), Table 20-2.


11. Arnett (1998); Arnett & Taber (1994).

12. Alan Reifman has developed a scale for assessing these five features, and initial results show empirical support for them. See Reifman, Arnett, and Colwell (2003).


15. As Gene Bockneck (1986) notes, numerous developmental theorists in the 20th century have described something like what I am calling emerging adulthood. As far back as 1935, Charlotte Buhler described a "preparatory stage" following adolescence that involved entry into self-chosen and independent activity. More recently, Daniel Levinson and his colleagues (1978) delineated an "early adult transition," lasting from age 17 to 22, which is characterized by separating physically and psychologically from one's family, followed by a period of "entering the adult world" from age 22 to 28, in which people explore possible roles and relationships and make tentative commitments. But none of these theoretical ideas took root as a distinct area of scholarship on this age period, perhaps because up until recently only a minority of young people (mainly men) were able to use the late teens through the twenties for independent identity explorations.


21. The idea about a Plan with a capital P is based on an essay by Elizabeth Greenspan (2000).


26. The graph is from Arnett (2000a).


29. A variety of scholars have commented on the increasing "individualization" of the self in "posttraditional" societies, meaning that social timetables for the life course have become less standardized and people now have a greater range of individual choice in when they make transitions such as finishing education, marriage, and retirement (e.g., Heinz, 2002). I agree, but I would add that the range of individual choice is greatest during emerging adulthood.

30. E.g., Hogan & Astone (1986); Shanahan (2000).

33. The data in Table 1.1 are from Population Reference Bureau (2000).
36. For a perspective on the darker side of emerging adulthood, including the limitations imposed by social class, see Côté (2000).
39. The data in Table 1.2 are from Population Reference Bureau (2000).
40. In the total sample there were 157 Whites, 56 African Americans, 48 Asian Americans, and 43 Latinos. All of them have been given pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of their responses.

Chapter 2


Chapter 3

1. Laursen, Coy, & Collins (1998); Larson & Richards (1994). There is currently a widespread view in adolescent psychology that adolescents get along just fine with their parents, but I don’t think this fits the evidence. It’s true that adolescents often say they like and admire their parents, but it’s also typical that conflict with parents rises sharply in adolescence and closeness sharply declines. For an analysis of this issue, see Arnett (1999).
4. For an excellent account of both current and historical patterns of leaving home, see Goldscheider & Goldscheider (1999). Most of the information in this section is from this source.
5. Goldscheider & Goldscheider (1999).
8. There is little research on this topic, but for related papers see the 1996 issue of New Directions in Child and Adolescent Development, “Leaving Home: Understanding the Transition to Adulthood,” edited by Julia A. Graber and Judith Semon Dubas.
10. The ages are 23 for men and 21 for women; Silbereisen, Meschke, & Schwarz (1996).
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