

Yet Another Stage of Life?

With millions of young adults failing to launch, the claim that “emerging adulthood” is a new stage of life is gaining traction. This idea could do more harm than good.

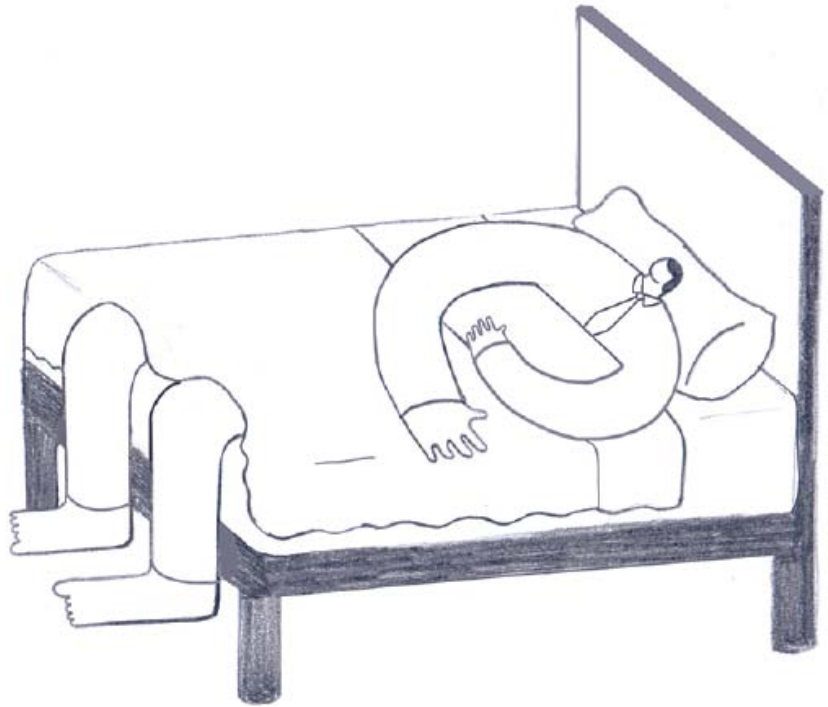
BY ROBERT EPSTEIN

HOW MANY stages of life are there? According to Hindu teachings, human life unfolds in four stages: childhood, apprenticeship, adulthood and old age. William Shakespeare in *As You Like It* insisted on seven, beginning with infancy, when we are “mewling and puking,” and ending with old age, when we are “sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.”

It will come as no surprise that social scientists have expressed their own opinions on the matter, often arguing over the details and sometimes specifying different sets of stages for different abilities, such as cognitive development (Jean Piaget), moral reasoning (Lawrence Kohlberg) and psychosexual development (Sigmund Freud). What is more, when cultures change sufficiently to alter behavior during certain age spans, social scientists sometimes add *new* stages as they notice them.

One dramatic case in point: in 1904, with industrialization rapidly displacing the apprentice system that had tied young and old people together for millennia and with hundreds of thousands of young people wreaking havoc on the streets of mushrooming U.S. cities, psychologist G. Stanley Hall put the term “adolescence” on the social map. Hall mistakenly claimed that this tumultuous stage of life existed in all cultures and eras, but we know now that adolescence is actually a product of industrialization and is by no means a necessary stage of life.

Anthropological studies show that adolescence as Hall defined it is absent in more than 100 cultures around the world—cultures in which young people work side by side with adults at early ages. My own research suggests that it is only when we hold people back from



adulthood that we see the depression, defiance and anger so typical of American teens, nearly 50 percent of whom are now diagnosable with at least one emotional, behavioral or substance abuse disorder, according to the 2010 National Comorbidity Survey.

In 1950 psychoanalyst Erik Erikson proposed the existence of yet another new stage of life—“young adulthood”—*in between* adolescence and adulthood proper, characterized by “a deep sense of isolation and self-absorption” and the search for “intimacy,” “identity” and “moral values.” It lasted, Erikson said, from age 18 to about age 35. Unlike adolescence, however, this stage lit no fires. His idea was still little more than an academic footnote when Erikson died in 1994 at age 91.

But that same year, prompted by a

growing body of data suggesting that entry into adulthood in the U.S. was being increasingly delayed, developmental psychologist Jeffrey Jansen Arnett of Clark University gave the idea another shot, this time calling the stage “emerging adulthood.” His proposal was also largely ignored until 2000, when, with even more data about delayed adulthood in hand, he presented his case in greater depth in the journal *American Psychologist*.

Between 1970 and 1996, Arnett said, the median age of first marriage had increased from 21 to 25 for women and from 23 to 27 for men, and far more young people were getting college or graduate degrees. With entry into marriage and the workforce delayed, he observed, we need to recognize that a new stage of life exists before adulthood

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characterized by “identity explorations,” “instability” and “self-focus.”

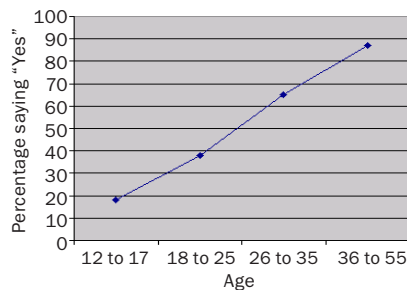
This time neither the general public nor scientists (who are also members of the general public, after all) could ignore the idea for the simple reason that many of their offspring were still sitting on their doorsteps. According to a 2012 study by the Pew Research Center, the likelihood that young adults would move to another state dropped by 40 percent between 1980 and 2008. The proportion of young people getting driver’s licenses also dropped substantially over that period—and that was even before the Great Recession hit. Since 2008 a whopping 29 percent of adults between the ages of 25 and 34 have lived with their parents at some point.

Interest in Arnett’s idea has paralleled the changing U.S. demographics. According to Google Scholar, before 2000 only 140 articles mentioned emerging adulthood, but between 2000 and 2007 the number jumped by another 1,980, and the recession has added, at this writing, another 8,180 scholarly articles to the pile. The trend in Google pages, which mirrors interest by the general public, has been similar. Google now lists 224,000 pages mentioning the phrase “emerging adulthood.”

Timing is indeed everything. Hundreds of thousands of teens were on the streets when Hall wrote about adolescence, and millions of young adults are now living in their old bedrooms with Nirvana posters still on the walls. With so many young adults now conspicuously off track, the idea that emerging adulthood exists as a new stage of life has taken hold.

But do scientific data justify its naming, and is there any benefit to the acceptance of such a stage? Having been a researcher for more than 30 years, I cannot help but be skeptical on both fronts. For one thing, if emerging

adulthood were truly a new stage, we should see meaningful discontinuities in data that mark both its beginning and end. Instead we generally see a continuation of the century-old trend that is delaying entry into adulthood—a gradual increase in the median age of first marriage, for example. Also, much of the data that Arnett himself cites shows continuity in data across a life span, rather than a discontinuity suggesting that something distinct is happening to young adults [*see illustration below*].



The proportion of people identifying themselves as “adults” increases fairly smoothly as a function of age. The proportion is not especially high or low among so-called emerging adults.

My main concern with Arnett’s proposal has to do with the power of labels—especially when we are putting a label on a negative stereotype. There is enormous variability among teens; many are troubled or incompetent, it is true, but my own data suggest that 30 percent of them are actually more competent than half of grown-ups across a wide range of adult abilities. The label “adolescent” is so powerful, however,

that it leads us both to view and to treat *all* young people as if they are equally impaired—even to blame that impairment on the so-called teen brain. In my opinion as a behavioral psychologist, this popular idea confirms our negative biases about teens but has a dubious scientific basis [see “The Myth of the Teen Brain,” by Robert Epstein; *SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN MIND*, April/May 2007].

According to the new Pew study, most people in their 20s have jobs and do not live with parents, and many are in stable, fulfilling relationships. It is imprudent, I believe—especially based on short-term social trends—to suggest that most or all individuals that age are inherently unstable and unfocused. Over time the label could quite easily come to function as a self-fulfilling prophecy, creating expectations that push more young adults toward dysfunction.

As with new “temporary” taxes, once new psychological labels make it into textbooks, they never disappear. Emerging adulthood is probably here to stay, and that could be bad news for young adults. **M**

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(Further Reading)

- ◆ **Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: A Cultural Approach.** Fourth edition. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett. Pearson, 2009.
- ◆ **Debating Emerging Adulthood: Stage or Process?** Jeffrey Jensen Arnett et al. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- ◆ **Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood.** Christian Smith et al. Oxford University Press, 2011.

SOURCE: “EMERGING ADULTHOOD: A THEORY OF DEVELOPMENT FROM THE LATE TEENS THROUGH THE TWENTIES,” BY JEFFREY J. ARNETT, IN *AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGIST*, VOL. 55, NO. 5, MAY 2000