

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

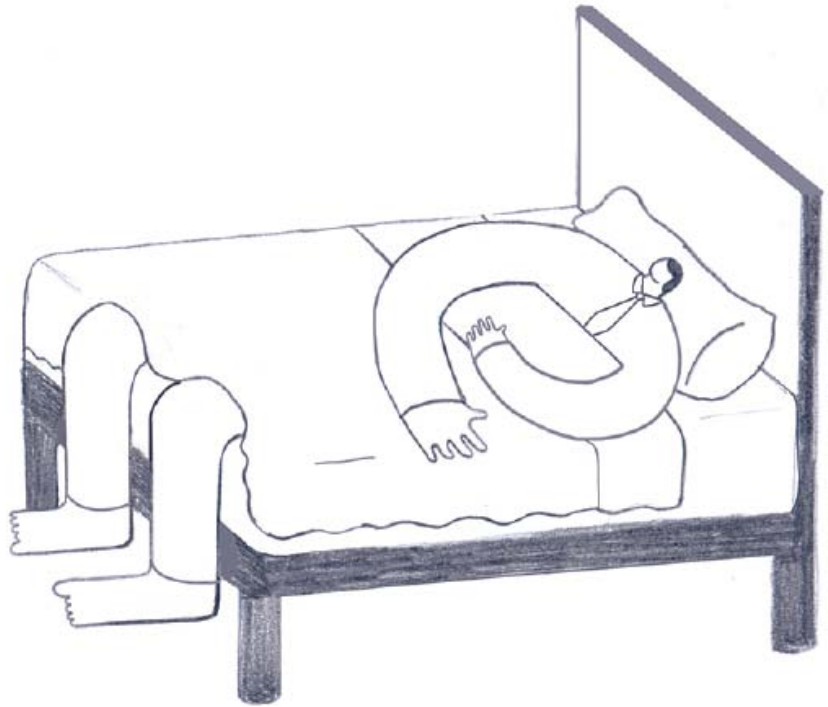
BY ROBERT EPSTEIN

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

