

# Emerging Adulthood: The Perils and Promise of a New Life Stage

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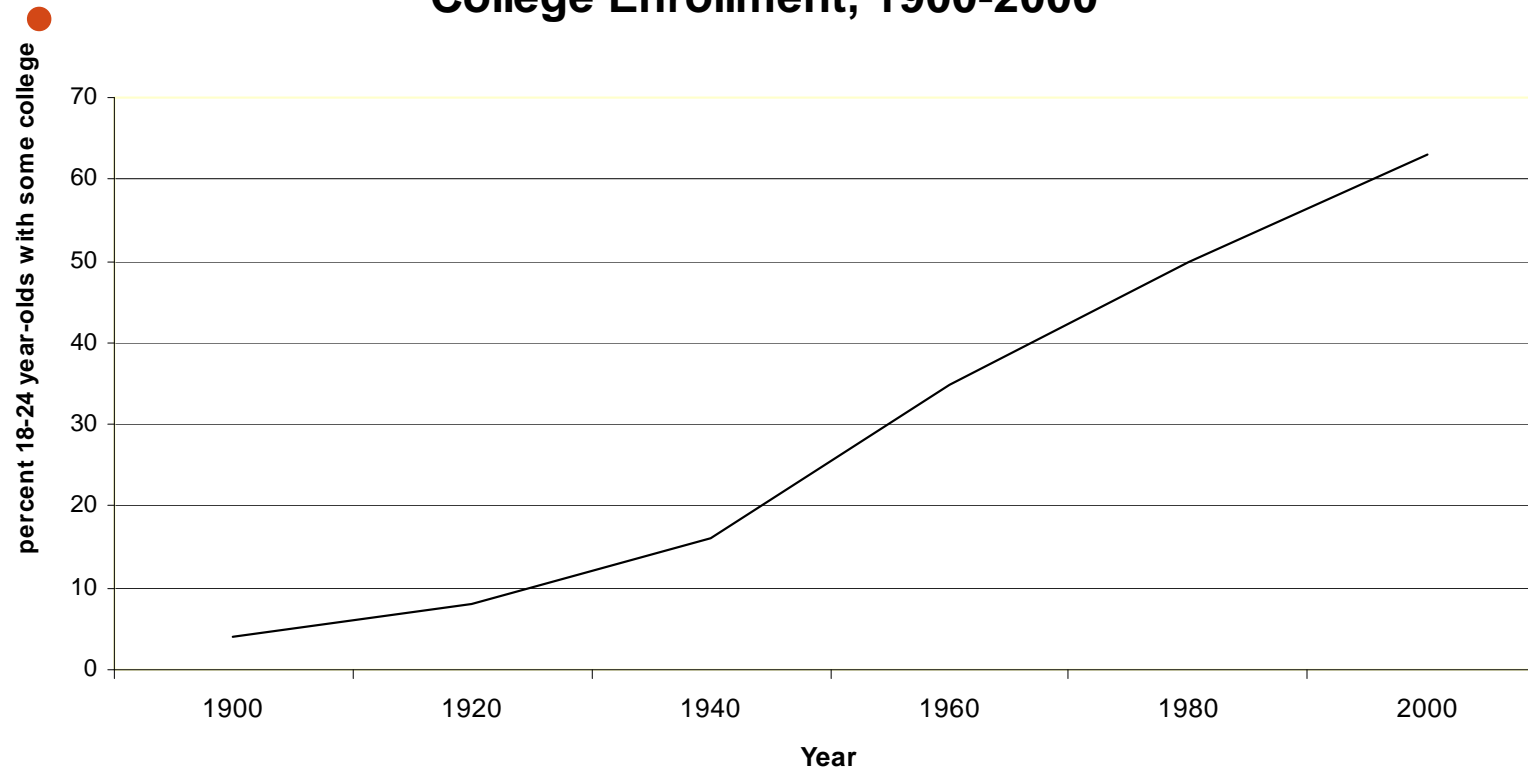
# What is emerging adulthood?

- Lasts from about age 18-25; for many, lasts through the twenties
- Begins with the end of secondary school; ends with the attainment of full adult status--?
- Exists mainly in industrialized societies, but growing in developing countries

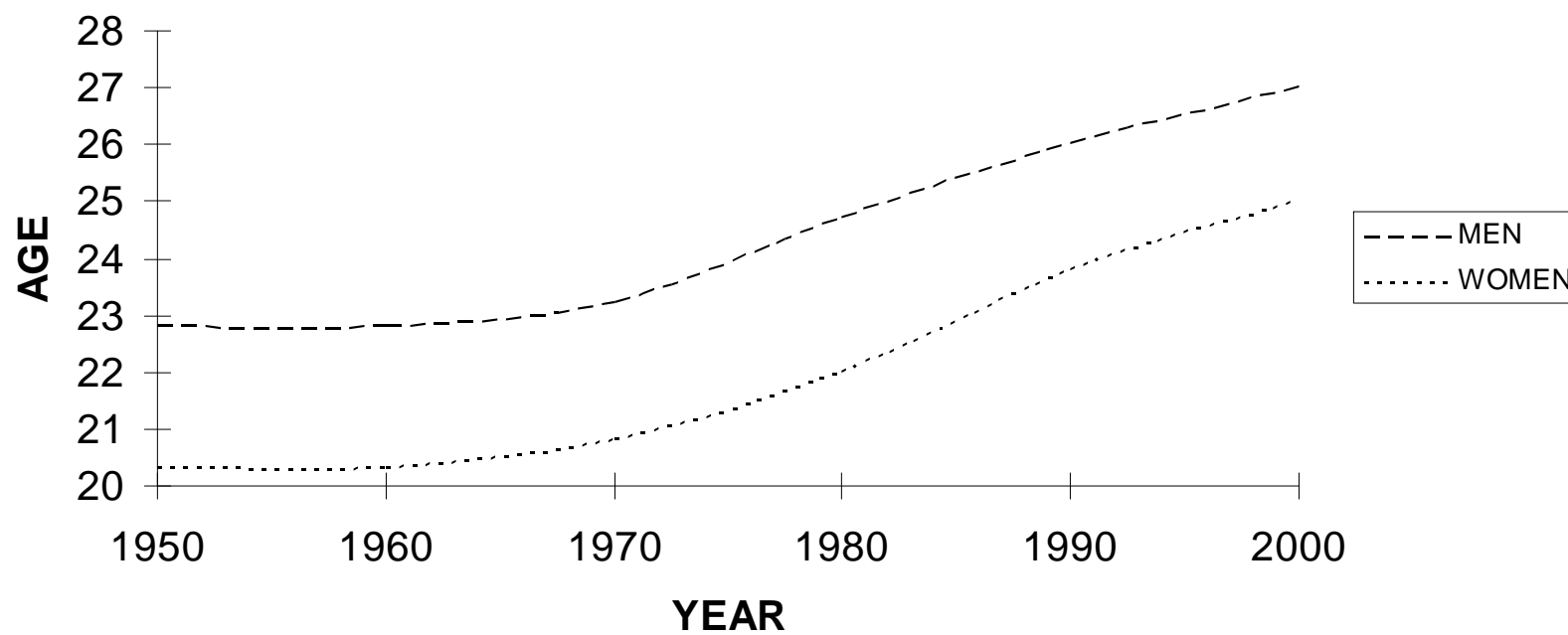
## Social changes leading to emerging adulthood

- Later ages of marriage and parenthood
- Longer and more widespread education
- Birth control, fewer children
- Acceptance of premarital sexuality, cohabitation
- Changes in women's roles
- Ambivalence about adult status

## College Enrollment, 1900-2000



Median U.S. Marriage Age, 1950–2000



- Median Marriage Age (Females) in Selected Countries

Industrialized Countries	Age	Developing Countries	Age
• United States	26	Egypt	19
• Sweden	32	Morocco	20
• Germany	30	Ghana	19
• France	29	Nigeria	17
• Spain	30	India	20
• Japan	28	Indonesia	19
• Australia	28	Brazil	21

# Five features of emerging adulthood

- (Based on 300 interviews with American ages 18-29, diverse backgrounds.)
- In 2012: Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults (CUPEA), national sample of 710 18-25-year-olds
- The age of identity explorations
- The age of instability
- The self-focused age
- The age of feeling in-between
- The age of possibilities

# The Age of Identity Explorations

- “This is a time of my life for finding out who I really am.” (CUPEA)
- 81% of 18-29s agree
- Trying to find a place in the world in love and work
- Love: searching for a “soul mate”  
---“When you marry, you want to find your soul mate, first and foremost.” 94% of Americans 20-29 agree (National Marriage Project).
- Work: searching for self-fulfillment; money is not enough.  
---“They pay well, but I hate my job! There’s no opportunity for growth there.” Tamara, age 22, legal assistant.



# The age of instability

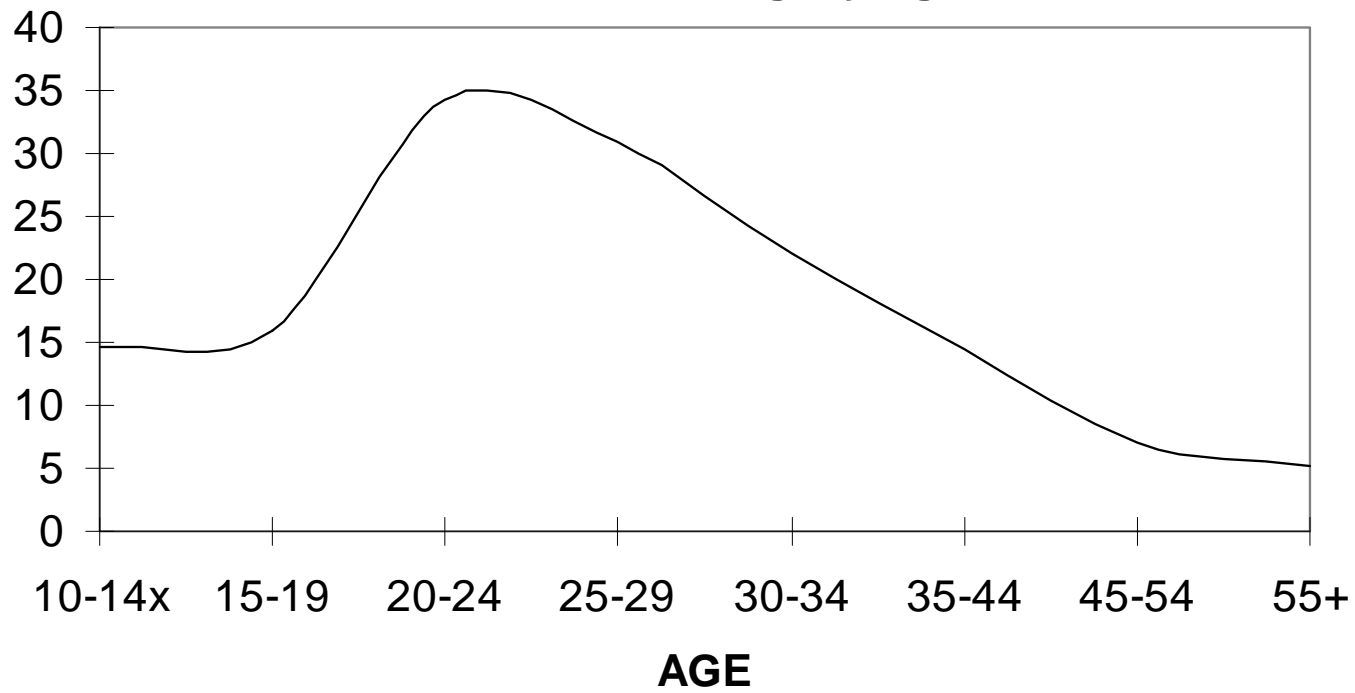
- “This time of my life is full of changes.” 86% agree. (CUPEA)
- “This time of my life is full of uncertainty.” 67% agree. (CUPEA)
- Average number of job changes from age 20-29 in U.S.: Seven





Percent Who Moved in Past Year

**Rates of Moving, by Age**



# The self-focused age:

- More independent from parents
- Not yet tied to others
- “This is a time of my life for focusing on myself.”  
74% agree. (CUPEA)
- “I think I want to get more in touch with myself. I want to be a little selfish for awhile, 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.” (Rosa, 24 year-old Latina)

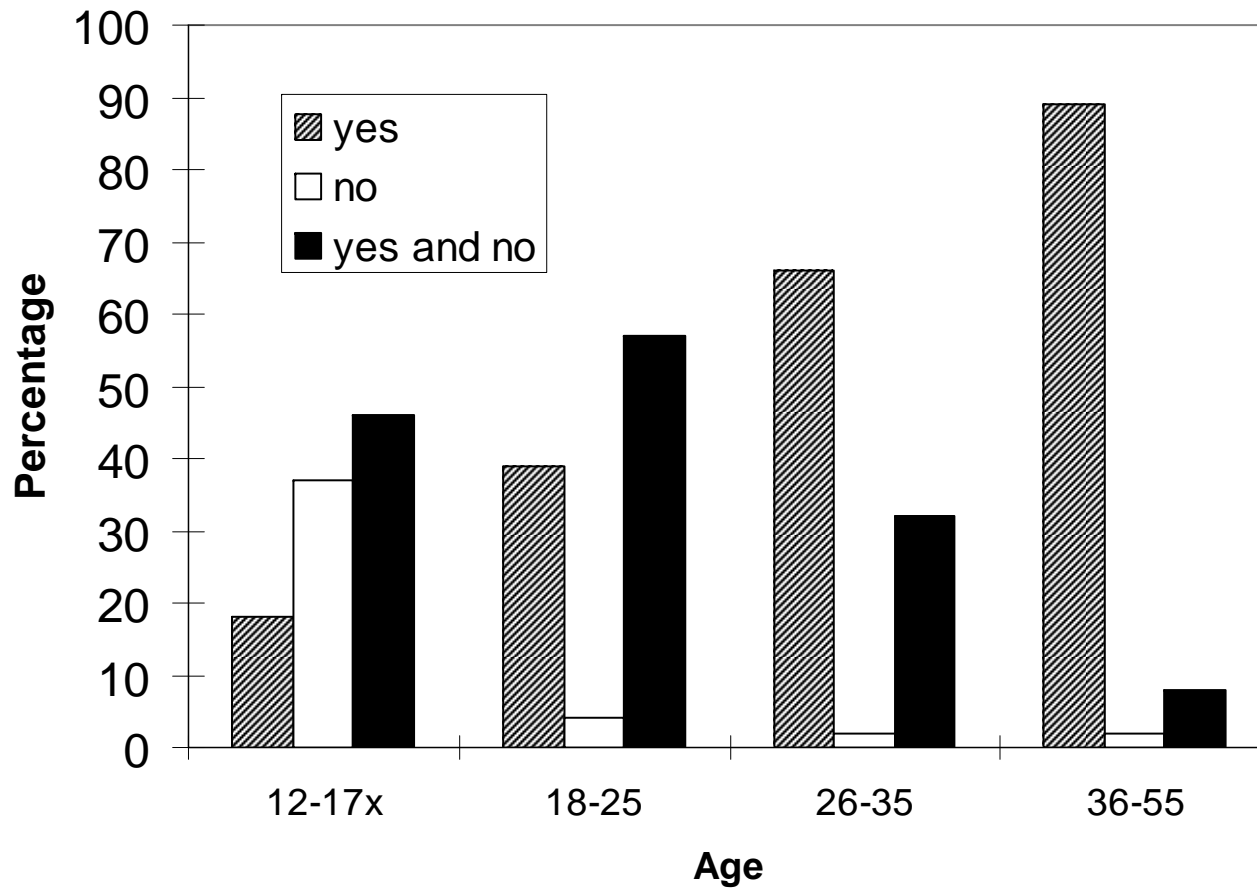


# The age of feeling in-between

- Not yet fully adult, and definitely not “kids” or “adolescents”
- Adults in some ways but not others.



Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?



- Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?  
“Not absolutely, because I still sometimes get up in the morning and say, ‘Good Lord! I’m actually a grown up!’ ‘Cause I still feel like a kid. I’ve done things like just got up one morning and said, you know, ‘I’m going to Mexico’ and just get up and go. And I should have been doing other things.”  
(Terrell, 23 year-old African American)



# Top criteria

- Accept responsibility for yourself.
- Financial independence

# Bottom criteria

- Marriage
- Parenthood



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# The age of possibilities

- “At this time of my life, it still seems like anything is possible.”
- 82% of 18-25s agree. (CUPEA)

# The age of possibilities:

- Do you think your life will be better or worse than your parents' lives have been?
- Better 76% of 18-25s. (CUPEA)

“Better economically. Better personally. I just think by the time my parents reached my age, they'd already run into some barricades that prevented them from getting what they wanted, personally and family-wise. And so far, I've avoided those things, and I don't really see those things in my life. I don't like my job. I'm frustrated about the lack of relationships with females. But in general, I think I'm headed in the right direction.” (Bob, 23 year-old White American)

# Variations by social class

- Education looms large, now and later.
- EAs from lower class backgrounds feel adult earlier, marry 2 years earlier, have children earlier.
- BUT—the same five features apply across social classes.

# Mental health challenges

- High rates of substance use, sexual risk behavior, eating disorders, depression, anxiety disorders.
- Nearly half of 19-25 year-olds in U.S. have had a psychiatric disorder in past year (Blanco et al., 2008).
- “I often feel depressed.” 35% of 18-25s (CUPEA)
- “I often feel anxious.” 58% of 18-25s (CUPEA)

# Implications for mental health

- Identity challenges → identity confusion.
- Instability → inconsistent social support.
- Self-focus can be lonely.
- Feeling in-between → anxiety.
- Age of possibilities → disappointment.
- Can be difficult to distinguish a developmental challenge from a mental health problem.



# Implication for Mental Health Treatment

- Neither child nor adult system fits them well.
- Age of possibilities unrecognized and untapped.
- Critical period for resilience.

# Don't forget the good news

- “This time of my life is fun and exciting.” 83% of 18-25s agree. (CUPEA)
- “I am confident that eventually I will get what I want out of life.”
- 90% of 18-25s agree. (CUPEA)

- “Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties,” by Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, Oxford University Press.
- [www.jeffreyarnett.com](http://www.jeffreyarnett.com)
- Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood (SSEA) now established! [www.ssea.org](http://www.ssea.org)

