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What Is It about 20-Somethings?

ESTABLISHING A PROBLEM AND SAYING WHY IT MATTERS

It's happening all over, in all sorts of families, not just young people moving back home but also young people taking longer to reach adulthood overall. It's a development that predates the current economic doldrums, and no one knows yet what the impact will be—on the prospects of the young men and women; on the parents on whom so many of them depend; on society, built on the expectation of an orderly progression in which kids finish school, grow up, start careers, make a family, and eventually retire to live on pensions supported by the next crop of kids who finish school, grow up, start careers, make a family, and on and on. The traditional cycle seems to have gone off course, as young people remain untethered to romantic partners or to permanent homes, going back to school for lack of better options, traveling, avoiding commitments, competing ferociously for unpaid internships or temporary (and often grueling) Teach for America jobs, forestalling the beginning of adult life.

MAKING THE PROBLEM CLEARER WITH DETAILS AND PROPORTIONS

The 20s are a black box, and there is a lot of churning in there. One-third of people in their 20s move to a new residence every year. Forty percent move back home with their parents at least once. They go through an average of seven jobs in their 20s, more job changes than in any other stretch. Two-thirds spend at least some time living with a romantic partner without being married. And marriage occurs later than ever. The median age at first marriage in the early 1970s, when the baby boomers were young, was 21 for women and 23 for men; by 2009 it had climbed to 26 for women and 28 for men, five years in a little more than a generation.

SOCIOLOGISTS → AY

INTRODUCING A KEY CONCEPT

PRESENTING EVIDENCE IN SUPPORT OF THE CONCEPT

We're in the thick of what one sociologist calls "the changing timetable for adulthood." Sociologists traditionally define the "transition to adulthood" as marked by five milestones: completing school, leaving home, becoming financially independent, marrying, and having a child. In 1960, 77 percent of women and 65 percent of men had, by the time they reached 30, passed all five milestones. Among 30-year-olds in 2000, according to data from the United States Census Bureau, fewer than half of the women and one-third of the men had done so. A Canadian study reported that a typical 30-year-old in 2001 had completed the same number of milestones as a 25-year-old in the early '70s.

COMMENTING ON WHAT SOCIOLOGISTS SAY ABOUT ADULTHOOD MILESTONES

The whole idea of milestones, of course, is something of an anachronism; it implies a lockstep march toward adulthood that is rare these days. Kids don't shuffle along in unison on the road to maturity. They slouch toward adulthood at an uneven, highly individual pace. Some never achieve all five milestones, including those who are single or childless by choice, or unable to marry even if they wanted to because they're gay. Others reach the milestones completely out of order, advancing professionally before committing to a monogamous relationship, having children young and marrying later, leaving school to go to work and returning to school long after becoming financially secure.

RESETTING THE PROBLEM TO BE EXAMINED IN THE ARTICLE

Even if some traditional milestones are never reached, one thing is clear: Getting to what we would generally call adulthood is happening later than ever. But why? That's the subject of lively debate among policy makers and academics. To some, what we're seeing is a transient epiphenomenon, the byproduct of cultural and economic forces. To others, the longer road to adulthood signifies something deep, durable, and maybe better-suited to our neurological hard-wiring. What we're seeing, they insist, is the dawning of a new life stage—a stage that all of us need to adjust to.

THEY SAY; ARNETT SAYS

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, a psychology professor at Clark University in Worcester, Mass., is leading the movement to view the 20s as a distinct life stage, which he calls "emerging adulthood." He says what is happening now is analogous to what happened a century ago, when social and economic changes helped create adolescence—a stage we take for granted but one that had to be recognized by psychologists, accepted by society, and accommodated by institutions that served the young. Similar changes at the turn of the 21st century have laid the groundwork for another new stage, Arnett says, between the age of 18 and the late 20s. Among the cultural changes he points to that have led to "emerging adulthood" are the need for more education to survive in an information-based economy; fewer entry-level jobs even after all that schooling; young people feeling less rush to marry because of the general acceptance of premarital sex, cohabitation, and birth control; and young women feeling less rush to have babies given their wide range of career options and their access to assisted reproductive technology if they delay pregnancy beyond their most fertile years.

INTRODUCING/ORIENTING READERS TO A NEW CONCEPT TO MAKE SENSE OF THE PROBLEM

(SUMMARY, PARAPHRASE, QUOTING, SPOTLIGHTING, EXPLAINING...)

Just as adolescence has its particular psychological profile, Arnett says, so does emerging adulthood: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and a rather poetic characteristic he calls "a sense of possibilities." A few of these, especially identity exploration, are part of adolescence too, but they take on new depth and urgency in the 20s. The stakes are higher when people are approaching the age when options tend to close off and lifelong commitments must be made. Arnett calls it "the age 30 deadline."

STILL ORIENTING, COMPARING A NEW CONCEPT TO A FAMILIAR ONE