

# Work and Careers

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When you hear the term *Baby Boomers*, most likely a bundle of characteristics comes to mind that makes them distinctive—they are iconoclasts, activists, authors of the therapeutic revolution, spiritual explorers, restless entrepreneurs. Likewise, we associate the Great Generation with the hardships of growing up in the Depression and the sacrifices they made during World War II. Are today's emerging adults a distinctive generation, and will they put their own stamp on our culture and institutions?

Some commentators in business, education, and the media believe that they will. They argue that the “Millennials” or “Generation Next” are especially distinct in how they approach work and careers, having new habits, expectations, and attitudes that are reconfiguring the workplace. Some social scientists agree, pointing to several factors that shape a distinctive approach to work among today's emerging adults: the size of the birth cohort (which is large compared to their parents'); the structured and supervised nature of their adolescent activities; experiences with technology; and positive experiences with diversity and egalitarianism.

Other social scientists are not so sure; they are more likely to point to large-scale transformations in the economy that have affected how *all* Americans approach paid employment and their expectations about career outcomes. These include the wired revolution and the globalization of the labor market, but also the decline of wages (and increase in wage inequality) since the 1970s and other transformations that have reduced the generosity and security of both wages and employment-associated benefits for all workers.

Both perspectives have merit. They both point to historical events and social trends (globalization, economic changes, the wired revolution) that had serious effects

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on all Americans in the last several decades, and especially on those under 40. Where they disagree is whether these changes have had a different kind of impact on emerging adults today because of the way these events and trends shaped their experiences of childhood and adolescence. What the academic studies of this generation often miss are the optimism and achievement orientation of today's emerging adults. What the more popular commentaries often miss are the uneven pathways that people take through the period of emerging adulthood and how social inequality, particularly differences in race and social class, can shape the capacity to successfully navigate the risk economy.

In this essay I describe how emerging adults experience work and their expectations for their careers. I also describe the demographic and economic changes that have led to a longer and "messier" period of emerging adult life and which have shaped the trajectories of emerging adults, leading some to thrive in today's high-risk economy but also fostering long-term inequality in financial stability and career achievement.

### **Approaches to Work and Experiences of Work**

Management consultants and educational leaders have done a great deal of research on emerging adults' attitudes toward education and paid work. Such research is often conducted on a smaller scale and with fewer external quality controls than academic research, but there is a strong central tendency across studies and findings that is consonant with the academic research, which increases the validity of the findings from this research. Today's emerging adults were raised to be confident and hopeful, goal-oriented, civic-minded, and egalitarian. They have been told that they are special, and they expect success.

The advice these educators and consultants have for anyone working with young adults today? Remember that they are used to structured environments, so they need leaders who provide that structure as well as challenges. They are used to being connected and like to work in teams. They want work to be fun, and they expect deadlines and the organization of work to be flexible. They expect to be treated with respect. They want to use technology (and to be in environments that are technologically savvy). They do not have much patience with inequalities in the workplace (or the

classroom, church, or civic organization) based on gender, race, or sexual orientation.

Academic research supports this overall view. One recent report finds several factors that distinguish Generation Next (emerging adults between 18 and 25 years old in their 2006 survey) from Generation X (those between 26 and 40 years of age). The poll asked about the revolution in electronic communications, the automation of jobs, the growing number of immigrant workers, and the outsourcing of jobs overseas. More than any other generation, emerging adults believe that these changes have helped American workers, not hurt them. This is one source of their optimism.

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow calls today's emerging adults "tinkerers," capturing their flexibility, self-motivation, creativity, egalitarianism, pragmatism, resiliency, and short-term focus. He argues it is an appropriate orientation given the economic changes that have transformed career trajectories; census data show that the average American worker today will hold seven or eight jobs between the ages of 18 and 35 (25% of emerging adults will have more than 10 jobs). Wuthnow gives an example that illustrates the meaning of these changes. A chemistry major who graduated in 1970 would have joined DuPont or a similar employer right out of college and had a career with that company. Now she is likely to hedge her bets by getting experience in writing or marketing, and perhaps working for a start-up or two and a nonprofit, and then maybe (or maybe not) a major company like DuPont. At some point she may well switch to something else that draws on her experience but is in a different sector, perhaps becoming a technical writer, a teacher, or a consultant. She is likely to view this as normal and be confident about her ability to negotiate each change as it arises. But this is an example of a thriving trajectory; others do not fare so well.

### **Changing Families and the Economy of Risk**

Two trends that began in the 1970s have shaped the experiences of today's emerging adults, affecting the kinds of households in which they grew up and the kinds of expectations they have for their own working lives. The first is the change in women's roles and the accompanying reconfiguration of the American family. The second is the emergence of the "risk economy." Because of these two changes, emerging adults today take longer to establish themselves in a stable job or career, and taking on paid

employment has become decoupled from a set of other transitions that used to be bundled together and occur shortly after leaving school: marriage, establishment of an independent household, and the birth of children.

The 1970s saw a rapid influx of women, including mothers of young children, into the labor force. Bureau of Labor Statistics figures show that by the year 2000, 68% of households with children under six were dual-earner households. The Boomer generation grew up with Ozzie and Harriet as their cultural reference for the ideal family, but today's emerging adults grew up with the Huxtables. They take the two-earner couple for granted, and most of them have a more egalitarian gender ideology than even their parents did (who were in turn more egalitarian than their parents had been). Changing women's roles have coincided with the emergence of a new cultural pluralism when it comes to what it means to be a family or what a "good family" looks like. Whether they grew up working-class or middle-class, and regardless of their racial or ethnic identity, today's emerging adults never expected their fathers to support the family on one income, and most of them do not look forward to forming that kind of family themselves.

The second important trend that began in the 1970s is the reconfiguration of paid employment and the rise of the risk economy, which has transformed the workforce, the marketplace, the employment contract, and the way we live. This shift also affected the parents of today's emerging adults, who experienced it as a radical—and disheartening—transformation. Today's emerging adults did not experience this transition itself—the risk economy for them is "business as usual."

The risk economy is characterized by a reduction in both the generosity and stability of wages and benefits compared with previous generations. One of the ways that Americans have responded is to move from a male-breadwinner to a dual-earner family. Another response has been to invest more time in paid employment. By the end of the 1970s, for the majority of Americans, paid employment consumed more time than it had for any previous generation—more time for each individual wage earner, but also more combined time for all the wage earners in the family as more wives and mothers either entered the labor force or began to work longer hours. At the same time, some Americans, especially men of color and working-class white men, experienced chronic

underemployment.

Workers in the risk economy, especially lower-skilled males, are less likely to have stable, lifetime employment, and men and women are increasingly likely to work into their later years. Wages and benefits have changed, too. Shrinking health-care coverage and rising costs have left many Americans uninsured or underinsured, individual retirement accounts have largely replaced pensions, and reduced wages and lower investment returns have reduced household incomes. Despite the steady growth in the percentage of income that wives contribute toward the family coffers, gaps between the rich and poor have grown more and more acute. In this environment, workers may be fearful about finding and keeping a job, and even if they have a job, they may not be able to make ends meet.

Overall, this period saw a radical concentration of wealth and “good jobs” among a small portion of well-off Americans, with increasing numbers of others being left behind. Some negotiate the pitfalls of the new economy well, but many, especially lower-class families, encounter difficulties achieving economic sufficiency and stability. Berkeley sociologist Marianne Cooper refers to this as the new “inequality of security.” This insecurity is most acute for the chronically underemployed but has spread to include a larger segment of workers.

These economic transformations have changed the way that individuals and families interact with schools, community institutions, and employers. As David Brooks pointed out in an influential essay in the April 2001 *Atlantic Monthly* called “The Organization Kid,” today’s emerging adults spent a historically unprecedented amount of time, while they grew up, in organized and supervised activities designed to keep them busy doing something constructive and enriching—beginning with daycare and continuing through after-school lessons, clubs, sports, and high-school-based volunteer programs.

However, while Brooks is right to identify these as trends that affected most of today’s emerging adults, the research of sociologist Annette Lareau highlights the important *differences* in parenting styles and experiences of childhood that are rooted in social class. Privileged middle-class parents raise their children to have the skills,

habits, and dispositions that enable them to succeed in schools and workplaces, often through immersing them in the structured activities Brooks wrote about. But these parents also engage in a particular style of intensive parenting in the home. For example, they use a collaborative, discussion- and reason-oriented approach to discipline. Working-class and poor parents approach child-rearing differently. They may take advantage of some organized activities, but their children spend more time alone and more time in unsupervised play with peers. In the home, working-class parents have a more authority-oriented approach to discipline. As a result, they raise children who are less collaborative and more autonomous, who are comfortable with unstructured time, and who accept limits and disappointments without complaint. These children have fewer skills to successfully negotiate today's schools and workplaces and are more likely to simply accept their fate when opportunities do not work out.

The research of sociologist Marianne Cooper on the new inequality of security suggests that such class-based differences in child-rearing patterns have direct consequences for adult outcomes when it comes to work and careers. Some workers are able to negotiate the pitfalls of the new economy well, while others, especially those from lower-class families, encounter difficulties that impede their efforts to achieve economic sufficiency and stability.

### **Emerging Adults' Pathways through the Risk Economy**

When economic sufficiency becomes more difficult to achieve, the rest of the transition to adulthood is also affected. For earlier generations, a bundle of five life-course transitions tended to occur together: completing high school (or college, for the fortunate), getting married, finding full-time employment, establishing an independent household, and having children. For women, motherhood often, but not always, meant exit from the labor force. By the early to mid-20s, the transition to having one's own independent household and nuclear family was complete. But today entry into adulthood is gradual, ambiguous, and complex. In 1960, 77% of women and 65% of men had completed all of these major life transitions by the age of 30. In 2000, only 46% of women and 31% of men had completed all these transitions by the age of 30; emerging adulthood is a new life stage that does not end until the mid-30s. Furthermore, many Americans do not achieve all the traditional adult markers until they are 40, and quite a

few never do, remaining single or childless throughout adulthood.

According to sociologist Robert Wuthnow, the age at which most emerging adults achieve economic sufficiency is not only changing, but also lagging behind expectations. He cites poll data showing that most Americans believe that young people should be employed full time by age 21 and be able to support a family by age 25. Today's emerging adults largely share these aspirations, but they are unable to reach these goals until their late 20s or early 30s. The inability to meet economic expectations has resulted in changing residential patterns and relationships with parents. About one third of adults between 18 and 34 receive substantial financial help from their parents in any given year, and rising numbers continue to live with their parents and delay establishing their own household.

Popular movies such as *Failure to Launch* lampoon 20- or 30-something adults who live with their parents, but as new research by Katherine Newman at Princeton University shows, a long period of living with one's parents is increasingly common not only in the United States but in other advanced industrial countries, too. Parents are providing direct cash transfers, reduced rent, provision of utilities and other services, and the like. Such arrangements are changing the nature of parent-child relationships and fostering a reconsideration of the nature of autonomy and adulthood. They are also reconfiguring the nature of late-life for increasing numbers of parents who are actively involved in their children's daily lives well into their own 50s, 60s, or beyond.

The pathways that emerging adults take through this long period of adult establishment are shaped by social inequality. The most comprehensive study of emerging adult trajectories, based on a national study funded by the MacArthur Foundation, found three different pathways, each of which characterized about one third of emerging adults. Race and social class also affect who is likely to follow one of the "thriving" pathways; being white and coming from a middle-class background are both protective, but they are not guarantees.

First, roughly a third of emerging adults thrive using a *teamwork* strategy. They complete college and soon get married or form a long-term stable romantic partnership, working together to amass resources and remaining childless until the late 20s or early

30s. This group often receives substantial help from their parents, at times living at home or receiving money for tuition or living expenses. The teamwork strategy allows both partners to invest either in advanced education or in long-hours employment that provides valuable work experience and connections. They avoid the responsibilities of child-rearing until both partners have established themselves in a “good” job with benefits and have begun accumulating assets. By their mid-30s, the teamwork group have established careers and have paid down their debt (or avoided debt in the first place). They are buying homes and have begun to save for retirement. Some will remain childless, but the majority will begin having children once long-term security is in sight.

Roughly another third of emerging adults also thrive in the risk economy by using a *flying solo* strategy. They complete college and invest either in early work experience or in graduate education. This group also receives substantial help from their parents, but by 34 or 35, they have completed the transition to adulthood and begun the process of asset accumulation and retirement planning, including buying a home. Among those who have adopted the *flying solo* strategy, some will remain single, but most will partner in their early- to mid-30s. When they partner, it is with someone else who has also spent their 20s and 30s investing in education and work experience. Child-bearing and rearing, for this group, is the last step of adult establishment, and some will remain childless; by their late 30s, however, most will begin having children of their own.

The other third (roughly) of emerging adults follow alternative pathways that are associated with more instability and insecurity. Some do not complete college but do maintain paid employment; they may live with their parents or sometimes with roommates, but they have trouble achieving financial independence, especially the transition to owning a home. Others have trouble sustaining employment, often because they have not been able to finish high school; they remain with their parents and could not make ends meet without substantial parental support. Others, perhaps 10% of emerging adults, become parents relatively early by their generation’s standards. They either do not partner at all or, if partnered, neither partner is able to achieve stable employment. For emerging adults, early parenthood and the failure to complete high school make it much more difficult to thrive and establish an independent household.

## Summary

Today's emerging adults have a distinct, even unique, experience of making the transition to adulthood. This is the result of the demographic and economic transitions that have affected all Americans since the 1970s but which fundamentally shaped both the experiences and the expectations of emerging adults when it comes to the nature of work, the meaning of a career, and how work and family intersect. Most emerging adults are optimistic, and for many this is warranted; over two thirds thrive. But as many as a third face serious obstacles to achieving financial independence and security in today's risk economy.

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## Annotated Bibliography

### ***Overviews—Academic Research on Emerging Adulthood***

Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. (2004). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen, and Jennifer Lynn Tanner (Eds.). (2005). *Emerging adults in America: Coming of age in the 21st century*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

These two books portray the lives of Americans between adolescence and young adulthood. The first develops the concept of “emerging adulthood” and explains why this is a good term to describe the nature of the transition to adulthood in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The second is a collection of essays that cover a range of topics from relationships with parents to views about love, sex, and marriage; from experiences in college to those in the workplace; and from religious beliefs to beliefs about the concept of adulthood.

Furlong, Andy (Ed.). (2009). *Handbook of youth and young adulthood: New perspectives and agendas*. New York: Routledge.

This book is notable for its global treatment of the subject, gathering authors from

several countries to write about young adulthood. The book tackles current theoretical perspectives on youth and the transition to adulthood as well as several substantive themes: work, education, culture and lifestyles, civic engagement, family relationships, values and identity formation, and crime/deviance. It also contains a section on social inequality, or how young adulthood is shaped by differences in race and social class in different national contexts.

Macmillan, Ross (Ed.). (2007). *Constructing adulthood*. Vol. 11: *Agency and subjectivity in adolescence and adulthood* (Advances in Life Course Research). Oxford: JAI/Elsevier.

Review of social scientific research on the transition to adulthood using a life-course perspective. The first part of the volume centers on agency, especially young adults' abilities to shape their trajectories into adulthood and factors that constrain that ability. The second part looks at subjective experiences of those making the transition to adulthood; this part is a particularly good window into the lives of young adults in America today from a social-scientific perspective.

Settersten, Richard A., Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut. (2005). *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

This book focuses on using sophisticated quantitative analyses of the most wide-ranging and current large-scale datasets in order to describe the transition to adulthood today, identify sources of variation in life-pathways from adolescence to adulthood, understand problems encountered on the way to adulthood, generate policy recommendations, and make theoretical contributions to how we understand emerging adulthood. Despite its emphasis on quantitative analysis, the book is accessible and quite useful both as a facts-and-figures reference and also for its deft summaries and interpretations of trends.

Wuthnow, Robert. (2007). *After the baby boomers: How twenty- and thirty-somethings are shaping the future of American religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton

University Press.

This book is mostly about the religious and spiritual lives of post-Boomer generations in the United States. Its main concerns are how changes in religiosity and spirituality for Americans under 40 will pose challenges for mainstream religious institutions and how those challenges can be overcome. Wuthnow's thesis is that changes in religiosity are largely driven by changes in the life course, especially the long period of emerging adulthood that characterizes the lives of post-Boomers. As a result, the introduction of this book contains a nice and relatively jargon-free review of both family formation and the establishment of work and careers for Americans under 40. Nontechnical readers may want to start here for their review of the literature on work and careers for young adults today.

### ***New Family Ideals***

Skolnick, Arlene. (1991). *Embattled paradise: The American family in an age of uncertainty*. New York: Basic Books.

The author dispenses quickly and thoroughly with any idea that nostalgia for the Ozzie and Harriet family is a healthy thing for our society. In this history of the American family, the author argues that post-60s changes in the family have transformed family ideals to include a much broader range of ideas about "the good family," including blended families, single-parent families, same-sex families, and dual-earner families. She points to changes in demographics and the economy, and not a "crisis of values," as the motivation behind recent family changes, and her account of these changes is, overall, a positive one.

Stacey, Judith. (1990). *Brave new families: Stories of domestic upheaval in late twentieth-century America*. New York: Basic Books.

As the title implies, this book was motivated by a concern with understanding family disruption and reformation—a pattern made increasingly common by rising divorce rates. However, its qualitative, exploratory approach allowed the author to map out the diverse, and sometimes entirely new, ways in which Americans find and form supportive, nurturing, family-like relationships. As such, it also has relevance for

understanding how long-term singles create family-type bonds. Of particular note is the ease with which many people include members of current and previous unions within their families, draw on wide networks of relationships with kin from previous unions, and include some nonfamily (by blood or marriage) relationships in what they *consider* to be their families.

### ***Polls and Media Accounts—Emerging Adults***

*60 Minutes*. (2008, May). “The millennials are coming!”

[www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=3486473n](http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=3486473n).

Typical of media coverage of the Millennials, this story focused on the differences between emerging adults and previous generations, especially with respect to their ability to tolerate authority structures common in business and academic institutions, and their preferences for flexible hours, collaborative relationships, and “wired” work environments. The story was told from the perspective of managers who were, by and large, unsure about how to provide leadership for this generation of workers and who were to some extent worried about what they saw as troublesome generational changes in the overall approach to paid work.

Brooks, David. (2001). “The Organization Kid.” *Atlantic Monthly*.

[www.theatlantic.com/doc/200104/brooks](http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200104/brooks).

This article caused a hubbub when it was first published. It was one of the first articles to document changes in child-rearing and young adult environments. The article itself focuses on the incoming class at Princeton University, with the idea that these future leaders in business, politics, and the professions need to be understood. While Brooks finds much to be praised in the work ethic, civic mindedness, and optimism of the young adults he talked to, he also raised concerns that the amount of time they spent in structured and supervised environments made them unable to respond well to riskier or faster-changing environments and made them too dependent upon others and less likely to show leadership or take risks themselves.

How the new generation of well-wired multitaskers is changing campus culture. (2007,

January 5). *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 53 (18): B10–B15.

This short article discusses the preparation and expectations of today's college students. Several themes are considered especially important, including their familiarity with structured environments and need for leadership from instructors, their preference for flexibility, comfort with diversity, and technological expectations for classrooms.

Kohut, Andrew, Kim Parker, Scott Keeter, Carroll Doherty, and Michael Dimcock. (2007). *How young people view their lives, futures, and politics: A portrait of "generation next."* Washington, DC: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

Good, quick snapshot of the experiences and values of Americans ages 18–25 (at the time of the survey in 2006). The report calls this group "Generation Next." Tables compare responses of this group to responses of either (a) all those over 25 or (b) three other generations: Generation X, Baby Boomers, and Seniors. The report covers overall outlook and worldview, technology and lifestyle, politics and public policy, and values/social issues. Cited in summary as the source of attitudes toward electronic communications, the automation of jobs, the growing number of immigrant workers, and the outsourcing of jobs overseas.

New Strategist Publications. (2009). *The millennials: Americans born 1977 to 1994*, 4th ed. Ithaca, NY: New Strategist Publications.

This is an exhaustive compendium of facts and figures about the Millennials, defined as those born between 1977 and 1994. It covers education, health, housing, income, labor-force participation, living arrangements, spending habits, time use, wealth accumulation, and basic demographics (how many of this group are there, gender/race/ethnic composition, marriage and fertility, etc.). Much of this information is undigested tables, although there are bullet points and short summaries that introduce each table.

Raines, Claire. 2002. *Managing millenials*. GenerationsAtWork.com, [www.generationsatwork.com/articles/millenials.htm](http://www.generationsatwork.com/articles/millenials.htm).

A summary of what Millennials expect from their work environment and practical advice for communicating across generations in the workplace.

***Economics and Social Class—Negotiating the Risk Economy***

Cooper, Marianne. (2008). The inequality of security: Winners and losers in the risk society. *Human Relations*, 61 (9): 1229–1258.

A small-scale qualitative study of 89 workers in California’s Silicon Valley, with a focus on life histories of two illustrative workers. Cooper argues that both structural position and cultural capital (education, habits, dispositions) shape one’s ability to successfully navigate the current high-risk economy. Managers and professionals have better structural positions and the kind of cultural capital that makes it easier for them to thrive under risk; the lack of a safety net means that the risks of the new economy fall disproportionately on lower-class workers. The new risk economy exacerbates social inequality.

Hacker, Jacob S. (2006). *The great risk shift: The assault on American jobs, families, health care, and retirement—and how you can fight back*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hacker documents changes in the nature of employment, financial markets, and public policy that have contributed to a fundamental shift in the economic climate. His main argument is that there is a growing “inequality of security,” with some having access to secure, well-paying jobs, good benefits, and adequate means of saving for retirement, while others lack access to all these things despite working longer hours or having two wage earners in the family. He argues against what he calls the “Personal Responsibility Crusade.” This Yale political scientist has a lot of insight into how our political processes privilege some people’s interests and leave others behind.

Lareau, Annette. (2003). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lareau shadowed 12 diverse families for about a month in an intense and

“naturalistic” look at parenting habits and family culture. Parenting methods, Lareau argues, vary by class more than by race. In working-class and poor households, parents favor maintaining authority over reasoning with children, and children find their own recreation, spending more time alone and more unstructured time with peers. Middle-class children spend more supervised time with peers and have more structure; they become adept at negotiating adult interactions and environments. Both methods of child-rearing have advantages and disadvantages, she says. But there are also implications here for perpetuating inequality; middle-class parents and children learn to get what they want and need from institutions such as schools and workplaces, while working-class children often do not.

Newman, Katherine S. (2008). Ties that bind: Cultural interpretations of delayed adulthood in western Europe and Japan. *Sociological Forum*, 23 (4): 645–669.

Throughout the developed world, young adults hit hard by declining labor market opportunities and rising housing costs have been staying in the natal home. Particularly hard hit are the weak welfare states of southern Europe and Japan, while the social democracies have continued to support the residential independence of young people at early ages. This article considers the divergent cultural interpretations of this pattern of “delayed departure” in order to show that the same demographic configurations may be coded quite differently. (This article is part of a larger project leading to a forthcoming book entitled *Failure to Launch*. For more information, contact the author, who is a professor at Princeton University in the Department of Sociology.)

Schor, Juliet. (1992). *The overworked American: The unexpected decline of leisure*. New York: Basic Books.

This influential book first made Americans aware of the trend toward working longer hours—both individually and as husbands and wives. She traces the roots of this trend toward long work hours to economic changes that, at the same time, led a small number of Americans—mostly men, and especially men of color—to experience chronic underemployment.