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**Author:** Jack Levin

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Lauren Diamond-Brown (BROWNYYJ)  
104 6th Street  
Cambridge, MA 02141

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## THE RELAXATION OF AGE CONSTRAINTS

Time norms give us shared guidelines as to the chronological age at which important and long-term transitions, events, and achievements are expected to occur (Elder, 1981; Levin and Levin, 1991; Neugarten, 1979; Roth, 1963). These norms of proper timing were, early on, addressed by Merton (1957) as well as Roth (1963) in his concept of “career timetables.” Such timetables were said to include a series of stages or phases leading to some recognizable goal or end point. For example, the traditional courtship process, at least in its ideal-typical form, involved movement from casual to exclusive dating, a period of engagement, and finally to marriage and childbirth. In the area of education and work, children were expected to move from elementary school through junior high (or middle school), high school, and college, to secure an advanced degree, to obtain a job, to have a long-term career, and then finally to retire from the workforce by the age of 65 (Clark, 2007).

### **Blurring the Boundaries of Age**

In reality, just like rules of everyday life generally, timetables for such life events as completing formal education, moving out of parents’ residence, marrying, having children, and retiring vary by era, culture, subculture, and social class (Clausen, 1986; Hendry and Kloep, 2011).

Coming on the heels of a long period during which the rules for normative behavior were concentrated within narrow age ranges, the relaxation of timetables by chronological age was an important aspect of the cult of youth that seemed to monopolize the thinking of many Americans during the sixties.

What began as a youth counterculture soon became part of the dominant culture. By the seventies, norms had become more flexible and broader guidelines appeared; and, by the 1990s, informal age norms for education, work, and family transitions had lost much of their power to sanction those individuals who failed to comply with the demands of conventional timetables (Settersten and Hagestad, 1996). Rigid timing norms were transformed into flexible cognitive maps, whose expectations guided and evaluated but hardly sanctioned behavior (Settersten, 2006). As indicated earlier, the loosening of age norms for major life transitions (e.g., education, work, and family) benefited efforts to reduce gender bias.

Paradoxically, it was precisely during the youth-dominated years—the sixties and seventies—when policies favoring older people began to be institutionalized. The same egalitarian thinking that became incorporated into the civil rights movement, the gay liberation movement, and the women's movement also generated a relaxation of the ageist policies that had previously been so widely accepted. Youth was revered, but old age was no longer so much singled out formally for proscriptive sanctions. Blurring the boundaries of age coincided with the blurring of boundaries separating other ascribed statuses—gender, sexual orientation, and race. In all of these arenas, social roles lost much of their power to specify acceptable behavior and to set rigid limits on what was right and wrong.

Moreover, the conflict associated with the sixties counterculture was essentially between boomers and their middle-aged parents' generation, not necessarily as strong between teenagers and elders. This was the essence of the so-called generation gap. Indeed, people in their forties and fifties seemed to be on the opposite side of every major political and social position held by youngsters—in particular, the civil rights movement, the anti-war protest, and the women's movement (Jacoby,

2011). From the point of view of teenagers of the day, old age was merely 10 or 20 years older than they were. People over 65 may have been viewed as irrelevant, but not necessarily as the enemy.

Perhaps the most effective legislation for improving the quality of life for elders was designed to eliminate the socially and legally imposed distinctions between young and old. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 addressed many of the complaints of older workers who experienced discrimination on the job. As extended in 1978 and 1986, the Act later abolished mandatory retirement laws (Von Wachter, 2007).

In some cases, public policy originating during the boomer era was actually ageist in a positive sense, singling out older people for special and well-deserved treatment. Enacted in 1965, Medicare and Medicaid provided government-mandated health insurance for virtually all older Americans. Legislation enacted in 1973 established COLAs (cost-of-living adjustments) to assure that social security benefits would keep pace with inflation. In 1974, the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation was created to make available pension income to those retired workers whose employers had failed to provide benefits. Also in 1974, the National Institute on Aging was established to support research aimed at improving the health of older Americans (Binstock, 2010).

### **The Timing of Major Life Events**

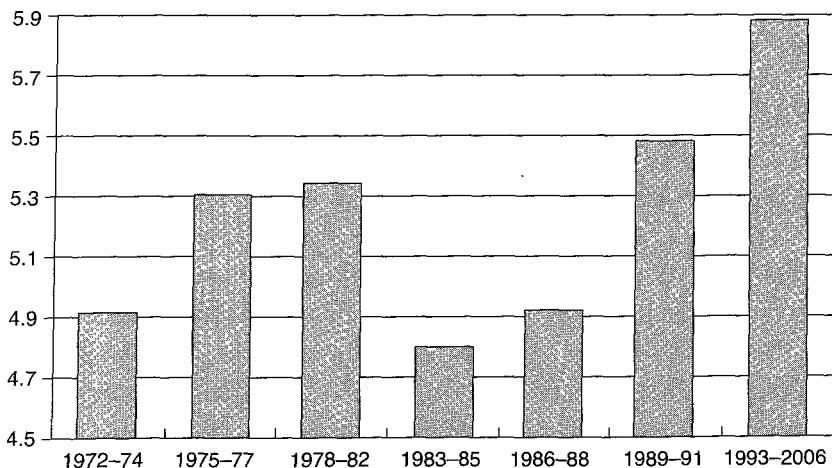
The legacy of the sixties included also certain important changes in the relevance of age for making major life decisions. What began as a cult of youth decades earlier gradually generated a declining significance of age for determining the appropriate timing of such events as first marriage and childbirth, leaving the family home, as well as retirement. Age restrictions were far from the only constraints that were loosened or lifted. Ironically, the same social forces that had produced the generation gap and ageist attitudes toward older people during the turbulent sixties were later responsible for increasing the freedom of adults from the constraints of age.

Timetables by chronological age vary with respect to flexibility or spread, typically specifying a span of time within which an individual's

expected behavior may legitimately fall. According to Modell and colleagues (1978), rigid career progression was a twentieth-century phenomenon. Young people were given a narrow range of years to transition from adolescence to adulthood—that is, to leave their parents' residence, marry, and set up an independent household. Those who fell outside of the tolerated range were seen as being "off schedule" and might have been treated as "time deviants" (Byrne, 1988; Harris, 2005; Levin and Levin, 1991; Zerubavel, 1981). In the fifties, for example, an individual who failed to marry by the age of 40 would have been regarded as socially and sexually inept; someone who failed to retire by the age of 65 would have been subjected to tremendous social pressure, both subtle and blatant, both informal and legal, to disengage not only from the workplace but also from conventional society generally.

### "Get Me to the Church on Time"

As shown in Figure 4.1, results obtained from a sample of more than 26,000 Americans in the National Opinion Research Center's General



**Figure 4.1** Standard deviation for age of first marriage

Source: National Opinion Research Center, General Social Survey, Data analysis using NESSTAR, 1972-2006

Social Survey indicates that the time schedule for “tying the knot” and “settling down with a lifelong partner” was considerably broadened in the mid-seventies as indicated by the size of the standard deviation for age of first marriage.<sup>1</sup> Then, the spread became temporarily more restrictive again during the conservative era of the early eighties but was substantially widened from the mid-eighties through the year 2006.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services data indicate that the span of chronological ages at which first childbirth occurred similarly became broader from the early seventies on. In 1970, the standard deviation for mean age of mother at first birth was 5.5; by the year 2000, the standard deviation grew to 6.1, indicating that a larger number of women were taking advantage of a widening age category for motherhood (Mathews, pers. comm., Oct. 22, 2010).

It isn't only that age of marriage and childbirth increased; it is just as important to note that the acceptable range of first marriage became substantially expanded. Many couples decided legitimately to marry late, but some couples chose just as legitimately to marry early. In the same way, many middle-class twenty-something individuals elected to enroll in college or graduate school, delaying their plans for getting married and having children. Others—especially those lacking in economic resources—were more likely to embrace the responsibilities of adulthood at an early age. They married early, had children early, and left school early. As a result, their position at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder was assured (Kloep and Hendry, 2011; Settersten and Ray, 2010).

The early to mid-seventies seem to represent a major turning point (Kohli, 1986; Modell et al., 1978). One explanation takes into consideration the changing values of the hip counterculture from strict materialism to greater tolerance for events that formerly would have been regarded as deviant behavior: for example, abortion, divorce, extramarital sex, and single parenthood (Inglehart, 1990).

The Canadian experience is apparently very close to that occurring in the United States as well as other Western countries (Settersten and Hagestadt, 1996). Using a nationally representative sample of more than 10,000 Canadians from the General Social Survey of the

Family conducted in 1995, Ravanera et al.(2004) found life course standardization until the seventies in the age of leaving the parental home, first marriage, and first childbirth. Then, as the early boomers transitioned into adulthood, there was a loosening of the norms and greater variability governing aspects of family life.

Broadening the range of acceptable behavior by chronological age is another of the legacies of the sixties. As the baby boomers transitioned into middle and old age, the relaxed rules of their youth were substantively changed, albeit preserved, broadened, and intensified over generations. No longer was youth revered and admired. Instead, the broadening of age norms became applied to adult concerns—again, the concerns of the aging baby boomers.

The blurring of age boundaries does not always generate ambiguity and uncertainty. What was formerly determined by an individual's age category was later more a result of some other factor, especially educational attainment, adequate income, or gender. Prior to the seventies, the socially appropriate time to become independent of parents, marry and have children was largely a function of chronological age. These were the measures that indicated that you had finally achieved the status of a grown-up, a fully-fledged adult. More recently, however, middle-class couples make their decisions to wed and give birth based more on when they receive their college diplomas and whether they are able to get a decent job. They move out of their parents' residence not necessarily when they reach adulthood, but when they feel they can afford to pay the rent. Age means less; personal and economic factors mean much more.

### Participation in the Arts

According to Stern (2011), American social life between 1900 and the sixties became more standardized or uniform with respect to age norms, and conformity was pervasive. Since the seventies, however, age has become a less reliable predictor of how Americans behave.

To test this notion for the National Endowment for the Arts, Stern studied the changing impact of chronological age on benchmark indicators of "arts participation"—attendance at jazz and classical music

concerts, opera, musical and non-musical plays, ballet and other dance performances, as well as visits to art museums and galleries. He concluded that the predictive value of age has gone through a gradual decline over the last several decades. The effect of age on arts participation turns out now to be quite minor, at the same time that educational attainment and gender have gained in their influence. For none of the benchmark indicators did age explain more than 1 percent of the variance.

### **Educational Late-Blooming**

During my freshman year in college, my degree of motivation for studying and attending classes couldn't have been much lower. I might as well have majored in partying, because that's how I spent much of my time daily. Actually, my major was business administration, but it could have been anything else, and I still would have been a failure. By the end of the first year, my GPA was a paltry 1.6, and I was on academic probation.

Then, during my sophomore year, everything changed. I began to be profoundly concerned about what I would be doing with the rest of my life. Would I turn out to be a homeless drifter, lacking in ambition or aptitude and surviving from day to day? Or, would I be forced by economic reality to have a career in some field that I found to be tedious, monotonous, and boring? Would I become a disappointment to my family and an embarrassment to myself?

My level of misery had increased to the point where I reached rock bottom and was totally ready to bloom academically, but I also needed some help from others. So, I lost contact with my partying friends and instead made friends on campus with students who were serious about learning, always went to class, and did the assigned reading. For the first time, I found myself paying attention during lectures and discussing academic subjects after class. I took introductory courses in economics, psychology, and sociology, and discovered that I was quite interested in them. In fact, I began to read voraciously and never missed a class. By the middle of my second year, I had gone from obsessive partying to obsessive studying—from believing that academic success was irrelevant to considering any grade below an A as total failure.



I regard myself as an educational late-bloomer who was very lucky to have remained in school long enough to mature and develop into a serious and dedicated student. Misery can be a turning point for educational success, but only if a student is given another opportunity—a second chance—to excel.

The almost universal preference for on-time academic success may have its roots in quite practical considerations, at least from the point of view of educational administrators who might prefer to deal with on-time, not late, bloomers. The presence of an orderly progression of students from high school to college—almost all of whom are in their late teens and have already displayed academic success—assures predictability to college admissions officers. Educational timing norms allow for detailed planning; in particular, types and quantities of texts to be used in each class, the training needed for instructors and teaching assistants, the size and number of classrooms, the quantity of PowerPoint and DVD facilities required, and the methods of evaluation of student progress against norms for their age group (Levin and Levin, 1991).

In addition, the emphasis on a deadline for academic achievement may encourage and support the value that we place on educational excellence. Societies in which future time orientation is stressed may not always tolerate postponing achievement. The imposition of a normative deadline sends a clear message that educational success is very important and cannot wait to be achieved (Jones, 1988).

Moreover, sociologists have long suggested that compulsory education serves as a “baby-sitting service” for young people who might otherwise be problematic to other members of society. In the absence of high school, adolescents would lack adult supervision, especially those living in dual-career or single-parent families—not to mention that they would compete with their parents in the labor market (Bakan, 1971).

In the United States, we still have a normative timetable for the optimal age for graduating from high school (17–19 years) and from

college (21–23 years). At the same time, there are countless *late-bloomers*—individuals who finally succeed academically, even if they are off schedule. For those students who haven't yet matured enough by the age of 17 or 18, the transition from high school to college can be difficult, if not impossible to make. For individuals who interrupt their formal education in order to marry and/or raise children, the opportunity to graduate may not come until they are in their thirties or forties. For some rebellious teenagers who are too busy with illicit drugs to accumulate a school record that meets standards, higher education does not become a realistic option until much later in life (Levin and Levin, 1991).

Until recently, the United States was one of a few countries where youngsters were given a second or third chance for educational success. In most places on our planet, you succeeded academically by the age of 12 or you were excluded from the pool of eligibles for a college education—and you were probably off to a trade school. Since 1970, the norms for academic success have loosened somewhat in many countries, but the United States continues to lead the world with respect to the provision of opportunities for late-blooming (Levin and Levin, 1991; Levin, 1993).

One of the most telling indicators of such opportunities after the deadline has passed can be found in the tremendous growth of community college students who may not have the academic credentials or money to attend a four-year college but haven't given up on the possibility of extending their education beyond high school. In the year 1970, some 2,300,000 students were enrolled in two-year colleges. By 2008, the number had almost tripled—more than 6,500,000 students—some 43 percent of all undergraduates—were enrolled in two-year colleges. In some states (for example, Florida and Maryland), enormous numbers of community college graduates go on to enroll in and graduate from four-year institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). More generally, the so-called traditional college student—living on campus at a four-year institution—now represents only 15 percent of the 17.6 million undergraduates. Instead, there has been a tremendous increase in the presence of students over the age of

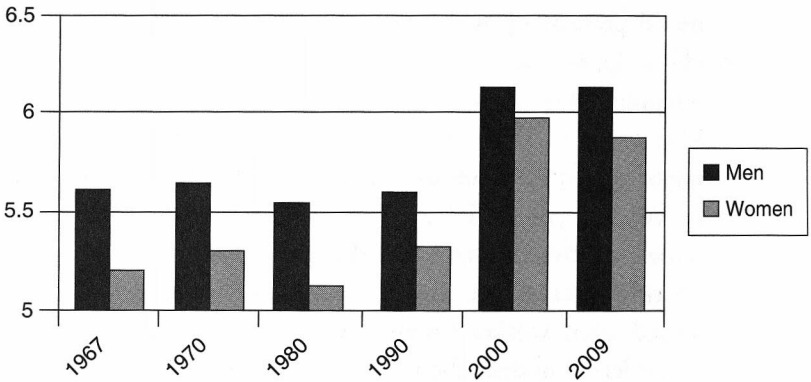
25; they are 38 percent of all students enrolled in higher education (Hess, 2011).

### Retirement

The undoing of age expectations in a number of areas may have initially originated with the youthful baby boomers, but there was also a “slippery slope” afterwards that carried greater and greater freedom from certain age restraints from decade to decade. Rapid technological change required many workers to alternate between employment and schooling in order to update their job skills. The traditional road to retirement from full-time work to full-time leisure was gradually replaced by a wide range of socially acceptable later-life pathways including part-time employment, re-engagement in a separate career, early retirement, and continuing labor force participation into old age (Settersten, 2006).

In their classic study of age expectations in the late fifties, Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe (1965) discovered tremendous agreement regarding age-appropriate scheduling of life’s transitions and behavior for particular situations as well as age-proper dress and personal appearance. Research conducted in the eighties similarly uncovered consensus about the scheduling of events by age, but also a wider range of acceptable ages for particular lifestyle transitions and broader approval of events occurring later in life (Zepelin, et al., 1986–1987).

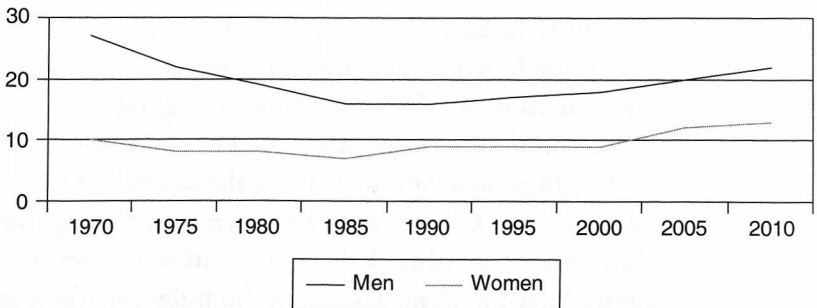
Compelling evidence for the decreasing influence of chronological age on retirement timetables can be found by examining trends in variability for labor force participation of men and women aged 60 and over, covering the period from the mid-sixties to 2009. As presented in Figure 4.2, U.S. Department of Labor statistics suggest that the standard deviation for workforce participation of older workers declined in width only slightly for a period of time during the eighties, but then grew dramatically over the first decade of this century. During the seventies and eighties, retirement tended to occur within a narrow age range, indicating that most workers disengaged from the workforce at about the same time in the life course. More recently, the much wider spread of the distribution of workplace participation indicates that



**Figure 4.2** Standard deviation for labor force participation of 60+ men and women, 1967–2009  
Source: U.S. Department of Labor (2010).

older workers were more likely to retire at a more advanced age, at the same time that some instead decided to retire earlier. Age *per se* has apparently become much less of a factor for scheduling retirement plans than pensions, social security, family commitments, satisfaction with work, absence of alternative activities, health, and so on.

As indicated in Figure 4.3, more than 26 percent of all men and 10 percent of all women aged 65 and over, until the mid-seventies, remained in the workforce, frequently out of economic need. With the subsequent enactment of pension and social security protections as well as the abolition of mandatory retirement laws, however, the presence of



**Figure 4.3** Labor force participation rates, ages 65 and over  
Source: U.S. Department of Labor (2011–2012a).

older workers fell rather sharply until the mid-1990s when their rate of labor force participation again trended upward.

This recent upswing in the participation of older workers may not be simply a result of economic need, as it had been decades earlier. In June 2011, during a period of high unemployment and little growth in the economy, Gallup surveyed a national sample of 534 employed adults, aged 18 and older, who lived in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. The pollster found that 80 percent of American workers thought they would continue to work full- or part-time after reaching retirement age. Yet fully 44 percent reported they would do so because they “want to” rather than because they “will have to.” Only 36 percent told Gallup that they would continue to work after retirement age based on economic necessity. Gallup also found that when asked at what age they expected to retire, the average response in 2011 was at the age of 66, in contrast to the age of 60 in the year 1996.

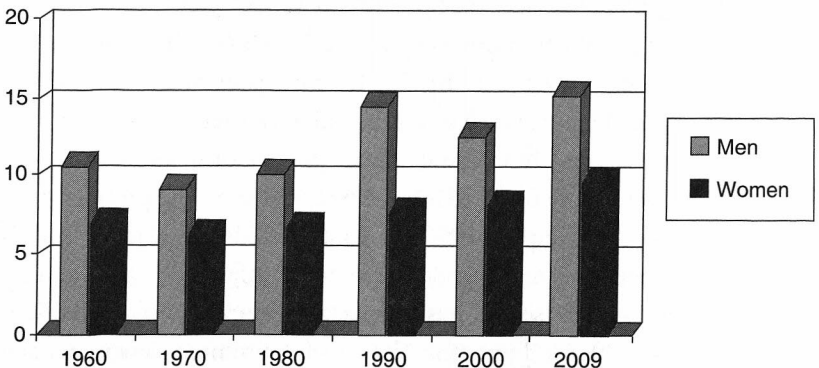
These results suggest that many workers nowadays actually desire to continue being employed when they reach old age. Apparently, a leisurely and disengaged lifestyle does not, for most employed individuals, have the appeal of a busy and fulfilling work schedule. At the same time, recent reductions in guaranteed pensions for retirees as well as the rising cost of healthcare may have persuaded a smaller but still sizable proportion of workers to postpone retirement.

Gallup suggests that in the year 2002, some 59 percent of all non-retired adults reported thinking they would have enough money to live comfortably when they retire. By 2011, that optimistic response had dropped to only 42 percent. Moreover, older workers are generally in better health than their forebearers whose jobs in a robust manufacturing economy were more likely to require heavy lifting. The proportion of workers involved in the production of goods has declined precipitously since the early eighties, and this decrease in manufacturing and increase of jobs in the service sector have especially impacted older workers (Munnell et al., 2006). Thus, the choice of retirement versus work—even during periods of economic recession—may be more a function of personal preference for continued engagement and less a function of chronological age *per se* (Gendell and Siegel, 1992; Jones, 2011).

### A New Stage of Life?

The blurring of the boundaries of age has been particularly severe between two stages of life: adolescence and adulthood. The separate stage known as adolescence did not exist at all prior to 1900. Most individuals transitioned directly from childhood to adulthood, with little or nothing in between. Then, at the turn of the twentieth century, a transitional stage of development was socially constructed for the period separating puberty from legal adult status. For the first time, child labor laws kept children out of the workforce and compulsory education laws kept them in school. By 1930, most youngsters under the age of 14 were out of the labor market and headed toward graduation from high school. Social and legal policies created what was widely called “the teenage years” (Zelizer, 2010).

Since the sixties, however, adolescence became seriously elongated, as puberty was initiated at younger and younger ages. Many twenty-something individuals delayed their plans for marriage and childbirth and remained reliant on their parents for financial support, thereby prolonging a period of dependence. Figure 4.4 suggests that growing numbers of young adults—ages 25–34—are electing to live in their family home rather than establish an independent household alone or with a partner. Being with their parents gave many young adults a



**Figure 4.4** Percentage of young adults aged 25–34 living at home

Source: National Survey of Family Growth (1970, 1975, 1980, 1985, 1988, 1995, and 2002); Guttmacher Institute (1994).

number of important advantages including money, business connections, advice, and lodging (Kimmel, 2009; Settersten and Ray, 2010).

In 1960, only 10 percent of male and 7 percent of female young adults lived at home; in 2009, more than 15 percent of males and 10 percent of females continued residing with their parents. Part of the motivation for remaining at home involves the impact of bad economic times. In 2011, for example, 85 percent of that year's college graduates reported having to move back home, simply because they could not afford to live on their own (Huffington Post, 2011b).

European young adults are even more likely than their American counterparts to move back with their parents (Pew Research Center, October 10, 2010). Among Europeans ages 25–34, almost one-in-three men and one-in-five women lived with a parent in 2008, according to a report from the European Commission. The largest proportion of a country's population of young people living with their parents was in Bulgaria for men (61 percent) and in Slovakia for women (42 percent). Not coincidentally, these are also countries in which the unemployment rate among young adults has been exceptionally high.

Some developmental psychologists have argued that the blurring of age boundaries has been so severe as to produce a new stage of life called *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2004). More specifically, the postponement of such major life transitions as the completion of school, the onset of full-time employment, marriage, childbirth, and the establishment of an independent household has delayed adulthood until what Arnett calls “the age 30 deadline.”

But the change didn't happen overnight; it was not abrupt but gradual, dating back to the sixties and seventies and becoming more and more delayed every decade since. Moreover, the change in young adults was part of a much broader blurring of age boundaries, not just those between adolescence and young adulthood.

The hallmark of the teen years—its strained dependence—has no longer ended at the age of 20 for numerous young people. Instead, it has continued almost another decade, on average. Young adults—especially middle-class young adults—no longer marry by their early twenties but remain single until almost 30, continuing in school for an

undergraduate or graduate degree and postponing their plans for parenthood to a later date. According to Settersten and Ray (2011), we have shredded the traditional rule book for the appropriate time to leave home, finish college, and settle down. Instead, young people are left with a new rule book that is still in the process of being written, yielding a good deal of ambiguity in their lives. Parents are just as confused and uncertain as their offspring, having to invent their own norms for maintaining a close relationship with the emerging adults in their household.

At what age does childhood end and adolescence begin? When does an adolescent become an adult? The traditional boundaries between these stages in the life course have blurred to the point where agreement as to appropriate conduct has been superseded by disagreement among society's members. Rather than suggest the development of a new stage of life between adolescence and adulthood, it may be more accurate to argue that adolescence has been vastly elongated, now beginning at the age of 8 or 9, ending at the age of 30 or so, and lasting more than 20 years. Other stages of life including the middle years and old age have long crossed at least a couple of decades in the life course. Adolescence may now be no different.

Another way to look at changes in adolescence is to view it in a much broader perspective over time. Until the sixties, the life course could more reasonably be conceptualized as a series of stages of development from childhood to old age. Beginning in the seventies, however, the stage theory approach tended to break down. The blurring of life decisions created major areas of overlap between stages to the point that they may have lost much of their heuristic value as a guide for understanding or even describing human development. What formerly took the shape of discrete stages has become more of a fluid and ever-changing process (Hendry and Kloep, 2011; Kloep and Hendry, 2011).

One of the more important changes in characteristics of students in institutions of higher education began in the seventies. At the start of the decade, only 15.3 percent of all undergraduate students were over 30; by 1985, students over the age of 30 had increased to 25.7 percent



of all undergraduates. The trend toward the matriculation of older students continued into the mid-1990s, when the presence of over-30 students reached an all-time high of 26.7 percent and then declined only slightly to 25.6 percent by 2004 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010b). Until the mid-seventies, youngsters seemed to experience greater uniformity in the timetable for becoming college students. Subsequently, however, the opportunities for older students to matriculate broadened considerably, allowing many middle-aged men and women a second chance to receive their undergraduate diplomas (Levin and Levin, 1991).

We have earlier seen the average age of first marriage and first childbirth rise as growing numbers of women entered the labor force and spent several years in their twenties to secure college or graduate degrees. We have also observed larger numbers of young adults who remain in their parents' homes into their thirties. Similarly, the labor force participation rate for older workers has risen during recent years, perhaps having more to do with life expectancy and financial resources than chronological age. To an increasing extent, older men and women are remaining in the labor force. Yet such decisions about when to move out of parents' residence, go to college, marry, give birth, and retire have become more a function of personal preference than was the case prior to the turbulent sixties.

### Summary

By the seventies, many informal norms were beginning to be transformed into more flexible and broader guidelines; and, by the 1990s, informal age norms for education, work, and family transitions had lost much of their power to sanction those individuals who failed to comply with the time demands of conventional society. What began as a cult of youth decades earlier gradually generated a declining significance of age for determining the appropriate timing of such events as starting a first marriage and childbirth, leaving the family home, as well as choosing to retire. Many individuals elected to postpone getting married and having children; many others chose to "tie the knot" at an earlier age. Early retirement became more attractive for many older

Americans; others decided to retire deep into their seventies or even older.

Higher education was similarly impacted. Beginning in the sixties, the trend toward the matriculation of older students continued into the mid-1990s, when the presence of over-30 students reached an all-time high. Since the sixties, moreover, adolescence has become seriously elongated, as puberty was initiated at younger ages and twenty-something individuals delayed their plans for marriage and childbirth to remain reliant on their parents for financial support, thereby prolonging a period of dependence.

In Chapter 5, we explore those factors in society that have helped to keep the boomer changes going. We suggest that the sixties' counter-culture was co-opted by commercial interests interested in making a profit from various aspects of the hip ideology. Over the decades, intense competition in the business world assured that practices and policies initiated in the sixties would continue or escalate. For example, if you can make some money introducing a little sex and violence, you might make even more money introducing more sex and violence.

## Note

- 1 Some prefer to express trends in variability by means of the coefficient of variation rather than the standard deviation, simply because the size of the latter is influenced by differences in the mean. Coefficients of variation ( $SD/Mean$ ) for age of first marriage ranged from .217 in 1974 and .215 in 1984 to .273 in 1994 and .279 in 2006.