

# GUYLAND

The  
Perilous  
World  
Where Boys  
Become Men

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## “WHAT’S THE RUSH?”: GUYLAND AS A NEW STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT

When do you become an adult? How do you know? What are the markers of adulthood today? Is it when you can legally drink? Get married? Drive a car? Vote? Serve in the military?

Demographers typically cite five life-stage events to mark the transition to adulthood: leaving home, completing one’s education, starting work, getting married, and becoming a parent. Of course, not all adults would actually check off all those markers, but they represent a pattern, a collection of indicators. In 1950, when social scientists first identified these markers of adulthood, they all clicked in at almost exactly the same time.

My parents’ story is typical. They got married in 1948, after my father returned from the wartime Navy, and both he and my mother began their careers. At first, like so many of their generation, they lived in the bottom floor of my grandparents’ home, saving their money to flee the city and buy a house in the New York suburbs—part of the great wave of suburban migration of the 1950s. My mother, and her five closest lifelong friends, all had their first children within two years of their

weddings, and their second child three years later—all within five years of graduating from college.

Flash forward to my generation. A few years ago, I went to my twenty-fifth college reunion. Some of the women in my graduating class had college-age children; indeed, one or two already had a child at my alma mater. At the time, my wife and I were just deciding about whether or not to start a family. As I looked around, my former classmates were arranged across the spectrum—some with toddlers in strollers and others with adolescents in full pubescent rebellion. One former classmate had just become a grandmother! In one short generation, our class had extended child-bearing from a period within a year or two of graduation to a full generation.

We also took our time completing our education, getting married, settling into our careers, and leaving home. More than half went to graduate or professional schools; many of my classmates were in their late twenties to early thirties when they completed their education (I was 30). Many had interrupted their educations (as I had) to test out a possible career path. Some waited until their late twenties or early thirties to get married; others married right after college and divorced within a few years of their weddings.

The pendulum is swinging in the same direction for the next generation. The U.S. census shows a steady and dramatic decline in the percentage of young adults, under 30, who have completed these demographic markers. In 2000, 46 percent of women and 31 percent of men had reached those markers by age 30. In 1960, just forty years earlier, 77 percent of women and 65 percent of men had reached them.

The passage between adolescence and adulthood has morphed from a transitional moment to a separate life stage. Adolescence starts earlier and earlier, and adulthood starts later and later. This stage of life—call it “the odyssey years” as does *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, or “adulthood,” or “young adulthood”—now encompasses up to two full decades, beginning at puberty and ending around one’s 30th birthday. Everyone knows that 30 is the new 20. But it’s equally true these days that 12 is the new 20.

## A New Life Stage

We often fret how our children “grow up so fast” as we watch our precocious preteens doing things we would not even have considered until we were at least 16. On the other hand, “When will he ever grow up?” is the refrain of many older parents whose 26-year-old is also doing the same things he was doing at 16—including living at home! Both are true. Kids are growing up faster than ever, and they’re staying un-grownup longer than ever, too. The “seasons of a man’s life,” those supposedly naturally evolving developmental stages, have undergone a dramatic climate change. In the effort to avoid an early frost, this generation is prolonging its Indian summer—sometimes for decades.

In many respects this is understandable. After all, to a guy, growing up is no bargain: It means being a sober, responsible, breadwinning husband and father. It means mortgage payments, car payments, health insurance for the kids, accountability for your actions. Just think about how manhood is portrayed on network television, where shows like *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *According to Jim* feature grown men being infantilized by their wives, unable to do the simplest things for themselves, clueless about their kids’ lives, and begging for sex—or reduced to negotiating for it in exchange for housework. “Where’s the fun in that?” they ask, and rightly so. Adulthood is seen as the negation of fun. It sucks. Who can blame them for not wanting to jump right in with both feet? If that’s your idea of adulthood, of marriage, and of family life, it makes sense that you’d want to postpone it for as long as possible, or at least take the time to figure out a way to avoid the pitfalls so that your own life doesn’t turn out that way. Here’s Ted, 25, a Northwestern graduate who is working “in a soulless office” in Chicago’s Loop:

At least I got time. I mean, I’m only 25, and I’m gonna live to what, 90? So, like, why hurry on the marriage and kids thing? And besides, this gives me lots more time to meet the perfect woman, and figure out the perfect career. What’s the rush?

In some ways, these young people grew up too fast. As children they were overscheduled and overobserved, every utterance and gesture parsed

endlessly for clues to their developmental progress. They’ve coped with divorces; navigated their ways through the treacherous middle-school waters of mean girls and bullies, cliques and teams; thrown themselves into extracurricular activities and sports in order to write brilliant college application essays. They often feel that they’ve spent their entire childhoods being little grownups—being polite, listening attentively, and prepping for college since elementary school.

“I feel like my whole life has been one long exercise in delayed gratification,” says Matt, a graduate student in psychology at the University of Wisconsin:

I mean, in high school, I had to get good grades, study hard, and do a bunch of extracurricular things so I could get into a good college. Okay, I did that. Went to Brown. Then, in college, I had to work really hard and get good grades so I could get into a good graduate school. Okay, I did that. I’m here at Wisconsin. Now, though, I have to work really hard, publish my research, so I can get a good tenure track job somewhere. And then I’ll have to work really hard for six years just to get tenure. I mean, by the time I can exhale and have a little fun, I’ll be in my mid-30s—and that’s too old to have fun anymore!

Matt is paving the way for his career, but he can’t wait to regress; adulthood is a burden.

“My grandfather died at 66,” Matt says, “and he was already working and supporting a family at age 23. I expect to live to my nineties—so what’s the rush? I got 30 more years than he had!”

What happened? What happened to the clearly defined path from adolescence to adulthood? What has made it expand so dramatically? The answers to these questions lead us back to some significant changes in American society—economic and demographic shifts that have had a profound impact on young people today. Before we get inside Guyland, it is important to understand the historical trajectory, set the cultural context, and map the terrain in which guys now become men. Not because these changes are either good or bad: They’re neither—and both. Rather

because without understanding the economic, social, and cultural context, we cannot adequately understand the pressures and the realities that face young men as they try to become adults in America today.

## A Brief History of Adolescence

Once, Americans understood that a boy became a man when he completed school, got a job, and began to raise a family. In the nineteenth century, the passage from boyhood to manhood took place, for most boys, in their early teens, when they left school for the farm or factory. It wasn't that far from the truth for a Jewish boy to declare, at his bar mitzvah, that "today I am a man."

Just over a century ago, in 1904, the famous psychologist G. Stanley Hall published his massive tome, *Adolescence*, demarcating a psychological stage between childhood puerility and adult virility. Coinciding roughly with the biological changes of puberty, and coincident with its time period (roughly 12 to 15), adolescence was described as a time of transition, a time when the boy (or girl, of course, though Hall conveniently overlooked them himself) develops his adult identity, tests himself, and finds out who he really is. He enters the stage a boy, but he leaves a full-fledged man, able to negotiate his way through the thicket of adult life issues: job, family, responsibility.

Hall saw adolescence as a "storm," a perilous time of dramatic and rapid transformation. Shielded from the demands of work, boys could engage with the question of identity. But at the turn of the century, and even as late as the 1920s and 1930s, boys still entered the workplace, and adulthood, at 16. It was only when high-school graduation rates began to rise, throughout the first half of the twentieth century, that the adolescent years began to expand. By the time America entered World War II, the high-school graduation rate was at an all-time high, and a new word, "teenager," had entered the American vocabulary. Critics worried that this "sudden and dramatic prolongation of adolescence" meant that over half of those who had "passed the terminal age of adolescence" were not acting as adults—physically, socially, or economically.

And Americans have been worrying about teenagers ever since.

Some worried about teen sexuality, especially after the publication of the two volumes of the Kinsey Reports on American sexual behavior. Some worried about "juvenile delinquency," another new term from the era—lonely disaffected boys who sought approval from their peers by increasingly dangerous stunts and petty crime. "Let's Face It" read the cover of *Newsweek* in 1956, "Our Teenagers Are Out of Control." Many youths, the magazine reported, "got their fun" by "torturing helpless old men and horsewhipping girls they waylaid in public parks."

Perhaps the most influential thinker on this new stage of development was psychologist Erik Erikson. His path-breaking books, *Childhood and Society* (1950) and *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968), identified the seven life-stages of individual psychological development that became a mantra in developmental psychology classes for decades. By labeling adolescence as a "moratorium," a sort of prolonged time-out between childhood and adulthood, Erikson tamed and sanitized Hall's fears that adolescence was a maelstrom, a chaos of uncontrolled passions.

This moratorium was a time for regrouping, reassessing oneself before undertaking the final quest for adult identity, "a vital regenerator in the process of social evolution," as Erikson put it. Rather than rushing headlong into work and family lives, as children did in earlier societies, adolescence slows down the process to allow young people to accomplish certain identity tasks. The venerable institutions that once structured a young person's socialization—family, church, school—could no longer provide those identity needs, and thus, though plagued by doubts, adolescents were beginning to take those tentative steps toward autonomy by themselves, before facing the responsibilities of adulthood that loomed ominously ahead. In a sense, Erikson did for adolescence what Dr. Spock did for babies: reassured parents that the everyday crises their children were experiencing were simply a normal and healthy part of growing up, and that there was little they could do to screw it up.

Sociologist James Coleman had a somewhat less sanguine view. In *The Adolescent Society* (1961), he argued that the gradual recession of education, religion, and family as the primary institutions of socialization left a vacuum, and high-schoolers had largely become the agents of their own socialization. Anti-intellectualism abounded, sports reigned

supreme, and everyone simply wanted to be popular! Hardly tremulous individualists, Coleman saw adolescents as frighteningly dependent on peer culture, and boys, especially, as desperate to prove their masculinity in the eyes of other boys. This certainly seems to be the case today, as guys continue to turn to one another for the validation of manhood that was once provided by the community of adults.

### Biology and Science Weigh In

One reason why adolescence starts so much earlier today is that puberty, the collection of physiological markers of adolescence, now occurs four to five years earlier than it did about a century ago. Improvements in nutrition, sanitation, and healthcare have lowered the average age of puberty about one year for every twenty-five years of development. Each generation enters puberty about a year earlier than its predecessor. In the years just before the Civil War, the average age for the onset of puberty was 16 for girls, and 18 for boys; today it is about 12 for girls, and 14 for boys. Anyone who has actually spent more than five minutes in the company of contemporary 12-year-old girls and 14-year-old boys knows that these pubescent children are already well into their adolescence.

But just as adolescence reaches us earlier and earlier, what we now know about the brain suggests that it stretches longer and longer. Biologically, though puberty begins earlier, full physiological maturation still doesn't take place until well into our twenties. By 18, neuropsychological development is far from complete; the brain continues to grow and develop into the early twenties. (In a bit of a stretch, one biologist suggests that this immature brain lacks the "wiring" for placing long-term benefits over shorter-term gains, which explains how we are "hard-wired" for high-risk behaviors like drug taking, smoking, and drinking when we're young.)

### Markers of Adulthood: Marriage and Family

The five classic demographic markers—education, marriage, parenthood, career, and residential independence—have not simply shifted over the

past generation. They've scattered across a time span that now stretches to more than a decade for a large swath of American youth. Take marriage and family. In 1950, the average age of marriage was 20.3 for women and 22.8 for men. Close to half of all women were married by age 20. By 1975, the median age had climbed about a year for both. But today it is 27.4 for men and 25.8 for women. And young people are having their first child four years later than they did in 1970.

Many of these changes have been pushed along, in part, by changes in women's lives, which have not only dramatically affected young women but young men as well. The entry of overwhelming numbers of middle-class women into the workplace is largely responsible for the postponement of marriage and child-rearing for both sexes. Today, with women appearing to be every bit as professionally competent, career-oriented, and ambitious as men, and equally capable of earning a living wage, there is no longer the same sense of urgency for men to move toward "getting a good job" to eventually provide for the material needs of a wife and children.

In much the same way, the sexual revolution of the 1960s, coupled with the invention of the birth control pill, has had a profound impact on the lives of young women, which again, in turn, has changed the lives of young men. Before the sexual revolution, young adulthood certainly didn't promise the smorgasbord of sexual experiences that it does today. Premarital sex, while certainly in existence, was nowhere near as ubiquitous. In fact, given the injunctions against it, particularly for women, it might not be too off the mark to suggest that many young people got married *in order to* have sex.

In this sense, ironically, women's newfound freedom invites men to delay adulthood even longer. With no family to support, no responsibilities to anyone other than themselves, and young women who appear to be as sexually active and playful as they could possibly ever fantasize, they're free to postpone adulthood almost indefinitely. They now assume, rightly, that since they'll live into their eighties, they have all the time in the world to commit to a career and marriage. They keep all their options open, even into their thirties (and sometimes their forties), and see their early jobs and relationships more as placeholders

than as stepping-stones to adult life. There is no reason to get a real job if you don't actually need one. No reason for marriage, or even a serious relationship, if sex is really all you want. Why *should* they grow up, they wonder?

In part, this might be because parenthood and family life are no longer as appealing as they may have been in the past. Today's young people come from much less stable and settled family lives; they're far more likely to have been raised in a single-parent home and, if not, are living in a culture where divorce is the norm for half of the population. "I'm in no rush to get married, and even less in a rush to have a kid," says Jeff, a UC, San Diego, senior. "I watched my own parents get a divorce, and it became pretty clear that they got married and started having kids—namely, me—before they were ready. I'm not going to make that mistake."

Their reticence is the result of both high expectations for their own relationships and fears that their love lives will resemble their parents'. Afraid to commit, yet desperate to connect, they form close friendships with members of the opposite sex, but often make sure that sex is just about hooking up at the moment, and not about building a relationship.

### "Serial Jobogamy"

They feel similarly about their careers. Middle-class kids know that their career is supposed to be more than a job; it is supposed to be financially rewarding, emotionally rich and satisfying, and offer them a sense of accomplishment and inner satisfaction. Work, for them, is an "identity quest." And while there is certainly nothing wrong with wanting a satisfying and financially rewarding professional life, many have absolutely no idea of what's available, what they want to do, or how they might begin. They have utterly unrealistic expectations about the range of jobs they might find satisfying, and no real understanding of the level of commitment and diligence involved in developing those careers. They all seem to want to write for television, become famous actors, or immediately become dot-com entrepreneurs. Whatever they do, they want to make an impact—starting on Day 1. One employment

recruiter calls them "the Entitlement Generation" since they have such "shockingly high expectations for salary, job flexibility, and duties but little willingness to take on grunt work or remain loyal to a company."

While their parents fret, and wonder "when is he going to get a good job?" the truth is he'd be lucky to find a job at all. In 2000, 72.2 percent of Americans aged 20 to 24 were employed; four years later, it was 67.9 percent, barely two-thirds. The career expectations of a generation raised to feel special, their self-esteem protected at every turn, spiral upward at the same time that their economic forecast looks increasingly bleak. The secure economic foundation on which previous generations have come of age has eroded. For both the traditional blue-collar and white-collar guys, globalization has changed everything. Working-class guys face a decline in manufacturing jobs, a decline in union protection, and an increase only in the least secure dead-end service sector jobs, with neither pension nor health benefits. Middle-class guys watch their fathers get "outsourced," "downsized," "reallocated"—and they know those are just nice words for the difficult task of finding a new job at mid-life in a less certain job market than ever.

Both groups know that corporations are no longer loyal to their employees—just consider all those companies that picked up and moved out of towns they had helped to build, watching indifferently as entire communities unraveled. They've watched as corporate executives lined their pockets with the pension funds of their own employees. They've seen that despite all the promises, there's been no "trickle down" of the bloating at the top. All the tax breaks for the wealthy and wealthier have only strapped the middle class even further to their credit card debts. So why should they be loyal to the company? Or to the economy? Or to some vision of the future? They have come to believe that the only way to get rich in this culture is not by working hard, saving and sacrificing, but by winning the lottery.

Unlike virtually every single previous generation of Americans, the income trajectory for the current generation of young people is downward. Between 1949 and 1973, during that postwar economic boom, men's earnings doubled and the income gap narrowed. But since the early 1970s, annual earnings for men aged 25 to 34 with full-time jobs

has steadily declined, dropping 17 percent from 1971 to 2002. Of male workers with only a high-school diploma, the average wage decline from 1975 to 2002 was 11 percent. Only half of all Americans in their mid-twenties earn enough to support a family. Two-thirds of this current generation “are not living up to their parents’ standard of living,” commented Andrew Sum, the Director of the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University.

The gap between college-educated and noncollege-educated has increased as well. In the late 1970s, male college graduates earned about 33 percent more than high-school graduates; by the end of the 1980s, that gap had increased to 53 percent “When I graduated from high school, my classmates who didn’t want to go to college could go to the Goodyear plant and buy a house and support a wife and family,” Steven Hamilton of the Cornell University Youth and Work Program told *Time* magazine. “That doesn’t happen anymore.”

Nor do they have much protection. Once they’re 18 or 19, young people are only covered as dependents on their parents’ medical and healthcare plans if they go to college. All government healthcare covers children only through their eighteenth year. (They lose healthcare under these programs on their nineteenth birthday.) And many young people work at low-wage, temporary, low- or no-benefit jobs, or remain dependent on their parents.

There is no mistaking the economic signs: This generation of young people is downwardly mobile. Gen X’ers and Gen Y’ers will earn less than their parents did at every single age. Young adults, those 18 to 26 years old are the lowest ranked in earned income of all age groups. Their household income is the second lowest (right above 65 and older). “On most socioeconomic measures, the young were the worst-off age group in 1997—and the gap has widened since,” notes Tom Smith, the director of the General Social Survey, that has tracked Americans’ life experiences since 1972.

The only economic sector in which jobs are being created is entry-level service and sales. In *Generation X*, author Douglas Coupland calls it “McJob”—“low-paying, low-prestige, low-dignity, no future job in the service sector.” Young people, along with immigrants, minorities, and

the elderly, are the bulk of workers in the new service economy. Half of all workers in restaurants, grocery stores, and department stores are under 24. As one journalist recently put it, “hundreds of thousands of young people are spending hours making decaf lattes, folding jeans, grilling burgers, or unpacking boxes of books and records for minimum wage.” And their poverty rates are twice the national average.

Since these jobs are so plentiful, many young people don’t feel the need to commit to a career right out of college. And because so many of the entry-level “real” jobs pay almost as badly, and are almost as mind-numbing, they are even less motivated to do so. The young have been raised in a culture that promises instant gratification; the idea of working hard for future rewards just doesn’t resonate with them. They don’t have their eyes on the prize; it’s really more like their “eyes on the fries,” as a recent documentary film put it. The increased instability of their long-term employment prospects, coupled with their sense that jobs must be emotionally and financially fulfilling, leads to a volatile career trajectory. Many experience the “two-month itch” and switch jobs as casually as they change romantic partners. They take “stop-gap jobs,” engaging in what I like to call “serial jobogamy.” Listen to Jon, a 1992 Rutgers grad, who told a journalist about his career cluelessness:

I had absolutely no idea what I wanted to do right out of college. I fell blindly into a couple of dead-end jobs, which were just there for me to make money and figure out what I wanted to do. When I had no idea what I wanted to do, I couldn’t even picture myself doing anything because I was so clueless about what was out there. I had so little direction. I was hanging on to these completely dead-end jobs thinking that maybe something would turn up. I was unhappy about the situation, and the only thing that made it better was that all of my friends out of college were in the same boat. We would all come home and complain about our jobs together. We were all still drunks back then.

Many young adults feel they are just treading water, waiting for the right job, the right person, the right situation, to reveal itself. “I’m just

sitting around waiting for my life to begin, while it's all just slippin' away," sings Bruce Springsteen on "Better Days."

Most guys do grow out of this phase, eventually. They get tired of living four-to-a-room, tired of dead-end jobs that leave them broke and exhausted, tired of answering to their parents if they live at home, and they begin to reconsider career paths that they once dismissed as being "too boring." Some go on to graduate school; others accept those entry-level jobs that, they hope, will lead to something better. But in our increasingly competitive economy, where the cost of living is rising and the availability of well-paying jobs is shrinking, they're facing a tougher time of it than ever. When their first real job requires that they work late every night, yet only pays enough to cover the rent if they share a two-bedroom apartment with four other people, it's no wonder guys are reluctant to grow up.

### Education for What?

Young people today are the most highly educated group of young people in our history. At the turn of the last century, only a small fraction of male teens attended secondary schools. Most lived with their families and made considerable financial contributions to the family income. In fact, for many working-class families, the family's most prosperous years were the years their children were living at home with them.

Now, the vast majority of teens attend secondary school. In 2000, over 88 percent of all people 25 to 29 had completed high school and nearly 30 percent (29.1 percent, to be precise) had a BA—up from 17 percent only thirty years ago.

Although more are going to college, it's taking them longer to finish. Four years after high school, 15 percent of the high-school graduating class of 1972 had obtained their degree. Ten years later, the percentage had been cut to less than 7 percent, and today it's closer to 4 percent four years out.

They also leave college with huge debts. Two-thirds of all college graduates owe more than \$10,000 when they graduate; the average debt is nearly \$20,000, and 5 percent owe more than \$100,000. Recent college

graduates owe 85 percent more in student loans alone than graduates a decade ago according to the Center for Economic and Policy Research. (The amount you are allowed to borrow has steadily increased as well, enabling more students to stay in school, yet increasing their repayment burdens when they leave.) And this doesn't begin to touch the credit card debt amassed by this age group, which has more than doubled between 1992 and 2001. Bombarded daily with promotional offers from credit card companies, many rack up debt like I used to collect baseball cards.

The twentieth century has seen these kids move from being productive citizens to being dependent on their families, the educational system, and the state. Less than one-third of this age group are employed enough to make them potentially financially independent. Those who live with their parents make virtually no contribution to family income. The opposite is true, and for a lot longer time. More than one-third of youth aged 18 to 34 receive cash from their parents, and nearly half receive what sociologists call "time-help" from their parents in any given year—that is significant contributions of time helping kids with their daily lives, from cooking, to cleaning, to doing laundry—averaging about \$3,410 in cash and about 367 hours of help.

No wonder two-thirds of all young people 18 to 24 live with their parents or other relatives, and one-fifth of all 25-year-old Americans still live at home. And no wonder that 40 percent of all college graduates return to live with their parents for at least some period of time in that age span. Forget the empty nest syndrome—for one in five American families it's still a "full nest."

One reality that makes this possible is that we live in a culture of privilege. Many parents today can afford to a greater extent than ever before to let their children take advantage of this situation. They have large homes, larger disposable incomes, and are more receptive to the idea of kids coming back to the nest. This is not necessarily a bad trend, but it certainly helps explain why young people are taking so much longer to reach adulthood.



## What the Experts Say—and Don't Say

Others have surely noticed that something is happening, that there is a difference from the way previous generations passed from adolescence to adulthood. A front-page story in *USA Today* in September 2004 was followed a few months later by a cover story in *Time* calling them "twixters"—neither kids nor adults, but betwixt and between. But the subsequent letters the magazine published offer a glimpse into our national confusion. The twixters themselves wrote eloquently about their situations. One moved back home after college because she couldn't find a job that paid enough to live on her own—only to find that "... the majority of my high school class had done the same thing." But, she insisted, "... we are not lazy. We want to work and make our way in the world." Another pointed out that her generation is "... overwhelmed by indecision. We have the necessary tools, but now have too many options and not enough options at the same time. We are stuck."

By contrast to the twixters themselves adult letter writers were uniformly unsympathetic. They blamed the kids, as if the disastrous economy, sky-high housing costs, and high aspirations with no ways to fulfill them were somehow the fault of job seekers, not job-suppliers—namely the adults themselves. "If only their parents had cut the golden apron strings and left them to their own devices, they would have learned to be more independent," wrote one. "There's not a single thing wrong with the young adults who live off their parents that a stint in the U.S. Marine Corps couldn't fix," wrote another. "Why do we need to come up with a new label for kids who stay home with their parents while figuring out what to do?" asked another, before reminding us that "we've had a name for that for years: moocher."

Ironically, all of the twixter letters were from women, and all of the adult respondents were male. And though *Time* did not comment on this interesting gender difference, it is an important element in our conversation: It is fathers—far more than mothers—who deeply resent the return of their college-graduate children. Mothers may, for a time, mourn the absence of their children, as if their world has suddenly lost its center of gravity and spins aimlessly off its axis. Fathers, by contrast,

often celebrate their new freedom from child-care responsibilities: They buy new golf clubs, load up on Viagra, and talk about this being, finally, their "turn." Mothers may be ambivalent about the "full nest" syndrome, but their husbands seem to be universally unhappy about it.

Developmental psychologists and sociologists have also tried to map this newly emerging stage of life. Sociologist James Cote, at the University of Western Ontario, calls the period "youthhood," while Terri Apter, a social psychologist in Cambridge, England, calls them "thresholders," who suffer from the neglect and scorn from parents who mistake their need for support and guidance as irresponsibility and immaturity.

Perhaps the most ambitious effort to map this post-adolescent *terra incognita* has been psychologist Jeffrey Arnett's studies of what he calls "emerging adulthood." Like Erickson a half-century ago, Arnett sees emerging adulthood as a time for the gradual unfolding of a life plan, a "time for serious self-reflection, for thinking about what kind of life you want to live and what your Plan should be for your life." It's a period of increased independence—including independence from the preordained roles that they inherited from their elders. They are moving deliberately if unevenly toward intimate relationships, a steady and stable career path, and family lives, and along the way they are developing closer friendships with their parents, since the old issues of adolescent rebellion have been resolved by time and experience.

In an ideal world, this might be a dream trajectory. Yet Arnett's view of this stage of life is so sanguine, so sanitized, it's hardly recognizable. It's hard to square such serious self-reflection with the bacchanalian atmosphere of a college weekend; increasing autonomy and a decreasing reliance on peer groups with the fraternity initiations, athletic hazing, and various forms of sexual predation that often fill exposés of campus life.

Perhaps the chief characteristic of this stage of life is its indeterminacy. There's a massive mismatch between the ambitions of this group and their accomplishments. They graduate from college filled with ideas about changing the world, making their contribution, and making lots of money, and they enter a job market at the bottom, where work is utterly unfulfilling, boring, and badly paid. "It concerns me that of the

many gifted people I went to school with, so few of them are actually doing what they really want to do,” said one. This was a generation that was told from the get-go that each of them was special, in which their self-esteem was so inflated they became light-headed, in which they were rewarded for every normal developmental milestone as if they were Mozart.

Extremely other-directed, they perform to please grownups—parents, teachers—but exhibit little capacity for self-reflection or internal motivation. They have high self-esteem, but often little self-awareness. Many suspect that their self-esteem, so disconnected from actual achievement, is a bit of a fraud. Many lack a moral compass to help negotiate their way in the world.

For these young people, the world is unstable and uncertain. They drink more than they think they should, take more drugs, and probably get involved in more hookups and bad relationships than they think they should. And they also get more down on themselves, because at this stage they also think they should know better. Their suicide rate is the highest for any age group except men over 70.

They’re also more disconnected from society. They have less confidence in social, economic, and political institutions. They are less likely to read a newspaper, attend church, belong to a religion or a union, vote for a president, or identify with a political party than any other age group, according to the General Social Survey. They’re more cynical or negative about other people and less trusting. They are less likely to believe that people are basically trustworthy, helpful, fair, or that human beings are naturally good.

### Adulthood Is an Attitude

If the demographic markers of adulthood are now scattered across a decade or more, young people today are turning to more attitudinal indicators of when they become adults. Arnett found that the traditional demographic markers held little sway in determining whether or not a student felt like an adult. On the other hand, psychological criteria received much higher endorsements. “Accept responsibility for the

consequences of your actions” led the list. Being able to “decide on personal beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences” was next, tied with being “less self-oriented, develop[ing] greater consideration for others.”

So, today people become adults when they *feel* like adults. They experience a “situational maturity.” Sometimes they want to be treated like adults, sometimes they want to be treated like children. (And their parents invariably guess wrong!) “You don’t get lectures about what life is like after college,” comments a guy named Brandon to journalist Alexandra Robbins in her book, *Quarterlife Crisis*. “You don’t have a textbook that tells you what you need to do to find success.” “People have to invent their own road map,” commented another.

And they don’t experience a calamitous break with their childhoods, since there is no one time when all five transitional indicators are achieved. By spreading them out, adulthood becomes a gradual process, a series of smaller decisions. One looks back suddenly and realizes one is actually an adult. The General Social Survey found that most people believe the transition to adulthood should be completed by age 26, a number that seems to rise every year.

One young man recently wrote to me that, a year after graduating from college and moving across the country, his father had come to visit him. And the father stayed at the son’s apartment. “I’m starting to feel like a real adult,” he wrote. “I mean, when you live in a different city from your parents and when they visit, they stay with you, well . . . you’re an adult!”

### Gender: The Missing Conversation

One reason Jeffrey Arnett and his colleagues can be so sanguine about emerging adulthood is because there is nary a word about gender in their work. But how can one possibly discuss the age group 16 to 26 and not talk about gender? It’s the most gendered stage of a person’s development. Sociologists James Cote and Anton Allahaar call it “gender intensification”—the assertion of “exaggerated notions associated with the different roles that still hold many men and women in separate spheres

of endeavor." This stage is when the struggle to prove manhood becomes even more intense, in part because it's no longer as easy to differentiate between men and women as it was in the past. The traditional markers of manhood—being the head of a household, having a steady job, and providing for the material needs of a family—are obsolete. The days when "girls were girls and men were men," are long gone. What once marked manhood today marks adulthood—for both sexes. So what does it mean to be a man? That's something most guys are still trying to figure out.

Today's young men are coming of age in an era with no road maps, no blueprints, and no primers to tell them what a man is or how to become one. And that's why none of the terms given to this stage of development—"emerging adulthood," "transition to adulthood," "twixters," "thresholders"—has any resonance whatever with the young men I have spoken to on college campuses and in workplaces around the country. Almost all of them call themselves—and call each other—"guys." It's a generic catch-all term that demarcates this age group, setting it apart from "kids" and "grownups."

Understanding exactly what guys are up against is vital and urgent—for the young men, for those who love them, and for our society. Young men need more than the often volatile combination of anomie and entitlement that can come to characterize Guyland. They need guidance. They need the adults who orbit their world—their parents, teachers, counselors, bosses, coaches, administrators—to understand what is happening in their lives, the pressure they feel to live up to unattainable ideals of masculinity, and the feelings of doubt, anxiety, and shame that often accompany that quest. And they need—and deserve—a larger public conversation about the world they inhabit, to enable them to better navigate its more hazardous shoals.

Even with a map, it is a difficult passage to chart. After all, part of the definition of masculinity is to act as if one knows exactly where one is going. If men have a difficult time asking for directions when they get lost driving their cars, imagine what it feels like to feel lost and adrift on the highway of life! One must act as if one knows where one is going, even if it isn't true. And it's this posture, and the underlying sense that

one is a fraud, that leaves young men most vulnerable to manipulation by the media and by their peers. It's as if they're saying, "If I just follow along and don't ask any questions, everyone will assume I have it all together—and I won't be exposed."

Guyland thus becomes the arena in which young men so relentlessly seem to act out, seem to take the greatest risks, and do some of the stupidest things. Directionless and often clueless, they rely increasingly on their peers to usher them into adulthood and validate their masculinity. And their peers often have some interesting plans for what they will have to endure to prove that they are real men.

They feel incomplete and insecure, terrified that they will fail as grownups, that they will be exposed as fraudulent men. "Every man's armor is borrowed and ten sizes too big and beneath it, he's naked and insecure and hoping you won't see," is how journalist Norah Vincent put it in her cross-dressing memoir, *Self-Made Man*. Caught between being "real boys" and real men, they have all the entitlement and none of the power. No wonder that, to guys, boyhood is a safe and secure retreat—it's a regression with a mission.

Guyland is a volatile stage, when one has access to all the tools of adulthood with few of the moral and familial constraints that urge sober conformity. These "almost men" struggle to live up to a definition of masculinity they feel they had no part in creating, and yet from which they feel powerless to escape. Individually, a guy often feels that if there is a playbook everyone else has read it—except him. That playbook is called "The Guy Code."