

## **Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood**

Christian Smith, Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davison and Patricia Snell Herzog, 2011

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Is there a clear threshold between adolescence and adulthood? Most scholars and ordinary people think that the periods of adolescence and adulthood overlap and that there might not be a clear boundary between them. Young adults who have just graduated from high school and either entered college or the workforce are living in this transitional period. On the one hand, they have the freedom to shape their future lives. On the other hand, they are usually not fully independent of their parents, because they may lack stable social or economic status. Therefore, they experience aspects of both adolescence and adulthood. It is difficult to classify their experience according to the traditional categories of adolescence and adulthood. Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson and Herzog's *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* addresses this issue. The main purpose of the book is to acquire knowledge about this transitional period. The book also employs its data to suggest possible methods for young adults to cope with current social problems. The authors start the book with a description of their methodology. To achieve a more sophisticated understanding of this period, they approach young adults through sociology. The authors interview their individual subjects, and interpret their responses.

The opening section of the book introduces the authors' awareness of the social problems associated with the transitional period defines sociologically and psychologically. Firstly, the book defines the period and its aspects as "emerging adulthood." This term reflects the diverse problems of emerging adulthood, which include the negative influence of mass communication, consumerism and new technology. On the basis of these contemporary factors, the authors criticize the notion that a young adult will naturally become a typical adult in the mold of older generations; instead, the book argues that while today's emerging adults are socialized by their elders, we have to be fully aware of their unique contemporary experiences. The authors' findings provide useful insights for us regarding further moral developmental research on young adults.

The following sections focus on the phenomenon and the cause of the moral psychological problems in emerging adults. The first and most important problem is their moral drift. The authors point out the moral individualism, moral relativism and egoism of the majority of emerging adults. And then, they argue that emerging adults cannot fully and logically defend their own moral philosophy. The worst and most important problem is that most young adults do not consider moral problems in their everyday life. The authors asked the young adults whether or not they had experienced moral dilemmas in their lives. The results show that the majority of the subjects had not experienced any moral dilemmas within the last few years. In fact, the authors argue that they had confronted some kinds of moral problems, but they could not detect them. From the viewpoint of neo-Kohlbergian moral psychology, the majority of the emerging

adults exhibit undeveloped morality including moral sensibility, moral judgment, moral motivation and moral character (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau and Thoma, 1999). The authors continue to consider this lack of awareness in four subsequent sections that focus on more specific problems. In sum, the authors argue that the emerging adults do not show the commitment to any meaningful goals: moral, political or social.

The four sections deal with specific moral problems faced by emerging adults. The topics include consumerism, drug abuse, sexual liberation and civic and political disengagement. All of these problems stem from the lack of awareness and commitment, the authors identify in section I. The book shows that the goal of the majority of emerging adults is to achieve material affluence; they are not critically aware of the problems of consumerism and materialism. Alcohol consumption and binge drinking are continuously increasing. Sexual liberation is greater than in previous generations, and many emerging adults are not aware of a world of hurt, regret and other negative emotions beneath the veneer of happiness. Moreover, most emerging adults are apathetic, uninformed and disengaged from political and public life. In all aspects of life, the majority of emerging adults are experiencing a lack of reflection, criticism and firm direction. This findings comports with Damon (2008)'s qualitative study, *The Path to Purpose*. His study indicates that the majority of adolescents and young adults do not have a clear commitment to a purposeful life. Damon describes them as "drifting", which fits with Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson and Herzog's analysis. The lack of purpose, goals, reflection, criticism and awareness will result in emptiness and nihilistic morality. This phenomenon might be related to the degenerative moral development of young adults. Since emerging adults will become the future leaders of society, the problem of their lack of moral development is very urgent. If not addressed, their problems may be repeated in future.

How, then, can the problems of emerging adults be addressed? Since Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson and Herzog's *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* is mainly concerned with the sociological investigation of the phenomena it studies and their causes, it does not suggest concrete solutions. However, its analysis of emerging adults provides useful, reliable information for further moral developmental studies. As the book started from a sociological viewpoint and applied sociological methods, its solutions focus on the socialization of emerging adults. The authors emphasize the role of the older generation as an agent of socialization. The key solutions suggested by the book are the reformation of social institutions, such as schools, and the efforts of older adults to establish firm relationship with emerging adults. Since the majority of moral psychological studies concentrate on the period from childhood to secondary school level, this book provides useful background knowledge on a less studied, but important, period of life.

## References

- Damon, W. (2008) *The Path to Purpose* (New York, Free Press).
- Rest, J., Narvaez, D., Bebeau, M. J. & Thoma, S. J. (1999) *Postconventional Moral Thinking: A Neo-Kohlbergian Approach* (Mahwah, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates).