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THE MARRIAGE PARADOX

Why Emerging Adults Love Marriage Yet Push it Aside



Brian J. Willoughby and Spencer L. James

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THE MARRIAGE PARADOX ▲

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SERIES FOREWORD ▲

The *Emerging Adulthood Series* examines the period of life starting at age 18 and continuing into and through the third decade of life, now commonly referred to as emerging adulthood. The specific focus of the series is on flourishing (i.e., factors that lead to positive, adaptive development during emerging adulthood and the successful transition into adult roles) and floundering (i.e., factors that lead to maladaptive behaviors and negative development during emerging adulthood as well as delay and difficulty in transitioning into adult roles) in the diverse paths young people take into and through the third decade of life.

There is a need to examine the successes and struggles in a variety of domains experienced by young people as they take complex and multiple paths in leaving adolescence and moving into and through their 20s. Too often the diversity of individual experiences is forgotten in our academic attempts to categorize a time period. For example, in proposing his theory of Emerging Adulthood, Arnett (2000, 2004) identified features of the development of young people, including *feeling in-between* (emerging adults do not see themselves as either adolescents or adults), *identity exploration* (especially in the areas of work, love, and world views), *focus on the self* (not self-centered, but simply lacking obligations to others), *instability* (evidenced by changes of direction in residential status, relationships, work, and education), and *possibilities* (optimism in the potential to steer their lives in any number of desired

directions). Although this is a nice summary of characteristics of the time period, the scholarly examination of emerging adulthood has not always attempted to capture and explain the within-group variation that exists among emerging adults, often making the broad generalization that they are a relatively homogenous group. For example, emerging adults have been categorically referred to as “narcissistic,” “refusing to grow up,” and “failed adults.” Although there certainly are emerging adults who fit the profile of selfish, struggling, and directionless, there are others who are using this period of time for good. Indeed, there is great diversity of individual experiences in emerging adulthood. Hence, there is a need to better examine various beliefs/attitudes, attributes, behaviors, and relationships during this period of time that appear to reflect positive adjustment, or a sense of flourishing, or conversely those that lead to floundering.

For example, recent research (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2013) shows that young people who appear to be successfully navigating emerging adulthood tend to engage in identity exploration, develop internalization of positive values, participate in positive media use, engage in prosocial behaviors, report healthy relationships with parents, and engage in romantic relationships that are characterized by higher levels of companionship, worth, affection, and emotional support. For others who appear to be floundering, emerging adulthood appears to include anxiety and depression, poor self-perceptions, greater participation in risk behaviors, and poorer relationship quality with parents, best friends, and romantic partners. Thus, although various profiles of flourishing and floundering are starting to be identified, the current work in the field has simply provided cursory overviews of findings. This series provides a platform for an in-depth, comprehensive examination into some of these key factors that seem to be influencing, positively or negatively, young people as they enter into and progress through the third decade of life and the multiple ways in which they may flourish or flounder. Furthermore, the series attempts to examine how these factors may function differently within various populations (e.g., cultures and religious and ethnic subcultures, students vs. nonstudents, men vs. women). Finally, the series provides for a multidisciplinary (e.g., fields ranging from developmental psychology, neurobiology, education, sociology, criminology) and multi-method (i.e., information garnered from both quantitative and qualitative methodologies) examination of issues related to flourishing and floundering in emerging adulthood.

It is important to make one final note about this series. The choice to employ the term “emerging adulthood” was not meant to imply that the series will include books that are limited in their scope to viewing the third decade of life only through the lens of emerging adulthood theory (Arnett, 2000). Indeed, the notion of “emerging adulthood” as a universal developmental period has been met with controversy and skepticism because of the complex and numerous paths young people take out of adolescence and into adulthood. It is that exact diversity in the experiences of young people in a variety of contexts and circumstances (e.g., cultural, financial, familial) that calls for a book series such as this one. It is unfortunate that disagreement about emerging adulthood theory has led to a fragmentation of scholars and scholarship devoted to better understanding the third decade of life. Hence, although the term “emerging adulthood” is employed for parsimony and for its growing familiarity as a term for the age period, this series is devoted to examining broadly the complexity of pathways into and through the third decade of life from a variety of perspectives and disciplines. In doing so, it is my hope that the series will help scholars, practitioners, students, and others better understand, and thereby potentially foster, flourishing and floundering in the lives of young people in the various paths they may take to adulthood.

▲ The Marriage Paradox

As noted, one of the problems that exists in both scholarly and media approaches to understanding and depicting the third decade of life is the failure to capture the diversity of individual experience. One of the areas in which this mistake is made is in the examination of the role of marriage in the lives of young people. It may be argued that the diversity in and complexities of navigating the 20s might be due to the delay in marriage more than any other single factor. Compared with past decades when young people married in their early 20s (or younger), the delay in marriage now leaves the 20s as a period of time for many young people to engage in a number of other recreational, academic/vocational, and personal pursuits. Because of this, broad generalizations are made regarding the complete lack of importance of marriage to emerging adults. This completely ignores the actual diversity that exists related to both beliefs and behaviors associated with marriage in emerging adulthood.

This sweeping generalization might likewise be responsible for a trend we see of researchers not treating marriage as a viable area of scholarly inquiry during the third decade of life. Again, this fails to capture the diversity of paths through the third decade of life. Focusing solely on the average age at marriage as a potential starting point of when marriage might become a worthy target of scholarly interest, researchers are missing out on the potential fruitful area of examining how cognitions about marriage may play important roles in guiding the behaviors of young people throughout their 20s. And, lastly, a failure to examine the diversity in how young people think about and approach marriage dismisses the very real and personal inner struggle that many young people experience as they grapple with very personal and meaningful aspects of their lives related to marriage (i.e., How can I avoid/replicate what I saw in my parents' marriage? Do I want to marry? Will I marry and, if so, when? How will it fit within my career plans? How does my current romantic relationship play into my plans for my life—now and in the future?). These are real issues for young people, and as such they should be of significant interest to scholars as we attempt to unpack the multiplicity of factors that account for the diversity of individual experience in the third decade of life.

It is for these very reasons that *"The Marriage Paradox: Why Emerging Adults Love Marriage yet Push It Aside"* by Drs. Brian J. Willoughby and Spencer L. James is such an important contribution to this book series with its goal to better understand how various beliefs/attitude, attributes, behaviors, and relationships are associated with flourishing or floundering in emerging adulthood. Although the authors make it very clear in the book what the shifts have been during the emerging adulthood period (e.g., rise in the average age of marriage, disconnecting childbearing from marriage) that have changed the marriage landscape during and past the third decade of life, they also make it clear why a discussion focused solely on those aggregate trends across all segments of the population masks the underlying complexity and reality of marriage for many emerging adults.

The foundation for their book is found in the examination of what they refer to as the marriage paradox, which is the apparent contradiction of two key findings related to marriage in emerging adulthood—(1) that modern-day emerging adults largely value, respect, and plan for marriage; and (2) that modern-day emerging adults are marrying later and less often than previous generations. Through the use of both

quantitative methods and extensive interviews with a diverse cross-section of young people, the authors help us understand at a scholarly level the effect that this paradox has in accounting for within-group differences related to views about and approaches to marriage in emerging adulthood and also help us feel at the personal level the lived experiences of individuals as they grapple with this paradox in their own lives. The book shows how modern emerging adults think about and orient their lives either around or away from marriage. The authors articulate how emerging adults' beliefs, values, and choices of behavior affect their lives now and in the future. In doing so, the authors provide valuable information to both scholars and the general public that illuminates the internal struggles about marriage that many emerging adults feel, and how that intrapersonal grappling with these issues can help account for the diversity in approaches to marriage, specifically, and individual differences in flourishing and floundering, more generally, during the third decade of life.

Larry J. Nelson
Series Editor

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INTRODUCTION ▲

▲ The Marriage Paradox

Is marriage dead? Is it merely changing? Has it been replaced by alternatives such as cohabitation or serial dating and singlehood? These questions, and others like them, have been the subject of debate across American and Western societies for decades. Journalists, media personalities, scholars, and policy makers have all argued over the role marriage plays in modern life, and it has been the topic of myriad casual discussions around office water coolers and family dinner tables. In fact, perhaps no other question has been as enduring across the past 50 years of American history as whether marriage is relevant in modern society. Over the past several decades, marriage rates have declined, divorce and age at marriage have increased, and single parenthood has become more widely accepted. To the casual observer, it may seem that marriage, the primary mechanism for bearing and raising children and regulating the sexual behavior of adults for thousands of years, has become obsolete, a relic of the past.

But such a declaration about the death of marriage seems premature at best. If marriage were dead, people in the typical marriageable age range—emerging adults in their 20s and early 30s—would report that marriage no longer matters to them. In reality, emerging adults, those individuals typically between the ages of 18 and 30, continue to

tell scholars and pollsters, and anyone else who asks, that marriage is important and is one of the most important milestones of life.

According to the Monitoring the Future data, in the late 1970s, 69% of high school senior boys and 80% of high school senior girls said that having a good marriage and family life was extremely important to them. By the early 2010s, virtually the exact same percentage of girls stated the same thing. The boys? The percentage actually increased slightly to about 72%. These results, perhaps startling when considering the monumental changes that have shaped the contemporary American family, reveal a nuanced and complex picture of where marriage fits. How can marriage be dying if so many emerging adults still value it and plan to marry someday? Paradoxically, why are emerging adults seemingly abandoning an institution they seem to value so much?

This dichotomy, whereby emerging adults value and plan for marriage while simultaneously relegating it to the back shelf, is the key question of this book. To state it more succinctly, we seek to answer one of the more puzzling questions facing those who study emerging adults: Why do modern emerging adults behave in ways that move against marriage when they say marriage is so important to them?

Data have consistently suggested two trends among modern-day emerging adults:

1. *Modern-day emerging adults largely value, respect, and plan for marriage, perhaps even more so than previous generations.*
2. *Modern-day emerging adults are marrying later and less often than previous generations.*

This is what we refer to as the *marriage paradox*. This is the question mystifying so many who study and seek to understand both family formation trends and the emerging adulthood period itself. Understanding this paradox requires not just an examination of national trends, although that is certainly essential, but also an understanding of the lived experience of emerging adults themselves. That is, to understand the marriage paradox we must first understand how marriage has become a paradox in the minds of emerging adults. We must understand how an institution that represents stability, perceived happiness, and “adulthood” can also exemplify fears of divorce, a loss of independence, and, potentially, the end of the best years of their lives. By natural extension, we must also explore the implications a shift away from marriage has on emerging adults’ behaviors. How do changing

attitudes toward marriage translate into their conduct and demeanor, as well as the activities in which they choose to engage?

We divide this book into three separate sections. The first section comprises Chapters 1, 2, and 3. This section provides a contextual and foundational discussion of the setting in which emerging adults live. After all, values, ideas, and beliefs are both creations and expressions of the wider context in which they are immersed. For this reason, we first discuss the cultural context of the developmental period of emerging adulthood (Chapter 1) before discussing the unique relationship context of the 20s (Chapter 2) and scholarship on marital beliefs generally (Chapter 3).

Our second section describes and articulates emerging adults' views of themselves in relation to marriage (Chapters 4, 5, and 6). This section seeks to understand how emerging adults think about marriage and how they value and measure it against their other goals and aspirations.

The remainder of the book examines the influences and consequences of emerging adults' beliefs about marriage (Chapters 7–11). It is here that we attempt to understand where the marital paradox of emerging adulthood might come. We explore how influences such as parents, religion, and peers—along with larger cultural contexts such as the media—contribute to contemporary emerging adults' understanding of the costs and benefits of marriage. In doing so, we hope the reader might appreciate how modern emerging adults' beliefs about marriage are both complex in their nature and complex in how they are created and maintained.

THE MARRIAGE PARADOX

1 ▲

Modern Marriage and Emerging Adulthood in the United States

▲ Understanding Emerging Adulthood

Despite ongoing debates about whether emerging adulthood is a new developmental period or the result of middle- and upper-class privilege (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011), there is no denying that the third decade of life in the twenty-first century is a very different experience than it was even a generation or two ago. Emerging adults' views and behaviors toward marriage are not divorced (pun intended) from this fact. Societal changes—including shifting norms, attitudes, and behaviors surrounding marriage and family life during this period—have paved the way for many of the paradoxical findings we detail later in this book. Here, we briefly discuss the unique cultural environment that many emerging adults currently find themselves in, before we tackle the specific issue of the marriage paradox.

Most discussions of the emerging adulthood period begin with the simple fact that fewer than half of emerging adults believe they have reached adulthood, but most do not feel that they are youths or teens either (Arnett, 2000). Rather, they occupy an ambiguous period rife with decisions about relationships, education, sexuality, and occupations, but often without the direction of norms that guided previous generations. Although many elements of emerging adult culture have been discussed elsewhere, we focus on several of the most salient elements for how emerging adults think about marriage and family formation. Numerous potential explanations for emerging adults' perceived lack of adulthood exist, from biological and genetic factors to large-scale shifts in how society is organized. We argue that the increased *variation* in how emerging adults experience their 20s is perhaps the most important factor in the shifting marriage and family formation trends currently seen among emerging adults. In this chapter, we explore what this variation is and examine its historical roots. In chapter 2, we will

explore how economic uncertainties have led some young people to make very different choices regarding relationships than their parents or grandparents made, and why this matters for marriage in America in the twenty-first century.

▲ The Age of Choice

Nearly all scholars agree that emerging adults today have more socially acceptable choices and possibilities upon leaving the parental home than previous generations. One prominent scholar noted that emerging adulthood could partially be described as the “age of possibilities” and suggested that modern emerging adults’ life trajectories are often more varied than in previous generations (Arnett, 2000, 2007). In previous generations, emerging adults often encountered fairly normalized and institutional guidelines for the pathway to adulthood, even if these pathways tended to vary by social class and were somewhat restrictive. Just a few generations ago, this path was clear for the majority of emerging adults: Upon leaving one’s family of origin, one either entered the labor force or, for a lucky minority, attended post-secondary education. Either way, marriage was expected to come fairly soon after leaving home, with children quickly nipping at the heels. This sequence was fairly straightforward and simple: job, marriage, and finally children. Deviations and variations certainly existed but were generally frowned on, and emerging adults of the time experienced strong cultural pressure to conform to this sequence of life transitions.

Much has changed in the last 70-odd years since the *Leave-It-to-Beaver* stereotype of the American family was firmly rooted into the psyche of most emerging adults. From the 1960s forward, cultural changes meant that the stability of family life began to erode and even evaporate for many. Variations from the normative family life sequencing became both more acceptable and common. The sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s brought with it structural shifts in the form of legalized abortion, widespread availability of affordable birth control, and more liberal cultural attitudes surrounding sex.

One result of greater sexual freedom outside of marriage has been an increase in nonmarital childbirth (both planned and unplanned). From 1940 to 2013, the nonmarital birth rate in the United States increased

more than tenfold, from 3.8% of all births in 1940 to 40.6% of all births in 2013 (Hamilton, Martin, Osterman, & Curtin, 2014; Ventura & Bachrach, 2000). Although this increase in nonmarital childbearing has affected nearly all socioeconomic groups, the disconnect between marriage and childbearing is especially stark among the disadvantaged. In 2010, 65% of births to families with a household income of less than \$25,000 were outside of a marital context (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The difference is even more striking when considering racial and ethnic differences. In 2013, for example, 71% of births to black women were nonmarital, which was almost twice that of white women (35.8%). Hispanics were right in the middle at 53.2% (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Curtin, & Mathews, 2015).

Beyond the increase in nonmarital childbearing, changes in divorce laws have also contributed to the remaking of the American family. Perhaps most notably, the advent of *no-fault divorce* (Adams & Coltrane, 2007; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007) helped usher in a divorce boom during which divorce rates sharply spiked, peaking around the early 1980s. Since that time, the divorce rate has decreased, from a high of 22.8 divorces per 1,000 married couples in 1979 to 16.7 divorces per 1,000 married couples in 2005 (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). Despite the divorce rate itself decreasing, the proportion of the population that is divorced has continued to increase. The percentage of women in the United States who had ever divorced almost doubled from 1980 to 2011, from 6.6% to 11% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Rates of marriage and divorce from 1900 to 2012 are shown in Figure 1.1. At marriage's high point in 1940, there were about twelve marriages per 1,000 people. This number has now dropped to fewer than seven marriages per 1,000 people. The divorce rate, on the other hand, rose to five divorces per 1,000 people in the 1980s, but has recently dropped to less than four divorces (see Figure 1.1).

Despite these changes, many of today's emerging adults, as children of the baby boomers, grew up in the economic prosperity that was the norm in the 1980s and 1990s ("The Economy in the 1980s and 1990s," 2012), which provided families with resources for their children that were unheard of even 20 years before. Consequently, the baby boomers' children (the Gen X and Gen Y crowd) grew up in a time when vacations became standard practice for many middle-class American families, when home sizes dramatically increased, and when access to newly available electronic devices, such as cell phones

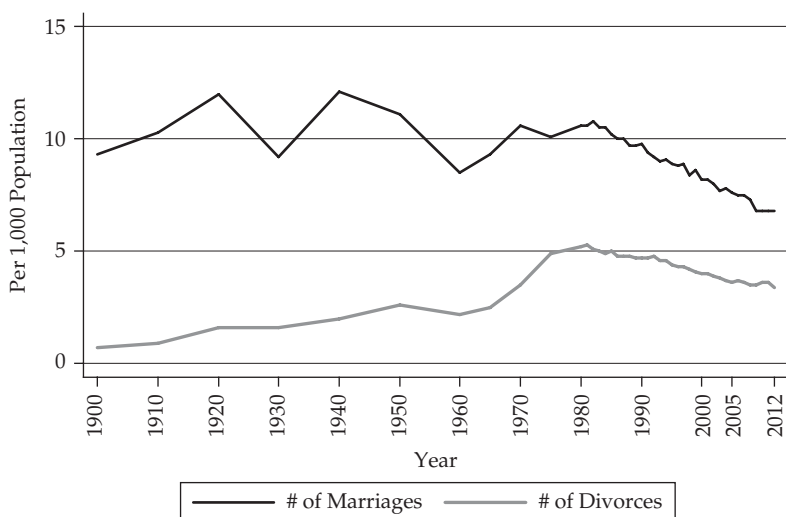


FIGURE 1.1 Historical marriage and divorce rates, 1900–2012.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: National Vital Statistics System.

and the Internet, began to change interpersonal communication on a large scale.

▲ A Changing Economic and Educational Reality

Along with shifts in the institutional norms regarding family life, economic and educational shifts have also contributed to the day-to-day lives of modern emerging adults. One of the most prominent shifts of the past several generations has been the dramatic rise in post-secondary enrollment. Although college or university attendance was traditionally a privilege of the elite, the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, or “GI Bill,” instituted in 1944 made college education a realistic possibility for an increasing number of Americans. This trend has continued throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. In 2012, 20.6 million people were enrolled at a degree-granting institution in the United States, an increase of 24% compared with the previous decade (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The trends of obtaining a college education versus other levels of education are seen in Figure 1.2. A bachelor’s degree has gone from the least common

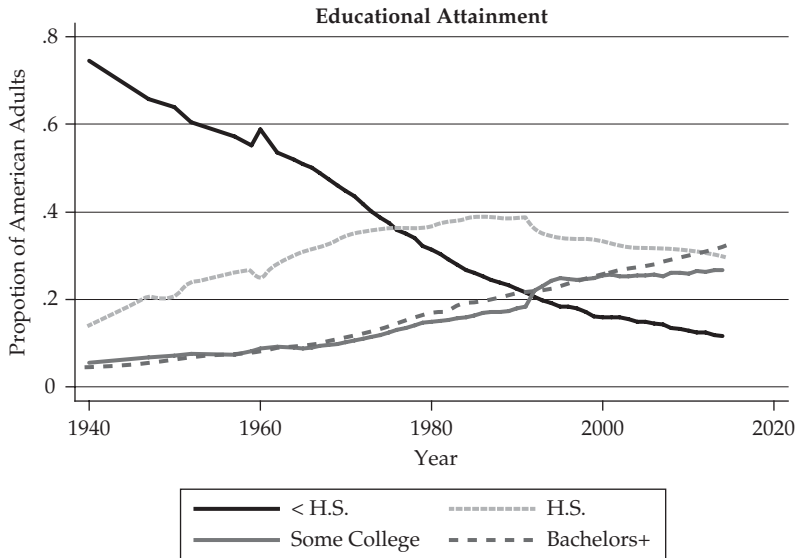


FIGURE 1.2 Educational attainment in the United States.

Source: US Census Bureau.

to the most common level of attainment, whereas the reverse is true of having less than a high school education. It is also interesting that the spread of educational attainment was previously very polarized, whereas now the levels have converged.

Although increases in college education have been beneficial to both the individual and society, they have had a more problematic effect as well. As the number of people with college degrees grew, the societal value of those degrees began to decline, leading to higher unemployment rates among college graduates. In recent times, the Great Recession of 2007–2009 saw many companies cut back on entry-level positions for newly minted college graduates. Subsequently, only 46.1% of 16- to 24-year-olds were employed, the smallest portion recorded since data collection began in 1948 (Pew Research Center, 2009). In turn, the lack of employment opportunities pushed more people back into school, creating a continued influx of college graduates seeking employment in a tepid job market. The lackluster job market, coupled with increasing student loan debt (the average college graduate has \$24,000 in loans; Cheng & Reed, 2010), has resulted in difficult economic circumstances for many of today's emerging adults (see Figure 1.2).

In light of changes in the way modern emerging adults pay for and value a college education, it is ironic that today's economic landscape essentially requires a college degree for financial stability. Economic uncertainty, a constantly shifting (and not usually in their favor) labor market, and crushing student loan debt have led to anxiety among people in this demographic group as they move into adulthood. In a national poll of emerging adults conducted by scholars at Clark University, more than half (56%) of 18- to 29-year-olds agreed that they "often feel anxious" (Arnett & Schwab, 2013), especially in regard to career instability (Arnett, 2014; Schulenberg, Sameroff, & Cicchetti, 2004).

Thus far, I have focused primarily on the privileged—those with college degrees. But the same cultural and economic shifts have had an equal effect on emerging adults from more disadvantaged backgrounds. However, the news isn't all bad. For some of these emerging adults, expanded educational opportunities provided by online and community colleges may equalize the playing field. In fact, attendance at community colleges rose to an all-time high of 3.4 million emerging adult students in 2008 (Pew Research Center, 2009). Still, for many other disadvantaged emerging adults, restrictive labor markets and the general decline of traditional blue-collar jobs have meant an increase in residential and employment instability (Michaelides & Mueser, 2012; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Thus, emerging adults from impoverished backgrounds also have experienced increased instability in their lives, although often for very different reasons than emerging adults from a middle-class or upper-class background. To illustrate this, Figure 1.3 shows trends of six different categories of the labor force.

▲ The Rise of Individualism

Accompanying changing norms and behavioral expectations regarding relationships, education, employment, and sexuality, there has been a general cultural shift toward individualism—a trend that goes hand-in-hand with the number of choices available to modern emerging adults. Individualism is not a new characteristic, especially in the modern West, yet the rigor and strength with which it has gripped the public

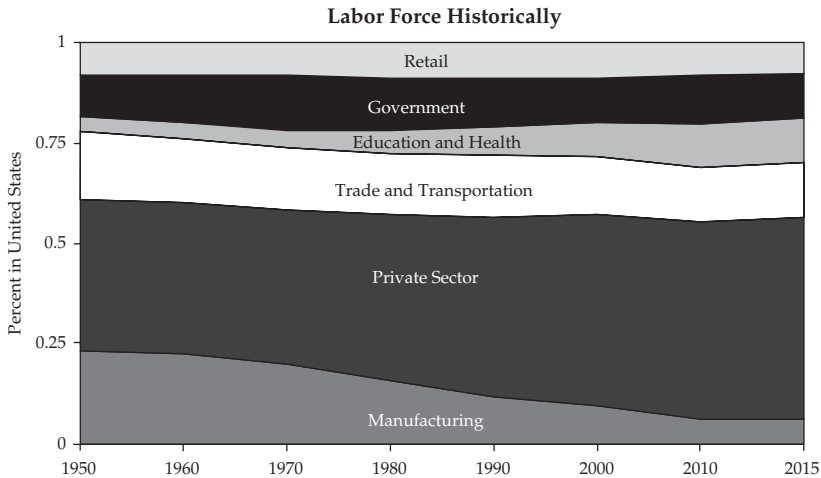


FIGURE 1.3 Labor force areas historically.

Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

psyche has been staggering. Although much of Western thought and culture are founded on principles of individual prosperity and freedom, prevailing social structures and norms in the United States historically structured what was considered proper behavior in almost all facets of life. As outlined previously, however, these norms have shifted toward valuing an individual's right to choose his or her own path regardless of whether those choices conform to "normative" behavior.

For example, the Monitoring the Future Study, which began in 1970, has been asking high school seniors a battery of questions about social norms and behaviors for decades. One of these questions is whether students agree or disagree with the following statement: "Having a child without being married is experimenting with a worthwhile lifestyle or not affecting anyone else." As recently as the late 1970s, only about one third of girls agreed with this statement. By the early 2000s, that percentage had almost doubled to more than half, hovering around 55%. This increase in acceptance of previously non-normative behavior suggests another, related shift: moral relativism. *Moral relativism* suggests that emerging adults believe that their own behavior should be unencumbered by social norms and, additionally, that they should not be judged for their actions as long as those action don't "affect others."