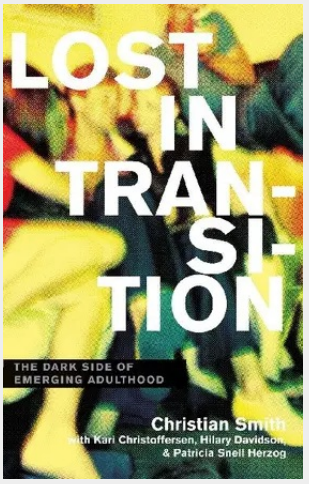
Smith / Christoffersen / Davidson

Lost in Transition

The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood



Life for emerging adults is vastly different today than it was for their counterparts even a generation ago. Young people are waiting longer to marry, to have children, and to choose a career direction. As a result, they enjoy more freedom, opportunities, and personal growth than ever before. But the transition to adulthood is also more complex, disjointed, and confusing. In Lost in Transition, Christian Smith and his collaborators draw on 230 in-depth interviews with a broad cross-section of emerging adults (ages 18-23) to investigate the difficulties young people face today, the underlying causes of those difficulties, and the consequences both for individuals and for American society as a whole. Rampant consumer capitalism, ongoing failures in education, hyper-individualism, postmodernist moral relativism, and other aspects of American culture are all contributing to the chaotic terrain that emerging adults must cross. Smith identifies five major problems facing very many young people today: confused moral reasoning, routine intoxication, materialistic life goals, regrettable sexual experiences, and disengagement from civic and political life. The trouble does not lie only with the emerging adults or their poor individual decisions but has much deeper roots in mainstream American culture--a culture which emerging adults have largely inherited rather than created. Older adults, Smith argues, must recognize that much of the responsibility for the pain and confusion young people face lies with them. Rejecting both sky-is-falling alarmism on the one hand and complacent disregard on the other, Smith suggests the need for what he calls "realistic concern"--and a reconsideration of our cultural priorities and practices--that will help emerging adults more skillfully engage unique challenges they face. Even-handed, engagingly written, and based on comprehensive research, Lost in Transition brings much needed attention to the darker side of the transition to adulthood.

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