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The Role of Social Class and Early Outlooks in Positive Transitions to Adulthood

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As in other chapters in *On the Frontier of Adulthood*, D. Wayne Osgood, Gretchen Ruth, Jacquelynne Eccles, Janis Jacobs, and Bonnie Barber find that youth are carving varied paths into adulthood. Extended education and delayed family formation are again evident among the youth examined by these authors. They also find, as do Sandefur and coauthors in their chapter, that the paths youth take are often influenced by their family's social class. Yet, social class is not destiny. Early attitudes toward education, regardless of social class, strongly influence the directions youth take.

Paths into Adulthood

The authors use data from the Michigan Study of Adolescent Life Transitions, which tracked a middle-class, mostly white, sample of youth in Detroit beginning in 1984, when they were 12, through 1999, when they were 27. The authors use data at age 18 and again at age 24. Nearly two-thirds of the youth (62%) had left their parents' home to live on their own; 20% were parents themselves; 85% were employed, 21% had only completed high school, 47% had some college or postsecondary training, and 33% had a bachelor's degree.

Based on a latent class analysis, the youth sort into five different groups: fast starters (12% of the sample), parents without careers (10%), educated partners (19%), educated singles (37%), working singles (7%), and slow starters (14%). It should be noted that, with this method, the group or "class" of youth are not directly observed but are inferred from the data as a set of pure types that would most plausibly produce the set of groupings observed. Some individuals clearly exemplify a single class, while others plausibly fit two or more of the classes.

The **fast starters**, who married, entered the workforce, bought a home, and had children early, had the most adult-like lives at age 24. They were heavily invested in work and family, working full-time at jobs they saw as long-term, and in romantic partnerships they saw as stable and which had already lasted for several years. They typically had been with the same partner since age 19. However, they were also the most likely to report abusive relationships. They had less time for leisure, and were less likely to use illegal substances or be involved in other illegal activities. (Schulenberg and coauthors, in another chapter in this book, find that family responsibilities are often a precursor to a decline in substance use.) The trade-off for these early transitions was less education, which brought less prestigious employment (most often in skilled and technical trades), and weaker prospects for long-term occupational advancement.

The second group, **parents without careers**, also had deep commitment to family, even deeper than fast starters. However, their commitment to work was significantly less than the fast starters. Very few respondents held positions with upward mobility or prestige; they were more likely to have jobs in sales, low-level service, and skilled trades, and their earnings were quite low. They worked, on average, only 23 hours per week and earned only \$239 per week, the lowest of the six groups examined. This group also had the lowest level of education. Their relationships, however, had begun at earlier ages and had lasted longer (33 months versus 26 months for fast starters), although they were much more likely to report that their relationships were in trouble. Their early commitment to family may have been foreshadowed in high school. At age 18, this group had the highest future, and early, expectations of marriage and parenthood.

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Network on Transitions to Adulthood

The third and fourth groups—**educated partners and educated singles**—are distinct from the other two groups in that they are not as involved in adult family roles and spend more time in leisure activities. Of course, neither of these groups has children, and their romantic relationships are newer or nonexistent.

As the label implies, these groups had the highest levels of education (61% of educated singles had a bachelor's degree) and were the most likely to be continuing that education. They also held the highest-prestige jobs, although their careers were at an early stage. Although they earned significantly less than fast starters, they had greater future earnings prospects. It is the largest group and, in many respects, exemplifies the notion of “emergent adulthood” by delaying some adult commitments in favor of an extended period of exploration.

These two groups' value on education was clearly foreshadowed at age 18. Compared with all other groups, these respondents had higher self-concepts of academic ability, greater interest in academics, and stronger expectations for their future education. They also spent more leisure time in activities that contribute to better educational outcomes.

Working singles were similar to fast starters in the world of work and education, and to educated singles in the realm of family involvement. They invested more heavily in work early on, and at age 24 had good earnings from long-term jobs, although those jobs did not carry much prestige. They were also the most likely to still be living with parents.

As the label implies, **slow starters** had experienced the fewest transitions to adulthood. Further, they were not positioning themselves well to enter those roles. Most had reached their mid-twenties with little education, many still lived with parents, few had romantic relationships, and they either were not working or were in low-paying, low-prestige jobs. Those who held jobs worked fewer hours and earned less than other groups.

Predicting the Future

If being an adult means being settled in work, marriage, and family, this group of young adults falls short at age 24. Rather than viewing this as a failure, however, these patterns tend to reflect two emerging trends: a delay in taking on the full responsibilities of marriage and family in favor of personal exploration and education; and acceptance of a wider range of valued adult lifestyles, such as cohabitation and jobs as stepping stones rather than long-term positions.

Clearly there is more than one pathway into adulthood, but what leads individuals to take these different paths? As with Sandefur and coauthors in their chapter, the authors find that the paths youth take through early adulthood are greatly influenced by social class. The educated singles and educated partners were more likely to have come from families of higher social class, as measured by parents' education and family income. Family resources and attitudes toward education likely help in putting these young adults on paths to personal and professional advancement.

However, social class is not destiny. After controlling for educational expectations and performance at age 18, the family social class profiles did not differ significantly among the five groups. In other words, children whose parents are highly educated have a much greater chance of becoming educated partners and educated singles at age 24 precisely because they are more likely to have done well in high school and to expect to obtain a college degree. Furthermore, students from poor families who do equally well in school and have the same high expectations are just as likely to arrive in those high-trajectory groups at age 24.

Based on Wayne Osgood, Gretchen Ruth, Jacquelynne Eccles, Janis Jacobs, and Bonnie Barber, “Six Paths to Adulthood: Fast Starters, Parents without Careers, Educated Partners, Educated Singles, Working Singles, and Slow Starters,” in On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy, edited by Richard A. Settersten, Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming 2004.

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The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy examines the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Significant cultural, economic, and demographic changes have occurred in the span of a few generations, and these changes are challenging youth's psychological and social development. Some are adapting well, but many others are floundering as they prepare to leave home, finish school, find jobs, and start families. The network is both documenting these cultural and social shifts, and exploring how families, government, and social institutions are shaping the course of young adults' development. The Network is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and chaired by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank Furstenberg.

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