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The Changing Nature of Young Adulthood throughout the Century

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The lives of young adults in 1900 and 2000 could hardly be more different. The youth of today face a much wider menu of options for living, working, and forming families. Educational opportunities have expanded dramatically, and for women, opportunities in the workforce have expanded as well. Differences between black, white, and foreign-born populations in education and labor market opportunities have narrowed in the convening years since the 1960s. Yet, these very options often make life more complex, with few maps to guide youth through the expanding choices.

In their chapter in the forthcoming *On the Frontier of Adulthood*, Elizabeth Fussell and Frank Furstenberg chronicle the impact of these and other events on youth making the transition from childhood to adulthood. Using census data, they examine youth in each decade of the twentieth century at ages 16, 20, 25, and 30, grouping them by status (e.g., enrolled in school, in the labor force, living as head of household or with their parents, married, and as parents themselves). The strength of their approach is that they observe youth in multiple statuses simultaneously rather than focus on one or two statuses. In doing so, they describe combinations of all the statuses recorded by the census to draw a representative picture of youth and young adulthood throughout the twentieth century.

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The twentieth century witnessed two revolutions that reorganized work and family life—the technological revolution and the gender revolution. The former raised the importance of technical knowledge, and thus education, in the labor market. The latter lowered barriers to the workforce for women and created space for more egalitarian gender relationships within home and work.

These two revolutions upset the institutions and social norms that had guided the transition to adulthood. For men, the ability to support a family through stable employment has always been a necessary precursor to family formation. In the industrializing economy of the first half of the twentieth century, most men were able to attain such independence by age 20. As the economy shifted, however, young men, and increasingly young women, had to gain the education and skills necessary to participate in an increasingly technical and information-based market.

While the long-term trend toward later ages for marriage and fertility was briefly interrupted by the marriage and baby boom in the immediate post-World War II period, by 1970 the trend resumed and by 2000 unprecedented (late) ages at marriage and childbearing had emerged. For example, after 1960, 25-year-old men in all groups increasingly remained single and childless.

Women, too, see a shift toward delayed marriage and more independent living while working or attending school. Among all 25-year-old women after 1960, the fastest growing status combination was single, working, childless, heads of household. Not only single women, but in an extraordinary shift, more married women were working as well. In 1900, most 25-year-old married women were dedicated to domestic housework. Very few white or foreign-born women worked after marriage. Black women, in contrast, more often continued to work after marriage. In the 1930s, economic necessity drove many married women into the workforce, but this would ebb again with the prosperity that followed World War II. However, beginning in the 1960s, women would once again look to the work world to add to their families' income.

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Network on Transitions to Adulthood

Also emerging after 1950 is single motherhood, especially for black women. The percentage of 20-year-old black single mothers grew from 2% in 1950 to 22% in 2000. Among their white and foreign-born peers, the percentage has increased from 0% to 6% (white) and 0% to 12% (foreign-born).

As Fussell and Anne H. Gauthier document in another chapter in *On the Frontier of Adulthood*, however, marriage was only postponed, not abandoned. By age 30, men and women of the early and later twentieth century do not look that much different from one another. In 1900 and 2000, the most common status for 30-year-old men of all races and ethnicities was married, employed, household heads with children. Although off from its high point in the 1950s and 1960s, when 67% of all white men and about 50% of black and foreign-born men fit this description, this combination has remained most common since the 1970s.

A notable trend for women is the growing proportion that postpones marriage, but not necessarily motherhood, until after age 30. In 1980, 1%–2% of white and foreign-born 30-year-old women were single mothers, rising to 6% in 2000. For black women, the rise has been from 7% in 1970 to 26% in 2000.

Summary

Over the course of the century, the ages at which young people fill adult roles have been extended and the combinations of roles more varied. As more young people, regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity, participate in higher education for longer periods, they leave home and begin work at later ages. The early twenties have become, for some, a period of independent, non-family living. Even after marriage, men and women combine a variety of roles more often than in the past, such as attending school and working, both before and after childbearing. The lives of young people have begun to look more similar as employment and educational opportunities have opened for women and minorities with the passing decades. The meaning of these changes has been particularly profound for women. Men have held work and family roles simultaneously throughout the century. But for women of all groups, this combination involves a complex balancing of traditional and new statuses. For native-born blacks, integration into the social institutions that structure the life course has meant that their lives increasingly resemble those of their white peers, although there are still gaps in educational attainment and employment, and differences in patterns of family formation that reflect persistent racial differences in life circumstances. Although the lives of prior cohorts of young foreign-born men and women were beginning to resemble those of native-born whites, recent cohorts of foreign-born youth are now diverging, reflecting a growing complexity of status combinations.

As young people adapt their lives to a more complex world, it becomes more difficult to say at which point they have reached adulthood. There are more paths to be taken through life and few maps to guide youth on the increasingly complex transition to adulthood.

Based on Elizabeth Fussell and Frank Furstenberg, "The Transition to Adulthood during the 20th Century: Differences by Race, Nativity and Gender," 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.