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Working More, Playing Less: Changing Patterns of Time Use among Young Adults

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Moving into adulthood is a time of shifting devotion to work, home, and family. Changes in the social and economic situations of young adults in the recent decades have not only restructured this transition, but have likely altered patterns of time use among young adults at different stages.

Anne H. Gauthier and Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., in their chapter in *On the Frontier to Adulthood*, track changing patterns since the 1970s to examine whether young adults are spending different amounts of time on education (including time spent attending classes and studying), work, housework, child care, leisure, personal activities (eating, sleeping, bathing, dressing), and travel to and from work or school. In general, it appears that young adults are sacrificing leisure time and housework for more paid work and child care is an increasing part of their days. In large part, traditional gender roles prevail in the split between housework, child care, and paid employment, although the gap has narrowed somewhat.

The authors analyze 23 different time-use surveys carried out since the 1970s in 11 countries. All surveys relied on 24-hour diaries. The authors divide youth aged 18–34 into six subgroups: students (no partners, no children); employed singles (no children); employed partnered (cohabiting or married, no children); employed parents; disengaged (no partners, unemployed, no children); and at-home parents (cohabiting or married, unemployed with children).

General Patterns of Time Use

Overall, time trends still mirror traditional gender roles, with fathers devoting the most time to paid work, and women of all subgroups—even students and employed singles—devoting less time to paid work than their male counterparts. The gender difference is especially large when children are present. Women continue to spend more time than men on housework, and less time on leisure than men in all subgroups. Women, however, spend slightly more time on personal activities than men.

Students

Contrary to what might have been expected in light of the competitive labor market of the 1990s, students did not devote more time to education than earlier cohorts. If anything, they spent less time on education than students in the 1980s. However, the trends are not strong. Students spent approximately 5 hours per day on education in 1980 and 4 hours per day in the mid-1990s. In contrast to education, students are spending more time working than in the 1980s. Higher tuition and poorer economic circumstances may be forcing young people to combine school and work more frequently than in the past. Compared with any other group, students spend the least amount of time on housework; there is also a slight indication that men contribute more time to housework than in the past and women less. Fitting images of student life, this group spends large amounts of time on leisure—on average, 6.4 hours per day, or about 30 minutes more per day than working young adults.

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Employed Singles and Employed Partners

Trends in time use have been relatively stable for this group. Interestingly, however, employed singles are now devoting more time to both education and work. Across the decades, work has become a larger part of a youth's day, possibly because of the declining economic situations faced by young adults. For employed partners, a divergence results between men and women as men begin to devote more time to work than women. Furthermore, although women still spend more time on housework than men, the gap has narrowed considerably. Men are sacrificing leisure time when they enter the workforce and marry or cohabit, while women have always made these sacrifices.

Employed Parents

Employed parents experienced the most dramatic time changes among the six groups. When working women marry and have children, the amount of time spent in paid work decreases by about 2 hours per day. Fathers, on the other hand, increase their paid work by about 30 minutes a day. Leisure time is sacrificed for housework and child care among both men and women. Over time, women are spending less time on housework and more time on child care. Men are spending more time than in past decades in both areas. Although the gap in child care is still significant between the two genders—during the 1970s through the 1990s, men devoted 0.8 hours per day to child care compared with 2.6 for women—there is nevertheless an unmistakable trend in increasing time devoted to child care. It should be noted that the authors' analyses likely underestimate time devoted to child care because the analyses are restricted to primary activities, and child care is often done simultaneously with other activities.

Disengaged Young Adults and Nonworking Mothers

Reflecting the increasing labor force participation of women, the share of nonworking mothers has declined since the 1970s. Nonworking mothers' time-use trends are similar to employed mothers, with a small increase in time devoted to education, a strong increase in time devoted to child care, and a decline in housework. Leisure time has been sacrificed considerably since the 1970s. Youth who are out of school, not working, single, and childless (a relatively small group) devote the majority of their time to leisure, about 7–10 hours a day. They also spend a little more time than other groups on personal activities.

Policy Implications

Today, more young adults are students, single, and childless than 30 years ago. In addition, economic shifts have made the job market more competitive and increased the demand for a higher skilled workforce. As a result, one might expect youth to invest more heavily in education and training. The authors, however, find no increases in time spent in education (although it is important to remember more young adults are now full-time students than in past decades). They do find students are spending more time in paid work than in the past, however. Social norms have also changed, with more women entering the workforce and greater gender equality. Given these changes, one might expect a convergence in time use patterns between the genders, with more time devoted to paid work by women and to child care and housework by men. This convergence was clearest for employed young adults without children. Although the gap narrowed among employed parents with children, it did not completely converge. Interestingly, both men and women seem to be devoting more of their time to child care, regardless of employment status, indicating perhaps that the most recent generation may be having fewer children, but they are spending more time rearing them.

Based on Anne Gauthier and Frank Furstenberg, "Historical Trends in the Patterns of Time Use of Young Adults in Industrialized Nations," 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.

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.