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The Effect of Timing and Sequence of Choices on Young Adults' Futures

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The markers of adulthood have remained fairly constant over the past century. Youth leave home, gain additional education, enter the workforce, marry, and have children. The sequence and timing of these markers, however, have changed significantly in the last 50 years. Although many researchers have documented this shifting pattern, few have done so with data that allow detailed insight into the full sequence of these steps.

Ted Mouw, in his chapter in *On the Frontier of Adulthood*, uses longitudinal data to follow 5,464 youth interviewed in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) between 1979 and 1998 as they traverse the paths into adulthood. The youth were between ages 16 and 22 in 1979, and were interviewed each year between ages 22 and 35. Mouw also examines whether the timing and sequence of these experiences affect later economic and psychological well-being, such as self-reported happiness and depression, family income, poverty, and education.

The Timing and Sequence of Paths to Adulthood

Unlike cross-sectional data, such as census data, longitudinal data can document the movement into and out of adult “states,” such as marriage and employment. Only longitudinal data, for example, can reveal whether individuals who leave home return to live with their parents at a later date. In fact, Mouw finds that 54% of men and 64% of women in his sample had left their parents’ home by age 22. However, 16% of both men and women returned home at some point before age 35. Similarly, 77% of men and 82% of women had completed education by age 22. Yet, 15% of men and 22% of women would at some point return to school, perhaps for more work-related training.

Even with the added insight of these reversible transitions, the results confirm much of what has previously been found with cross-sectional data. Men leave home earlier than women, but by their late 20s, three-fourths of both men and women have left home. Women both complete education earlier than men and are more likely to return to school again. Both men and women become economically independent fairly early. Three-fourths of men and women are working full-time by age 25. Family transitions, however, are more delayed. Only about two-thirds of men are married at age 25, whereas most women are married by then. Childbearing is the most delayed and shows the greatest variation.

Data also confirm that youth are taking more varied paths into adulthood. In the 1960s and early 1970s, youth finished education, left home, got jobs, married, and had children—and often in that order. In contrast, today’s young adults are choosing more varied routes. The percentage of young adults who follow that sequence declined from 37–40% in the 1960s to 25–29% in the 1990s.

Do Chosen Pathways into Adulthood Affect Life Outcomes?

The timing and order of experiences during this period has clearly changed. But do different pathways result in different outcomes? For example, one group might leave home, finish education, get a job right after graduation, work for two years before marrying, and wait another two years before having children. A second group might leave home, have a child, and never marry by age 35. Mouw explores whether six distinct pathways are associated with particular adult outcomes, controlling for an array of factors that might also influence outcomes (such as parental education, race, and achievement test scores).

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Network on Transitions to Adulthood

Among men, the author finds that those who married but had no children had higher levels of education at age 35, lower poverty rates, higher family incomes, and appear to be happier and less depressed. In contrast, unmarried men who still lived with their parents at age 32 had higher poverty rates and lower family incomes. The highest poverty rates were among unmarried men with children before age 30.

For women, those who had no children by age 28 and were married by age 32 had the lowest poverty rate and the highest family income. Women who had a child between ages 24 and 28 and were married by age 29 were the happiest and the least likely to be depressed.

The question remains, however, to what degree this life course perspective improves our understanding of adult outcomes. A large body of research already demonstrates, for example, that education and the timing of first birth and marriage are associated with different income and poverty levels. Do we learn anything more by grouping individuals together based on their timing of multiple life events, or is it just as useful to address the effect of the timing of the individual transitions separately?

The author finds that the sequence of events plays a role in some, but not all, adult outcomes. For men, knowing the sequence of the adult transitions improves our understanding of adult poverty and self-reported happiness and depression, but not family income (as measured by the poverty ratio). For women, the sequence affects individual poverty rates and depression, but has no effect on family income or happiness above and beyond the effect of timing. One policy implication of this is that the income-related problems associated with early or late transitions might be addressed separately because the timing of one transition does not change the "effect" of the others.

Based on Ted Mouw, "Sequences of Early Adult Transitions: How Variable are They, and Does it Matter?" 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.