

Excerpt from
Making it in the Motor City: Emerging Adulthood in Michigan

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The Mother Identity

Women and men moved differently through the transition to adulthood, including differences in timing, type, and intensity of role transitions and involvement. For instance, women in the study often left the family home to assume partner or parenting roles, whereas young men left home more often solely for work and job roles. Further, many of the women who became mothers moved more quickly and intensively into the mother role, while young fathers focused more on work to support the family and be the economic provider. Consistent with these traditional gender roles, young women's lives were very focused on the day-to-day aspects of parenting, household duties, and activities in the community involving their children (e.g., volunteering at school).

As this 30-year-old white female reveals, her identity as a mother is paramount, and her comments reveal how her personal values, goals, and definitions of success help her to prioritize her life pursuits, such as work and money versus children. The conflicting pursuit of money versus children is more pronounced for the women than the men in our Michigan sample.

I: What would your life be like now if you never had children?

R: God, boring. I would still be doing the same thing. I would be making more money. Those positions now make more money than I did when I was around but maybe not much changes in two years.

R: But I would still be working and I would still be doing all the same stuff, still hanging out with all my friends but I think I would be really unsatisfied because I always wanted kids. I think if by thirty I didn't have them, I would feel like an utter failure.

This quote highlights not only her investment in a maternal identity in contrast to a career identity, but also her disappointment had she not had children by age 30. Indeed, many of young adults in the Michigan sample used the age of 30 as a marker for achieving adult goals, and when these goals were not met, they expressed some regret and frustration. In the face of a declining working class and the current need for higher education to be self-sufficient, many of the young women and men in the present study expressed frustration and regret regarding their pursuit, or lack thereof, of a college degree.

Getting an Education

One of the biggest regrets for many of our young adults was their lack of education. Many expressed regret that their family did not have the resources to put them through school or that their families never encouraged them to achieve. They also regretted their own lack of motivation and application, and many wished they had made a clearer commitment and followed through on higher education. Most of our participants said that education was not stressed when they were growing up, and many of them believed they could have achieved more had their parents motivated them to do better in school. This lack of motivation and focus extended into early adulthood. Of those who went to college, many could not decide on a major and this, along with other distractions such as raising children or working, led them to drop out.

Lack of Parent Instrumental Support— One young white male expressed regret and some resentment about the lack of financial support from his parents and a teacher who gave him a grade that he believed forced him to take a different path to college:

R: You know in college my parents didn't help me at all financially and I blamed them for everything and was very bitter.

I: Because they couldn't help financially?

R: Right. They couldn't. My thoughts then were that they wouldn't.

You know, come on. I was surrounded by people whose parents paid for everything and I wanted more than anything to go to this certain college after high school. I was first in my class up until the last semester when this terrible English teacher gave me an A minus and so I ended up dropping to third. I still hate her. She robbed me of Valedictorian which might have led to more scholarships to go to that college. I ended up with a full scholarship to go to a different college.

Lack of Emotional and Motivational Support—Another young white male talked about the lack of encouragement also expressed by a number of young adults whose parents did not attend college themselves:

In my education, personally I feel like I didn't have support. I didn't...well I needed the finances but I didn't ask for that. I just wanted them to be happy that I was going to school. And I don't feel that I got that.

Disincentives for a Working Class Life

Although a number of the participant's in Michigan struggled with higher education, others successfully attained a college degree that led to a professional occupation. Often, this was motivated by the experience of family members' difficulties in work and financial hardship associated with manufacturing jobs. A young man who was a lawyer expressed such a sentiment when talking about his father:

He [dad] worked in a factory. Neither of my parents is educated beyond high school. We never had a lot of money and my dad was just, you know, I thought he was an alcoholic. I don't know if that is the case anymore. But he had to work so many hours and I think it's a terrible life working in the factory and that's what he did. You know, twelve hours a day. When the auto companies suffered, he was doing odd jobs, working at the gas station or whatever. We just didn't relate to one another at all.

Success is in the Eye of the Beholder

Although many of the young adults pursued or desired a college education, many others had no interest in or intent to go to college and were successfully engaged in other life pursuits, such as work and family. As a result, most of the young adults in Michigan agreed that success is individually defined and varies by person. One young white female conveyed this as follows:

I How would you define success for someone your age?

R Being happy with what you are. What you have. I mean I'm happy being a mom. Somebody else might graduating from college and making this much money. Not me. I'm happy being a mom. That's success to me. Having kids that are happy.

In summary, the 30-year-old young adults making it in Michigan reflected on the struggles and successes that led to their present lives. Their pursuits and achievements were defined by their ecological niche, families of origin, life experiences, and individual identities. Although themes of regret and resentment emerged around some aspects of life, most of the young adults expressed happiness in their life situation. At age 30, this included a focus on career, family, or both. For those who had not achieved conventional markers of adulthood, particularly moving out of their parents' home, they felt a strong push and motivation at this time of life to do so.