



September 2009, Issue 42

Young People's Changing Meaning of Work

Laura Wray-Lake, Amy Syvertsen, Laine Briddell, Constance Flanagan, and D. Wayne Osgood

The values of young people are a barometer of social change. Teens' values about work have changed substantially over the past three decades. In their forthcoming *Youth in Society* article, "Exploring the Changing Meaning of Work for American High School Seniors from 1976 to 2005," Laura Wray-Lake and colleagues find that teens today are less likely than teens in previous generations to believe work will be a source of meaning or purpose in their adult lives. Given that young people's values take shape in adolescence and tend to follow them into adulthood, this decline in the centrality of work will likely affect the workforce for years to come.

Study Design

To trace the changing meaning of work, the authors use the Monitoring the Future survey, an annual, nationally representative survey of high school seniors between 1976 and 2005.¹ They examine changes in the importance and centrality of work in one's life; the willingness to work overtime to see a job done right; the importance of a job that allows more than two weeks of vacation and that leaves time for other things in life; and the importance of job security. They also examine whether teens value work for its intrinsic or extrinsic rewards. Intrinsic rewards include the ability to use one's skills and knowledge on the job, see the results of one's work, and to update skills and learn new things. Extrinsic rewards include high status or prestige, good chances for promotion, and high salaries.

The authors examine these trends for respondents of different races, for both men and women, and for those with and without college plans, including both two-year and four-year aspirations.

Work Has Become Less Central Over Time

Since the mid-1980s, teens have become less likely to see work as a central part of their lives (see Figure 1). In 1978, three-fourths of teens considered work to be central to their lives. At its lowest point in 2001, a little more than one-half (57%) saw work as central. Teens have also become significantly less willing to work overtime, particularly from the late 1990s onward. They also measure work vis-à-vis leisure time: Over time teens have become less willing to continue working if they don't need the income, and they are now more interested in jobs that leave more time for leisure.

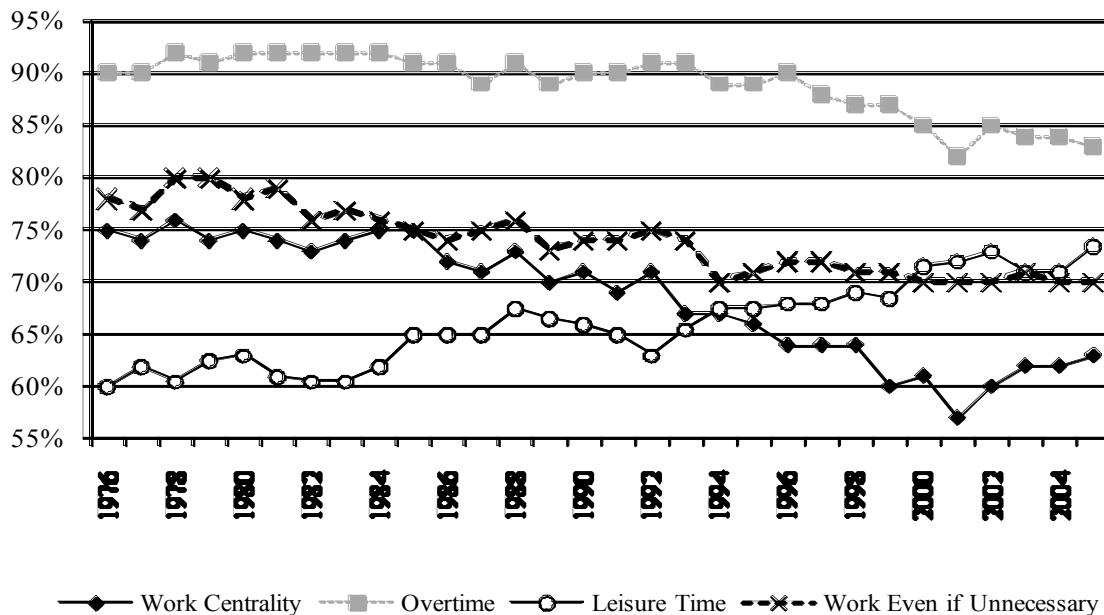
Males were more likely than females to view work as a central part of life, although females were more willing to work overtime and to work even if they had the means to support themselves comfortably. Black teens placed greater importance on work than white teens. High school seniors with college aspirations, whether two- or four-year plans, saw work as more central to life than those with no plans to attend college.

¹ For more information on the Monitoring the Future survey, visit their website at <http://monitoringthefuture.org/>.

Network on Transitions to Adulthood

Overall, then, the most recent classes of high school seniors have lower expectations that work will be a source of meaning and purpose in their adult lives. This could signal recognition on their part that jobs are less stable today than in years past, or that work is not all there is to life.

Figure 1. Trends in Work Centrality, Work Even if Unnecessary, Overtime, and Leisure Time



Job Security Still Important

In the past, many workers could expect a full-time, and often life-long job with one employer. That reality started to disappear about the time the survey first began in the mid-1970s. Over the past few decades, teens' expectations have accommodated to this fact. In recent years, the importance that high school seniors attach to job security has declined slightly. Nevertheless, having a job that offers a reasonably predictable and secure future is valued by nine out of ten teens. Far fewer, though—roughly six in ten—expect or hope to hold the same job all of their lives. Teens' views could be an adaptive response to the modern-day “just in time” job market, with its nonstandard shifts and temporary or part-time work, or a resignation to the reality of diminishing job security.

Valuing Work for the Money and Prestige on the Upswing

From the late 1970s to the late 1980s, the urge to find a job that was highly rewarding in money and prestige climbed steadily. By 1988, 85% of teens saw value in jobs with high salaries and advancement opportunities (see Figure 2). Males were particularly keen on such jobs, while females were more often interested in jobs with intrinsic rewards. Females did, however, increasingly want jobs that garnered respect. Blacks and other ethnic minorities and teens whose parents had less education (a proxy for socioeconomic status) placed higher value on extrinsic rewards. Teens with college aspirations also saw more value in higher-prestige jobs.

As the value placed on extrinsic rewards was on the rise, intrinsic values such as jobs that offered opportunities to develop skills, see the results of one's work, and engage in interesting work remained stable and even declined

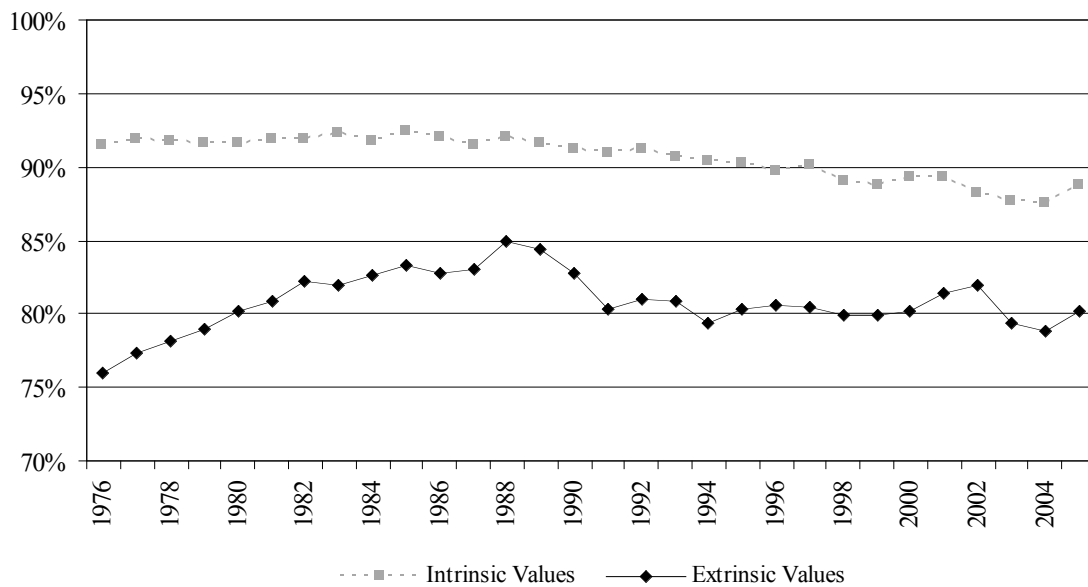
The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy examines the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Significant cultural, economic, and demographic changes have occurred in the span of 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.

Network on Transitions to Adulthood

slightly beginning in the 1990s. In addition to females, youth with college plans and whose parents were more educated were more likely to place value in jobs that were interesting and tapped their skills. Youth not bound for college and whose parents were less educated were more interested in jobs that offered opportunities to update their skills. Black teens and those with college plans were more likely to value work that produced visible results than their counterparts.

The rise in extrinsic values such as prestige and salary since the late 1970s reflects an increasing materialism among teens and in society overall. In addition, tight job markets can create a competitive atmosphere that rewards achievement and with it, status. In times of economic change, money and related extrinsic rewards may be the only sure things the work world provides. This idea aligns with the declining centrality of work as well.

Figure 2. Trends in Intrinsic and Extrinsic Work Values



Overall, young people today place less value in work and see it as less central in their lives. Although males were more likely than females to see work as a central component in their lives, they were also more geared toward work's extrinsic values of money and prestige. Women have historically been more drawn to jobs with intrinsic values and jobs with a caregiving orientation. Women today, however, are more likely to value a job that people respect, which may reflect a desire to move past the traditional association of women with lower-status jobs.

Racial minorities and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds generally reported a stronger work orientation than their peers, including work's centrality in their lives, job security, extrinsic values, and several intrinsic values, as well. Compared with their peers who were not college-bound, students with two- and four-year college plans more highly valued work centrality, job security, extrinsic rewards (except for earning money), and the intrinsic rewards from interesting work using one's skills, and producing visible results. Those without college plans were more likely than their college-bound peers to value higher salaries, which may be unrealistic given the competitive job market and increasing tie between education and pay.

Network on Transitions to Adulthood

Implications

That teens are placing less emphasis on work in their lives and are more often seeking monetary rewards over finding a purpose in work itself could signal trouble ahead for productivity and the well-being of the future workforce. The decline in intrinsic values, particularly the value of updating skills, may also portend trouble for tomorrow's workers. The current economy demands constant improvement from its workers, and its instability also demands that workers stay attuned to employers' changing demands. At the same time, however, youths' decreased focus on work could be an adaptive response to the uncertainty of the economy and anxieties around job availability and stability.

These trends signal a need for parents and educators to help youth consider alternative pathways for defining their identities, besides their careers. Furthermore, youth with two-year college aspirations stood out in placing high value on learning new work skills and having a job in which skills do not go out of date. Given the focus in two-year college and technical schools on pragmatic training and work skills, these teens' values appear well-matched with their college aspirations. Overall, these trends offer an important context for individuals who are in the business of preparing young people for the future world of work.

Based on the authors' forthcoming Youth in Society article, "Exploring the Changing Meaning of Work for American High School Seniors from 1976 to 2005,"

Laura Wray-Lake and **Amy Syvertsen** are a doctoral student in Human Development and Family Studies at Pennsylvania State University; ; **Laine Briddell** is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Richmond; **Constance Flanagan** is professor of youth civic development at Pennsylvania State University **D. Wayne Osgood** is professor of crime, law and justice and sociology at Pennsylvania State University.

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.