

## Social Change, Family Characteristics, and Youth Transitions

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As young people make the journey from adolescence to adulthood, they encounter a series of choice points in the road. The paths they choose or are forced to choose at each of these forks will determine where they wind up as adult members of the society in which they live. The collective decisions that members of their age cohort make will help shape the health, prosperity and sustainability of that society in the future.

The major decision points confronting a young person include the following;

1. How much and what type of schooling to obtain;
2. When to enter the paid labor force and what type of employment to seek or accept;
3. Whether to remain in the parental home and, if not, where and with whom to live;
4. Whether, when and whom to marry or enter into a sustained intimate relationship outside of marriage with;
5. Whether and when to have children and how many.

The routes that young people take through these five sets of choice points are not necessarily unidirectional. There may be backtracking and redirection. And the order in which the choices occur is not necessarily the same as that outlined above. For example, a young man may make a young woman pregnant before either of them has completed school, gotten a job, or even committed to a sustained relationship.

### **Factors That Affect Youth Transitions**

The choices that young people make in going through these transitions to adulthood are determined in large measure by the talents, interests, and personality characteristics possessed by the young person her- or himself. Youth with high scholastic aptitude, for example, are likely to remain in school longer and earn more advanced degrees than those with less aptitude. In a national longitudinal sample of young people in the U.S. who were seven years past the start of high school in 2016, those who had ranked in the top fifth on a math achievement test were four times more likely to be enrolled in college as those in the bottom fifth (79% versus 22%). Conversely, those in the bottom fifth in math scores were five times more likely than those in the top fifth to be “disconnected” as young adults (not in school and not working) (25% versus 5%) (Radford et al., 2018, Table 3).

But the career choices young people make are also affected by social, economic, and political factors that have little or nothing to do with the skill or character of the individuals involved. Dramatic changes over time in the numbers of young people attending college, or

giving birth as adolescents, or living together without being married testify to the importance of larger-scale social influences in altering customary youthful trajectories. There are also sizable differences across nations in such indicators as sex differences in educational attainment, the youth unemployment rate, the median age at first marriage, and the mean age of women at first birth (OECD, 2016).

### **Technological Developments, Changing Social Norms**

Technological developments and changes in social norms have been important in altering customary pathways from adolescence to adulthood. The development of reliable pharmacological methods for preventing conception, i.e., “the pill,” meant that couples could engage in sex without fear of the woman becoming pregnant. While this had beneficial effects for older married couples who did not want to have additional pregnancies and large numbers of children, it also reduced the motivation for young people to marry at younger ages. They don’t have to wait until they are married to enjoy the pleasure of sexual intercourse (Eig, 2014).

It has also had an unintended consequence. Because effective contraception requires conscientiousness in taking the pill regularly, young women who are less intelligent, poorly informed, or irresponsible wind up having more children and children at younger ages than young women who are intelligent, well-informed, and responsible. Although long-acting reversible forms of contraception, such as implants and IUDs, are now available, they too require foresight and initiative on the part of young women who wish to use them.

The weakening of stigma against premarital sex and cohabitation and the widespread availability of pornography has further weakened the motivation of young people, especially males, to marry (Regnerus, 2017). Feminist ideology that questions the necessity of reproduction and devalues motherhood has played a part in lowering the motivation of young women to marry and have children at early ages, at least not before establishing themselves in a career or achieving financial self-sufficiency. In the U.S. and other developed nations, there have been substantial increases in the numbers of women who reach age fifty without having given birth to any children. Childlessness is particularly prevalent among college-educated women, just the women that a sensible society would want to see reproducing (Bachu, 1999).

**Automation and globalization.** The growing role of computers and computer-controlled equipment in factories, farms, and service industries has affected the options available to young people as they move from adolescence to adulthood. Automation has eliminated many routine, lower-skill jobs that were formerly available to young people who were not interested or did not have sufficient aptitude to go to college. On the other hand, electronic technology has created employment opportunities for young people who are knowledgeable about computers, mobile phones, or video games, particularly those able to design, program, or service these devices. But these jobs require particular aptitudes and self-instruction or training, and these are not distributed evenly across class and gender lines.

Electronic technology has also undermined parental authority and upended traditional wisdom about the value of postsecondary education. Today’s teenagers and young adults often

know more about the operation of electronic gadgets than their parents do. So, members of the younger generation feel, rightly or wrongly, that their parents' career advice has limited value. A young person may be able to earn more money by leaving college and going into a high-tech job or starting a technology-related business than by remaining in college and getting a degree.

The outsourcing of production to less developed countries where wages are lower, and worker and environmental protections fewer, has reduced job options for young adults in more developed countries, especially for non-college-educated youth. The movement of large numbers of immigrants and refugees from less developed into more developed nations has tightened the job market and led to wage stagnation, again especially for non-college educated youth in developed countries. High youth unemployment and stagnant wages have led to political turmoil and social unrest. They have also led to proposals for new laws and social policies aimed at increasing job opportunities for young adults. Some of the proposed policies have been wildly unrealistic, such as calls for all young people to attain college degrees.

In the face of these momentous developments and the weakening of parental authority, it is a daunting task to come up with actions that a family can take to help ensure that their offspring will follow a rewarding path into adulthood, particularly one that is also compatible with sustainable development of the society. Before considering this question, let me review some of what we know about relationships between family characteristics and youth transitions.

### **Family Characteristics**

The paths young people take along the transition to adulthood tend to vary with the types of families from which they come. Specific family characteristics that relate to variations in youthful transitions include the following:

1. The educational attainment of the young person's mother and father;
2. The family income level, wealth, and poverty status;
3. The race and ethnicity of the parents;
4. Family structure and marital conflict, i.e., whether both parents were present in the home during the youth's upbringing, and whether they were legally married to one another; whether the parental relationship was harmonious or conflict-filled;
5. The religious involvement of the family; and,
6. Whether the family lives in an urban or rural area.

In the following sections, I summarize how the first three of these family characteristics – parent education, income, and race and ethnicity – relate to youthful transitions. I do so with the proviso that the relationships show some variation over time and across different countries.

**Parent educational attainment.** Compared to young people who are raised by parents who have completed secondary education only, those raised by parents with tertiary schooling (college graduates or more) are more likely to:

- Stay in school longer and attain graduate or professional degrees;
- Begin working later, be more selective about the jobs they search for and will accept, and seek employment in fields related to their graduate or professional degrees;
- Leave the parental home earlier and be readier to move to areas of the country with better employment opportunities in their field of interest;
- Postpone marriage until they have completed higher education and established themselves professionally. But having done so, they are *more* likely to marry;
- Postpone having children until they are married and stably employed and limit the number of children they bear or sire to only one or two.

By contrast, young people whose parents have not completed even secondary education are more likely to:

- Leave school early, without obtaining a diploma or degree;
- Start working earlier and be less selective in the jobs they accept, including those with low wages, few or no benefits, and little prospect of permanence; become unemployed;
- Remain in the parental home longer and be less ready to move away from the area in which they were raised for better employment opportunity;
- Marry early or cohabit with an intimate partner without getting legally married;
- Have children while still in their teens or early twenties and have four or more children.

To illustrate the magnitude of these differences: In the U.S. national longitudinal sample of young adults who were seven years past high school entry in 2016, those whose parents had a bachelor's degree were nearly twice as likely to be enrolled in college themselves as those whose parents had only a high school diploma or less (70% versus 37%), and one-and-a-half times more likely than those whose parents had some college but had earned only a certificate or associate's degree (70% versus 47%). Conversely, those whose parents had a high school diploma or less were nearly three times more likely to be "disconnected" (not in school and not working) as those with college-educated parents (20% versus 7%). Those whose parents had some college, but no bachelor's degree, were nearly twice as likely to be disconnected (13%) (Radford *et al.*, 2018, Table 3).

Note that some of the above relationships may have weakened as a consequence of economic disruptions and changes in social attitudes. For example, in the U.S., the numbers of young adults remaining in the parental home well into their twenties surged during the Great Recession of 2007-2009, including among youth with highly-educated parents. Another American example is the sharp decline in the number of teenaged women giving birth, which has occurred among teens with high-school dropout parents as well as among teens with more educated parents.

On the other hand, there has been an increase in assortative mating by education, meaning that a college-educated man is now more likely to marry and have children with a college-educated woman than was true in the past. Conversely, a man who lacks any college education is now more likely to marry and have children with a woman with no college as well. This trend may be strengthening the relationships noted above.

**Family income, wealth and poverty.** The relationships between family income and youth transitions are much like those with parental education. Young people whose parents have higher incomes and greater wealth are more likely to get more schooling; begin working later and be more selective in their job choices; leave home earlier and be more mobile in following interests or employment opportunities. They are also more likely to postpone marriage and parenthood until after the completion of schooling and the establishment of a career and have only one or two children.

By contrast, young people raised in poor or near-poverty families are more likely to leave school early, work at marginal, insecure jobs or be unemployed, remain longer in the parental home and be less likely to relocate to other areas with better employment opportunities. They are more likely to marry early or cohabit without getting married; be younger and often unmarried when they begin having children and have three, four, or more children. The pattern of young people raised in low-income homes having children in circumstances that raise the chances that their children will also grow up poor is sometimes called the “cycle of poverty.”

There is some indication that young people raised in extremely wealthy families may deviate from the typical transition paths of those raised in financially comfortable but not rich families. They may, for example, have more checkered academic careers and employment histories, less stable marriages, more frequent divorce, and more offspring.

**Race and ethnicity.** Young people who come from families whose race and ethnicity is in the minority in a country tend to have somewhat different and often more difficult paths to adulthood than young people from families whose race and ethnicity is in the majority. These differences are not uniform across all ethnic minorities, nor across all nations. They can be partly but not wholly accounted for by related differences in average parent education and family income. Racial prejudice and neighborhood differences in resource availability are often invoked as explanations, though it is difficult to ascertain exactly how much of a role they play.

In the U.S., for example, black and Hispanic youth are half as likely as white youth to obtain college or graduate degrees. As of 2017, 23% of black and 19% of Hispanic 25-29-year-

olds had earned bachelor's degrees or more, as opposed to 42% of whites in the same age range (NCES, 2018). Black and Hispanic youth are twice as likely to be "disconnected," i.e., to be neither in school nor working). Among young people who were seven years past the start of high school in 2016, 20% of black young adults and 18% of Hispanics were not enrolled in school and unemployed or not in the labor force. The comparable figure for whites was half as large, 10% (Radford et al., 2018, Table 3).

Among 16-19-year-olds who were in the U.S. labor force in 2018, the unemployment rate for black teens (20.8%) was nearly twice as high as that for white teens (11.2%). The rate for Hispanic teens (16.4%) was one-and-a-half times as high. Unemployment rates were lower and differences narrower among 20-24-year-olds, but the rate for black young adults (10.9%) was still nearly twice as high as the white rate, while the Hispanic rate was only slightly higher (6.4%) than the white rate (5.8%) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018).

Hispanic teenaged women were more than twice as likely to have married in adolescence as white or black female teens. The respective proportions of 15-19-year-olds ever married in 2006 were 4.6%, 2.1%, and 1.7% (Bureau of the Census, 2006). For the broader population of women 15 and over, however, a higher proportion of white females were currently married (51%) than Hispanic (42%) or black women (26%). Conversely, higher proportions of black and Hispanic women than white women had never married: 48%, 39%, and 25%, respectively. (Census Bureau, 2017). In 2017, 63% of black births and 41% of Hispanic births were to women who had never married or were separated or divorced. The same was true of 25% of white births (Census Bureau, 2017).

Black and Hispanic women start having children at earlier ages than white women. Although teen birth rates have declined in all racial and ethnic groups, the birth rate for Hispanic women aged 15-19 (31.9 per thousand) and black women in the same age range (29.3 per thousand) is still twice as high as that for white teens (14.4 per thousand) (Interagency Consortium, 2018). The average number of children born per woman (total fertility rate) is also higher for Hispanic women (2.01) and black women (1.82) than for white women (1.67) (Centers for Disease Control, 2017).

Youth from another U.S. minority group, Asian-Americans, follow quite different transition pathways to adulthood, however. They are more, not less likely than white youths to obtain college degrees (61% of Asian-Americans aged 25-29 had bachelor's degrees in 2017, compared to 42% of whites). And, seven years after the start of high school, 75% of Asian students were enrolled in college, as opposed to 56% of white students. The proportion of Asian students in the same longitudinal cohort who were "disconnected" was the same as that for white students, 10%.

The unemployment rates for Asian 16-19-year-olds, 12%, was essentially the same as that for white teen workers, while the rate for Asian 20-24-year-olds, 8.8%, was one-and-a-half times higher than the white rate. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018).

The proportion of Asian women 15 and over who were currently married, 58%, was higher than the same proportion for white women (51%). The proportion who had never married,

27%, was essentially the same as that for whites (25%). Only 10% of Asian women who had a birth in the previous year were unmarried, compared to 25% of white mothers. The teen birth rate for Asian young women, 5.2 births per thousand women, was only about a third that of white teens (14.4).

### **Choosing the Right Path: What Families Can Do to Help**

Some would conclude from the relationships summarized above that if we would like young people to follow a productive path to adulthood, we should encourage parents to observe the parenting practices of well-educated, financially comfortable families or Asian families and do what they do. Such a strategy is in fact being followed in many early childhood and youth intervention programs. Some early childhood programs, for example, send trained aides into the homes of low-income and minority families and encourage parents to talk to their children in instructive ways, read to them, take them to parks, museums, zoos, and libraries, and have high expectations for how well they will do and how far they will go in school.

This is also the strategy followed by middle-class couples who adopt children from foreign orphanages or U.S. foster care. They house the adopted youngsters in comfortable, loving homes in safe, resource-rich neighborhoods, send them to good schools, and provide them with more time and intellectual stimulation than the average birth child gets from his or her biological parents.

But there is a problem with this strategy: There is no guarantee it will work. The young children in early childhood home visiting programs show short-term gains in their letter, word, and number skills and general knowledge. But those benefits typically fade when the children reach school and especially when they reach the reading and math challenges of later elementary and middle school. Likewise, adoptive parents often find that their charges get into conflicts with their classmates at school, display relatively little interest and enthusiasm about learning tasks, and register only middling academic performance (Zill, 2015, Zill & Wilcox, 2018).

As heritability studies conducted with twins and adopted children have shown, a large part of the association between family characteristics and youth achievement and behavior is due to the genes that children share with their parents (Rowe, 1994; Harris, 1998). More recent genome-wide association studies (GWAS) reach similar conclusions (Plomin, 2018). If a child has an unfavorable genetic endowment, either with respect to intellectual capacity or emotional stability, the stimulation and support parents provide can only do so much. The aid they provide may help the youngster grow up to be a moral and reasonably well-adjusted person, but not share the interests of the parents nor become the accomplished scholar, athlete, or entrepreneur that the parents might wish him or her to be. This is true of biological as well as adopted children. Every child, excepting monozygotic twins, has a different mix of alleles passed on from parents and grandparents.

There are several specific, if more modest, ways in which families can help smooth the path to adulthood. Here, in bullet point form, are several suggestions I offer for further discussion at the meeting:

- Help them discover where their interests lie and at what they excel;
- Help them develop good work habits;
- Help them develop a beneficial network of friends;
- Make sure they learn about the odds of success in different fields.

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