

National Symposium on Family Issues

Alan Booth  
Susan L. Brown  
Nancy S. Landale  
Wendy D. Manning  
Susan M. McHale *Editors*



# Early Adulthood in a Family Context

 Springer

# **National Symposium on Family Issues**

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Editors

# Early Adulthood in a Family Context

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# Preface

Early adulthood (ages 18–24) is a period of social–emotional, cognitive, and physical change, evidenced by increasing autonomy from parents, school completion and labor force entry, romantic relationship involvement, and transitions into parenthood. It is a critical life period because the timing and sequencing of these developments set the stage for later health and well-being as well as family and intimate relationship experiences. Although family formation is increasingly delayed, some men and women marry or become parents early, and others form romantic relationships. Young adults do not navigate emerging adulthood alone and often require substantial support from their families of origin to successfully accomplish the developmental tasks of this period. Indeed, family supports may be more salient now because of the growth of income inequality over the last several decades and the severity of the current economic downturn.

Research and theory, however, have not kept pace with the increasingly varied family and relationship experiences of today’s young adults. This volume bridges the gap by showcasing new theoretical, methodological, and measurement insights to the family contexts of early adulthood. The aims of this volume are twofold. The first is to advance understanding of the influence of the family of origin on young adults’ lives. Both family resources and constraints with respect to economic, social, and human capital are considered. The second aim is to contribute to the knowledge base on family formation and stability in early adulthood. Given delays in the timing of marriage for most young adults, these years provide opportunities for a wide range of relationships. In addressing these aims, chapters also highlight the diversity in young adults’ trajectories and the role of the broader economic climate in young adults’ development and well-being.

The contributions to *Early adulthood in a family context* are based on papers presented at the 18th Annual Symposium on Family Issues in October 2010. This edited volume is the culmination of 2 days of stimulating presentations and discussions in five sessions, each of which focused on a different question: (1) What is the contemporary context of young adulthood? (2) What are the key elements of parent–child relationships that facilitate successful transitions during young adulthood? (3) What are the types and trajectories of romantic and sexual relationships in young

adulthood? (4) What are the timing and family contexts of fertility in young adults? (5) How has the study of emerging adulthood advanced since 2000 and where does it need to go?

Each of the first four parts in this volume includes a chapter by a lead author, followed by shorter chapters by discussants from diverse disciplines who extend the breadth and depth of the theme. The fifth part is devoted to changes in the concept of “emerging adulthood” from the time it was first popularized by Jeffery Arnett. This volume concludes with an integrative commentary that summarizes key themes and overarching conclusions from all of the chapters.

## **Part I: The Contemporary Context of Young Adulthood**

The family context of early adulthood has shifted over the past few decades. The first four chapters in this volume address the main developmental tasks of young adulthood as well as the roles of both individual and structural factors in shaping the life course trajectories of young adults. The first chapter, by Richard A. Settersten, Jr., sociologist and professor of family studies at Oregon State University, provides a historical lens on many changes in the transitions to adulthood that have occurred in recent years. Demographic changes include delays in the occurrence of traditional markers of adulthood, including marriage and parenthood. The changing economy has lengthened the time it takes to secure employment that is sufficiently stable and remunerative to support a family. And, young adults today are more racially and ethnically diverse than previous cohorts. Settersten also points to the deficits in skills and capacities that can adversely influence the quality of social relationships and hinder the ability of young adults to navigate social institutions. Family support plays an especially crucial role in the success of young adults. He then describes the efforts needed to strengthen existing policies and create new ones that will ensure positive outcomes for young people and their families. He leaves us with the idea that the sheer number and density of experiences accompanying the transition to adulthood is unparalleled in its significance relative to other life periods while the social and government programs that deal with this life course stage relative to others are very limited. Sociologist Jeylan Mortimer, of the University of Minnesota, draws on Youth Development Survey data to show that less than two-fifths of youth achieve a normative trajectory (e.g., leave home, acquire stable full-time work, and form a family) by the time they are 30. Long-term financial dependence and unemployment threaten the sense of efficacy and success among young adults. Family support is integral to successful adjustment during young adulthood but must not preclude the achievement of psychological resources needed to achieve autonomy and independence as adults. Of special concern is the high proportion of youth who start but do not finish college, indicating the need for greater institutional support to help students finish college. In addition, community colleges and vocational training programs need to be more strongly tied to employers. Ross Macmillan, sociologist at Università Bocconi, Milano, Italy, advocates a more holistic approach to life course research that emphasizes the connections between social roles across various

contexts and social locations. He urges us to pay attention to the logic and meaning of incongruent roles (e.g., early parenthood and school attainment) to clarify the role of agency in formulating pathways, and to take into account the relationship between risk and resilience as well as the difference between affect and need. Developmental psychologist Eva Lefkowitz and her colleagues Shelly Vukman and Eric Loken in Human Development and Family Studies at Penn State take the reader on an extensive review of the impact of computers and cell phones on social relationships during young adulthood. The authors consider the way in which technology may relate to managing uncertainty and contribute to more fluid self-evaluations as well as greater interdependence through new types of social relationships. They point out how the Internet can create a sense of community, on the one hand, and yet facilitate risky or undesirable behavior, on the other. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the way in which the Internet challenges conventional social theories of relationships.

## **Part II: Parent–Child Relationships and Successful Transitions**

Over the last three decades, parent involvement with their young adult children has increased substantially. The second part of this volume focuses on young adults' relationships with their parents from a developmental perspective, emphasizing how family relationships during adolescence and young adulthood shape the transition to adulthood. All of the chapters point to the centrality of parental support for young adult adjustment. Studies by Karen Fingerman, scholar of social relationships and aging, at the University of Texas at Austin, along with Yen-Pi Cheng of Purdue University, Lauren Adams Tighe and, Kira S. Birditt of the University of Michigan, and Steven Zarit of Penn State, indicate growth in parent–offspring communication as well as parental financial and emotional support. Students receive more support than nonstudents, which may reflect the socioeconomic status of the parents. At the community level, the volatile housing market, coupled with limited access to long-term employment, helps explain offspring's extended dependency on parents. Using longitudinal data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson, Washington State, and Janel E. Benson, Colgate University – sociologists who study transitions from adolescence to adulthood – show that parent–child closeness enhances perceived success later in life, but that excessive parental monitoring may not provide the context for young people to make decisions on their own. Kelly Musick, professor of policy analysis at Cornell University and sociologist Ann Meier, of the University of Minnesota, also find, using the National Survey of Families and Households, that the key to young adult educational achievement is a very close mother–offspring relationship. Early mother–child closeness trumps all other combinations of family structure and parent–child relationships in predicting educational achievement. Wayne Osgood, a sociologist at Penn State, and Sonja E. Siennick, assistant professor of criminology at Florida State University, examine many cultural factors that lead people to view



the transition to adulthood as a “private trouble” to be resolved within the family. Not only is the issue examined from the standpoint of public policy but also its influence on the nature and quality of family relationships, including strains in the parent–young adult child relationship.

### **Part III: Types and Trajectories of Romantic and Sexual Relationships**

Part III of this volume contains four chapters that explore the dynamics of young adults’ romantic and sexual relationships. A central theme of these chapters is how the diversity of relationships in early adulthood challenges the traditional paradigm of marriage as a marker of adulthood. Drawing on a longitudinal sample of 1,321 adolescents who have been interviewed four times over a period of 7 years, Peggy C. Giordano, Wendy D. Manning, Monica A. Longmore, and Christine M. Flanigan, sociologists at Bowling Green State University, trace the development of romantic and sexual relationships from adolescence to young adulthood. Although there is a general trend toward committed, monogamous relationships, there is also a non-trivial share of young people who experience concurrence in sexual partners, although only 10% are exclusively engaged in casual sex. The ways in which these trends are linked to other aspects of the transition to adulthood are examined. Clinical and social psychologist Frank Fincham of Florida State points out the need for researchers to obtain information from both partners and observe couples. He illustrates the utility of creating measures of interdependence to determine whether relationship quality measures function similarly for men and women. Kelly Raley of the Population Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin uses newly released data from the 2006–2008 National Survey of Family Growth to construct a descriptive portrait of young adult intimate relationships, ranging from marriage and cohabitation, to noncoresidential unions and hook-ups, to the sexually inactive. Young adults are more likely to form committed relationships than to experience casual sex or hook-ups. Notably, college students in particular are quite likely to be sexually inactive.

### **Part IV: The Timing and Family Contexts of Fertility**

The fourth part of this volume is dedicated to young adults’ parenting behaviors. In these chapters, authors consider the timing and family contexts of parenthood as well as the implications of parenting for young adult well-being. Kathy Edin and Laura Tach, scholars of public and social policy at Harvard University and the University of Pennsylvania, respectively, report on their study of births before age 25. Edin and Tach find that although young parents express a commitment to making the relationship work, the lack of financial stability is a source of strain for many couples that often results in relationship instability and multiple-partner fertility.

The tableau of obligations, negotiations, and paternal access to nonresident children compromise maternal parenting effectiveness and create unstable family environments for children. The authors conclude with policy recommendations. Daniel Lichter, professor of policy analysis and sociology at Cornell University, is not optimistic that policy will be enacted that will slow the trend of rising proportions of births occurring outside of marriage. He provides demographic evidence that the next generation of fragile families will be disproportionately Hispanic, unmarried, and poor. Increasingly, unmarried births are to cohabiting parents, and shotgun cohabitations have largely replaced shotgun weddings. Marcia Carlson, a sociologist and affiliate of the Center for Demography and Ecology at the University of Wisconsin, extends this line of inquiry by identifying important directions for future research on young parents. Specifically, Carlson argues for greater attention to the processes that lead to early childbearing as well as the broader context in which this event occurs (e.g., multiple-partner fertility and paternal incarceration). Carlson concludes by noting that researchers should investigate the extent to which early parenting is part of the larger trend toward rising inequality in contemporary society.

## **Part V: Emerging Adulthood: Charting Its Path**

Psychologist Jeffery Arnett of Clark University, coined the term “emerging adulthood.” In Part V, Arnett critiques the primary application of the term to people aged 18–25. Arnett argues that up to age 30, the experiences characterizing emerging adulthood are still quite volatile and in need of further research. He proposes new research programs to better understand the trajectories of those in their 30s and even 40s. In addition, Arnett emphasizes the importance of cross-cultural research to inform our understanding of the shifting contours of emerging and young adulthood.

## **Part VI: Conclusion**

The final chapter is an integrative commentary by psychologist Christine Stanik and sociologist and demographer Jessica Halliday Hardie, both postdoctoral researchers at Penn State. This interdisciplinary team summarizes major themes and suggests next steps for research on the family contexts of early adulthood.

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The editors are grateful to many organizations at Penn State that sponsored the 2010 Symposium on Family Issues and this resulting volume, including the Population Research Institute; the Children, Youth, and Families Consortium; the Prevention Research Center; the Women’s Studies Program; and the departments of Sociology, Labor Studies and Employment Relations, Human Development and Family Studies, Anthropology, and Psychology. In planning the 2010 symposium, Penn State organizers were pleased to work alongside the co-directors of the National Center for Family and Marriage Research (NCFMR) at Bowling Green State University and greatly appreciate the center’s financial support. The editors also gratefully acknowledge essential core financial support in the form of a 5-year grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), as well as guidance and advice from Christine Bachrach (Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research, National Institutes of Health), Rebecca Clark and Rosalind King of NICHD. The ongoing support of all these partners has enabled us to attract excellent scholars from a range of backgrounds and disciplines – the sort of group on whom the quality and integrity of the series depends.

A lively, interdisciplinary team of scholars from across the Penn State community meets with us annually to generate symposia topics and plans and is available throughout the year for brainstorming and problem solving. We appreciate their enthusiasm, intellectual support, and creative ideas. In the course of selecting speakers, symposium organizers consult with a wide range of people at other universities, at NICHD, and at other organizations so the most qualified people are identified and contacted about participating. We also sincerely thank Doug Coatsworth, Kara Joyner, Amy Marshall, Jenny Van Hook, and Monica A. Longmore for presiding over symposium sessions.

Many details that go into planning a symposium and producing a volume cannot be overestimated. In this regard, we are especially grateful for the assistance of our administrative staff at Penn State, including Sherry Yocum, Angela Jordan, Miranda

Bair and Donna Panasiti. Finally, we could not have accomplished this work without Carolyn Scott, whose organizational skills, commitment, and attention to many details that go into organizing a good conference and edited book series make it possible for us to focus on the ideas.

The editors of this symposium volume agreed to list their names in alphabetical order.

Alan Booth  
Susan L. Brown  
Wendy D. Manning  
Nancy S. Landale  
Susan M. McHale

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**Part I**  
**The Contemporary Context**  
**of Young Adulthood**

# Chapter 1

## The Contemporary Context of Young Adulthood in the USA: From Demography to Development, From Private Troubles to Public Issues

Richard A. Settersten Jr.

**Abstract** This chapter describes how the passage to adulthood in the USA has changed, and what this means for individuals, families, and societies. It highlights some radical shifts in “traditional” markers of adulthood, and some problematic ways that scholars and the public think about the early adult years. It describes a few larger hallmarks of these years today, and some of the social skills and psychological capacities that young people need for traversing them, especially to foster supportive social relationships and the ability to navigate social institutions. The chapter illustrates the sizeable role of family support in determining the success of young people, as well as the significant need to strengthen existing social institutions and policies, and create new ones, to better support young adults. It is crucial that the launching of children into adulthood not be so exclusively understood as a “private trouble” to be managed with personal resources and strategies, but instead be understood as a “public issue” that requires considerable collective investments for the sake of everyone.

This chapter tells a big story in a short form: how the passage to adulthood in the USA has changed and what this means for individuals, families, and societies. I begin by highlighting some radical shifts in “traditional” markers of adulthood, and some problematic ways that scholars and the public think about the early adult years. I then turn to a few hallmarks of this period of life today, and some of the social skills and psychological capacities that young people need for traversing it, especially if they are to build supportive social relationships and successfully navigate social institutions. Next, I highlight the sizeable role of family support in determining the success of young people in the USA – where the launching of young people into adulthood is taken to be a “private trouble,” to use Mills’ (1959) famous phrase, to be managed with personal resources and strategies. Finally, I illustrate the

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need to strengthen existing social institutions and policies, and to create new ones, to better support young people. This is necessary if the launching of young people into adulthood is to be treated as a “public issue” that requires significant collective investments to better ensure positive outcomes for young people, their families, and the future of our nation.

## Some Radical Demographic Shifts in Transitions to Adulthood

The last century saw some radical shifts in the “Big 5” markers that have traditionally been associated with becoming adult – leaving home, finishing school, finding work, getting married, and having children. (My treatment here necessarily paints broad brushstrokes and focuses on the USA. For a more nuanced treatment of these changes, especially variability across gender, race, and socioeconomic status, see Berlin, Furstenberg, & Waters, 2010; Mortimer, 2008; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005; Settersten & Ray, 2010a.) From my perspective, the six most profound changes in these experiences are as follows.

*First, becoming an adult today involves a period of living independently before marriage.* This remains true despite the fact that the media often paints a different picture, with its attention to the growing shares of young people today who stay at home longer or return home later. In the middle of the last century, the norm was quick to leave home and quick to marry. Today, the early adult years are filled with many different kinds of living arrangements that do not involve spouses – that is the most important shift – and only a subset of these arrangements involve parents (see also Rosenthal, 2007).

In addition, living with parents into early adulthood is not a new thing – those numbers have been growing for a few decades, even in better economic times and, interestingly, rates of coresidence with parents and extended family members were even greater degree in the first few decades of the 1900s. Living at home is not the “new normal,” as we so often hear in the media. The proportions are not big enough to shoulder this claim, though they are sizable for young people between 18 and the first half of the 20s. In 2009, for example, 57% of young men and 49% of young women between the ages of 18 and 24 were classified as living with their parents, though this is inflated by college-going (that is, college students who depend on parents but live away are nonetheless classified as living at home) (US Census Bureau, 2010). These figures march downward by age. In 2009, the corresponding figures for 25- to 29-year olds were 21% and 13% for men and women, respectively; and for 30- to 34-year olds, they were 10% and 6%, respectively (US Census Bureau, 2010). Most coresidence with parents disappears after the age of 35.

It is important to emphasize that the recent economic downturn has simply heightened existing trends of coresidence with parents at every age – it has not created them. These trends have been growing for decades. The shares of young people who live with parents are always higher for men than women, and for minority and most immigrant groups (especially second-generation immigrant youth) than native-born Whites. In the cultures of many of these groups there is not only permission for

young people to stay at home, but the *expectation* to do so, often both to contribute to the household and to conserve resources (Rumbaut & Komaie, 2010). We should take caution not to assume that coresidence reflects something about the needs or circumstances of young adults alone; coresidence also can be prompted by the needs and circumstances of parents and the other family members, the likelihood of which only grows as young adult children move toward middle age and their parents toward old age. We also should not assume that such arrangements are permanent when, in reality, they are likely to be temporary or fluid.

In the USA, there is so much attention to *living* at home because *leaving* home has traditionally been the surest sign of independence – and independence has, in turn, traditionally been the surest sign of adulthood. As those links dissolve, it is no surprise that public concern increases. But as the prevalence of coresidence with parents grows, young people and their parents may see it as a viable option and do not feel shame about it (e.g., this is true in countries where there is a cultural expectation that young people remain at home until they marry or where the high cost or limited availability of housing makes multigenerational living a necessity) (for international evidence, see Newman & Aptekar, 2007; Yelowitz, 2007). It is this assumption – that youth should leave home early and not return – that we must wrestle with in the USA. Living with parents is not necessarily bad. Once we free ourselves of this idea, we can begin to think about the benefits of doing so. Indeed, for some youth and their parents, living at home is a smart, and often mutual, choice and strategy for getting ahead (Settersten & Ray, 2010b). This is particularly true if young people are working on degrees and gaining important experiences that will help them in the job market, or if they are building a nest egg for a stronger launch. Indeed, new poverty data also suggest that living at home keeps many young adults, especially on the older end, who would otherwise be in poverty, out of it. Officially, the percentage of people between the ages of 25 and 34 in poverty in 2009 was 9%; if they had not been living with their parents, their poverty rate would instead have been an estimated 43% (Rich, 2010).

*Second, the early adult years often involve the pursuit of higher education, as a decent standard of living today generally requires a college education, if not a professional degree.* In an earlier time, higher education was reserved for the elite. But colleges and universities are now mainstream institutions. Higher education is no longer a luxury but a necessity for both men and women who want access to good jobs with decent wages and benefits. Education and training are actually *more* valuable because jobs are impermanent and work careers are fluid. Of course, over the past four decades, the costs of higher education have also grown in tandem with the relentless demand for it, leading many young people and parents to wonder whether a university (bachelor's equivalent) degree is still worth it. The answer is yes, but choices must also be strategic: Data suggest that the economic returns to education have *increased* in recent years – even after taking into account the greater costs of obtaining an education (Barrow & Rouse, 2005; Beach, 2009), though there is also growing cause for concern that the wages of college graduates are beginning to stagnate. A college education also only “pays” if students actually finish and are able to reap the benefits of a credential, whether in salary or in leverage on the job

market. Of course, pay alone is a narrow indicator of the value of a college degree, which is associated with many positive outcomes in life besides income. The question of the worth of a college degree, even in the restrictive financial sense, must also be understood in conjunction with debt. Debt taken must also be judged against one's later potential earnings in the job market, which makes choices about a particular major or profession a crucial part of determining risk. Among other things, students also fare best when they are well-matched to the institutions they attend. (For a discussion, see Settersten & Ray, 2010b).

Those at greatest risk are those who have bought the mantra that college is for all, but are sorely unprepared for it. While young adults today are, in fact, more educated than any previous generation, many are also floundering badly. Nearly nine out of ten (87%) high school seniors plan to attend some form of college or training after high school (Adelman, 2006; US Department of Education & National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). But what seems to be out of public consciousness, and that of parents and students, is the fact that *high school* dropout rates remain high, especially among Blacks and Hispanics. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2008), the high school dropout rates among people 15–24 years old in 2007 were 9% overall and 5%, 8%, and 21% for White, Black, and Hispanic, respectively (Cataldi, Laird, & Kewal Ramani, 2009). More disturbing estimates, using an alternative formula, suggest that as many as three in ten ninth-graders today will not graduate 4 years later, and for Hispanics, Blacks, and Native Americans, the figures hover around an alarming five in ten (Gates Foundation, 2008). This is important to keep in our sights. High school dropout is a festering problem that has been left unattended in the obsession over college, and yet the very possibility of college rests on finishing a high school degree in the first place.

At the next juncture – college – the problem of retention also rears its ugly head. Despite great advances in *access* to college on the front end, *degree completion* on the back end is very low (see also Brock, 2010). Fully 49% of students seeking a bachelor's degree from 4-year institutions will not graduate within 6 years of entering; after this point, the chances of finishing are slim (Aud et al., 2010; Goldrick-Rab & Roksa, 2008). For students from traditionally underrepresented minority groups, these figures reach an alarming 57%, though even for Whites the corresponding figure is a startling 40%. These facts seem outside of the view of the public and policymakers in the pervasive cultural message of “college for all,” and outside of the decisions that young people and their parents are making about higher education. Of course, some of the longer time-to-degree completion is also driven by the fact that growing categories of students are *combining* school, work, and/or family (Fitzpatrick & Turner, 2007). But the bottom line is that the odds of finishing college are far lower than we would like to think or admit.

While “college for all” is a salient cultural message, it is important to realize that only 31% of young adults between ages 25 and 29 have a bachelor's degree today, and only 7% have graduate degrees (Aud et al., 2010). Popular perceptions to the contrary, these basic figures have not changed significantly since the 1970s. This fact, too, should shock commonplace assumptions that college graduation has become normative for the masses.

*Third, regardless of whether young people enter college, it takes longer today to secure a full-time job that pays enough to support a family, and young people now have a greater range of employment experiences on their way to financial security.* In the last three decades, wages and benefits to those *without* college degrees have eroded; in today's knowledge economy, even a college degree does not always guarantee stable wages and benefits. College graduates have made gains in earnings, but the strongest gains have come to men who completed some graduate school (Danziger, 2004; Danziger & Ratner, 2010). The earnings of women, unlike men, have improved, and their earnings have grown at greater rates than those for men, but their starting points were much lower and their average earnings remain well below men's (Danziger, 2004; Danziger & Ratner, 2010). Of course, even small gains translate into sizable effects on lifetime earnings. In addition, a greater share of young adults (18–34) in 2009 was living in poverty than the national average (16 versus 13), and young women were more likely to be in poverty than young men (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2010).

*Fourth, as a consequence of these changes, marriage and parenting now come significantly later in the life course.* Whereas once couples came together to build a life together, young adults today build their own lives and then marry (Cherlin, 2005; Furstenberg, 2010). For those attempting to pursue higher education, delaying marriage is largely the result of taking the time necessary to gain educational credentials and work experience. These attainments, in turn, are also linked to having enough money – or the potential to make enough money – to establish a foundation upon which to build a partnership or begin a family. This is an important part of the decisions young people make about when to partner and parent. Between 1960 and 1980, the median age at first marriage for young people leapt from age 20–23; by 2000, it had reached age 25; today, median age at first marriage for men is over 27, and for women, 26 (Cherlin, 2005; Furstenberg, 2010). The relationship pathway is now often punctuated by cohabitation, both in the expectations and experiences of young people (e.g., Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2005; see also Chap. 9). In 2009, about 25% of opposite sex couples under 34 were cohabiting (American Community Survey, 2009).

Early marriage and childbearing separate the destinies of young people. For young adults with fewer prospects ahead of them – those with the least education and lowest incomes – children come much sooner, and often before marriage or outside of partnerships altogether (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Furstenberg, 2007; Chap. 12). For those in school, or who have the hope of higher education, these statuses are major impediments to finishing a degree or to training that can help ensure success in the labor market (see also Roksa, 2009). And yet, this research also suggests that having limited prospects – or the *perception* of limited prospects – in education and work may lead young people to parent earlier, especially among women, where children may be viewed as an alternative source of meaning in a world where there are few other sources of it. Experiences in early adult life look very different for individuals depending on whether individuals have become parents, as becoming a parent changes how individuals relate to various social settings (e.g., families of origin, the labor market, higher education, local communities, schools and daycares).

*Fifth, on each of these fronts, young adults often have starkly different sets of options and experiences depending on family backgrounds and resources.* We will return to this theme later. For now, let us consider the crucial role that family support plays in determining how young people fare through their 20s – and which also generates significant inequalities among young people. Parents in the USA expend high levels of support to their young adult children – new data suggest about 10% of their annual household income, regardless of income level (see Wightman, Schoeni, & Robinson, 2010; see also Schoeni & Ross, 2005). This is money only, not other kinds of practical and emotional support. The fact that families at all income levels are essentially tithing is important because it shows that the support of young adults is not only a phenomenon among more privileged segments of the population; it is also now common among low-income parents too. However, it does reveal how drastically different the *amounts* of support are – 10% of \$40,000, for example, is considerably different from 10% of \$200,000. The higher transfers in financially well-positioned families give a further boost to children who are already much better off going into adulthood, while the support extended in less well-positioned families is surely a strain. All of the media attention on coddled children leads us to focus more on those who are receiving significant parental support and to overlook those who are getting very little or none at all.

*Sixth, young people today are now more diverse than any of our nation's other age groups.* They are more likely to be Black, Hispanic, immigrant, and multiethnic. They are also more likely to be foreign-born, a characteristic that in past generations was truer of families' oldest members. These shifts have prompted gross new inequalities in opportunities and experiences during the early adult years. As a result, we have good reasons to be concerned about the connections that many members of these groups have to mainstream social institutions. Again, the focus on the support that parents provide to young people in relatively privileged positions leads us to neglect the other end of the distribution: Those who come from fragile families, or families characterized by hardship, and those who are largely “disconnected” from both schools and the labor market, and who have little capital to get connected. For example, in 2000, 1 in 6 Americans between 18 and 24 were not enrolled in school or the military, or were working, and had no more than a high school diploma or equivalent; for Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans, that proportion is 1 in 4; for White non-Hispanics it is 1 in 10 (Jekielek & Brown, 2005). The parallel figures based on the 2010 Census are not yet available, but those ratios have surely worsened in the last decade, and especially the last few years, amid the economic recession.

Even more concerning is the fact that men from these backgrounds are also far more likely to experience spells of imprisonment, especially in their early adult years. The most conservative estimates, which come from the US Department of Justice, are that about 1 in 3 Black men and 1 in 6 Latino men are expected to go to prison during their lifetime – compared to 1 in 17 White men – if current incarceration rates remain unchanged (US Department of Justice, 2003; see also Pettit & Western, 2004; Raphael, 2007). Among all American males in their



twenties in 2008, 2% of Whites, 4% of Latinos, and 10% of Blacks were currently incarcerated (West & Sabol, 2009). These data highlight just how difficult the early adult experiences and circumstances of young Black and Latino men are in our nation.

These six changes relate to the *demography* of transitions to adulthood – actual behavior in large populations. Describing variability in these milestones and institutional arrangements is a central strength of a demographic perspective. This perspective, however, does little to reveal prior pathways and processes in childhood and adolescence that lead to particular experiences in early adulthood, or to reveal the later pathways and processes in adult life that result from particular experiences in early adulthood. More importantly, a demographic perspective does little to unearth the cultural or individual *subjective* meanings attached to such milestones, or how they matter for building adult identities (see Settersten Jr., 2011, as well as the “emerging adulthood” tradition in psychology, which is especially reflected in the research of J. Arnett). Indeed, there is an important tension to be reconciled between these “objective” and “subjective” views of early adult life. We have much to learn about how each perspective matters in its own right as well as the relationship between them. For example, is feeling like an adult a necessary condition for moving into adult roles or responsibilities, or does feeling like an adult grow out of them? Does feeling like an adult prompt greater success in education, work, or family relationships, or is it that these things instead prompt young people to feel more adult?

Demographic realities and subjective worlds are clearly intimately intertwined – demographic realities trickle down to shape what it means to be an adult as well as the things that members of a nation or culture value, expect, or strive for, just as new ideas bubble up to affect demographic realities. In the end, however, what young people *do* or *do not do* as adults matters more than whether they *feel* they are adult. After some age threshold, young people simply *are* adults and should be treated as such. It may also be part of the human condition to never feel fully formed, to feel at every age that we are still in the process of becoming. A subjective sense of adulthood matters if it means that young people are - or are not - preparing and striving for adult roles and responsibilities that are ultimately good for them and good for society. Research is only just beginning to explore these important connections, which are fertile ground for new theories and research.

## **Four Problematic Tendencies in How Scholars and the Public View the Early Adult Years**

Four important tendencies lead us to misdirect our attention or take too myopic a view of young people today: (1) the grip of exploration and privilege; (2) the grip of the current economic recession; (3) the grip of the middle of the last century; and (4) the grip of people rather than the life period.

### ***The Grip of Exploration and Privilege***

The first problematic tendency is the pervasive focus – in the media, among the public, and in the psychology of this life period – that these are years of great personal freedom and exploration, unlimited growth experiences, and plentiful choices. Even more, there is an assumption that these kinds of circumstances are widely shared and even constitute a new and universal stage of human development. Experiences like these may characterize the lives of young people in relatively privileged positions. But many of the trends described earlier should make it apparent that this is not the case for the majority of young people, including many young people who are middle class. While patterns of “delay” are widespread within the USA and in many parts of the world, the causes and consequences of delay are highly contingent on social class and other social factors, especially factors that extend far beyond individual milieu. Scholarship in this area should nurture a stronger “sociological imagination,” to use Mills’ (1959) term, by contemplating a more complete range of factors, from societal down to individual, that affect pathways into adulthood.

### ***The Grip of the Current Economic Recession***

This second problematic tendency somewhat contradicts the first, but is nonetheless strong. Since late 2008, we have been so bombarded with messages about the economic recession that it often becomes the primary lens through which we understand many phenomena under study—including what’s going on with young people today. On the one hand, the fact that the recession has brought much attention to the circumstances of young adults is good. On the other hand, the recession has not suddenly produced these changes. Instead, it has exacerbated a set of patterns that were already in place. The economic downturn, however, has become a safe way for young people and their parents to explain delays in their progress – there is comfort in pointing to factors in the world “out there” rather than in oneself, especially if there is embarrassment, shame, or stigma attached to it. People understand that hard economic times alter individuals’ circumstances and resources, and these effects are real. But we cannot make current economic decline the primary culprit for patterns that have been growing for decades.

### ***The Grip of the Middle of the Last Century***

The third problematic tendency has to do with how much the middle of the twentieth century has clouded our thinking. One of the most significant problems both in

the research literature and in public judgments about young people is that the “delay” in adulthood is often measured against the 1950s. The strong post-World War II script for life is so indelible that it often remains the benchmark against which individuals judge themselves and others, even today. Yet in the larger historical picture, it is the postwar model – that time, and those cohorts – that is the aberration, both in opportunities and expectations.

We do our subject matter a great disservice when we continue to use what was an anomaly as the standard for assessing how much and what has changed. Our perspective would be much different – our questions, analyses, implications – if we stopped falling into the trap of the mid-twentieth century mindset and instead took a longer historical view, even back to the early decades of the 1900s, when, much like today, young people experienced a long period of “semiautonomy” and scattered routes into adult life.

We should worry less about departures from what was “normal” for previous generations, and worry more about understanding how this period of life and the people in it are affected by today’s social and economic realities. While history is critical to both understanding and responding to the plight of youth today, lamenting too much about how much the world has changed does not get us far in dealing with the world in front of us. We would also do well to keep in mind the many positive changes that came with the second half of the last century, not only for experiences in early adulthood but in every period of life.

### *The Grip of People Rather than the Life Period*

The final problematic tendency relates to the problem of focusing too much on the people now in early adulthood rather than the period itself. Yes, new kinds of young people now occupy this period of life and play important roles in reshaping it. New generations of parents have also brought them about. But it is potentially more important to recognize that the period of life itself has been ruptured in fundamental ways. In focusing on the particular cohort of people now in their early adult years, we lose sight of larger social, economic, and demographic forces that have reconfigured this period of life. Those changes are not likely to go away as the next few cohorts file into early adulthood. In addition, it is important to remember that the early adult years are being rewritten alongside other periods of life, which are also being reconfigured. For example, what it means to be “middle aged” or “old” today – if we even admit that we become old – are also dramatically different from what they were a few decades ago. (Surprisingly, old age and early adulthood now also have some characteristics in common; see Settersten & Trauten, 2009). We must keep an eye on what changes in early adulthood mean for other periods of life, as well as how they reflect changes in the entire life course.

## **A Few Hallmarks of the Early Adult Years**

This section highlights three larger hallmarks of early adulthood today. These three hallmarks have significant implications for skills and capacities that are necessary for success in early adulthood, especially in fostering positive social relationships and the ability to navigate social institutions.

### ***The Need to Manage Uncertainty***

The most important hallmark of early adulthood today is the significant uncertainty with which young adults must live because of at least three things: changing opportunity structures, limited support of the welfare state, and absence of normative controls and clear life scripts (for a European perspective, see Blossfeld, Klijzing, Mills, & Kurz, 2005). In such a climate, personal characteristics and resources (e.g., psychological and physical health; family socioeconomic status) become increasingly important in determining how young people fare (see also Shanahan, 2000). As a result, aggregate routes into adulthood have in the span of a few decades moved from being highly standardized to being highly individualized (for a broader discussion of the tension between standardization and individualization, see Macmillan, 2005). At the individual level, this idea meshes nicely with Arnett's (2006, p. 9) description of this life period as an "age of instability," because young people make "frequent changes of direction with respect to love, work, and education."

Individualization brings new freedom and flexibility to live in ways that align with personal interests and wishes. But it also brings a host of new risks, many of which are not known in advance. When individuals choose or find themselves on pathways not widely shared by others, or that are not reinforced in institutions or policies, they may lose important sources of support and find that their pathway – indeed, their very development and well-being – is prone to breakdown (see also Beck, 2000; Giddens, 2002). Atypical pathways leave individuals vulnerable as they move through social institutions or are subject to social policies based on models of life that no longer reflect the realities of the contemporary world. For young people, these risks are exacerbated by the fact that the world they know differs dramatically from that of previous generations, and this gap may be fertile ground for family tensions because parents' expectations may be out of touch with their children's desires or actual opportunities.

Most important here is that growing individualization carries implications for the competencies and skills needed for successful adult transitions. The trend toward individualization means that young people are increasingly left to their own devices in determining the directions their lives will take.

### ***The Need for Fluid Self-Definitions***

Adaptation in early adulthood, in particular, may be facilitated by being open and committed to the exploration of a range of “possible selves” and to experimentation of many kinds as long as it is not too deviant or unconventional (e.g., Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004). The current social and economic climate of the early adult years may make it advantageous and even necessary for individuals to actively strive for fluid and dynamic self-definitions. That is, in such a climate, those individuals who can package themselves in multiple ways, and for multiple settings and people, will be in the best possible position to maximize their opportunities during a formative and risk-laden juncture. In this way, fluid self-definitions become a kind of “identity capital,” to use Côté’s (2000) phrase, for negotiating changing environments. This open hypothesis requires empirical data. But the ability of young people to package themselves in fluid ways fits well with Arnett’s (2006, pp. 8, 13) depiction of emerging adulthood as “the age of identity explorations” and “the age of possibilities,” as young people experiment in love, work, and education – at least those who have opportunities and resources to explore and who can see futures with possibilities.

In being so instrumental and self-serving, however, fluid packaging for personal gain results in an unpleasant view of human relationships. It also raises questions about the authenticity of the self and carries dilemmas related to loyalty and commitment: If identity is understood to be so fluid, then what is at the core of the self? How can individuals manage to build “authentic” selves within climates that promote instrumentality? And what might instrumentality and questionable authenticity mean for the nature of social attachments, loyalties, and commitments? Recent survey data show that young adults, relative to older age groups, consistently feel less loyalty toward virtually every institution and group considered (e.g., military, religion, ethnic/racial group, high school/college, country), with high levels of loyalty to family alone, and while they have become more cynical about other people, institutions, and society at large, they have not become more cynical about their own lives (John Templeton Foundation, 2005; see also Arnett, 2000). These, too, are important open questions and hypotheses for future research.

### ***The Need for Interdependence***

Achieving “independence” has been a, if not the, central marker of adulthood. Yet a more relevant milestone today might be the achievement of “interdependence.” That is, to compensate for uncertainties and the weak scaffolding provided by some families and welfare states, young people are finding it especially effective to build wider and stronger webs of relationships with other adults. These interdependent ties can foster development and provide a set of supports that can be activated as needed. At

a deep level, mentoring is a primary example of the power that positive ties to adults can play in the lives of young people – especially for those who have fractured relationships with their parents, or parents who do not have the resources or skills to help their young adults. At a superficial level, interdependence can also powerfully affect outcomes via the “strength of weak ties,” to use Granovetter’s classic (1973) phrase, in which wide networks of loosely connected acquaintances provide access to precious opportunities and resources.

Unlike *dependence*, the notion advanced here with respect to *interdependence* is that it is not about completely relying on others for your own welfare, but is instead about both making and maintaining positive, healthy, reciprocal relationships. A mature perspective on relationships also demands that individuals accept the obligations and expectations that such social relationships entail. These relationship skills are increasingly important as both peer groups and institutional environments become more diffuse as individuals move beyond adolescence and high school. These social competencies, if established early, would also serve individuals well *throughout* life. At the same time, an important aspect of the power of interdependence has to do with supportive and reciprocal relationships. Interdependence can also be negative and destructive when relationships are riddled with problematic behaviors and processes. Learning how to work through the challenges of relationships is an important part of adult life, as is knowing when and how to let go of troubled ones.

Yet if interdependence is now a necessary factor for success during this period, especially because institutional supports are fewer, then the most vulnerable of young people remain vulnerable. Disadvantaged young people have fewer resources to mobilize, and these kinds of skills are not likely to be reinforced in their social settings. For example, young people who already have decent social capital are more likely to have parents who know how to navigate educational institutions and job markets, access to other adults who can serve as mentors, and social networks that can connect them to opportunities and resources. Disadvantaged young people may also be further disadvantaged if cultural norms emphasize the need to prove that one can make it *without* the help of others. For example, working-class parents are more likely to take a “hard knocks” approach to launching their children, but this strategy can be detrimental in today’s world (for illustrations, see Settersten & Ray, 2010b).

## **What Social Skills and Psychological Capacities Are Beneficial in Early Adulthood?**

The trend toward individualization noted earlier means that young people are increasingly on their own in giving direction to their lives. This means that personal characteristics have become even more important in determining life outcomes. Below, several skills and capacities are raised that have relatively widespread applicability – as alternative and additional forms of “capital” – in negotiating the

complex passage to adulthood. They are especially influential in facilitating positive social relationships and permitting young people to effectively navigate the institutions through which they move and access resources they need for success.

### ***Planfulness, Coupled with Flexibility***

Personal plans become clearer and more differentiated as young people make their way into adulthood (Hill, Burrow, Brandenberger, Lapsley, & Quaranto, 2010). This process rests on learning individual strengths, limitations, and interests; identifying available options and ways to take advantage of them; and, most importantly, being able to set goals that are a good and realistic match to abilities – but also having a high degree of flexibility when things do not go as planned (e.g., Barabasch, 2006; Clausen, 1991; Devadason, 2008). Planfulness is shaped by input from parents, teachers, adult mentors, and peers. Research suggests that parenting styles and family socioeconomic status are especially associated with whether, what, and how individuals plan. As one moves further into adulthood, these processes are also heavily contingent on the other people with whom one's life becomes intimately intertwined (e.g., spouse or partner, children).

Given the uncertainty of the early adult years, flexibility in plans and openness to new experiences seem especially pertinent. Times of rapid social and economic change can also suddenly alter one's possibilities. Against such turmoil, even the best-laid plans may not come to fruition, which may make their dissolution difficult. Yet, in these very same times, precious opportunities may go to those who have planned well and carefully. In many countries and populations, life itself, let alone a long and healthy one, cannot be counted on. The ethos of individualism in the USA, and the penetration of popular psychology into public consciousness, also seems to foster a greater focus on intentional self-development and "identity projects" than in many other countries.

### ***Capacity for Intimacy and Close Social Relationships***

A central task of the early adult years is also to be able to build intimate personal relationships characterized by trust, self-disclosure, closeness, commitment, and concern (e.g., Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth & Tellegen, 2004; Scharf, Maysless, & Kivenson-Baron, 2004). In some ways, achieving intimacy in relationships is often viewed as the gateway to adult development as relationships shift from dating as shared recreation to having or seeking relationships that are emotionally and physically intimate. The capacity for intimacy is not only relevant to romantic relationships but also important for both forming and maintaining *all* types of relationships – which is, in turn, key to strengthening interdependence with others, as described earlier.

## ***Intergroup Relationships***

Given our diverse nation and world – and, as noted earlier, the fact that young people are the most diverse age group in the USA – individuals must be able to understand and relate to their own “group” as one of many subgroups in the larger society. More importantly, they must be open to and have relationships with members of *other* groups (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Ideally, this involves processes that challenge, and ideally enlarge, one’s attitudes and feelings, as well as cultural knowledge. It involves valuing and seeking out difference, and actively wrestling with those differences, not simply interacting in ways that reinforce one’s starting point assumptions. And it rests on being embedded in diverse rather than homogeneous environments. In the USA, like other countries, some of the most pressing social issues relate to immigration and social inequality, and to the incorporation of people from different nations, of different races or ethnicities, and from different social classes (Carling, 2008). Having skills related to intergroup relationships should facilitate positive individual outcomes in many domains (e.g., work, education, relationships with peers and friends) and, in percolating up to the societal level, create more harmonious and stable group relationships.

## ***Reflective Capacity***

Reflective capacity is about having good self-awareness and an ability to take the perspectives of others. It permits individuals to understand how their feelings and behaviors affect those of other people and involves taking these things into account before they act. These skills are central to forming healthy relationships of all kinds. These skills are also important to personal development in that individuals must critically analyze their own motives and experiences, and extract lessons to shape future goals, decisions, and behaviors. Much of adult life is also about failure and disappointment – about learning from and responding to failure and disappointment, and about living with the choices we make, including bad choices that cannot be reversed and may permanently sever future options. Some of what makes failure and disappointment so hard for young people is that it may be their first serious encounter with them. Experiencing failure and disappointment in the early adult years is important for getting more comfortable with these experiences in subsequent adult life – and for better understanding one’s personal strengths and limits in order to make better choices.

## ***Developmental Regulation***

Dynamics related to “developmental regulation” involve both the ability and need to harness one’s resources and exert control over the environment in the pursuit of developmental goals, and to exercise self-control and restrain one’s impulses in



accordance with social norms (e.g., Heckhausen, 2000; McClelland, Ponitz, Messersmith, & Tominey, 2010; Shulman et al., 2009). These processes are necessary for successful performance in multiple adult roles, as individuals must acquire, allocate, or refine internal and external resources in targeted domains and take “compensatory” actions when resources are lost or decline. Yet the need for compensation may be especially challenging for young adults because they find it difficult to recognize that they *have* to compensate or because they get into trouble by *failing* to compensate – especially if they believe that needing to compensate is a sign of failure (e.g., Lerner, Freund, De Stefanis, & Habermas, 2001).

### ***Self-Efficacy***

Another important and related capacity is self-efficacy (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Lewis, Ross, & Mirowsky, 1999). This involves the individual’s evaluation of his or her ability to organize and control functioning and manage future situations. Self-efficacy seems especially important in early adulthood because it affects aspirations, expectations, and achievements in education, work, social relationships, and other domains (Abele & Spurk, 2009; Koestner et al., 2006). Self-efficacy also seems important in handling disappointment in the face of foreclosed opportunities or failure, and it may increase tolerance for and foster persistence with setbacks. High levels of self-efficacy may also increase the investments and attachments that *other* people make or have in the individual, and low levels may instead have the opposite effect.

These illustrate the kinds of skills and capacities that should foster adaptation and resilience in early adulthood. Some may have greater relevance in some settings or for specific populations or outcomes. For example, vulnerable youth who have few social resources on which to draw might be protected if they have some of these personal skills and capacities. Yet young people from more privileged backgrounds will have higher levels of support because of their socioeconomic status and better access to education in particular. These skills and capacities therefore become additional types of “capital” that complement and further protect those who already have access to other kinds of resources, thereby increasing inequalities among young people. But, to some degree, some of these seem like things that can be modeled and taught, bringing the hope of intervention.

One should ask, of course, whether skills and capacities such as these were any less important in the past, and whether they are any less important during other life periods. These are important open empirical questions. But one strong hypothesis is that these things matter more now, given current social and economic climates, and that they matter more at this time in life, given that what happens during early adulthood determines subsequent success in so many domains. One could also argue that many of these skills and capacities will naturally improve as young people mature and gain increased knowledge of themselves and their environments. However, to the degree that these skills and capacities can be developed early on, individuals can

presumably reap their cumulative benefits throughout their lives. In this way, the early adult years become a central juncture for understanding the accumulation of advantage and disadvantage over the life course.

## **Why Family Relationships Matter So Much for the Success of Young People in the USA**

In the USA, the government and public place a high premium on personal responsibility and self-reliance (Hacker, 2006). It is up to young people and their families to take advantage of the opportunities they encounter or actively create, and to shoulder responsibility for problems that ensue as they navigate markets for education, jobs, and partners using whatever knowledge and resources they have acquired. That is, launching children into adulthood is taken to be a private issue that requires private solutions. As a result, stark inequalities are found in young people's experiences, depending on what parents can provide at this juncture or what they provided in the two prior decades.

This stage of life is therefore creating some consternation for families, who have to adjust to the changing pace of adult transitions and feel strain in trying to help their youth get ahead. Indeed, American parents are now, more than at any time in recent history, being called upon to provide material and other types of assistance. This does not mean that they resent the support they give to their young adults. But it does bring strain, and many American parents are unprepared for just how much support their children will need as they move into and through the 20s. Families with limited means are hard-pressed to find ways to support children, especially in a course of extended education for which they have little knowledge or funds. This occurs at the same time that their more privileged counterparts are allocating sizable amounts of resources to support their young adult children. Even middle-class families, who once seemed strongly positioned to invest in young adult children, are now experiencing new vulnerabilities amid the "Great Recession" that began in 2008. As the middle class shrinks and family incomes vacillate, families cannot offer the same set of resources to their children. Families on the low end of middle-income seem especially vulnerable – they have some, but not ample, resources, and their incomes are just enough to render them ineligible for government support.

The volatile economy has also exacerbated the challenges of young people who are already vulnerable going into adulthood – those whose skills and resources are less than adequate, whose family relationships are absent or fragile, or who have been attached to foster care, special education, or juvenile justice systems and are abruptly cut off from support when they reach the legal ages of adulthood (for a comprehensive review of the challenges of these populations, and programs and policies that affect them, see Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010; Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005). This is an important reminder of the fact that many young people do not have parents they can count on, or have parents with whom they have destructive or abusive relationships. We should not assume that the relationships between parents and young people are always positive and supportive; indeed,

it may be these very relationships that place young people at risk. These vulnerable youth may continue to require social investments at a time when their advantaged peers receive sizable assistance from their families. For these populations, maintaining supports is an important priority, especially in times of economic hardship.

However, it has always been true that some youth do well and others do not, regardless of resources. Having resources is no guarantee of success, just as the absence of resources does not mean that young people are predestined to fail. But the presence of resources should foster positive outcomes in early adulthood. Resources may also buffer poor judgments and mistakes, which seem more perilous today as the safety nets on which post-World War II generations could rely (e.g., pensions and health insurance, steady work with benefits, company loyalty) are fraying.

In political contexts that emphasize personal responsibility – like ours – those young people who can build stronger and wider connections to adults *other than their parents* also end up faring better (e.g., Rhodes, 2002). These relationships supplement or compensate for the expertise, guidance, and other forms of support that parents can or cannot provide – reinforcing my earlier points about the power of interdependence. The presence of meaningful relationships with adults significantly bolsters school achievement, success in jobs, emotional maturity, and satisfaction with life, and keeps in check problematic behaviors such as substance abuse. Relationships with adults are also important in opening opportunities and resources by connecting young people to the larger and loosely connected social networks in which adults are embedded.

The significance of other adults in promoting the well-being of young people serves as a reminder that we should not focus our lenses so exclusively on parents and on monetary support. Even within the extended family realm, other members – especially grandparents – may play important roles in supporting young adults, even indirectly through the support they extended to the parent generation. It is also important not to assume that children easily or readily accept support from parents, or that support is given unconditionally. Similarly, we should not assume that young adults do not provide support *to* their parents; here, emotional support and meaning seem especially important to bring into view. The relationship between young adults and their parents has also undergone fundamental shifts in recent decades, and the net result is that they are close and connected. (For a closer look at parent–child relationships in young adulthood, see Chap. 5.)

## **Strengthening Pathways into Adulthood Through Social Institutions and Policies in the USA**

Pathways into adulthood take place within multiple institutional contexts, and the investments that society makes in the institutions around young people and their parents are also crucial to the former group's success. The challenges of managing the early adult years cannot simply be “private troubles” that are to be managed with personal resources and strategies. They must instead be seen as “public issues” that

require significant social investments. As the transition into adult life changes, so too must the social institutions and policies that serve or target young adults. There is often, however, a “structural lag,” to use Riley and Riley’s (1994) term, between changing lives and changing institutions. Behaviors change more rapidly than institutions, which lag behind the times.

As young people and their families struggle with the reality of a long and complex transition to adulthood, existing institutions and policies may need to undergo change and new ones may need to be created. A central challenge, then, is to determine which institutions are most important to a successful transition, which will reach the largest share of young adults in meaningful ways, and which are also most malleable or open to intervention? Three seem especially important: (1) community colleges; (2) settings that provide opportunities for civic engagement and service learning; and (3) the military (for further discussion, see Settersten & Ray, 2010a, b; Settersten, 2005).

*Community colleges* are ideal targets for intervention. They touch large numbers and a wide variety of young people, serve many purposes, are flexible, and offer connections to a range of potential career paths. Yet community colleges, which have been the stepchild of higher education, have been viewed as second-chance institutions, have been undernourished, and are in need of support and reform. Four-year residential colleges and universities, by contrast, are the best example of a full-fledged social institution that shapes the lives of young adults – they provide shelter, directed activities, adult and peer support, healthcare, and entertainment. They are explicitly designed to bridge the family and the wider society and, increasingly, have been tailored to provide the sort of semiautonomy that characterizes early adulthood.

Why not restructure community colleges to provide these same kinds of services? As also noted by Brock (2010), it is both an irony and a tragedy that already advantaged students in the most selective institutions of higher education are further wrapped in support, while those in the least selective institutions are provided little support. At the same time, it is also important to rethink the organization of 4-year institutions – especially in addressing the gap between access to college, which has grown dramatically, and degree completion, which is very low. This gap sounds an important alarm about the viability of college for many young people, at least within institutions as they are now organized, and with the characteristics of students as they now are. Of course, the success of students in higher education rests on programs and policies that affect their performance in secondary and primary schools (for illustrations, see Bloom, 2010).

*Opportunities for civic engagement and service learning* in schools and workplaces provide important networks and opportunities for young people to “take stock” of themselves and society, wrestle with social and political attitudes and values, explore their identities, build skills, contribute to their communities, and develop a larger sense of purpose beyond the pursuit of individual gain (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Flanagan, Levine & Settersten Jr., 2009). For young people, the recent Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act increases the numbers of slots in AmeriCorps programs; adds several new Corps and fellowships; increases the education award; adds flexibility to ways that young people can become engaged in

service and balance other responsibilities; and targets the needs of low-income communities and prioritizes the inclusion of marginalized youth.

It is especially important to focus on marginalized youth because research has consistently pointed to the fact that youth from disadvantaged backgrounds have few opportunities to gain civic skills and be recruited into civic action. They are less likely to have parents who participate in community organizations, to have peers who are incorporated into mainstream institutions, to live in neighborhoods that are safe and include opportunities to be involved in the civic life of the community, and to have schools that have strong civic programming, teachers, counselors, and parent participation.

Another important institution to target is the *military*, which serves many young people, especially those who are not college-bound. For the majority who enter the military, it is not a second-chance institution but a first choice (Kelty, Kleykamp, & Segal, 2010). Whatever one's values, the military is the key institution outside of higher education that creates a strong pathway into adulthood. Like 4-year residential colleges and universities, the military is designed to cultivate the futures of young adults by providing a setting in which they can live, work, and learn. These particular social arrangements are well suited to the needs of young adults because they couple expectations and demands with guidance, mentoring, and other resources to acquire skills and experiences that foster a sense of competence. The military, like national service programs, also provides a bridge from school to higher education or the labor force through mentoring, tuition credits, loan forgiveness, financial stipends, access to jobs, and health insurance.

These are good examples of the need to establish clearer and more viable paths into adulthood for those who are not bound for 4-year colleges and universities and do not want to be. It is important to find opportunities to positively engage these young people and integrate them into mainstream social institutions. College is not the only route to a successful adulthood, but there are few other alternatives – and in our society, anything less than college is interpreted as failure. Youth with bachelor's degrees clearly have multiple advantages, but the “college for all” mentality does disservice to many youth who simply do not have the intellectual, motivational, and economic resources to complete a 4-year (or more) program of higher education.

New institutions and policies are needed to match the new experiences of young people – or to offer new direction, as may also be the case (institutions and policies can be used to reward or penalize choices, or to open or close opportunities). The new provisions for health insurance for young adults in healthcare reform are a good example of a policy change that is a direct response to the times – the longer transition into adulthood has created a large group of young adults who were without health insurance coverage because their statuses did not match the assumptions of policies created in an earlier era (e.g., that by the age of 19 they would be engaged in full-time work that provided benefits *or* in full-time school with coverage through parents). According to recent estimates from the US Department of Health and Human Services (2006), 30% of Americans aged 19–25 have no health insurance.

FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act), which protects the privacy of student records and allows parents limited rights to their student's education records, is also a good example of a policy that carries an assumption that college

students and their parents are *legally independent* when the student reaches the age of 18 – even though they are often *not independent* psychologically, socially, and/or economically. College administrators and faculty feel this tension acutely as they are unable to share information with parents about their students. One wonders whether policies such as FERPA might, like insurance policies, also eventually be altered with the extended transition to adulthood, as well as basic definitions of “adult” status that are codified in many other laws and policies.

As another example, policies that make financial aid and scholarships dependent on full-time study seem likely to be questioned in the future as growing numbers of students combine work and school in various full- or part-time statuses, fluctuating over time in response to family, economic, and other concerns. The extraordinary growth in online programs – now in the mainstream, and even a part of elite colleges and universities – similarly reflects a growing need to reach beyond full-time students of “nontraditional” ages or circumstances.

As the storylines here clearly reveal, it is crucial to offer supports as youth make their way into adulthood. The impulse in Washington to focus so exclusively on early childhood is short-sighted. Young adults make and take extraordinarily consequential decisions and actions – not only related to educational, economic, and occupational attainments, but to the selection of intimate partners, marriage, and parenthood. One could argue, in fact, that the sheer number and density of experiences that accompany the transition to adulthood, and the degree to which this juncture also involves movement into and out of multiple social institutions, leave it unparalleled in its significance relative to other life periods – and in its power to shape the subsequent life course. And yet, while so much is at stake, youth policies and programs, relative to those on early childhood, are slim and incoherent. The time has come to think in bigger and more imaginative ways: What might we want to do, if we could do anything, to build stronger routes into adulthood for all of our youth – and make a stronger collective investment in the future of our nation?

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## Chapter 2

# Transition to Adulthood, Parental Support, and Early Adult Well-Being: Recent Findings from the Youth Development Study

Jeylan T. Mortimer

**Abstract** This chapter addresses the diversity of the transition to adulthood and the significance of this variation for early adult well-being; the circumstances and consequences of parental support during this period; psychological vulnerability during the transition to adulthood; and finally, institutional changes to facilitate youth's transition from school to work. Recent findings are reported from the Youth Development Study, a longitudinal prospective study of a community sample of 9th graders, followed through their mid-thirties. These findings suggest that pathways of transition to adulthood that reflect the timing and sequencing of role configurations marking adult status influence both health and socioeconomic attainment; that parental financial and residential support provides critical scaffolds and safety nets as youth navigate the increasingly prolonged transition to adulthood; and that unemployment, and the ensuing financial dependence it brings, can threaten youth's self-efficacy. The considerable work-related difficulties faced by young people who start, but do not finish, college indicates the need for both greater support to help students complete 4-year college degrees and the upgrading of community college and vocational certification programs to encourage more youth to enter these institutions and obtain these alternative credentials.

Richard Settersten (Chap. 1) has characterized the transition to adulthood as an objective and subjective phenomenon, with multiple challenges confronting young people as they strive to attain the “big five” objective markers of adulthood as well as a secure identity as an adult. He highlights the social skills and psychological capacities that promote a successful transition, and the critical importance of the family of origin in assisting youth in their path toward independence. Recognizing the inadequacy of contemporary social institutions in the USA in facilitating this

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transition, especially for the substantial proportion of youth with limited higher education, he calls on us to creatively imagine and support structural innovations that would strengthen institutional bridges to adulthood.

This comment addresses a small selection of the many interrelated problems and issues that he brings to our attention: first, the diversity of passages to adulthood and the significance of this variation for early adult well-being; second, the circumstances and consequences of parental support during this period; third, psychological vulnerabilities during the transition to adulthood; and finally, the methods that may be used to help youth in navigating the transition from school to work. My colleagues and I have been following a community-based panel of several hundred Minnesota youth from their teen years through their mid-30s (Mortimer, 2003). As we have given considerable attention to each of these topics, I describe recent findings from the Youth Development Study.

Settersten points out that young people are now, on average, staying longer at home, achieving more postsecondary education, delaying the acquisition of full-time jobs, and both marrying and parenting at older age than previously, particularly in comparison to the unusual cohorts that came of age in the 1950s. Still, he recognizes the great diversity in pathways to adulthood; findings from the Youth Development Study underscore that variability. Scott Eliason's (Eliason, Mortimer, Vuolo & Tranby, 2007) multilevel latent class analysis of YDS data identified five pathways of transition to adulthood. Testifying to the diversity of contemporary pathways, less than two fifths of the panel (37%) followed what might be considered a normative transition, including moving away from home, finishing school, acquiring stable full-time work, and family formation in their 20s. The majority of the youth (62%), in fact, did not. For approximately 35% of the panel, parenting occurred quite early, generally before the age of 20. The two early parenting pathways we identified looked quite different, however, in subsequent years. In one, marriage and full-time work had become quite prevalent by the mid-20s; in the other, neither of these markers had yet been achieved. For the modal pathway, including another 27% of the panel, family formation had hardly begun by the age of 30.

Whereas youth are selected, or select themselves, into these latent life paths, especially on the basis of gender and family socioeconomic background, the pathways appear to matter for subsequent outcomes independent of these earlier characteristics, including parental education, family income, gender, race, and the structure of the family of origin (Mortimer, Kim, Zhang, & Baiocchi, 2010). In fact, the five pathways we identified exhibited a remarkably consistent ordering in terms of early adult indicators of economic well-being and health by the age of 31 and 32. We examined college graduation, earnings, savings, and financial difficulties as well as physical and mental health. Youth who did follow what might be considered the most normative pathway today, those who had married and had children in their mid- to late 20s, were doing the best with respect to these indicators. Delayed parenting thus appears to be especially beneficial, as these young adults have had more time than younger parents to accrue human capital before taking on the resource-depleting parental role. The early parents who had not married and whose attachment

to the labor force was the most tenuous during their 20s were doing the most poorly on these indicators of successful transition.

Youth who followed what we called the “negligible family formation” pathway had experienced the longest “emerging adulthood” period, with the most time to explore their options and possibilities (Arnett, 2004). However, at the age of 31 and 32, this group had lower wages and less savings and reported more health problems than those who married and had children in their mid- to late 20s. “Too late” as well as “too early” transitions thus appear to have negative consequences. Despite the destandardized character of the transition to adulthood and possible erosion of the age-norm consensus, the timing of transition markers clearly matters for early adult health and economic well-being.

The parental role has been extended in recent years as families have attempted to help their children navigate the increasingly uncertain transition to adulthood, compensating for weak governmental resources and interventions. Growing inequality in income and wealth in the USA produces great variability in their capacity to do so. Moreover, as Settersten notes, there is considerable cultural ambivalence surrounding such support. The media appear to be fascinated with the phenomenon they call “helicopter parenting.” In recent years, a spate of newspaper articles and television commentaries has appeared every fall, describing parents’ anguish as they drop off their college freshmen, and parents’ proclivity to intervene with their children’s professors and even with the prospective employers of their children after graduation. Usually, the implied subtext is that all of this parental attention is harmful, indicating parents’ failure to “let go” and enable their children to become independent adults.

In contrast to this rather negative popular image, social scientists are apt to contend that continued parental support of their children is necessary, even essential, in this new world of increasing educational requirements for good jobs, the absence of marriage partners who could provide stable financial and emotional support, and other circumstances that prevent “timely” independence during the transitional period. This is clearly Settersten’s message.

Swartz, Kim, Uno, Mortimer, and O’Brien (2011) have begun to address these issues by investigating the circumstances under which both financial and residential (coresidence) supports are provided to young adult children. Do parents give these supports irrespective of what is going on in the younger generations’ lives, a kind of “unconditional” giving that could foster prolonged and unnecessary dependence? Or is support targeted in a manner that would likely facilitate successful transitions to adulthood? Parents may provide an important “safety net” during times of negative life events, such as a breakup of a serious romantic relationship, a serious illness, or being a victim of a crime. They also can “scaffold” the youth as they attempt to acquire human capital through postsecondary education. A fixed effects hierarchical modeling strategy to assess change in parental financial contributions and coresidence during the transition to adulthood, specifically from age 23 through 30, showed significant contingency between such supports and circumstances in the child’s life. Financial support was extended when the children experienced unemployment and other employment problems, helping youth to get through periods of

economic difficulty and uncertainty. Coresidence occurred when the youth experienced other negative life events. Parents stepped in with both financial and residential support during years when their children were attending school. However, as children achieved salient markers of adulthood, including cohabitation, marriage, and parenthood, and attained higher levels of income, parents stepped back. These findings suggest that the “helicopter” metaphor is much overdrawn.

Let me now turn to the matter of psychological orientations and subjective identities. Youth appear to be quite aware of the “on time” vs. “off time” character of their transitions to adulthood, despite the diversity in pathways that could undermine normative consensus surrounding age grading. In fact, there is much congruence in the YDS data between objective latent pathways and both the sense of being “on time” and assuming an identity as an adult (Eliason et al., 2007).

We need to know more about how experiences during the transition to adulthood influence the kinds of psychological resources and capacities that Settersten identifies as critical to successful transitions. Of crucial importance is self-efficacy, the assessment of the capacity to achieve one’s goals. A large body of research shows that individuals who have a stronger sense of self-efficacy set higher goals for themselves, exert greater effort, strive more persistently in the face of obstacles, and are more likely to achieve their objectives. Therefore, it would appear to be exceedingly important to preserve and strengthen this psychological resource as youth set education- and work-related goals, pursue full-time “career-like” (vs. “survival”) jobs, and encounter difficulties and obstacles in the labor market. Consistently, YDS youth who felt more efficacious at the end of high school (age 17–18) had higher educational attainment, were more likely to be employed, and had higher incomes in their early 20s (age 23–24); they were also more likely than the less efficacious youth to have avoided early parenting (Lee & Mortimer, 2009).

Still, self-efficacy is not a fixed trait; it is responsive to the vicissitudes that youth confront during this transitional period. Self-efficacy may be especially vulnerable to experiences that threaten adult identity and the capacity to achieve economic and residential independence. Our fixed effects modeling strategy yielded substantial evidence that youth’s global self-efficacy (as measured by the Pearlin Mastery Scale) deteriorates during their 20s when they experience unemployment (Mortimer & Kim, 2010).

What can be done to help youth who experience work-related problems? As we have seen, parents come to the rescue at such times, providing critically needed financial support. Settersten points out, however, that “A growing challenge of prolonged entry into adult statuses and reliance on others ... is that these may make it difficult to achieve a sense of both autonomy and responsibility ...” What is most disturbing, in view of this concern, is that financial aid from parents, often forthcoming when the young adult child becomes unemployed, was found to reduce self-efficacy, even net of the negative unemployment effects (Mortimer & Kim, 2010).

Parental “help” may thus have mixed, and sometimes countervailing, consequences – it provides essential material resources that act as a “safety net” in the contemporary highly tumultuous economic era, characterized by high youth

unemployment and the proliferation of nonstandard and therefore precarious employment contracts. At the same time, however, parental financial support undermines what many youth consider a central prerequisite of adulthood: economic self-sufficiency. For this reason, monetary contributions from parents may jeopardize the development of a sense of self-efficacy that provides critical psychological advantages in navigating the transition to adulthood.

We need better understanding of the circumstances and meaning of support from parents – we know something now about what triggers it, and about what its effects may be, but might the circumstances of support modify its consequences? Perhaps aid given under conditions of traumatic life events builds a sense of trust that parents will always be “there” when the children most need them, contributing to mental health while not threatening adult identity. Aid given for purposes of “scaffolding,” while youth are gaining higher educational credentials or starting a new business, may yield socioeconomic benefits. But aid put forward when neither of these conditions is present could possibly encourage the very kind of dependence and “slackerdom” that the media associates with “helicopter” parenting.

Let us now consider Settersten’s last major topic, the need for the development of institutions, or reformation of existing ones, to assist young people. We must not lose sight of the failure of our basic institutional infrastructure or, as he points out, attach too much significance to the acute economic problems accompanying the “Great Recession.” Tellingly, while youth unemployment has recently spiked throughout the world (Norris, 2010), Germany, with the most well-developed school-to-work transition, had about the same level of unemployment among youth under age 25 in 2007 (10.9%) before the worldwide recession began, and 2 years later, at the end of 2009 (10.3%). By contrast, in the USA, where youth are pretty much on their own as they enter the full-time labor force, youth unemployment jumped from 11.1 to 19.1% during the same period. Certainly, having the strong institutional bridge from school to work in the apprenticeship system shielded German youth from high youth unemployment rates elsewhere. This demonstrates that high rates of youth unemployment during economic downturns are not inevitable, or due to some essential, universal problems of young people, but that they can be mitigated by institutional structures and interventions.

Settersten points out an irony: the most successful students are the most strongly supported in their path to adulthood, since 4-year colleges provide “shelter, directed activities, adult and peer support, health care, and entertainment.” By contrast, he characterizes community colleges as the “stepchild” of higher education: “second chance institutions, undernourished, and in need of support and reform.”

Given the stark differences between these institutions, youth are encouraged to aim as high as possible, and most high school seniors do, in fact, aspire to graduate from college. But do we serve youth well by urging that as many as possible at least try their luck at a 4-year college? In our study, almost 75% aspired to graduate from a 4-year college at age 17–18, but only 43% of those who held this lofty goal were successful in achieving it by age 26–27 (Uno, Mortimer, Kim & Vuolo, 2010). Many “hold on” to their initial goals through their mid-20s, despite their lack of success in achieving them. Nationally, only about 37% of entering college students

who seek 4-year degrees are successful in doing so within 4 years; 57% do so within 6 years (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2010).

Vuolo, Mortimer, and Staff (2010) have recently identified four pathways in the school-to-work transition. Two might be considered successful, as self-identified careers are obtained after graduation from a 4-year college or after attainment of associate and vo-tech degrees. By their late 20s, youth who obtained these educational credentials were very likely to consider their current jobs as their “careers” or as “steppingstones” to careers, enabling them to build their knowledge and skills. But two other groups, who might be considered “floundering” or “churning” (Danziger & Ratner, 2010), were more likely to become stuck in noncareer, “survival” type jobs, or to be unemployed. These youth achieve very low levels of education – high school or less, and, somewhat surprisingly, those who attained some college. In fact, those who started but did not finish college fared no better than those with just a high school education in finding jobs that could be considered “careers.”

Importantly, in view of the large numbers of young people who start but do not finish college (Knapp et al., 2010), we do *not* identify a “college dropout to career” pathway. Given high school students’ overwhelming preference to go to college and pursue 4-year degrees rather than seek associate’s degrees and occupational certification, it is particularly startling to find that the latter route leads more readily to a self-identified career than attending, but not finishing, college. Still, the idea that all should go to college dominates in our culture.

The problem of college dropout and subsequent labor market “floundering” could be addressed in several ways. Increased supports of various kinds are needed for students after they are admitted to 4-year colleges to enable them to actually graduate within a reasonable period of time. Potential college dropouts might be encouraged to continue at another less demanding institution. As Settersten suggests, improving “2-year” colleges and enhancing their connections to employers would encourage more youth to take the community college route and become economically self-sufficient without having to obtain 4-year (or more likely, 5- or 6-year) degrees.

We also need to find ways to help the many youth who are having difficulty establishing themselves in work, especially given the huge toll of the Great Recession on younger workers. Economists (Gregg, 2001; Neumark, 2002) have documented labor market “scarring,” leading to permanent deficits in wages. But the risks of unemployment for youth who are attempting to establish themselves in stable adult-like work may be even greater. At a recent international conference in Cambridge a Finnish sociologist (Salmela-Aro, 2010) spoke of the worrisome phenomenon of “retirement” among youth in their 30s – what she was referring to, of course, was the failure to ever become established in work, not what we conventionally think of as “retirement” from a long-term job.

Work is the key to a successful transition to adulthood, providing the wherewithal for economic self-sufficiency, independent residence, marriage, and parenthood. If youth cannot achieve these objective markers of adulthood, cannot attain a sense of adult identity, and lose out on experiences that would help them develop the psychological strengths that Settersten assures us are needed for a successful



transition, their future adult trajectories will be greatly jeopardized. Innovative social structures are sorely needed to provide institutional bridges to adulthood, especially for youth who do not have the benefit of college degrees and postgraduate educations.

A crucial dilemma is how to support youth in their transitions to adulthood while still promoting the psychological resources that enable them to become truly independent adults. While this comment emphasizes the family and work domains, Settersten's concern about not undermining youth's resilience and psychological capacities is applicable to other institutions as well. For example, current welfare support is stigmatizing and undermines young mothers' sense of efficacy (Grabowski, 2006). More support for military veterans is needed to help them reintegrate into their communities, to heighten the likelihood that the military experience will become a positive turning point with respect to multiple future trajectories (Elder, Gimbel, & Ivie, 1991). As Settersten so aptly puts it, "Social institutions, much like young people and their families, are without a clear script for a new era and need to be refashioned to better reflect the times." He recommends "thinking big", asking, "what might we want to do if we could do anything?"

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## Chapter 3

# “First Principles”: Components, Holism, and Context of the Transition to Adulthood

Ross Macmillan

**Abstract** This chapter draws upon Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius’ concept of “first principles” to analyze contemporary perspectives on the transition to adulthood. The idea of first principles directs attention at both the fundamental features of the life course, notably social roles, and the complex of role combinations within and across time that reveal distinct pathways into adulthood. By extension, it also directs attention to the logic and meaning that particular pathways have for individuals and the motives and rationales that individuals have for choosing particular pathways over others. Finally, it suggests the need for direct understanding of the implications of particular pathways for the unfolding life course at a psychological level, an institutional level, and a population level. In the end, such a view suggests the need for greater attention to synthesis, interconnection, and understanding of the transition to adulthood, how it is produced, and what it means, personally and socially, for individuals in contemporary society.

Consider whence each thing is come, and of what it consists, and into what it changes, and what kind of thing it will be when it has changed, and that it will sustain no harm – Marcus Aurelius (2011), *Meditations*

Although written literally thousands of years ago, *Meditations* by the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius provides telling commentary for those interested in the transition to adulthood in contemporary society. In one respect, it was written as a personal guide to self-improvement. Indeed, the title *Meditations* was added posthumously to a work then entitled *To myself*. Such a theme has strong resonance through its emphasis on the enhancement of agency among adolescents and young adults in contemporary life course research. In another respect, *Meditations* is

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widely regarded as a testament to the importance of service and duty. Aurelius himself was deeply involved in and committed to public service; his writing resonates the value of such work. Given this, contemporary life course scholars should view Aurelius' life and work with approval given their concerns about social value and civic engagement in the transition to adulthood. Finally, *Meditations* strongly fuses logic and stoicism, demanding that both self and the social be viewed and lived in terms of rationality and reason. Likewise, much life course scholarship is keenly attentive to a better understanding of the transition to adulthood through rigorous social science and to the formulation of a social science-infused public policy that provides better scaffolding for adolescents and young adults. In the end, there is much similarity between Aurelius' text and contemporary scholar's emphases on self and subjectivity, education, work, and family, and the power of analysis and derivative social policy to smooth the stormy futures of contemporary adolescents transitioning into adulthood.

## **A Comprehensive and Informative Assessment**

One wishing to understand the contemporary scene of the transition to adulthood, from both social science and public policy perspectives, could do little better than to read Settersten's insightful chapter (Chap. 1). Divided into six sections, Settersten operates at multiple levels, delves into both historical and developmental time, highlights the shifting sands of contemporary family formation in the lives of young adults, and provides an interesting set of policy prescriptions that will better support young people as they respond to the difficult landscape of early adult life.

As Settersten notes, the seeds of discontent, personally and socially, lie in demographic change (see also Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005). This includes independent living prior to marriage; increased value of college degrees, which has prolonged length of time spent in school; problematic and lengthy transitions into work, particularly work that pays a wage sufficient for independence and family formation; delayed entry into marriage and parenthood; and heightened differences in options and experiences from all of the above, based on family background and resources. Importantly, these all occur against a backdrop of increased ethnic and cultural diversity. These demographic conditions set the stage for the subjective experience of the transition to adulthood with an increased need to manage uncertainty and the need for fluid self-definitions and interdependence through intimate and nonintimate social networks. Given these needs, an immediate question is: what characteristics or capacities are useful in navigating the new reality of the transition to adulthood? Here, attention focuses on planfulness coupled with flexibility, capacity for intimacy and close relationships, capacity for intergroup relationships, reflective capacity, developmental regulation, and self-efficacy. Here, as well, social institutions, particularly community colleges and arenas for civic engagement and service learning, and the military, as well as elements of state and federal law, can be important avenues of intervention and channeling that can foster more efficacious and less problematic transitions into adulthood.

## First Principles Revisited

We clearly gain a lot from understanding the demographic context of the transition to adulthood, the identification of social psychological manifestations (and correctives), and possible avenues for policy intervention. At the same time, Aurelius’ idea of first principles suggests value in a deeper, more nuanced approach. As noted at the start of this chapter, the Stoic and logician in Aurelius commanded him to seek the full essence of that which he desired to understand. This involved attention to its origins (i.e., “consider whence each thing is come”), its constituent parts (i.e., “[that] of what it consists”), what it becomes (i.e., “into what it changes”), and whether it will live, perhaps even live well, in the world in which it exists (e.g., “it will sustain no harm”). In formulating such a stance, Aurelius is repeatedly cautious of the need to “erase impressions,” to assent only to more objective and tangible descriptions of phenomena. To do so, he stresses the necessity of stripping things down into their core components while simultaneously reintegrating each thing into its “cosmic context.” Only through this process of dissection and reconstruction can one fully understand the true nature of phenomena. Such a view highlights notions of components, holism, and context and has powerful conceptual and methodological implications for understanding the transition to adulthood.

## First Principles: Fundamental Features

From this perspective, a lot is missing in contemporary analyses of the transition to adulthood. First, we often forget that the fundamental building blocks of the life course are social roles. Progress over the life span involves movement out of, into, and through social roles, with the most notable being (formal) schooling, (paid) employment, marriage, parenthood, and often independent living (Shanahan, 2000). The meaning of social life is largely a function of the roles that one occupies. How lives unfold is determined by the roles that one leaves and what roles one enters. Roles are, to some extent, age-graded and developmentally specific. We typically associate schooling with childhood and adolescence. Employment is increasingly recognized as a feature of both adolescence and adulthood, but more so adulthood when it involves career-type work that pays a living wage (Mortimer, 2003). Marriage and parenthood are largely viewed as adult statuses. These are the fundamental components of a social life; the transition to adulthood is both defined by and understood in terms of such roles.

If the former involves the stripping down of the transition to adulthood, an equally important exercise is the reconstitution of such a transition in terms of the complex interplay of roles within and across time. Here, a life course is typically understood as the *combination* of such roles both within and across ages. Consistent with this, Elder (1985, p. 30) defined the life course as a “multidimensional concept of interdependent careers or trajectories – work life, marriage, and parenthood” and thus highlighted the combinatorial character of roles and need to view a life course

in complex, multidimensional, and interdependent terms. It is also useful to recognize the plurality implied in that roles are put together in a life course in different ways. Variation in how roles are combined or trajectories are connected defines specific pathways over the life span. This is ultimately the key descriptor of the life course and central determinant or indicator of life chances.

I am skeptical about the level of our knowledge of the specific pathways taken by people into adulthood. I do not believe that we know all that much. Very little research models the life course in a multifaceted and dynamic manner that involves the interconnection of multiple roles, role trajectories, and role transitions. As a result, previous work does not really examine variation in pathways through life or their meaning. Certainly, lots of research exists on each of the different demographic phenomena that Settersten discusses, but we have much less, and, depending on the topic, virtually no research on the transition to adulthood and the life course more generally – that is, research conducted in a multidimensional, dynamic manner (Macmillan, 2005).

Why does this matter? It is not entirely clear how many of the “demographic changes” that frame the contemporary transition to adulthood are *in and of themselves* either “private troubles” or “public issues.” People live independently prior to marriage. Why is this problematic? College is more prevalent and has lengthened the time in school such that it stretches into the early 20s. Isn’t this a good thing? Transitions into full-time work are less clear than those seen in earlier generations. This sounds worrisome, but the specific problem is seldom specified. Maybe, as psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2000) has argued, a period of exploration is useful, if not utile, for subsequent life course successes. Who has defined the contemporary situation as problematic and why is it so? Marriage and parenthood have been delayed until the late 20s and early 30s. This seems like it should be viewed as a personal and public good given the various concerns about early transitions into family roles (see discussion in Furstenberg, 2010).

Clearly none of these conditions is inherently problematic, but it seems equally clear that combinations of these conditions may be so. Although there are likely many examples, two pathways have attracted a fair amount of research due to their perceived problematic character. First, young adults who do not occupy any social role – those not in school, working, in intimate relationships, and/or responsible for themselves or others – would seem to be in a type of developmental limbo, not making meaningful contributions to society. [The latter may seem harsh, but we do evaluate people and people evaluate themselves based on their actualization of social roles (Stryker, 2003).] There is also the added concern that a lack of social ties at these ages may increase the likelihood of crime, violence, and substance use (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Second, pathways that involve early transitions into parenthood may tax available resources, disrupt contemporaneous or subsequent roles, and undermine subsequent life course attainments (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1989). The key issue, as many have noted, is not that early parenthood itself is bad. Indeed, historically and cross-nationally, women have typically had children in their late teens and early 20s. Instead, pathways relating to early parenthood tend to be associated with limited school attainment, limited or ephemeral

work, often in the absence of marriage or long-term cohabitation, and may actually undermine future transitions into work and marriage (Furstenberg, 2010). Given that the problematic character of the transition to adulthood is really found in specific interconnections of roles over time – in other words, the character of a pathway – it seems that a more holistic view is necessary.

In an Aurelian sense, understanding of the transition to adulthood could benefit from both stripping it down into its most basic, elemental components and from simultaneously reintegrating them into their multidimensional complex. On a practical basis, this requires thought about the mechanisms of role attainments and processes by which people order and time roles over the life span. Such a perspective would allow us to understand the transition to adulthood as specific pathways followed by people as they are differentiated across the population and have variable meaning. It would also provide a firmer foundation for understanding how pathways of different types are “personal trouble” or significant “public issues.”

## **First Principles: Logic and Meaning**

A central principle of a life course perspective is the idea that individuals exercise agency in powerful ways that shape the character and content of their lives (Elder, 1994). When thought about in the context of roles and pathways, a concern with agency raises questions about why people make the role decisions that they do and the way in which decisions are formulated with respect to the life course. Again, we know less about such things than we should.

At its most fundamental level, the idea of agency involves a dynamic interplay of social psychological affect and action (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Settersten raises the issue of agency in two ways. First, current social conditions generate particular social psychological needs, including the needs to manage uncertainty, for fluid self-definitions, and for interdependence. Second, both demographic conditions and their consequent social psychological needs suggest social skills and psychological capacities that are beneficial in navigating early adulthood. These include planfulness combined with flexibility, capacity for intimacy and close social relationships, capacity for intergroup relationships, reflective capacity, developmental regulation, and self-efficacy. It is implicit that the latter will help satisfy the former and by extension foster more efficacious transitions into adulthood.

Thinking more concretely about roles and pathways and their meanings for individuals raises a number of issues. First, a desire to understand things in holistic terms would also raise questions about agency in the ways in which people construct or put together a life course. Here, the field is woefully ignorant about such processes. In one sense, we have organized our science around a set of background characteristics, very general social psychological orientations, and a set of models that specify rather loose and imprecise associations among such things and particular types of role attainments. As Settersten accurately describes, life course researchers universally identify conditions of origin (e.g., social location, family background,

resources) and couple them with social psychological manifestations (e.g., identity, self-efficacy, self-esteem, planfulness, aspirations) that translate conditions of origin into life course attainments. The question, then, is whether an approach that associates two quite distal things has strong purchase in predicting who follows what pathway into adulthood and why. By comparison, the conceptualizations and models that modern microeconomists use to understand preferences, their origins, and their behavioral expressions and the mathematical models used to specify how such things are related provide a vastly different framework for thinking about social processes. I do not necessarily think that economists have it right and life course researchers have it wrong, but much could be learned from approaching the idea of roles and pathways with an eye to (subjective and intersubjective) values and preferences, and approaching the question with more rigorous mathematical formulations. Given this, we do not know whether various social psychological expressions of agency matter much for pathways into adulthood.

Second, how much systematic research has been done on the social psychological “needs” of adolescents and young adults as they transition into adulthood? A particularly interesting article by Andrew, Eggerling-Boeck, Sandefur and Smith (2007) begins with the observation that there has been surprisingly little work on the “inner side” of the transition to adulthood and that most of this work is fairly descriptive (for an exception, see Andrew et al., 2007). Moreover, it has been observed for more than a century that adolescence is a time of “storm and stress” (Hall, 1904) and hence it seems necessary to move beyond master narratives and really illuminate the extent and nature of concern about contemporary transitions to adulthood. By contrast, existing work seems to begin from the standpoint that contemporary transitions to adulthood are experienced as problematic without any reference points for comparison or delving into what specifically is problematic and why. There is a difference between affect and need; the notion of unmet needs seems more of an assumption than a fact.

Equally important, not all difficult feelings are problematic. Indeed, life course research has developed a fine body of research on the relationship between risk and resilience. The key lesson from such work is that difficulty can be a positive force in the life course. Here, the important questions are what factors, be they scale, scope, contingency, or consequence, make particular experiences or feelings life course risks or life course resources (see, for example, Schoon, 2006). Even if we were to identify features of contemporary transitions to adulthood that were experienced as problematic, we need to be cautious about concluding that they are ultimately detrimental in the life course. Indeed, a key take-home message from Elder’s (1999) seminal study of children of the Great Depression is that problematic circumstances have many, many outcomes and not all of them are negative.

A third issue goes squarely to the issue of pathways and requires us to unpack heterogeneity in the transition to adulthood. Here, there are two interconnected dimensions. First, it is probably wrong to think about the “transition to adulthood”; instead, it is more useful to think about “transitions to adulthood.” Attention to the variable ways in which people order and to time roles would give greater precision to efforts to understand which types of pathways are indeed psychologically taxing and which are not.



Additionally, serious attention to context raises questions about the meaning and logic of roles and pathways for different groups of people. Clearly, there is value in Settersten’s global perspective. He rightly cautions us about the “grip of privilege.” This is sound reasoning but it may not go far enough. It is one thing to argue that we need to reject perspectives that focus solely on the choices and chances of those most advantaged in society. It is quite another to suggest and investigate whether different groups adopt very different meanings and values to particular life transitions or particular life course pathways that do not jibe with contemporary mores. The role of parenthood in the transition to adulthood is particularly instructive. As described poignantly by Furstenberg (2010), public discourse and public policy on parenthood are somewhat (perhaps even very) scornful of parenthood that occurs too “early” and particularly so when it occurs in the absence of a marital relationship. At the same time, demographers have shown dramatic differences in the likelihood of out-of-wedlock births across races, with significantly higher rates among African-Americans (Bachu, 1998). From a traditional life course perspective, such differences should be explainable in terms of differences in conditions of origin (which are easily measured) and social psychological orientations. But does variation in planfulness coupled with flexibility, capacity for intimacy and close relationships, capacity for intergroup relationships, reflective capacity, developmental regulation, and self-efficacy account for the particular role of family in early adulthood among African-Americans? We do not know, but there is intriguing evidence that they might not. In one respect, historical demography suggests that race differences in early out-of-wedlock births date back to the middle of the nineteenth century (Ruggles, 1994). It seems difficult to imagine that a somewhat narrow and decidedly modernist set of social psychological attributes would account for a phenomenon that spans widely disparate cultures, economic conditions, and social structures. At the same time, fine ethnographic work indicates that parenthood has unique value in the lives of (young) African-American females in providing an opportunity to demonstrate social success in the face of abject circumstances (Edin & Kefalas, 2007). Hence, parenthood can be seen as a vehicle for the accumulation of cultural capital for women with limited educational and occupational opportunities and for whom the addition of men to their lives is of questionable value. In short, the meaning of parenthood may vary across social groups and reveal multiple logics for parenthood in the transition to adulthood that are not reducible to a standard set of variables. Thus, it seems important to consider whether the various pathways into adulthood have particular values and logics *for particular groups* that make them not just wise personal choices but useful social choices. Of course, verification of this requires empirical investigation but even contemplating such multi-level processes requires the adoption of a broad, contextual framework that is somewhat disconnected from contemporary life course research.

In the end, we do not know much about the processes by which people exercise agency in the formation of pathways into adulthood, the unmet needs of adolescents and young adults, the extent or prevalence of such needs in relation to the different pathways that people take through life, whether meeting the unmet “needs” that we currently envision would indeed foster better transitions into adulthood, or the

complex interactions of social position and life course pathways as determinants of needs and social psychological ameliorations. Given such gaps, there would be value in a broader conceptual and empirical lens that would allow us to fill in some of these black boxes.

## **First Principles: Implications**

Given all this, there is little to say about the issue of public policy. Settersten is absolutely right: we could enhance our “social investments” for adolescents and young adults. He provocatively points to some examples that map well with the changing demographic realities (e.g., changes in the age structure and intergenerational rules around health insurance). He also makes a compelling case for the value of institutional change in community colleges, civic and service arenas, and the military.

At the same time, the complexities highlighted here suggest that the “personal troubles” or “public issues” in the contemporary transition to adulthood are most likely found in the ways in which roles are interconnected, that is, both connected to and with meaning shaped by the social location of an individual or group. Given this, there seems to be two aspects to effective social policy. First, social policy would need to bridge various role-related social institutions to influence connections between them. The obvious, oft conceived, and simpler (although in practice it has proved far from simple) connection is between educational institutions and the labor force. Quite simply, we would want policies that provide bridges between school and work and mutual engagement between the labor market organizations and educational institutions. The additional complexity stems from wishing to incorporate bridges or bridging mechanisms into family institutions, such as marriage and family, and to housing markets to facilitate independent living. Such bridges would clearly be multilevel and involve changes to the operations of educational institutions, the labor market, and real estate entities (both developers and sellers), as well as broader changes in health promotion, taxation, transfers, etc. Such thinking could begin with ideas of what particular pathways look like, what types of social investments are likely to support them, and the development of policy prescriptions that would foster such investments. To be clear, I am not actually offering solutions. Instead, I am suggesting an alternative way of thinking about solutions that would speak more directly to the “private troubles” and “public issues” in contemporary life course transitions.

Equally important, such social investments cannot be conceived independent of the populations that they intend to serve. Following from Settersten’s caution about the “grip of privilege,” it seems necessary to accept the possibility that the transition to adulthood may not be particularly problematic, personally or socially, for various groups in society. In one respect, the very privileged probably lead state-dependent lives in which only something truly cataclysmic is likely to produce detrimental turning points. For such groups, we might do well enough to leave all alone.

In another respect, efforts to foster pathways may require much more social investment for some groups than others. Consider, for example, a “college-to-work” pathway that is quite statistically normative and involves education through the early 20s, movement into full-time labor that is closely linked with independent living, which is followed by transitions into marriage and parenthood (and usually in that order). Given race differences in all the different components of this pathway, social investment with a high likelihood of payoff would need to be both multidimensional and span multiple life stages. In childhood, policies would need to increase academic preparation, which would increase the chances of high school graduation, college application and acceptance, and successful degree attainment. In adolescence, policies would need to continue efforts at academic preparation but couple them with family planning efforts given the higher prevalence of early childbearing among African-American women. This would make pursuit of education, including higher education, a more difficult proposition. In young adulthood, some efforts would also be devoted to rethinking or rescaling mechanisms for paying for college and college-related costs. Also in young adulthood, policies would need to confront discrimination in entry-level work (Page, Western, & Bonikowski, 2009) such that people from all groups have equal opportunities to receive a living wage. Clearly such efforts would require multisystem investments, but more importantly require thinking about social investments in the transition to adulthood as something not divorced from larger issues of stratification, differentiation, and inequality.

## Conclusion

If this chapter has one overarching message, it is the simple idea that scholarship on the transition to adulthood has reached a critical point in which thinking is needed on the fundamental building blocks of the life course (components), various ways in which such blocks are put together in the unfolding life course (holism), and varied circumstances and locations that both shape such processes and give them meaning (contexts). We seem to lack overarching frameworks that allow us to understand the basic elements of the life course, how and why people put a life course together in the ways in which they do, and what this may mean for the “private troubles” and “public issues” of the contemporary life course and our desire to “help” through policy innovation. Aurelius’ notion of “first principles” provides an old but provocative framework for rethinking both the contours and meanings of the contemporary transition to adulthood. It also provides methodological fodder for efforts to better understand these transitions. In particular, Aurelius’ emphasis on basic components, holism, and context are particularly useful frames for the future organization of theory and research on the transition to adulthood. While they do not necessarily provide answers, they do suggest a better way of asking questions. This may ultimately be the key to better theory, research, and public policy. Given that successive cohorts are both the expression and mechanism of social change, as Ryder noted over four decades ago (Ryder, 1965), we should demand nothing less.

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# Chapter 4

## Young Adults in a Wireless World

Eva S. Lefkowitz, Shelley N. Vukman, and Eric Loken

**Abstract** Settersten (Chap. 1) describes three hallmarks of young adulthood: the need to manage uncertainty, the need for fluid self-definitions, and the need for interdependence. We discuss the implications that rapidly developing technologies such as cell phones and social networking might have in these three areas. The Internet provides constant access to information but requires skills in use and evaluation that young adults may not have. Social media provide the possibility of niche-seeking, which could increase opportunities or stifle exploration. Cell phones and the Internet offer interdependence after leaving the family of origin, but may also hinder autonomy. Students use social networking to facilitate group behavior with real-world implications, as we show with an example of a student-constructed drinking holiday. Social technologies also have implications for family formation (e.g., meeting partners, establishing intimacy, and maintaining long-distance relationships). These technologies have the potential to widen or narrow the gap between individuals from different backgrounds. Finally, we suggest future research directions, including understanding whether (1) rapidly developing technologies lead to qualitatively new sociodevelopmental phenomena, or simply new forms of well-understood phenomena, (2) existing theories of development and family relationships can accommodate behaviors arising from new forms of social technology, and (3) technology brings with it new relationship forms, and what these forms might mean for development in young adulthood.

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Computer and cell phone technology are ubiquitous for young adults. Among 18- to 24-year olds, 90% own computers, 94% use the Internet occasionally, and 79% had used the Internet the prior day. Ninety-four percent own cell phones, 86% send and/or receive text messages, and, among cell phone owners, make/receive a median of 10 calls and 50 texts per day (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2010).

Statistics on social networking site usage are a moving target, changing dramatically in the past few years. Within its first year of being founded in 2004, Facebook reached nearly one million users. By 2008, Facebook had 100 million active users and the site reached 500 million active users in 2010 (Facebook, 2010). Even a few years ago, 94% of first-year college students spent some time in the prior week on social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, with 80% spending 1 or more hours per week, 51% spending 3 or more hours per week, and 9% spending 11 or more hours per week (Higher Education Research Institute, 2007). These college student usage rates are elevated compared to the general population of young adults, with reports that 72% of 18- to 29-year olds who use the Internet use social networking sites (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010).

Some have argued that technology increases disparities based on ethnicity/race or socioeconomic status (Hargittai, 2003; Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2003), whereas others have argued that technology decreases the technology gap (Hampton, 2010). In general, usage rates suggest few differences by ethnicity/race, but larger differences by SES. For instance, cell phone ownership does not seem to favor European Americans. Across all age groups, African American and Latino Americans are more likely to own cell phones than European Americans and are more likely to access the Internet on their phones than European Americans (Smith, 2010). Across all age groups, there are no racial/ethnic differences in computer ownership, but there are differences by socioeconomic status, with college-educated individuals and individuals earning more than \$50,000 per year more likely to own a laptop (Smith, 2010). Few differences in social networking site usage have been documented by race/ethnicity (Higher Education Research Institute, 2007).

These social technologies are relevant to all of the demographic changes described by Settersten in his chapter. For instance, they impact living independently because modern technology provides opportunities for inexpensive and frequent contact even when geographically distant. They impact the pursuit of higher education, as more young adults obtain degrees through online universities and more than 30% of college students take at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2010). They impact developmental transitions as young adults use the Internet to search for jobs and dating and marriage partners. In the remainder of this chapter, we discuss how new social technologies can both facilitate and/or hinder development in the three hallmarks of the young adult years that Settersten describes: managing uncertainty, fluid self-definitions, and interdependence.

## Managing Uncertainty

Settersten cites increases in uncertainty for young adults of the current generation due to changing opportunities, less institutional support, and less clear life scripts. However, today's young adults have access to more information than ever before. They may have less clear life scripts but they can usually find someone, somewhere on the Internet who describes a similar path to their interests. If they do not know something, they can Google it. For instance, recently (October 11, 2010) we entered "what can I do with" into Google's search engine, and the automatic completion options were "my degree," "an economics degree," "a biology degree," and "a psychology degree." It's telling that these are the automatic options. That question stem could easily be completed as: "What can I do with leftover hamburger meat" or "What can I do with my tax receipts?" Apparently, however, the most statistically probable inquiries concern what to do with university degrees. This instant access to information has tremendous advantages. Young adults can learn about different degrees and universities. They can search for information on how to write their resume, how to behave in the business world, how to prepare for an interview, or what to wear on interviews. At the same time, there is the possibility of information overload. The Google search "What can I do with a psychology degree" led to more than 7.5 million matches. Young adults need to learn how to evaluate this information for accuracy and intent. If they trust all sources equally, they could be receiving inaccurate health advice or applying to the universities that paid the most to come up in Google searches.

Recent research suggests that college students, although frequent consumers of online media, may not be particularly skilled in evaluating the quality of information or doing more than cursory work during searches. For instance, in one study students almost exclusively relied on Google for Web searches, rarely looked at search results beyond the first page, and generally trusted the search engine's results. They tended to be very confident that they could distinguish accurate from inaccurate information. They also admitted to using Wikipedia frequently for coursework, even though they knew that instructors did not consider it a viable source of information. Therefore, they often used it without citing it in academic papers (Combes, 2008). Young adults and individuals with more education do appear to be more skilled consumers of online media than older individuals, in areas such as operating search engines, opening various file formats, and navigating Web sites. However, even young adults lack the ability to select and evaluate online information accurately and apply the search results to their goal (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2008). To better understand young adults' ability to manage uncertainty, future research should identify the skills necessary to use the Internet and other media competently, how these skills might translate to other domains such as academic performance and career success, and how we can train adolescents and young adults in these areas. Such skills will help young adults manage the uncertainty of negotiating careers and life decisions.

## Fluid Self-Definitions

Arnett (2000) referred to the period of development from age 18 to 25 as emerging adulthood and described it as a time of possibilities and identity exploration. Settersten notes the need during emerging adulthood to package oneself in multiple ways and for multiple settings. In this regard, there are in fact multiple outlets for possible selves when social interaction is mediated through Internet-based social networks. A young adult can package him/herself as a smart, studious worker-self on a LinkedIn profile targeted at potential employers, and as a fun, partying, witty self on a Facebook profile targeted at friends and acquaintances. Young adults can use social media to experiment with different personas in different outlets. However, the opportunity to fluidly explore possible selves also brings a risk of permanence. A young adult's online presence can follow him/her. In fact, it is conceivable that it is harder to reinvent oneself in the current age of online permanency. A student in 1985 might have begun their first year of college with the sense of a fresh start. Assuming that few people from the student's high school went to the same university, no one there would have known that student's social standing in school, what clubs s/he had attended, or how often s/he had dated. In 2010, many college students are finding their roommates and other classmates online (through social networking sites such as Facebook) months before they begin college. Once they find each other, they have instant access to each others' networks of friends, activities, and past. The ability to reinvent oneself is, therefore, somewhat double-edged. Although social media allow for experimentation with self-definitions and possible selves, it also leaves a legacy that may be difficult to overcome.

Fluidity also provides an opportunity for niche-seeking. Finding "like" others can provide social opportunities but also may prevent diversification. Historically, one of the best predictors of voluntary relationships has been physical proximity. Research prior to the Internet era suggested that both college freshmen and adults living in apartment buildings form friendships with those they live closest to within a building (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950; Martin, 1974). Marital relationships demonstrate a similar proximity effect (Bossard, 1932). However, physical proximity may become less important when individuals can seek out similar others online. Why should a young adult become friends with the young woman in the next dorm room who is slightly different from her when she can use Facebook to find the other students at her university who overlap more closely in past experiences and immediate interests? Do young adults limit their chances for exploration and learning about other interests by finding individuals similar to themselves? The studies cited here regarding proximity and relationships are decades old, and it will be important to examine whether proximity continues to be a primary influence on friendship and relationship formation. Other future work could address whether young adults are forming a larger number of acquaintances at the expense of fewer, more intimate connections. In addition, future research can address the extent to which individuals transitioning to college seek out similarity or diversity in new platonic and romantic relationships.



## Interdependence

Settersten describes a web of relationships with other adults and notes that these interdependent relationships can both provide a support network and foster individual development. Modern technology may facilitate this continued interdependence once young adults leave their family of origin's home, city, state, or country. Many young adults now have access to frequent, easy, and inexpensive contact that can include inexpensive or free video conferencing from across the world. Recent data suggest that almost all first-year college students talked to their parents at least 1 out of 8 week days, and more than one third interacted daily (Hurtado et al., 2007; Small, Morgan, Abar, & Maggs, *in press*).

This access to interdependence has the potential to hinder autonomy and independent development in several ways. The term helicopter parents refers to parents who hover over their children even after they have moved out of their parents' home (Lum, 2006; White, 2005). Although we know of no research to support claims about these parenting types, universities are beginning to create new positions, policies, and procedures to deal with or limit the influence of overly involved parents (Gabriel, 2010; Lum, 2006). As many as 70% of 4-year universities and colleges now have parent coordinators (Lum, 2006). It will be important for future research to examine the extent to which these behaviors are true phenomena or a media-created concept. If true, even if for a subpopulation of young adults, future research could examine the implications of overly involved parenting on young adults' development of autonomy.

Some also have argued that new technology can lead to social isolation, and that the current generation may be more socially isolated as a result (Nie, 2001; Taylor & Keeter, 2010). Because individuals can accomplish almost everything necessary online, the need for face-to-face personal contact might seem to be sharply reduced. Limited research to date does not support this idea. In fact, online networks appear to extend and support rather than replace real-life friendships (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Haase, Wellman, Witte, & Hampton, 2002; Ito et al., 2008). The majority of young adults' friends on social networking sites are also their friends in real life (Ellison et al. 2007; Ito et al., 2008).

Modern technology could potentially inhibit autonomy or create extended dependence on parents. That is, it is not clear the extent to which young adults are becoming independent if they call their parents multiple times per day for help with decision-making. Mortimer (Chap. 2) describes research which suggests that financial support from parents can erode self-efficacy. It is possible that intense and frequent emotional social support could erode self-efficacy, as well. Some social support from others is clearly beneficial, particularly at transitions (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980), but at a stage when developing autonomy is crucial, there may be such a thing as too much support. To examine how modern technology affects interdependence, researchers should examine how amount of contact and support relate both to the quality of the parent-offspring relationship, and more generally, to the young adult's autonomy, competence, and self-efficacy. In addition, research should

address how individual and contextual factors, such as offspring's mental health, socioeconomic status, or romantic relationship status moderate these associations.

This juxtaposition – the need for autonomy and self-expression coupled with the need for interdependence – may be part of what makes social networking sites such as Facebook so popular with 18- to 24-year olds. For adults over 30, Facebook may be a way to stay in touch with others and keep up-to-date on life events. But for young adults, social networking sites may not only be about staying in touch, but also about being part of a larger group or community. In fact, our own recent research provides an example of the use of social networking Web sites for creating a larger group or sense of community, demonstrating that these new technologies can provide opportunities for risky or undesirable behavior.

In 2007, Saint Patrick's Day occurred during spring break at a large state university with a dominant drinking culture. Frustrated that so many students would be out of town on the popular holiday, students quickly constructed and advertised a new party-based holiday, State Patty's Day. As students described it in the largest Facebook group about State Patty's Day: "We are encouraging a move from the weekend of the 17th to the weekend of the 2nd (the 2nd is a friday, b/c we all know how much fun it is to go to 9 a.m.'s three sheets to the wind). I know it doesn't sound right, moving a holiday like St. Pats...but come on people, this is bordering on crisis! What would spring semester be without our weekend extravaganza that is St. Patrick's Day?" To an outsider, this holiday may seem to be exclusively about getting drunk. However, to fully appreciate what motivated these college students, one must understand that beyond a shared interest in getting drunk, there was a shared sense of common social purpose.

We were uniquely positioned to study the effects of this spontaneous party because we were in the field doing daily Web-based surveys on alcohol-related behaviors (Lefkowitz, Patrick, Morgan, Bezemer & Vasilenko, *in press*). In this work, we searched for and recorded all Facebook posts that referred to State Patty's Day in 2007, coding them for their content. We found that much of the social discussion did not simply focus on drinking or getting drunk, but also on the social aspects of drinking. For instance, many of their posts concerned the social context of drinking, as students discussed locations to converge to have communal drinking. A number of other posts focused on a sense of belonging to a larger community and of developing traditions. For instance, 17% of all posts concerned where/how to buy merchandise with State Patty's Day logos so students could advertise their participation in the event. Finally, other posts referred to a sense of school pride and spirit. A frequent theme among these posts was the idea that the students were banding together to fight against the university, as some students even believed that the administration intentionally planned for St. Patrick's Day to fall during spring break (Lefkowitz et al., *in press*).

We used 2 weeks of daily Web-based surveys on 227 students over 2,992 person-days to examine level of drinking by date, comparing student drinking on State Patty's Day to other weekend (Thursday, Friday, or Saturday) days in a 2-month period that same semester. On State Patty's Day, 51% of all students consumed alcohol, compared to 29% on other weekend days. Considering only students who

drank on a specific day, students consumed an average of 8.23 drinks on State Patty's Day, compared to 6.30 drinks on other weekend days (Lefkowitz et al., [in press](#)).

Police reports of criminal offenses during the same period corroborated the self-reported drinking behavior but at the community level. State Patty's Day had more criminal offenses than any other day during the 2-month period (Lefkowitz et al., [in press](#)). Thus, based on both individual drinking outcomes and community-level crime outcomes, State Patty's Day serves as a unique demonstration of the speed and efficacy with which motivated students can use social networking Web sites to create a large-scale event. Clearly, students' networking goals, even if stemming from a longing for interdependence and need for a sense of belonging, are not always noble.

Students, and young adults more generally, may turn more and more often to social networking to spread and receive information about social events. This behavior is not limited to college students or even to the United States. Recent press attention highlights the use of Facebook in France to plan Apéros Géant, large drinking parties in public locations with as many as 10,000 attendees (Rosenberg, 2010). Thus, in many different contexts, young adults may use social networking to spread information about events involving risky and potentially harmful behaviors. However, this same sense of enthusiasm and desire to be part of a larger community also can lead to civic engagement and philanthropic acts. Cell phone users aged 18–29 are more likely than any other age group to make a charitable donation through text messaging (Smith, 2010). In early 2010, in response to an earthquake in Haiti, the Red Cross raised \$32 million in less than a month through text messages (American Red Cross, 2010), and given higher rates of donating through texts for this age group, many of these donors were likely young adults.

## Technology and Family Relationships

We have already described how new technologies such as the Internet and cell phones have potential for increased contact between young adults and their family of origin. From the parent perspective, a positive benefit might be increased opportunities for continued monitoring of their offspring's activities, thoughts, and well-being without direct communication, by following their Facebook status updates and posted photos. Thus, parents can acquire knowledge of their offspring's daily activities without being visibly intrusive.

Social technologies also have implications for family formation. Most notably, the Internet provides opportunities to meet partners through Web sites such as match.com. An online survey (which likely oversamples those who use the Internet frequently) reported that 1 in 5 individuals in committed relationships met their partner on a dating Web site. In the last 3 years, 1 in 6 married couples met each other on a dating Web site – more than twice as many who met at bars, clubs, or other social events combined (Chadwick Martin Bailey, 2010).

Second, social technologies have implications for establishing intimacy in burgeoning relationships. Individuals can learn about their new partners surreptitiously by reading about them and their friends on Facebook and in other social media. Many relationships may start with texting and instant messaging (Ito et al., 2008). It may be even easier to self-disclose intimate information in this less intimate context in the early stages of relationships. That is, some early flirting or information-sharing may occur in short snippets of information rather than in longer, face-to-face interactions. In fact, individuals who met online describe their relationships as committed; individuals who have never met in person tend to report more communication openness than committed partners who have met in person (Rabby, 2007).

Third, social technologies may assist in maintaining relationships in certain contexts, such as long-distance relationships or relationships in which one partner experiences extended travel. Telephone calls require both partners to be available simultaneously. Text messages and emails, however, allow one partner to share information or sentiments whether the partner can receive information at that time or not. This communication can serve both instrumental purposes (e.g., “my flight arrives at 7:00 p.m.”) and emotional purposes, such as sharing affectionate thoughts. Rhodes (2002) recommended that dual-career commuting couples stay in frequent contact and maintain rituals such as daily phone calls; current technology makes this frequent contact easier. Similarly, military families are able to stay in touch through email, instant messaging, and video messaging (Merolla, 2010).

## Technology and Disparities

Modern technology has the potential to *widen* or *narrow* the gap between individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds, though scholars present conflicting perspectives on which occurs (Hampton, 2010; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2003). Here, we focus on two areas where technology could affect the socioeconomic gap: social capital and social connectedness. With regard to social capital, some have argued that technology can help to close the gap for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds because it provides equal access to information for all (Hampton, 2010). However, technology can only close the gap or decrease disparities to the point where young adults have access to the correct tools and the necessary skills to use them. We suspect that lack of tools and skills leads to increasing disparities for those from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds. Individuals with less education have more trouble with a range of Internet-related tasks, including using search engines, identifying relevant information, and even opening browser windows (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2009). In addition, young adults who are more educated or come from more resource-rich backgrounds use the Internet for more capital-enhancing activities such as learning about news, health and financial information, and product information (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008). The majority of 18- to 24-year olds own a cell phone, but 6% do not (Pew

Internet and American Life Project, 2010). This 6% is less likely to have constant access to social contact with close others or instant access to information.

Technology provides opportunity for social connections throughout the day, while individuals work, study, etc. For college students or employees who are at their computers much of the day, no matter how busy they feel, they can make the choice to IM a friend, surf the Web, peruse Facebook status updates, or search for a new job. However, individuals who work construction, clean hotel rooms, or work as fast food cashiers may not have the same daily options to engage in these online social connections. Even if a young adult owns a cell phone and/or a computer, if his/her family of origin cannot afford them, the gap between social classes may widen.

Another domain of diversity that is particularly salient in young adulthood is in the area of sexual identity. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) youth may feel particularly marginalized and victimized during young adulthood as they grapple with their sexual identity and the coming-out process (Harper & Schneider, 2003; Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001). New technology has the potential to facilitate their exploration and social connectedness experiences (Elias, 2007; Ito et al., 2008). A young man grappling with his sexual identity living in rural Iowa can find other young men like him online. But this same technology can be used to harass or embarrass young adults, as shown in recent tragedies, including the death of Tyler Clementi at Rutgers University after his roommate taped his sexual encounter with another young man and broadcast it on the Internet (Foderaro, 2010). That is, technology may lead to opportunities for identification and social connectedness with others, but also for humiliation and shame on a large scale.

## Future Directions

Past research has established the prevalence and frequency of use of various types of technology. Research needs to go beyond examining percentages or hours of use in activities, to understand the process of how technology is leading to changes in identity formation and social relationships. We know that time use, daily activities, and ways of contact are changing. What we do not yet know is whether the context of rapidly expanding technology is leading to more of the same. That is, are these newer forms of the same phenomena, with similar meanings for development? Or are technological changes leading to new phenomena, with new implications for development?

A number of theories explain normative development in the transition to adulthood, parent–offspring relationships at young adulthood, and romantic relationship formation and maintenance. Can existing theories explain the implications of using new forms of social technology, or do we need to adapt existing theories or even create new ones to explain these new phenomena? For instance, do our existing theories of identity development account for the kinds of exploration and experimentation that occur online? A line of research on identity development examines

narratives or life stories to understand how individuals make meaning of their past experiences (McLean, 2005). Existing Web sites such as MySpace, Facebook, and Formspring may serve as rich resources for narratives and life stories that researchers may use to understand young adults' naturally occurring self-narratives.

Another pressing question is whether theories of mate selection and family formation explain the process of evaluating, meeting, and becoming intimate with others online. Almost 40 years ago, Becker (1973) put forward the idea of a marriage market based in economic theory, in which each person attempts to find the best possible mate within the restrictions of marriage market conditions. Udry (1971) proposed the filter theory of mate selection, with the broadest filter for geographic propinquity. Individuals are most likely to date those who live nearby, and those who live nearby are likely to be similar to each other on other dimensions, such as SES and race/ethnicity, creating subsequent filters. However, the Internet expands the marriage marketplace exponentially and allows vastly increased access to others and flow of information. Economists might view such a market as more efficient, given that marriage consumers now have increased access to potential partners. Individuals also can essentially advertise themselves through online dating Web sites, deciding which attributes to highlight, downplay, and misrepresent. What does this new online market mean for existing theories of attraction and mate selection? Future research could examine the process of mate selection online versus in person, as well as the quality of romantic relationships formed online compared to relationships formed through traditional channels.

Symbolic interaction theory proposes that all interactions are reciprocal events between two or more individuals, conducted through symbols (Blumer, 1969). To what extent are these interactions or symbols the same or different when they occur outside of face-to-face interactions, such as through text messages or IMs? How do these interactions change when they become public, such as when someone changes their relationship status on Facebook or posts "I love you" on a partner's Facebook wall? Future research could also address the ways that people manage relationships online versus by telephone or face-to-face, and the relative emotional experiences of these different ways of communicating.

Finally, it is possible that new technology brings with it new relationship forms. We do not yet know whether there are new relationship forms that current terminology and conceptualization fail to adequately address. There may be new categories of relationships because people who historically would not have interacted now can stay in contact as virtual friends. For instance, individuals who attended high school together but were not close friends can maintain contact through social networking sites. Individuals who meet through an interest group chat room or have blogs about related topics may never meet in person but can provide each other emotional support. It will be important to understand the role that such relationships play in individuals' lives, partially in terms of social support and perceptions of networks. Just as the demographic changes that Settersten describes have led to new experiences, challenges, and developmental needs during young adulthood, current and future technological changes will likely lead to changes in the experience of being a young adult.

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**Part II**  
**Parent–Child Relationships**  
**and Successful Transitions**

## Chapter 5

# Relationships Between Young Adults and Their Parents

**Karen L. Fingerman, Yen-Pi Cheng, Lauren Tighe,  
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**Abstract** Relationships between young adults and their parents have received considerable media attention in recent years. However, research on relationships between young adult children and their parents during the transition to adulthood are scant. Using data from the Family Exchanges Study and national data sets, we document parental involvement in the lives of young adult children (aged 18–24). Parents and offspring are highly involved in one another’s lives as evident by their phone conversations (more than once a week) and frequent parental financial, practical, and emotional support. This involvement represents an increase from parental involvement 30 years ago. Students are more likely to talk with parents by phone, and nonstudents are more likely to see parents in person. Students received more support from their parents than nonstudents, and that support contributed to their life satisfaction. Parents also use student status as an indicator of the offspring’s potential future success and experience more positive relationships with grown children they view as on target for achieving adult milestones.

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The transition to adulthood is rarely a solo journey. The majority of young adults traverse this period accompanied by their parents. Imagine the following scenarios: Michael, age 23, comes from an affluent background. He just graduated from college and landed a starting job in accounting, making him much luckier than most of his friends graduating college in a recession. Michael's parents helped him move out of the college dormitory, find an apartment, pay the deposit, move in using some of their old furniture, prolong his health insurance until benefits from the new job kick in, and offer him advice about the myriad issues involved in starting a new job in a new location. Eleesha, age 20, moves in with a former stepfather and his new partner. She never knew her biological father, and her biological mother is addicted to drugs and has insufficient funds to support herself, let alone Eleesha. Eleesha got along well with her stepfather, and he let her move 2 years ago. Eleesha started working at Burger King when she was 16. She is proud that she graduated from high school and has not gotten pregnant yet. Finally, Katlyn, age 19, calls her mother on her cell phone between classes at a local community college where she is studying to get a degree in early childhood education. She lives at home with her mother and sister, and she touches base throughout the day whenever something upsetting happens, with questions about children for her classes, and with her latest boyfriend issues.

In recent years, such relationships between young adults and their parents have received considerable media attention. Newspapers, magazines, and movies portray an overly-dependent young generation, with adults who turn to their parents for a variety of needs. These media imply two scenarios for parental overinvolvement: (1) offspring lack the resources, maturity, or motivation to leave the parental nest (either literally or figuratively) and/or (2) parents are overly invested in offspring due to their own difficulties or narcissism. Notably, few social scientific studies have examined why parents might be so involved with grown children.

Moreover, the effects of parent involvement with grown children are murky. Cultural conceptions in the USA suggest heavy parental involvement with grown children arises from weaknesses (the child's, the parent's, or both) and gives rise to further negative consequences (overdependency). This argument implies that close and supportive ties with parents would be deleterious for grown children if they fail to develop independence and their own identity. Yet, a vast literature has established that close, supportive personal relationships enhance well-being (Berkman & Glass, 2000; Cohen, 2004; Cohen & Janicki-Deveris, 2009). Of course, under some circumstances, heavy parental support may undermine offspring's adjustment. But under other circumstances, parental involvement may function like other close relationships, and warm interchanges between the parties may yield beneficial outcomes.

Finally, a monolithic view of young adults' ties to parents overlooks variability in these relationships. Parents' relationships with grown children may vary as a function of factors such as social class or the child's pursuit of education or work in young adulthood. The nature of these ties may differ in current cohorts from patterns in the recent past. Similarly, parenting young children has changed dramatically during the past century, from an emphasis on the economic value of children to an investment of parental emotion and time in raising each individual child (Alwin, 2010; Hulbert, 2003). With fewer children per family than in past generations,

middle- and upper-class parents have greater resources to invest in developmental play, lessons, play dates, tutoring, and sitters or nannies to enhance a child's future success. Indeed, these trends are also evident among less-well-off mothers. Time use data from the 1980s to 1990s suggest that daily time devoted to playing with children and teaching them increased for single mothers as well as for married mothers (Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004). Among low-income single mothers, limited resources may preclude the ability to invest in a child's future, but these mothers exert considerable efforts to secure outside resources for their child's success (Uehara, 1994). Nonetheless, well-off parents typically have more time and money to invest in their children. Parallel variability with regard to economic and family conditions appears in young adulthood.

Other papers in this volume and in the literature describe vast differences in young people's experiences during the transition to adulthood. Well-off young adults experience an extended transition marked by prolonged education, a series of romantic partners, and other explorations before settling down. By contrast, disadvantaged youth may curtail their education and be unemployed or employed in jobs without benefits, irregular hours, and few opportunities for advancement (Furstenberg, 2010). Likewise, these distinct pathways may be associated with distinct relationship patterns with parents.

Here, we give particular attention to student status as a key factor that may determine qualities of ties with parents. Young adults who are students may traverse a distinct route from those who enter the work world or lack employment or education throughout the transition to adulthood. Over the past decades, the proportion of high school graduates continuing their education has increased steadily, from 49.3% in 1980 to 68.6% in 2008 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). If parents are more involved with students than nonstudents, the apparent increase in parental involvement with offspring may partially reflect the increase in the proportion of young adults who are students. Of course, student status is correlated with parents' socioeconomic background as well as parental marital status. Young adults who are students are likely to have parents who are better off financially and who are married than young adults who are not students. Thus, we consider parents' background as well.

In describing young adults' relationships with their parents, we address the following questions:

1. How involved are parents in the lives of young adult offspring in the early twenty-first century? We consider associational and emotional aspects of involvement: coresidence and contact between the parties, positive and negative emotional qualities of their ties, and parental evaluations of their grown children's successes and problems. We then consider different types of support that parents provide children during the transition to adulthood.
2. Do parent-child relationships vary by personal and situational factors? The literature clearly documents variability in family relationships as a function of gender, race or ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (McHale, Whiteman, Kim, & Crouter, 2007; Swartz, 2009). In addition, we consider the status of the offspring.

As mentioned, we focus primarily on student status, and secondarily on whether the offspring have partners.

3. What are the implications of parental involvement for young adult offspring? If parents are heavily involved in offspring's lives, does such parental involvement help or hinder these offspring? At the end of the chapter, we consider this issue for offspring and also ask whether parents find it rewarding or stressful to assist grown children.

## Sources of Data

To address these questions, the principal source of data is the *Family Exchanges Study (FES)*, with supplementary analyses of national data sets including the American's Changing Lives study and the US Census. The FES study included multiple generations, but this chapter focuses on middle-aged participants' descriptions of their grown children and a subset of their young adult offspring who participated. This study involved high minority participation (36% identified as racial minority) and a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. We used data from the Family Exchanges Study to evaluate parental contact with children aged 18–24 in the twenty-first century. The Family Exchanges Study included reports from middle-aged adults (age 40–60,  $n=633$ ) regarding each of their children aged 18–40 ( $n=1,374$ ), but here we focus only on those offspring aged 18–24, experiencing the transition to adulthood.

The middle-aged adults were recruited using listed samples and random digit dialing within regional area codes in the greater Philadelphia Primary Statistical Area encompassing urban, suburban, and rural areas (Pennsylvania State Data Center, 2001). Oversampling in high-density minority neighborhoods obtained a highly diverse sample (see Table 5.1 for sample description). The response rate for eligible middle-aged adults was 74%.

Data for the Family Exchanges Study were collected from January–August 2008, when some economists say the USA was in the early stages of a recession (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2010). Other economists argue that the recession took hold during the third quarter of 2008 (Chauvet & Piger, 2008; Thoma, 2008). It is clear, however, that FES data were collected immediately prior to the economic crisis of September 2008 (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2010). Thus, parental involvement trends in this study may be exacerbated by economic needs that have arisen for the younger generation since 2008.

Participants completed a computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) regarding each of their grown children and living parents. At the end of the interview, participants who were willing provided contact information for each grown child. Parents provided information for 63% of offspring, and 75% of those offspring participated ( $n=592$  total), comparable to participation of offspring reported in other studies (Suitor, Sechrist, & Pillemer, 2007).

Here, we report on the parents who had grown children aged 18–24 ( $n=296$  parents, reporting on 741 children) and their grown children aged 18–24 who

**Table 5.1** Description of family exchanges study parents and offspring aged 18–24

| Variables                         | Parents ( <i>n</i> = 597) |      | Offspring ( <i>n</i> = 381) |      |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|------|-----------------------------|------|
|                                   | M                         | SD   | M                           | SD   |
| Age                               | 49.26                     | 4.98 | 20.65                       | 1.94 |
| Years of education                | 14.30                     | 2.16 | 13.39                       | 2.09 |
| Household income <sup>a</sup>     | 4.65                      | 1.34 | 3.63                        | 1.71 |
| Self reported health <sup>b</sup> | 3.07                      | 1.12 | 3.69                        | .98  |
| <i>Proportions</i>                |                           |      |                             |      |
| Women                             | 0.51                      |      | 0.51                        |      |
| <i>Ethnicity</i>                  |                           |      |                             |      |
| African American                  | 0.24                      |      | 0.22                        |      |
| European American                 | 0.74                      |      | 0.73                        |      |
| Hispanic                          | 0.00                      |      | 0.01                        |      |
| Multiracial                       | 0.01                      |      | 0.05                        |      |
| <i>Marital status</i>             |                           |      |                             |      |
| Married                           | 0.71                      |      | 0.04                        |      |
| Remarried                         | 0.07                      |      | 0.00                        |      |
| Divorced                          | 0.11                      |      | 0.00                        |      |
| Separated                         | 0.02                      |      | 0.00                        |      |
| Cohabiting                        | 0.03                      |      | 0.10                        |      |
| Single/never married              | 0.05                      |      | 0.87                        |      |
| <i>Work status</i>                |                           |      |                             |      |
| Employed full time                | 0.75                      |      | 0.20                        |      |
| Employed part time                | 0.08                      |      | 0.09                        |      |
| Student                           | –                         |      | 0.65                        |      |
| Unemployed                        | 0.04                      |      | 0.04                        |      |
| Homemaker                         | 0.05                      |      | 0.02                        |      |
| Retired                           | 0.02                      |      | 0.00                        |      |
| Disabled/Other                    | 0.07                      |      | 0.01                        |      |

<sup>a</sup>Household income in 2007: 1 = less than \$10,000, 2 = \$10,001–\$25,000, 3 = \$25,001–\$40,000, 4 = \$40,001–75,000, 5 = \$75,001–\$100,000, 6 = more than \$100,000

<sup>b</sup>Self-reported health rated from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*)

participated in the study (*n* = 381 reporting on 597 parents). Young adults reported on each parent, but in some cases we have siblings from the same family (thus, the number of parents' offspring reported on is not double the number of offspring). We first examined similarities and differences in parents' and offspring's reports of their relationships. Consistent with prior studies (e.g., Aquilino, 1999; Mandemakers & Dykstra, 2008), their reports were correlated and patterns of findings were similar when conducted for parents or for offspring. For parsimony, we present findings from offspring's data in the first section and from parental data later in this chapter.

Table 5.1 provides descriptive information regarding the offspring and their reports of their parents. The sample includes a large minority population and a wide range of income levels, but parents and offspring were better educated than the general

population (Pennsylvania State Data Center, 2001). The offspring sample included a large proportion of students (65%), comparable to the proportion of students in this age group in the general population. In 2008, 68.6% of high school graduates pursued additional education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

The analytic strategy for the Family Exchanges Study data reflects the nested structure of the data; the sample included some siblings in the same family ( $n=165$  had at least one sibling), and offspring's reports on two parents. Thus, we used the Mixed Model function in SPSS to estimate multilevel models with unstructured covariance matrices. We present descriptive information and findings from such models throughout this chapter.

The American Changing Lives Survey (ACL), a longitudinal study of 3,617 adults in the 48 contiguous states, included one question regarding contact with grown children, in person, by phone, or by mail in 1986, 1989, and 1994 (House, 2010). The study was longitudinal and thus is not a true cohort study. Moreover, the study did not differentiate biological children from stepchildren. Nonetheless, these data may provide insights into changes in contact with regard to 18- to 24-year-old offspring; different respondents may have had children that age range in different waves of data, and, at the very least, different offspring were in that age range at those times. Societal mores may shape different experiences for younger children in the same family than for older children.

In sum, although general interest in the tie between adults and their parents has surged in the past decade, social scientists have been reticent to jump into a debate about the nature of this relationship and variability in its patterns. We refer to published research with available data, but where data were not already published, we analyzed data from the US Census, ACL, or FES to understand ties between adults and their parents as well as changes in these ties over time. This chapter and the data available provide fodder for discussion.

## **Parental Involvement with Young Adult Offspring**

Parental involvement with grown children takes many forms, including face-to-face visits and telephone conversations, emotional feelings of affection and irritation, and tangible and nontangible assistance. We begin with a consideration of contact and coresidence and then turn to emotional qualities of the tie, including parental appraisals of how their grown children have turned out.

### ***Coresidence, Proximity, and Contact***

In early life, children in the USA typically reside in the household of at least one of their parents. Most young adults still undergo a transition from residing with at least

one parent to the adult pattern of residing independently of parents. Indeed, during the twentieth century, the start of “adulthood” in the USA was marked by young adults’ moving out of the parental home (Goldscheider, 1997). Affluent young adults left the parental home to establish their independence via advanced education or the start of a career. Less affluent young adults also moved out of the parental home to establish independence, but this transition often involved marriage (Avery, Goldscheider, & Speare, 1992).

### *Coresidence of Adults with Their Parents*

This is not to say that all young adults left their parental home in the twentieth century. Even in the 1990s, many ethnic groups endorsed positive views of intergenerational coresidence (Becker, Beyene, Newsom, & Mayen, 2003). Moreover, in the 1980s, over half of adult offspring of all age lived within 50 miles of their parents, and presumably rates were even higher for younger adults (Lawton, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 1994; Lin & Rogerson, 1995). And in times of economic (e.g., loss of a job) or marital (e.g., divorce) crisis, young adults often returned to their family of origin.

The literature suggests proximity between generations is largely determined by social structural variables both in the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century. Coresidence and geographic distance between adults and their parents appears to stem from opportunities and familial decisions regarding education, jobs, or romantic partners (particularly for women), more so than from relationship qualities (Longino, 2001).

In the USA, data regarding the proportion of adult offspring who coreside with parents are available from the census. The US Census considers college students as coresident with parents even if the student resides in a college dormitory far from home 9 or 10 months a year. Official rates of coresidence with parents for 18- to 24-year olds from 1985 to 2009 suggest a fair degree of stability. Over this 25-year period, the census classified 55–60% of young men and 47–49% of young women as coresiding with parents (US Census Bureau, 2009). The rates wax and wane from year to year (rather than systematically), with a slight increase in rates of coresidence occurring since the recent economic downturn of 2007. In other words, national data regarding coresidence with parents do not support a view of dramatic increases in the past two decades during the transition to adulthood, but rather suggest that structural factors such as economic opportunity and housing have played a role in observed vicissitudes.

Similar to national data, in the Family Exchanges Study, 63.8% of offspring reported residing with a parent during the past 12 months and 37.6% reported currently residing with a parent. These patterns differed by student status (see 5.2), due to the fact that many students reside at the university during the academic year, but with their parents during school breaks. Indeed, when we looked at average geographic



distance from parents, students reported greater geographic distance from parents than nonstudents ( $M=164.0$  miles for students and  $M=111.7$  for nonstudents) when offering information on distance from parents while away at college.

### ***Contact Frequency Between Parents and Adult Children***

By contrast, contact between generations may reflect discretionary factors such as feelings of affection and interdependence. In the early and middle twentieth century, in-person and telephone contact between generations was largely a function of geographic proximity. But as air travel became increasingly affordable and relatively easy (delays on the tarmac notwithstanding), a greater proportion of grown children residing at a distance from parents traveled to visit more frequently. Although geographic distance remains a constraint on the ability to share activities, throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, technological advances such as cell phones, e-mail, text messages, or Skype and related technologies have permitted long-distance communication between adults and their parents with increasing efficiency at negligible costs (Cotten, McCullough & Adams, 2010; Fingerman, 2009).

There is relatively little information regarding the effects of technological changes on relationships between adults and their parents, however. Owing to electronic technologies, communication between today's young adults and their parents may occur on a more frequent basis than in prior cohorts. Anecdotal observations from walking across a campus suggest students "thumb" their parents or talk by cell phone several times a week. But actual data regarding such patterns of communication are difficult to come by. Below, we present available data regarding this issue.

Few studies have systematically asked about contact between adults aged 18–24 and their parents over different cohorts. Using findings from the ACL, there appears to be a consistent trend of increasingly frequent contact with offspring from the 1980s to the 1990s. The proportion of parents reporting contact more than once a week with at least one grown child showed a modest linear increase over time from 51.9% in 1986 to 54.3% in 1989, and 56.7% in 1994. Thus, overall, the trend toward contact more than once a week increased linearly.

In the Family Exchanges Study, we examined frequency of contact with a scale of 1 = *less than once a year or not at all*, 2 = *once a year*, 3 = *a few times a year*, 4 = *monthly*, 5 = *a few times a month*, 6 = *weekly*, 7 = *a few times a week*, and 8 = *daily*. Table 5.2 contains means and standard deviations for contact. On average, offspring reported frequent contact with parents. Indeed, 51.2% reported in-person contact with their parents at least a few times a week, and 62.1% talked with parents on the phone at least that often. E-mail or text message contact was not pervasive. Only 33.6% of offspring reported e-mailing on a weekly basis. Given the low frequency of e-mail contact, we did not consider it further.

Findings from the FES are not directly comparable to data from the 1980s and 1990s obtained in the ACL. There were differences in the nature of the questions

**Table 5.2** Offspring's reports of frequency of contact and coresidence

| Type of contact         | Students ( <i>n</i> =247) |      | Nonstudents ( <i>n</i> =134) |      |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|------|------------------------------|------|
|                         | M                         | SD   | M                            | SD   |
| In person <sup>a</sup>  | 5.99                      | 1.93 | 6.25                         | 2.03 |
| Telephone <sup>a</sup>  | 6.66                      | 1.39 | 6.34                         | 1.72 |
| E-mail <sup>a</sup>     | 4.30                      | 2.52 | 3.52                         | 2.50 |
|                         | <i>Proportions</i>        |      |                              |      |
| Coresident at present   | 0.33                      |      | 0.46                         |      |
| Coresident in past year | 0.72                      |      | 0.58                         |      |

<sup>a</sup>1 = less than once a year or not at all, 2 = once a year, 3 = a few times a year, 4 = monthly, 5 = a few times a month, 6 = weekly, 7 = a few times a week, 8 = daily

and the sample. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that technological advances have resulted in increased contact between young adults and their parents. If the data were comparable, the linear increase in proportion of parents and offspring having contact more than once a week appears to continue from the 1980s to the present.

Frequency of contact also varied in different relationships. As expected, offspring reported more frequent contact with mothers than with fathers. In fact, 72.8% of grown children reported talking with their mothers on the phone several times a week or more often and 89.0% spoke to mothers at least once a week. By comparison, 51% talked with their fathers several times a week and 72% talked at least weekly. Nonetheless, the global pattern involves frequent contact with each parent for most offspring.

Of equal interest is how SES and student status may shape these ties. We estimated multilevel models for frequency of contact in person and by phone, with student status and parental socioeconomic background (i.e., income and education) as independent variables, controlling for parent's and offspring's gender.

For in-person contact, we obtained significant findings for student status and for parental education. In this case, students reported less frequent in-person contact ( $B=-0.65$ ,  $t=-3.58$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), as did offspring whose parents reported higher education ( $B=-0.19$ ,  $t=-5.24$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Of course, better-educated parents tended to have children who sought higher educational attainment. Thus, in better-off families, young adults had less frequent in-person contact with parents. Lower in-person contact likely stems from students residing at universities away from the parents' home during the school year. As such, students had limited in-person contact with parents.

By contrast, telephone contact with parents was more frequent among students ( $B=0.36$ ,  $t=2.44$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), as well as with mothers ( $B=0.71$ ,  $t=5.16$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and for daughters ( $B=0.25$ ,  $t=1.90$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Thus, the stereotype of a college co-ed on a cell phone talking to mom may be a truism. But young adults who are not students have more frequent face-to-face contact with parents, suggesting that the cell phone contact may in some way compensate for a lack of face-to-face contact at this stage of life.

In sum, based on data from the Family Exchange Study, adults and their parents appear to have frequent contact, but the nature of that contact differs by

socioeconomic background. Among lower-educated parents and their offspring who are not students, face-to-face contact is more common. Among better-educated parents, offspring are more likely to pursue education when they are 18- to 24-years old, and educational opportunities may take them away from home at least part of the year. Therefore, they rely more on telephone contact.

### ***Positive, Negative and Ambivalent Relationship Qualities***

Interest in propinquity reflects other basic questions about qualities of relationships between young adults and their parents. The early relationship between a given child and parent may warrant consideration. A distinct feature of this tie is its longevity; parents and children experience the transition to adulthood after nearly two decades of prior interactions. Qualities of relationships in young adulthood stem from earlier histories and prior relationship qualities from childhood or adolescence.

In this section, we describe what is known about trajectories of relationship quality in the parent–child tie from childhood into young adulthood. We review the scant longitudinal literature addressing such changes over time. We also consider the potential of these relationships as offspring complete the transition into adulthood and approach middle age. In doing so, we consider positive and negative qualities of the relationship. The adolescent literature frames relationship qualities in terms of behaviors such as warmth and conflict (Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998; Shanahan, McHale, Crouter & Osgood, 2007). But research has shown that parents and adult children experience frustration, disappointment, or worry without explicit behaviors and in the absence of communicating those feelings to the other party (Birditt, Rott, & Fingerman, 2009; Fingerman, 2003; Lefkowitz & Fingerman, 2003). As such, we focus on subjective feelings rather than behaviors. Moreover, the literature on inter-generational relationships has focused on ambivalence (or combined positive and negative feelings; Birditt, Miller, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, 2009; Fingerman, Chen, Hay, Cichy, & Lefkowitz, 2006; Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek, 2008; Pillemer et al., 2007) and we draw on this concept here. Finally, we address parental appraisals of their young adult offspring's adjustment. In that regard, we examine subjective views of offspring's successes and problems.

### ***Continuity and Discontinuity in Relationship Qualities***

The most distinct feature of relationships between adults and their parents involves the longevity of the tie. At the transition to adulthood, offspring and parents have 18 years of shared history to shape their relationships. Early psychodynamic perspectives on this tie purport a view of continuity, suggesting that qualities of the relationship in infancy and parental sensitivity determine much of the child's subsequent personality development, as well as inherent tensions in relationships between

parents and their grown children (Erikson, 1950). Studies suggest considerably more malleability and plasticity in relationship qualities, however.

From the perspective of general age trends and cross-sectional data, research finds that most adults and parents report their relationships are predominantly positive (Fingerman et al., 2006; Umberson, 1992). In terms of longitudinal changes, parents and children typically experience a decline in feelings of warmth from middle childhood through mid-adolescence (approximately age 9–15) and then increasing warmth again as offspring approach the transition to adulthood (age 19; Shanahan et al., 2007). Researchers using data from the 1980s also documented increased warmth throughout the transition to adulthood, from age 18–23 (Thornton, Orbach, & Axinn, 1995). Similarly, more recent longitudinal research indicates that parents' feelings of negativity regarding their offspring decrease over time; especially among young adult and middle-aged parents (Birditt, Jackey, & Antonucci, 2009).

Nonetheless, individual differences in relationship patterns are not straightforward. Studies find only modest effects for relationship continuity from adolescence into young adulthood (Aquilino, 2006; Thornton et al., 1995), and early patterns appear to weaken over longer periods of time (Fingerman, Whiteman, & Dotterer, 2009). For example, Belsky, Jaffee, Hsieh and Silva (2001) used data from the Dunedin Study in New Zealand to examine continuity in early relationship patterns into young adulthood. The study assessed relationship qualities with parents every other year from the time the children were aged 3–15, and then again when these children were aged 26. Findings suggest that discontinuity in relationship qualities from childhood to young adulthood may be the rule rather than the exception. That is, relationship qualities at age 15 were modestly associated with relationship quality at age 26, but there were few associations from early or middle childhood into young adulthood. Of course, most children had positive relationships with parents by age 26. Thus, lack of variability in adulthood may help explain difficulties in detecting individual continuity. Moreover, apparent discontinuity may stem from the lessened ability of measures to distinguish subjective qualities of relationships in young adulthood in comparison to the behavioral measures used in early childhood. Nonetheless, data do not support the premise that adult relationships with parents are established early in life.

Studies also reveal within-family differences in relationship patterns. These patterns vary by parental gender and offspring's birth order. Parents respond to latter-born children differently than to their first child's adolescence, and mothers and fathers differ in their reactions to children over time, depending on the gender of the child (Shanahan et al., 2007; Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2003). We consider these issues in young adulthood as well.

### ***Ambivalent Relationships with Parents in Young Adulthood***

Although young adults and their parents generally report that their relationships are strong in young adulthood, conflicts and negative feelings do not dissipate altogether.

Rather, relationships in early adulthood may be characterized by ambivalence or a mixture of positive and negative sentiments. Scholars use different approaches to assess ambivalence, including separate assessments of positive and negative ratings of feelings that are then combined into a single index of ambivalence (e.g., Fingerman et al., 2006, 2008; Willson, Shuey, Elder, & Wickrama, 2006), subjective reports of feelings torn or conflicted (Lowenstein, 2007; Pillemer et al., 2007), and having participants classify their close relationships and their problematic relationships and looking for overlap in these classifications (Fingerman & Hay, 2004; Fingerman, Hay, & Birditt, 2004).

In a study of individuals aged 13–99, we found that parental ambivalence toward grown children peaked when children were adolescents, but nearly half of parents still classified offspring in their 20s as both close and distressful (Fingerman & Hay, 2004). By contrast, the majority of offspring aged 40 and over were classified as close (with few classified as ambivalent). Among offspring, ratings of ambivalence toward parents peaked when they were in their 20s (and were even higher than among adolescents), with over half of offspring classifying their relationships with parents as both close and problematic, particularly for mothers (Fingerman & Hay, 2004).

Throughout adulthood, however, the degree of ambivalence adults or parents report toward the other party varies across any given relationship. For parents, more ambivalent feelings are often associated with children who have not achieved success in normative roles of adulthood, such as marriage or employment (Birditt, Fingerman, & Zarit, 2011; Fingerman et al., 2006; Suito et al., 2007). Our prior research also found that parents reported greater ambivalence toward offspring who scored higher on personality measures of neuroticism (Fingerman et al., 2006). These findings held for older offspring who were in their 30s or 40s, as well as for offspring in their 20s. Collectively, these findings suggest that parental ambivalence is high when they must assist offspring to be independent. Indeed, offspring's autonomy from parents may allow a dissipation of parental negative feelings in part because parents feel less responsibility for them, or are pleased with their success in attaining normative milestones.

For offspring, concerns about parental health appear to generate ambivalent feelings (Fingerman et al., 2006; Willson, Shuey, & Elder, 2003). Young adults report worries about their parents' health, even when parents are middle-aged and still in relatively good health (Hay, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, 2008). As parental health declines in late life, not surprisingly the parents' functional deficits generate increasing difficulties for children. Indeed, relationship qualities appear more conflicted and less positive as parents approach the end of life and require hands-on care from offspring (Fingerman, Hay, Kamp Dush, Cichy, & Hosterman, 2007; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Zarit & Eggebeen, 2002).

Despite ambivalence, the period when offspring are in their 20s may be something of a honeymoon period if offspring are on track and doing well. In one study, we compared young adult women aged 18–22 and their mothers to middle-aged women in their 40s and their mothers over the age of 70 (Fingerman, 2000). In response to questions about what they enjoyed in their relationships, the younger

mother–daughter pairs painted their relationships in rosy terms, providing a wholly positive view of their tie. The younger women described conversations and visits that focused on the daughter’s lives, school, relationships, or her own children. These mothers and daughters alike contrasted their current tie with the recent, more tumultuous period of adolescence. The daughters often characterized the intimacy of the tie by describing their mothers as their “best friends.” Descriptions of the relationship included mothers who cooked favorite meals, did laundry, listened to the daughter talk only about her problems, and arrived to help in any emergency. In brief, these portraits of the relationship were considerably more lopsided than most friendships. By contrast, the middle-aged women and their mothers were subdued and nuanced in their responses, often mentioning negative events or situations such as the mother’s widowhood or the daughter’s stressful job, which detracted from their ability to fully enjoy their tie. The middle-aged women and older mothers also were equally likely to mention helping one another and their shared investment in other family members.

These findings suggest that young adults and their parents are able to recognize negative as well as positive feelings in the tie, but may view these feelings as compartmentalized. That is, the negative issues are solely negative and the positive issues are solely positive. As offspring enter their 30s and 40s, however, parents and offspring alike may integrate their positive and negative feelings into a more unified view of the relationship, with an understanding of strengths and weaknesses. Thus, the period of young adulthood serves as a segue in the parent–child relationship as well, from a period of behavioral warmth, conflict, and parental involvement in adolescence, to the mature state at the end of life, when positive and negative feelings may coexist without being acted upon.

## Parental Evaluations of How Offspring Turned Out

Although relationships between young adults and their parents are typical of other close ties, these ties also are unique in several respects. As mentioned above, parents appear to be more ambivalent about young adult offspring who are not attaining normative milestones of adulthood (Fingerman et al., 2006; Sutor et al., 2007). Indeed, parents have invested a great deal by the time children enter adulthood, and parents may be particularly sensitive to how their adult offspring have turned out. That is, they may react to their grown children’s successes and problems (Birditt et al., 2010; Fingerman, Cheng, Birditt, & Zarit, 2010).

Several studies have shown that offspring’s problems are associated with parental distress when offspring are in their mid-20s, 30s, and 40s (e.g., Byers, Levy, Allore, Bruce, & Kasl, 2008; Milkie, Bierman & Schieman, 2008). These studies have primarily examined negative life events grown children have experienced, such as health problems or injury, financial difficulties, divorce or relationship problems (Birditt et al., 2010; Greenfield & Marks, 2006; Pillemer et al., 2007). Further, scholars have attempted to differentiate whether the problems can be attributed to

the offspring's own behaviors (e.g., drug addiction) or as random events (e.g., victim of a crime; Birditt et al., 2010; Pillemer & Suito, 1991). Interestingly, there has been little attention to these issues during the period of young adulthood specifically. When offspring are young adults, parents may be particularly involved in their young adults' lives and thus may be particularly aware of such problems.

Parents also may hold evaluations of how their grown children have turned out with regard to success and accomplishments. Only a few studies have addressed parental evaluations of children's successes (Carr, 2004). Ryff, Lee, Essex and Schmutte (1994) examined middle-aged parents' evaluations of how their grown children had turned out using open-ended questions. More recently, we addressed this issue in the Family Exchanges Study (Birditt et al., 2010; Fingerman, Miller, Birditt & Zarit, 2009). We found that parents differentiate among their children and consider some grown children more successful than other grown children (Birditt et al., 2010). Indeed, parents are cognizant of their children's failures as well as their successes; parents who have more than one grown child most often view some as problem-ridden and others as successful (Fingerman, Pitzer et al., 2010). Finally, parents typically report comparable affection for offspring whom they deem successful and whom they deem problem-ridden, but they experience greater relationship conflict and distress with children suffering problems (Birditt et al., 2010).

Parents' views of offspring's successes during the transition to adulthood may not correspond to objective indicators of adult roles, however. Our prior research found that parental ratings of offspring success were not associated with actual educational attainment or marital status among 18- to 24-year olds, but parents' subjective appraisals of offspring's achievements correlated highly with actual indicators of adult attainment (i.e., employment, education, marital status) for adults over age 24. Young people in the transition to adulthood prior to age 25 may be in the process of attaining an education or in a long-term relationship that has not yet solidified with formal commitment. Indeed, a 19-year old who is studying successfully at a competitive university aspiring for graduate school looks the same "on paper" as a 30-year-old high school graduate. As such, parental ratings of their achievement may not correspond to observable external indicators. Moreover, relative success in education or career varies by social class, and parents may adjust views of offspring accordingly. We present data regarding offspring's negative life events and success during the transition to adulthood next.

Previously in this chapter, we presented data obtained from the offspring in the Family Exchanges Study (FES). In this section, we also include reports from parents in the FES who had grown children aged 18–24 ( $n=296$  parents) and their reports on 741 children, regardless of whether the offspring participated in the study. Table 5.3 includes descriptive information regarding offspring's ratings of their own success and parental evaluations of their offspring's successes and failures.

We considered factors that might be associated with whether parents and offspring view the offspring as successful. We looked at indicators of potential future attainments, such as student status and serious relationship/cohabitation, in predicting subjective ratings. We estimated four multilevel models, including control variables, each predicting offspring's ratings of their own success in (a) relationships

**Table 5.3** Parents' and offspring's evaluations of how offspring turned out and appraisals of support

| Variables  | Parent report<br>( <i>n</i> =480 parents reporting<br>on 741 offspring) |      | Offspring report<br>( <i>n</i> =381 reporting<br>on self) |      |
|--|---|------|---|------|
|  | M   | SD   | M   | SD   |
| Offspring's success  |   |      |   |      |
| Education and career success <sup>a</sup>                  | 3.52  | 1.16 | 3.57  | 0.94 |
| Relationships success <sup>a</sup>                         | 3.14  | 1.00 | 3.34  | 1.10 |
| <i>Appraisals of helping</i>                               |   |      |   |      |
| Offspring appraises support as appropriate <sup>b</sup>    | –   | –    | 3.04  | 0.79 |
| Offspring's needs compared to others same age <sup>c</sup> | 1.81  | 0.62 | –   | –    |
| Rewarding to help <sup>d</sup>                             | 4.20  | 0.90 | –   | –    |
| Stressful to help <sup>d</sup>                             | 2.20  | 1.20 | –   | –    |

<sup>a</sup>Appraisals of offspring's success compared to other people the same age: 1 = *less successful*, 2 = *somewhat less successful*, 3 = *about the same as other people the same age*, 4 = *somewhat more successful*, 5 = *more successful*

<sup>b</sup>Appraisals of the amount of help offspring received: 1 = *less than would like*, 2 = *a little less than would like*, 3 = *about right*, 4 = *a little more than would like*, 5 = *more than would like*

<sup>c</sup>Appraisals of the help offspring need compared to other people the same age: 1 = *less help*, 2 = *about the same*, 3 = *more help*

<sup>d</sup>Rewarding and stressful feelings parents find in helping offspring: 1 = *not at all*, 2 = *a little*, 3 = *somewhat*, 4 = *quite a bit*, 5 = *a great deal*

and family, and (b) education and career. We did the same for parents' ratings of success in the two domains. Findings are evident in Table 5.4. As can be seen, offspring's statuses projecting future accomplishments were associated with ratings of the offspring's success by both parents and offspring. That is, student status was associated with ratings that the offspring was more successful in education and career than others of comparable age, whereas partnered status (rather than marriage) was associated with higher ratings of success with regard to relationships. Thus, it appears that during the transition to adulthood, parents and offspring alike evaluate offspring with regard to activities that may foster future success, rather than solely based on current achievements. We consider this future potential in greater detail in the next section.

## Parental Support of Young Adults

In addition to love, affection, and contact, parents also often remain a source of tangible and nontangible support for young adults in the twenty-first century. Children were a source of labor and economic gain in agrarian societies but have become a target of parental investment of labor and material resources in the twenty-first



**Table 5.4** Student status and relationship partner associated with ratings of offspring's success<sup>a</sup>

| Variables                         | Parental rating          |                       |                       |                       | Offspring rating         |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
|                                   | Education/career success |                       | Relationships success |                       | Education/career success |                       | Relationships success |                       |
|                                   | <i>B</i>                 | <i>SE<sub>B</sub></i> | <i>B</i>              | <i>SE<sub>B</sub></i> | <i>B</i>                 | <i>SE<sub>B</sub></i> | <i>B</i>              | <i>SE<sub>B</sub></i> |
| Intercept                         | 2.64***                  | 0.59                  | 2.72***               | 0.52                  | 2.92***                  | 0.52                  | 3.01***               | 0.63                  |
| Predictors                        |                          |                       |                       |                       |                          |                       |                       |                       |
| Student status <sup>a</sup>       | 0.36**                   | 0.10                  | 0.12                  | 0.09                  | 0.22*                    | 0.09                  | -0.06                 | 0.11                  |
| Relationship partner <sup>b</sup> | -0.08                    | 0.16                  | 0.50***               | 0.14                  | 0.26*                    | 0.12                  | 0.91***               | 0.14                  |
| Controls                          |                          |                       |                       |                       |                          |                       |                       |                       |
| Parent income <sup>c</sup>        | 0.05                     | 0.04                  | 0.00                  | 0.03                  | 0.02                     | 0.03                  | -0.04                 | 0.04                  |
| Parent years of education         | 0.04                     | 0.03                  | 0.00                  | 0.02                  | 0.07***                  | 0.02                  | 0.03                  | 0.02                  |
| Parent sex                        | -0.11                    | 0.09                  | -0.11                 | 0.08                  | 0.03                     | 0.07                  | 0.01                  | 0.09                  |
| Offspring sex                     | -0.22*                   | 0.09                  | 0.05                  | 0.08                  | -0.04                    | 0.07                  | 0.09                  | 0.09                  |
| Offspring age                     | 0.01                     | 0.02                  | 0.02                  | 0.02                  | -0.03                    | 0.02                  | -0.00                 | 0.03                  |

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

<sup>a</sup>1 = student; 0 = nonstudent

<sup>b</sup>1 = cohabit or married; 0 = other relationship status

<sup>c</sup>Parental household income: 1 = less than \$10,000, 2 = \$10,001–\$25,000, 3 = \$25,001–\$40,000, 4 = \$40,001–\$75,000, 5 = \$75,001–\$100,000, 6 = more than \$100,000

century. These patterns continue into adulthood. In Western nations, parents give more to their offspring than the reverse until the very end of life (Fingerman, Pitzer et al., 2010; Lowenstein & Daatland, 2006; Zarit & Eggebeen, 2002).

Theories of family support have typically focused on help provided to those in need. Contingency theory in sociology and altruism theory in economics have pursued the premise that family members provide help in response to another's problems (Eggebeen & Davey, 1998; Schoeni, 1997), as have theories of social support more broadly (Vaux, 1988). But relationships between parents and young adults are distinct from these other ties. According to the developmental stake hypothesis, parents have a unique investment in their children as their legacy (Giarrusso, Silterstein, Gans & Bengtson, 2005). By extension, we propose that parents may invest in their grown children during the transition to adulthood if they foresee support as instrumental to the child's future success, even in the absence of present crisis. Indeed, our prior research on adults aged 18–40 found that parents provided more support to offspring they deemed high-achieving as well as offspring in need (Fingerman, Miller et al., 2009).

A key question in the transition to adulthood is whether support is linked to roles associated with future attainments, particularly student status. Student status might be viewed as a proxy variable for offspring's potential future success. Several aspects of the student experience may affect relationships with parents: residing away from home, financial commitments to pay tuition, lack of adequate income, and an amorphous sense of exploration or being unsettled. Thus, we might expect support of young adult offspring to be greatest when they are students. Table 5.5 presents the distribution of six types of support to students and nonstudents aged

**Table 5.5** Frequency of support provided by parents to grown children

| Type of support <sup>a</sup>         | Student ( <i>n</i> = 244) | Nonstudent ( <i>n</i> = 131) |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| Listening to talk about daily events | 6.41<br>(1.56)            | 6.13<br>(2.04)               |
| Advice                               | 5.83<br>(1.67)            | 5.74<br>(1.97)               |
| Emotional support                    | 5.77<br>(1.97)            | 5.57<br>(2.32)               |
| Practical support                    | 5.08<br>(2.05)            | 4.73<br>(2.36)               |
| Financial support                    | 5.02<br>(2.12)            | 3.98<br>(2.18)               |
| Technical help                       | 2.69<br>(2.10)            | 2.55<br>(2.15)               |
| Average total support                | 5.62<br>(1.45)            | 5.24<br>(1.74)               |

<sup>a</sup>1 = less than once a year or not at all, 2 = once a year, 3 = a few times a year, 4 = monthly, 5 = a few times a month, 6 = weekly, 7 = a few times a week, 8 = daily

18–24 from the FES. Consistent with our prior research (e.g., Fingerman, Miller et al., 2009, 2010), students and nonstudents alike reported receiving nontangible support such as having their parents listen to them talk about their day, emotional support, and advice most often, and practical and financial support less often.

We estimated six multilevel models with the offspring's reports of each type of support treated as the outcome. Student status was the predictor; the control variables included parental income and education, parents' and offspring's gender, and offspring's age. Each model revealed significant associations for age, with younger offspring receiving more support than older offspring, but student status was not significantly associated with any type of support when age and parental income were included in the models.

Not surprisingly, other variables were significantly associated with each type of help. For example, mothers gave more support to offspring and daughters received more help. These findings are consistent with studies of adolescence that show greater involvement of mothers with grown children (McHale, Crouter, & Whiteman, 2003). Likewise, parents with higher income provided more frequent practical and financial support. Given the association between parental income and offspring student status, in models excluding parental income, student status was associated with greater financial and practical support. The models for support are not shown here.

### *Cohort Differences in Parental Support*

Again, clear data regarding shifts in parental support are not readily available. Nonetheless, it appears that parental support of young adult offspring has increased over the past two decades. Eggebeen (1992) examined National Survey of Family and Households (NSFH) data collected in 1988. The study asked parents if they

had provided any child with different types of support (money, advice, childcare, practical help) in the past month. The most frequent form of support was advice, but fewer than half (46%) of parents reported providing advice to any child in the past month and only 31% had provided at least one child practical assistance (Eggebeen, 1992).

By comparison, we consider parental reports of support to grown children in 2008 in the Family Exchanges Study. Because we have within-family data and asked about each child (rather than asking one question regarding “any child”), we examined the child who received the most help. That is, the child whom the parent helps most serves as an indicator of providing “any child” with help in this case. We also did not ask about the past month but, rather more generally, the frequency with which parents provide each child with each type of support (e.g., daily, once a week, a few times a month, etc.). With regard to advice, 88.9% of parents reported giving at least one grown child advice on a monthly basis and 69.4% reported giving monthly practical support. We assessed other types of support not examined in the NSFH and found that 90.2% gave emotional support on a monthly basis and 89.9% lent an attentive ear when offspring wished to talk about their day. In other words, findings from two distinct studies suggest an increase in provision of support to grown children over the past two decades, even though the data sets are fraught with differences that make it difficult to assure the validity of these comparisons.

### *Evaluations and Implications of Parental Support*

A key question regarding parental involvement also pertains to benefits, costs, or harm to offspring and parents. Although classic family systems theories suggest that parents should not be overly involved or “enmeshed” in their children’s lives, parental involvement is not always indicative of family problems in adulthood (Fingerman & Bermann, 2000). Rather, under some circumstances, parental involvement may be beneficial, while in others it may be detrimental. Moreover, parents and offspring themselves may view the support as appropriate and valuable.

We considered two types of implications regarding parental support of young adult offspring (a) appraisals of the appropriateness of that support, and (b) associations between support and individual well-being. Subjective evaluations of support likely play a role in the way that individuals experience that support. That is, when parents and offspring feel that the support they receive is normative and appropriate, the support may be more beneficial than if they feel it is demanding or insufficient.

### *Appropriateness of Support*

The Family Exchanges Study included questions regarding both the parents’ and offspring’s perceptions of the appropriateness of support. Parents were asked whether they believed their grown children required comparable, more, or less sup-

port than others the same age. Offspring were asked whether the amount of support they received was about right, too little, or too much (for descriptive information, see Table 5.3). Findings revealed most parents and grown children evaluated the amount of support as about right or similar to what other grown children need. But a small proportion of offspring (13.9%) evaluated the support as too little, and likewise, a small proportion of offspring (17.2%) evaluated the support as too much. A proportion of parents felt the support was more than others of comparable age require (11.7%), whereas nearly one-third of parents felt their offspring required less support than others of comparable age (30.4%).

We estimated multilevel models looking at parents' and offspring's perceptions of the appropriateness of the support. That is, we asked whether parents' evaluations of the appropriateness of support were associated with the amount of support they reported giving.

We looked at parental evaluations of the appropriateness of support as the outcome and parental reports of the amount of support they provide as a predictor, including control variables (e.g., parent gender, age, income, education, whether offspring was a student or had a partner). The outcome variable was coded from 1 (less than others the same age) to 3 (more than others the same age). The model was not significant for overall support.

We then estimated six additional models for each type of support separately, to ascertain whether provision of certain types of support (i.e., practical support) was associated with parental evaluations of the appropriateness of support. We adjusted significance level to  $p < 0.01$  due to multiple analyses. The only significant finding related to the provision of monetary support,  $B = 0.54$ ,  $t = 4.11$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . That is, parents who provided more frequent financial support felt the support their offspring received was more overall than other young adults of comparable age.

Treating offspring's evaluations of support as the outcome variable, we looked at offspring's reports of the amount of support and control variables as the predictors. Findings revealed that a greater frequency of overall support was associated with offspring's appraisals that the support was too much (and vice versa for low support being appraised as too little),  $B = 0.14$ ,  $t = 6.42$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

We then considered each type of support separately for offspring's appraisals, again adjusting the significance level to  $p < 0.01$ . We found that all six types of support showed significant associations with offspring's evaluations of the appropriateness of support at the  $p < 0.01$  level. That is, offspring who received more of each type of support evaluated overall support as too much. Of course, these findings also speak to high correlations between types of support. Offspring who received more of one type of support received more of other types of support.

### ***Implications of Support for Individual Well-Being***

Provision and receipt of support have also been linked to individual well-being in other studies (Brown, Nesse, Vinokur, & Smith, 2003; Maisel & Gable, 2009).

Here, we considered whether parents' provision of support to offspring has beneficial or harmful implications for the offspring.

Research on this topic is scant, but one recent study of college students and their parents indicates parental involvement may be beneficial, particularly for students. According to findings from that study, communication with parents helped deter college students from heavy alcohol use (Small, Morgan, Abar, & Maggs, 2011). College students completed a 14-day diary study; on days when the students spent more time communicating with their parents, the number of drinks consumed, heavy drinking, and estimated peak blood alcohol concentration were lower. Thus, even nontangible support in the form of communication with parents can serve to buffer against poor health behaviors like heavy drinking during the transition to adulthood.

We then examined models for individual well-being, using an assessment of life satisfaction as a variable representing a general sense of well-being as the outcome. We included the amount of support, frequency of contact, and control variables as predictors.

When we ran the model for the full sample of offspring, findings for life satisfaction were not significant for either the amount of help offspring received overall or for appraisals that the amount of support was appropriate. When we looked at students, separately, we found that amount of parental support was associated with evaluations of life satisfaction. That is, students who received more support from parents also reported greater life satisfaction after controlling for other background characteristics,  $B=0.12$ ,  $t=2.34$ ,  $p<0.01$ . The models for nonstudents did not show such associations.

Interestingly, when we estimated models separately for each of the six types of support for students, each type of support from parents was significantly associated with offspring's reports of life satisfaction, except for practical support. That is, receiving more frequent practical support from parents was not associated with offspring's reports of life satisfaction, whereas receiving more frequent advice, emotional support, an attentive ear, companionship, and money were all associated with reports of higher life satisfaction among students. These patterns were not evident for nonstudents in the sample. Parental support of any type was not associated with nonstudents' life satisfaction.

Finally, for parents we also examined life satisfaction as an outcome variable. In these analyses, however, the outcome variable was an upper-level variable occurring at the parental level rather than at the offspring level. Thus, we did not have a nested outcome. Instead, we used ordinary least squares regression and aggregated assessments of the grown children in each family. We used several metrics to aggregate the ratings of appropriateness of support and amount of support provided, including the following: the mean across all children aged 18–24, the mean across all grown children (at least one of whom was 18–24), the sums, and the maximum rating. The regressions with amount of support provided to offspring as a predictor was not significant. The regression with appraisals of support as a predictor was significant, however, regardless of the metric we used,  $F(5,442) = 9.07$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for the regression with mean appraisals across children,  $R^2 = 0.09$ ,  $B = -0.44$ ,  $t = -3.73$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . Parents who viewed their offspring as needing more than other children of comparable age reported less life satisfaction.

## **Implications of Research on Young Adults and Their Parents**

The overall portrait of relationships between adults and their parents shows that an image of a helicopter parent hovering and diminishing their young adults' transition may be a gross oversimplification. Comparative data across cohorts suggest today's parents are more involved with young adult offspring than parents in the past, but they are involved in ways that may foster (rather than hinder) a successful transition into adulthood.

### ***Cohort Differences in Relationships with Parents***

Available data suggest there have been changes in parent–child ties over the past few decades. Contact between adults and parents appears to have intensified, with more young adults reporting contact with a parent several times a week than in the late twentieth century. Parents also appear to be offering more support of all types to grown children than they did in the last century. Although we attribute some of these changes to technological advances such as the widespread adoption of the cell phone, some of these differences also may stem from societal changes.

Data from international studies indicate that macro-level economic factors and social policies also shape ties between adults and their parents. For example, cross-national differences in coresidence suggest decisions to live with parents reflect factors such as availability and affordability of housing and ease of finding stable employment. Indeed, data from the European Quality of Life Survey in 2003 documented national variability in the rental housing market, mortgage availability, and access to long-term employment accounted for rates of coresidence. These factors, along with cultural acceptance of coresidence, help explain why 60% of adults aged 18–34 resided with parents in Southern European countries such as Italy and Spain, compared to only a 10% rate of coresidence in Scandinavian countries (Newman & Aptekar, 2006). Direct payment to university students and policies to facilitate the transition to employment in Scandinavian countries accentuate these differences.

For the sake of comparison to data from Europe, we note that among adults aged 18–34 the rate of coresidence was 28.1% in 1985 and 29.4% in 2009 (US Census Bureau, 2009), lying somewhere between the rates in Southern Europe and Scandinavia. Thus, social factors relating to job opportunity and affordable housing also may explain offspring's greater dependency on parents.

### ***Student Status in the Transition to Adulthood***

Likewise, an increase in the proportion of students in the USA may help explain increased dependency on parents on average. Of course, students also come from more distinct milieus than do nonstudents. Students typically have parents who are

more affluent and more likely to be married than young adults who do not pursue higher education. Lower-SES parents are less likely to be able to support their children through prolonged higher education. Thus, the portrait we present here is not simply one of being a student, but of how parents from different social backgrounds assist their progeny through young adulthood.

Distinctions between parent–child ties by SES should not be overblown, however, as there were also similarities. For example, parents of students and nonstudents alike experienced coresidence with offspring aged 18–24. Nonstudents were more likely to report that they currently lived with their parents, but students were more likely to have done so in the past year. Likewise with regard to contact, young adults in general were in touch with their parents often. But students and nonstudents used different modalities of contact. Nonstudents reported more frequent in-person visits, but students talked more often on the telephone. Likewise, our prior research from the 1990s found that mothers were equally invested in young adult daughters who were not pursuing education and had children of their own, as in daughters still in school (Fingerman, 2000). The transition to adulthood appears to evoke recognition of the two decades of childrearing that preceded it and heavy investment by parents from different backgrounds.

### *Consequences of Parental Involvement*

Involvement with parents does not appear to be detrimental for parents and children, however. Feelings of ambivalence were evident at the transition to adulthood, but the parent–child relationship involves a great deal of positivity that appears to increase as parents and children grow older.

In addition, the support parents provide is associated with greater life satisfaction among students. Given the importance of student status to how parents view their grown children and how parental support appears to affect these children, a key question is: what happens when these children complete their education? Future longitudinal research should address this issue.

It was notable that parents' sense of what is expected of offspring (i.e., parental evaluations of whether offspring required greater support than others of comparable age) was associated with their own well-being more than actual support provided. This finding is consistent with research on elder caregiving. The consequences of providing care to a frail older adult stem from perceptions of burden more than the objective burden of providing help (Son et al., 2007; Zarit, Reever, & Bach-Peterson, 1980).

In this case, helping grown children may yield future benefits for parents. Grown children who successfully enter jobs and find partners after completing their education reap the benefits of parental investment and fulfill the promise of success. It is less clear how relationships between adults and their parents will fare if current economic difficulties persist in the USA and these current students have trouble finding employment and stable family life after they complete their education. Parents may suffer if they view continued needs for support as nonnormative.

In sum, the parent–child tie is an important source of support and well-being for both parents and children across the lifespan. This chapter indicates that the parent–child tie is also dynamic and nuanced. More work is needed to understand how the parent–child tie changes over time and the characteristics that lead to its diversity. Understanding the parent–child tie at this stage of life will help us to make improvements in the lives of both parents and children as they experience the stresses of everyday life and more serious life events. Although recent economic upheavals and technological advances have led to important changes in the parent–child tie, this tie may also serve as a resource to cope with these changes.

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## Chapter 6

# The Implications of Family Context for the Transition to Adulthood

Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson and Janel Benson

**Abstract** In the prolonged transition to adulthood, young adults are increasingly dependent on their families for material and emotional support, but what effect does this support have on later success? This chapter extends research by Fingerman and colleagues to investigate the long-term implications of family context on young adults' success. Specifically, we draw upon data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to examine how adolescent family structure and parent-child relationships in both adolescence and early adulthood shape later subjective achievement. Youth growing up in two-biological parent families have the highest levels of subjective attainment, which is largely because youth in these families have greater access to financial resources in adolescence and as they follow different transition pathways into adulthood. Greater family resources allow families to provide financial support throughout the transition to adulthood. Parent-offspring closeness during adolescence and early adulthood is advantageous for subjective achievement while high levels of monitoring during adolescence is negatively associated with later success. Consistent with Fingerman and her colleagues, we find that young adult pathways condition the effects of parental support and closeness on achievement.

As noted by Settersten (Chap. 1), historical changes in the transition to adulthood have meant young people are now dependent on their families for material and emotional support for longer periods of time than perhaps ever before. The study by Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe, Birditt, and Zarit (Chap. 5) provides great detail on the

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ways in which parents are involved as their children transition to adulthood, as well as how they and their young adult children feel about it. Importantly, both Settersten and Fingerman and her colleagues point out that not all families are equally equipped to manage this increased responsibility. How families facilitate successful transitions to adulthood is a critical issue for contemporary family scholars. In this chapter, we first highlight what we see as some key contributions of Fingerman and her colleagues' study. We then identify some areas needing further explication. Finally, we build on Fingerman and colleagues' contributions by presenting additional empirical work that speaks to how families affect the transition to adulthood and young adults' success.

The ways families invest in young adult children have received increased attention, but existing work tends to focus on the transfer of material resources with less attention to dynamics within families, such as relationship quality and emotional support. A key contribution of Fingerman and her colleagues' work is that they do both. They provide an important portrait of parent–child relationships during early adulthood, including the quality of contact and the varieties of support young people receive from their parents. A major strength of their paper lies in recognizing and examining variation in parents' and young adults' *assessments* of their receipt of support rather than considering only the amount of support itself.

A second key strength is that to the extent allowed via available data, they have placed the findings from the Family Exchanges Study in an historical context. It is critically important that as we build our understanding of the contemporary transition to adulthood we carefully delineate changes in social structural and cultural contexts, that is, what is or is not changing, and likewise which behaviors and experiences are changing and which are not.

Fingerman and colleagues also demonstrate the importance of family context for families' capacities for involvement and support, focusing specifically on parental economic resources – income and educational attainment. For example, parental income predicts the financial and practical assistance parents provide young adult offspring and explains why students receive more of both types of assistance from their parents. In our past work, we have conceptualized family context more broadly to include family structure, parental resources, and parent–child relationships (Benson & Johnson, 2009; Musick & Bumpass, 1999), and here we argue for a more inclusive treatment of family context. Given the increasing diversity of family forms and their wide-ranging impact on family relationships and young adult outcomes, family structure is critical to consider (Benson & Johnson, 2009; Brown, 2010; Cavanagh, 2008). Beyond family structure, families are an important source of socialization, enabling young people to develop confidence, autonomy, and aspirations (Brown, 2010; Swartz, 2008). Thus, multiple dimensions of parent–child relations, both prior to and during the young adult years, likely facilitate or detract from successful transitions to adulthood.

While we know that parent–child relationships are critical during childhood and adolescence, scholars have focused less attention on parent–offspring relationships in young adulthood. Fingerman and colleagues contend that warm, supportive parent–child relationships may scaffold successful development but warn that excessive

involvement may undermine this development and create dependency rather than autonomy. For example, a recent study on the transition to college suggests that overly close relationships stifle autonomy and have negative consequences for attainment (Turley, Desmond, & Bruch, 2010). In their work, however, Fingerman and colleagues find only limited effects of parental relationships on offspring's life satisfaction. The amount of parental support provided (frequent advice, emotional support, companionship, and money) is positively associated with life satisfaction, but only among students. Yet, the authors find that parents who viewed their young adult children as needing more than other children reported lower life satisfaction than parents whose children needed less help. These findings raise important questions about the long-term effects of the extended transition on children *and* parents, with attention to potential costs and benefits across generations. In particular, it is important to consider whether and to what extent parent–offspring relationships impact other types of transitions associated with adulthood, such as educational and employment success.

In addition, Fingerman and her colleagues highlight how parental support to children may depend on the pathways taken in the transition to adulthood. Importantly, family support may operate on later attainment through role transitions and attainments early in the adult transition, and the effects of support may be conditioned by them as well. In addition to the student and partnership roles considered by Fingerman and colleagues, it is important to understand how family support is related to and conditioned by other major role transitions during this period. Employment, parenthood, and coresidence status may also play key parts in this process, and all are intertwined in important ways.

In this chapter, we examine the implications of adolescent and early adult family context on young adult subjective attainment. In doing so, we extend and complement Fingerman and her colleagues' work in several ways. First, we broaden the consideration of family context to include family structure, resources, and processes. Second, we examine parent–child ties both in adolescence and early adulthood. On one important dimension of parent–child relationships, parent–child closeness, we are able to examine its relation to subjective perceptions of attainment both as tapped in adolescence and in the earliest ages of the transition to adulthood, speaking to the issue Fingerman and her colleagues raise about the longevity of the parent–child tie. Like them, we address the ways in which support from and closeness to parents early in the transition to adulthood contribute to perceived success, although we consider how it may occur independently and by mediating the effects of adolescent family context. Third, we include employment, parenthood, and independent living in our consideration of pathway markers and how they work together with ties to parents. Finally, we expand our knowledge base by examining additional indicators of successful transitions – young people's subjective sense of their own success in terms of status attainment and career status – and at a somewhat later age in the transition to adulthood – age 24–32. We focus on these subjective evaluations of success because economic attainment is so central to perceptions of adulthood today (Arnett, 2004; Furstenberg, Kennedy, McLoyd, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2004) and extend consideration to somewhat older ages to see how ties with parents early in the transition matter later.

We address these questions by using panel data, which allows us to more fully assess the relationship between family context and subsequent success. The cross-sectional design of Fingerman and colleagues' study presents potential endogeneity or reverse causality issues and limits their ability to examine how these earlier family experiences shape subsequent development. Since family relationships and subjective success were measured at similar time points, it is difficult to know whether relationships drive success or level of success drives relationships. It also means that they are more limited in their ability to understand the processes that underlie the association of support from parents with successful outcomes. We more fully address these questions here.

## Data and Methods

This research is based on survey data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a nationally representative study of U.S. adolescents in grades 7–12 from 134 middle and high schools in 80 communities (Bearman, Jones, & Udry, 1997). The Wave I (in-home) survey interviews began during the 1995–1996 school year (Wave I), and participants were reinterviewed between April and August 1996 (Wave II), between August 2001 and April 2002 (Wave III), and between 2007 and 2008 (Wave IV). The total Wave I in-home sample size, including special over-samples, is 20,745. We use data collected in Waves I, III, and IV and restrict analysis to respondents who were interviewed in all three Waves, were assigned a sampling weight, and have complete data on all variables in the analysis ( $n=11,056$ ). We weight all analyses and use survey analysis techniques to adjust for the complex sample design (see Chantala & Tabor, 1999).

## Dependent Variables

We examine two subjective assessments of achievement, including perceived attainment and whether the respondent is working at a job related to his or her career. Both dependent variables are measured in Wave IV when young adults in the sample ranged in age from 24 to 32. Subjective attainment is measured using a question that asks respondents to rank themselves in comparison to other Americans in terms of having money, education, and a respected job, with “1” indicating low levels of these traits and “10” the highest level. Working a career job is measured with a dichotomous variable that distinguishes those young people working in jobs they say are related to their long-term career goals from those who say it is not related or preparatory for that career, or that they do not hold long-term career goals. While career jobs can vary in quality, this outcome complements consideration of attainment by tapping into what is considered a key part of becoming an adult – settling into a career (Mortimer, Vuolo, Staff, Wakefield, & Xie, 2008).



## Independent Variables

We examine adolescent family structure, parental resources including family income and parental education level, and parent–child relationships when respondents were 12- to 17-years old (Wave I). Family structure labels given in quotations indicate the status of the vast majority of families in categories that are in reality slightly more diverse than the label implies. These and all other variables in the analysis are described in Table 6.1. Early adult family relationships are captured in two ways: through a similar measure of parent–adolescent closeness as in Wave I (but derived from fewer items) and parent financial support. These measures, along with early adult achievements and role transitions, are taken from the Wave III survey when respondents were 18–26 years old. In our final models, we also consider personal income and educational attainment at Wave IV, when subjective attainment is also measured.

In our analysis, we first consider the baseline differences in the outcomes by adolescent family structure, and then consider how family resources and processes in adolescence contribute to the outcomes and mediate the effects of family structure. Next, we examine closeness to parents and parental financial support in early adulthood (age 18–26). Finally, we consider the adult roles young people have entered, along with objective measures of attainment to ascertain how they mediate the effects of the family measures and whether various aspects of the familial context contribute independently to young people’s perceptions of their own achievement. Here, we also consider whether the effects of parental financial support and close relationships early in the transition to adulthood are conditional on the roles offspring have entered.

## Results

Model 1 in Table 6.2 shows baseline differences in subjective attainment at Wave IV for those who lived in varying family structures, controlling only age, sex, and race/ethnicity. Compared to other young people who as adolescents lived with their two biological parents, those who lived in any other family structure as adolescents rate themselves later as less successful. The effect of living with two “adoptive” parents is not statistically significant, but is of a similar magnitude as each other family structure. Higher ratings of success come with age, and both Blacks and those of “other” race/ethnicities perceive themselves to be less successful than do non-Hispanic Whites.

Model 2 introduces adolescent family resources (family income and parental education) and the adolescent measures of family process. Not surprisingly, family income and parental education are associated with greater subjective success. Closer parent–child relationships and higher parental educational expectations are also associated with greater subjective success and high parental monitoring is linked to lower success. These findings speak to the debate Fingerman and her colleagues

**Table 6.1** Description and summary statistics (weighted) of study measures ( $n=11,056$ )

| Variable                         | Description   | Range | Prop /Mean | s.d  |
|----------------------------------|---|-------|------------|------|
| Subjective attainment            | Self-perceive rating of success based on question asking how successful $R$ was compared with other Americans in regard to having a respected job, money, and education. Higher scores=greater success  | 1–10  | 5.01       | 2.00 |
| Career status                    | 1 = $R$ reports the current/most recent job is part of long-term career or work goals, otherwise "0"  | 0–1   | 0.40       | 0.57 |
| <i>Family structure</i>          |   |       |            |      |
| Two-biological parents           | 1 = two biological parent family  | 0–1   | 0.59       | 0.57 |
| "Step-families"                  | 1 = all families with a biological parent and the parent's spouse or cohabiting partner   | 0–1   | 0.16       | 0.42 |
| "Adoptive" two-parent            | 1 = All other two parent family types such as two adoptive or foster parents  | 0–1   | 0.01       | 0.11 |
| Single biological mother         | 1 = single mother   | 0–1   | 0.18       | 0.45 |
| Single biological father         | 1 = single father   | 0–1   | 0.03       | 0.19 |
| Other family types               | 1 = diverse array of single, nonbiological parent family types  | 0–1   | 0.03       | 0.21 |
| <i>Family Resources (Wave 1)</i> |   |       |            |      |
| Parent education                 | Highest of mothers' and fathers' educational attainments (1 = completed 8th grade or less; 8 = graduate or professional training)   | 1–8   | 4.92       | 2.08 |
| Family income                    | Household income during adolescence as a percentage of 1994 federal poverty thresholds, which account for the # of people in the household  |       |            |      |
| Below poverty line               |   | 0–1   | 0.13       | 0.39 |
| 100–200% of poverty line         |   | 0–1   | 0.18       | 0.45 |
| 200–300% of poverty line         |   | 0–1   | 0.18       | 0.45 |
| 300–400% of poverty line         |   | 0–1   | 0.13       | 0.39 |
| >400% of poverty line            |   | 0–1   | 0.19       | 0.46 |
| Family income missing            |   | 0–1   | 0.20       | 0.47 |
| <i>Family Processes (Wave 1)</i> |   |       |            |      |
| Parent-child closeness           | 5-item scale of parent-child closeness, satisfaction, warmth, caring, and communication. When information was available for both parents, we use the lower of the parental relationship scores for each item in the construct. Higher scores = closer. Alpha = 0.89 | 0–4   | 3.12       | 0.88 |

|   |   |      |       |      |
|---|---|------|-------|------|
| Parental control                                  | 7-item additive index of parental monitoring of <i>R</i> 's activities (including weekend curfew, friends, clothes, amount of television watching, TV show selection, weeknight bedtime, and what food to eat.) Higher scores=more monitoring. Alpha=0.63   | 0-7  | 1.88  | 1.80 |
| Parental educ. aspiration                         | <i>R</i> reports of how disappointed parents would be if <i>R</i> did not attend college. Higher scores = greater disappointment  | 1-5  | 3.82  | 1.49 |
| <i>Family context (Wave 3)</i>                    |   |      |       |      |
| Financial assistance                              | <i>R</i> reports of whether each parent has given money or paid for something significant in the past 12 months. If so, they estimate the value as 1 = <\$200, 2 = \$200-499, 3 = \$500-999, 4 = \$1000 or more. If <i>R</i> reports more than one parent providing assistance, we take the value of the parent with the highest contribution | 0-4  | 2.17  | 1.65 |
| Parent-child closeness                            | 3-item scale of parent-child closeness, warmth, and enjoyment. When information was available for both parents, we use the lower of the parental relationship scores for each item in the construct. Higher scores=closer. Alpha=0.66   | 0-4  | 3.14  | 0.89 |
| <i>Role transitions and achievements (Wave 3)</i> |   |      |       |      |
| High school GPA                                   | Average of self-reported grades (1 = D to 4 = A) across four subjects: language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics  | 1-4  | 2.84  | 0.88 |
| Educational attainment                            | Years of education  | 6-22 | 13.19 | 2.09 |
| College student                                   | <i>R</i> reports current enrollment at a 4-year college or graduate program   | 0-1  | 0.26  | 0.46 |
| Other student                                     | <i>R</i> reports other current school enrollment (vast majority is at a 2-year college)   | 0-1  | 0.12  | 0.35 |
| Employed full-time                                | <i>R</i> reports current employment of 35 or more hours per week  | 0-1  | 0.53  | 0.53 |
| Married   | <i>R</i> reports ever having gotten married   | 0-1  | 0.18  | 0.41 |
| Cohabiting  | <i>R</i> reports ever having cohabited  | 0-1  | 0.40  | 0.52 |
| Parent  | <i>R</i> reports ever having a child  | 0-1  | 0.18  | 0.45 |
| Lives independently                               | <i>R</i> currently does not live with parents   | 0-1  | 0.57  | 0.53 |
| <i>Attainment (Wave 4)</i>                        |   |      |       |      |
| Educational attainment                            | Highest level of education achieved. 1 = 8th grade; 11 = Ph.D or Prof Deg.  | 1-11 | 5.67  | 2.39 |
| Income  | Log of personal income  |      | 9.24  | 4.24 |

(continued)

**Table 6.1** (continued)

| Variable             | Description  | Range | Prop /Mean | s.d  |
|----------------------|--|-------|------------|------|
| Race-ethnicity       |  |       |            |      |
| Non-Hispanic White   | 1 = White  | 0-1   | 0.68       | 0.55 |
| Black                | 1 = Black  | 0-1   | 0.14       | 0.41 |
| Hispanic             | 1 = Hispanic American                              | 0-1   | 0.11       | 0.37 |
| Asian                | 1 = Asian American                                 | 0-1   | 0.04       | 0.22 |
| Other race/ethnicity | 1 = Other race/ethnicity                           | 0-1   | 0.03       | 0.20 |
| Female               | 1 = Female   | 0-1   | 0.51       | 0.58 |
| Age                  | Age in years at Wave 4 (93% are between 26 and 32) | 24-34 | 28.17      | 2.13 |

Source: National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health

**Table 6.2** Ordinary least squares regression models of subjective attainment ( $n = 1,056$ )

|  | Model 1  |      | Model 2  |      | Model 3  |      | Model 4  |      | Model 5 |      |
|--|----------|------|----------|------|----------|------|----------|------|---------|------|
|  | B        | SE B | B        | SE B | B        | SE B | B        | SE B | B       | SE B |
| <i>Family structure</i>                      |          |      |          |      |          |      |          |      |         |      |
| “Step-parent”                                | -0.41*** | 0.06 | -0.29*** | 0.05 | -0.24*** | 0.05 | -0.09    | 0.05 | -0.10   | 0.05 |
| 2 “Adoptive” parent                          | -0.38    | 0.22 | -0.48*   | 0.23 | -0.49*   | 0.23 | -0.14    | 0.25 | -0.14   | 0.24 |
| Single mother                                | -0.43*** | 0.07 | -0.33*** | 0.07 | -0.27*** | 0.07 | -0.11    | 0.06 | -0.11   | 0.06 |
| Single father                                | -0.42**  | 0.15 | -0.42**  | 0.16 | -0.37*   | 0.16 | -0.13    | 0.14 | -0.15   | 0.14 |
| Other  | -0.29*   | 0.13 | -0.06    | 0.13 | -0.02    | 0.13 | 0.17     | 0.13 | 0.17    | 0.13 |
| <i>Family resources</i>                      |          |      |          |      |          |      |          |      |         |      |
| In poverty                                   |          |      | -0.45*** | 0.10 | -0.39*** | 0.10 | -0.22*   | 0.09 | -0.17   | 0.09 |
| 100–200% of poverty                          |          |      | -0.48*** | 0.08 | -0.43*** | 0.08 | -0.28*** | 0.08 | -0.25** | 0.08 |
| 200–300% of poverty                          |          |      | -0.32*** | 0.08 | -0.29*** | 0.08 | -0.19**  | 0.07 | -0.18*  | 0.07 |
| 300–400% of poverty                          |          |      | -0.23*   | 0.10 | -0.21*   | 0.10 | -0.19*   | 0.09 | -0.18*  | 0.09 |
| Income missing                               |          |      | -0.25**  | 0.08 | -0.22**  | 0.08 | -0.13    | 0.08 | -0.11   | 0.08 |
| Parent education                             |          |      | 0.15***  | 0.02 | 0.15***  | 0.02 | 0.06**   | 0.02 | 0.04*   | 0.02 |
| <i>Family processes (W1)</i>                 |          |      |          |      |          |      |          |      |         |      |
| Parent–child closeness                       |          |      | 0.16***  | 0.03 | 0.11**   | 0.03 | 0.07*    | 0.03 | 0.07*   | 0.03 |
| Parental control                             |          |      | -0.04**  | 0.01 | -0.04**  | 0.01 | -0.02    | 0.01 | -0.01   | 0.01 |
| Parental educ. Asp.                          |          |      | 0.09***  | 0.02 | 0.09***  | 0.02 | 0.04*    | 0.02 | 0.04*   | 0.02 |
| <i>Family processes (W3)</i>                 |          |      |          |      |          |      |          |      |         |      |
| Parent–child closeness                       |          |      |          |      | 0.14***  | 0.03 | 0.10**   | 0.03 | 0.11*** | 0.03 |
| Parent financial assist                      |          |      |          |      | 0.05***  | 0.01 | 0.01     | 0.01 | 0.01    | 0.01 |
| <i>Role transitions and achievement (W3)</i> |          |      |          |      |          |      |          |      |         |      |
| Educ. attainment                             |          |      |          |      |          |      | 0.16***  | 0.02 | -       | -    |
| HS GPA                                       |          |      |          |      |          |      | 0.20***  | 0.03 | 0.16*** | 0.03 |
| College student                              |          |      |          |      |          |      | 0.39***  | 0.07 | 0.20*   | 0.08 |
| Other student                                |          |      |          |      |          |      | 0.25**   | 0.08 | 0.13    | 0.08 |

(continued)

**Table 6.2** (continued)

|                        | Model 1  |      | Model 2 |      | Model 3 |      | Model 4 |      | Model 5 |      |
|------------------------|----------|------|---------|------|---------|------|---------|------|---------|------|
|                        | B        | SE B | B       | SE B | B       | SE B | B       | SE B | B       | SE B |
| Employed full time     |          |      |         |      |         |      |         |      |         |      |
| Married                |          |      |         |      |         |      | 0.19*** | 0.05 | 0.16**  | 0.05 |
| Cohabited              |          |      |         |      |         |      | 0.08    | 0.05 | 0.10    | 0.06 |
| Parent                 |          |      |         |      |         |      | -0.12*  | 0.05 | -0.13** | 0.05 |
| Lives independently    |          |      |         |      |         |      | -0.07   | 0.06 | -0.10   | 0.06 |
| Lives independently    |          |      |         |      |         |      | 0.13**  | 0.04 | 0.11**  | 0.04 |
| <i>Attainment (W4)</i> |          |      |         |      |         |      |         |      |         |      |
| Educ. attainment       |          |      |         |      |         |      |         |      | 0.21*** | 0.01 |
| Income (log)           |          |      |         |      |         |      |         |      | 0.03*** | 0.01 |
| <i>Race/ethnicity</i>  |          |      |         |      |         |      |         |      |         |      |
| Black                  | -0.26**  | 0.07 | -0.15*  | 0.06 | -0.17*  | 0.06 | -0.11   | 0.06 | -0.11   | 0.06 |
| Hispanic               | -0.09    | 0.09 | 0.26**  | 0.09 | 0.26**  | 0.09 | 0.23**  | 0.08 | 0.19*   | 0.08 |
| Asian                  | 0.26     | 0.13 | 0.23    | 0.12 | 0.24*   | 0.12 | 0.10    | 0.10 | 0.11    | 0.09 |
| Other                  | -0.46*** | 0.13 | -0.34** | 0.12 | -0.32** | 0.12 | -0.31** | 0.11 | -0.24*  | 0.10 |
| Female                 | 0.00     | 0.05 | 0.03    | 0.04 | 0.02    | 0.04 | -0.07   | 0.04 | -0.07   | 0.04 |
| Age                    | 0.07***  | 0.02 | 0.08*** | 0.02 | 0.08*** | 0.02 | 0.04*   | 0.02 | 0.07*** | 0.02 |

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

described about the potential costs and benefits of parent–child closeness. Closeness is associated with later perceived success, but high levels of parental monitoring is negatively associated with later assessments of success, perhaps because it hinders the development of autonomy and skills young people need to navigate the transition to adulthood. Differences across family structures are attenuated somewhat in this model, due specifically to the introduction of family resources to the model (additional analyses not shown).

In Model 3 we consider, to the extent measures are available, the influence of the ongoing parent–child relationship as offspring enter early adulthood. Closer relationships to parents at age 18–26, and the extent of parental financial help at age 18–26, both promote perceptions of success later. When we added measures of parental financial help and closeness in early adulthood separately, the effects of family income and parent–adolescent closeness on attainment, respectively, were considerably weakened (additional analyses not shown). This suggests that family income affects perceptions of attainment partially through the effect of financial support in early adulthood. Likewise, continuity in parent–offspring closeness partially explains why parent–*adolescent* closeness matters.

We next consider achievement measures and entry into adult roles at age 18–26. High school grades and educational attainment predict higher self-perceived attainment later, as does current enrollment in a 4-year college or graduate program, full-time employment, and having moved away from families of origin. Having cohabited by these age groups is associated with lower perceived attainment. Importantly, these pathway markers eliminate the remaining significant effects of family structure, and weaken further the effects of adolescent family resources and relationships on perceived attainment. The effect of parent financial assistance is also explained by the achievements and role changes of early adulthood. In analyses not shown, we examined the potential for conditional effects of parent–offspring relationships by the role transitions made by young adult offspring. There were few significant effects. Consistent with Fingerman and colleagues' results, we did find that parental financial support only affected the perceived attainment of those who were college students. We also found that the effect of close relationships to parents during this stage was weaker for young people who reported having cohabited with a romantic partner. In Model 5 we show that while contemporaneous objective measures of educational attainment and income do influence perceived attainment, the picture of how family processes in adolescence and early adulthood shape perceived attainment remains much the same.

Our second measure of achievement is the respondents' evaluations of whether they are working in jobs related to their long-term career goals. We follow the same analytic strategy. In Model 1 in Table 6.3 we again see baseline differences by family structure. In this case, however, young adults from two-parent “adoptive” families are doing as well as those from two-biological parent families (see Benson & Johnson, 2009, for an additional example of this pattern in the transition to adulthood). Working in a career job is linked to advancing age, as one might expect, but is lower among females than males, and lower among Blacks, Hispanics, and those from other race/ethnicities compared to non-Hispanic Whites and Asians. Parents' education and

**Table 6.3** Logistic regression models of career status ( $n = 10,947$ )

|  | Model 1  |      |      | Model 2  |      |      | Model 3 |      |      | Model 4 |      |      | Model 5 |      |      |
|--|----------|------|------|----------|------|------|---------|------|------|---------|------|------|---------|------|------|
|  | B        | SE   | OR   | B        | SE   | OR   | B       | SE   | OR   | B       | SE   | OR   | B       | SE   | OR   |
| <i>Family structure</i>                      |          |      |      |          |      |      |         |      |      |         |      |      |         |      |      |
| “Step-parent”                                | -0.31*** | 0.07 | 0.74 | -0.22**  | 0.07 | 0.80 | -0.16*  | 0.07 | 0.85 | -0.05   | 0.07 | 0.95 | -0.05   | 0.08 | 0.95 |
| 2 “Adoptive” parent                          | 0.06     | 0.26 | 1.06 | 0.00     | 0.28 | 1.00 | -0.02   | 0.27 | 0.98 | 0.26    | 0.28 | 1.30 | 0.34    | 0.27 | 1.41 |
| Single mother                                | -0.36*** | 0.08 | 0.70 | -0.29*** | 0.08 | 0.75 | -0.21*  | 0.08 | 0.81 | -0.09   | 0.09 | 0.92 | -0.08   | 0.09 | 0.93 |
| Single father                                | -0.36*   | 0.15 | 0.70 | -0.36*   | 0.15 | 0.70 | -0.30   | 0.16 | 0.74 | -0.09   | 0.16 | 0.91 | -0.13   | 0.17 | 0.88 |
| Other  | -0.31*   | 0.15 | 0.74 | -0.14    | 0.15 | 0.87 | -0.09   | 0.15 | 0.92 | 0.08    | 0.16 | 1.08 | 0.11    | 0.16 | 1.11 |
| <i>Family resources</i>                      |          |      |      |          |      |      |         |      |      |         |      |      |         |      |      |
| In poverty                                   |          |      |      | -0.31*   | 0.13 | 0.74 | -0.24   | 0.14 | 0.79 | -0.10   | 0.14 | 0.91 | -0.07   | 0.14 | 0.94 |
| 100–200% of pov.                             |          |      |      | -0.21*   | 0.10 | 0.81 | -0.16   | 0.10 | 0.85 | -0.04   | 0.10 | 0.96 | -0.01   | 0.10 | 0.99 |
| 200–300% of pov.                             |          |      |      | -0.10    | 0.09 | 0.90 | -0.07   | 0.09 | 0.93 | 0.00    | 0.09 | 1.00 | 0.01    | 0.09 | 1.01 |
| 300–400% of pov.                             |          |      |      | -0.05    | 0.09 | 0.95 | -0.02   | 0.09 | 0.98 | -0.01   | 0.10 | 0.99 | -0.01   | 0.10 | 0.99 |
| Income missing                               |          |      |      | -0.14    | 0.11 | 0.87 | -0.11   | 0.11 | 0.90 | -0.05   | 0.11 | 0.95 | -0.04   | 0.11 | 0.96 |
| Parent education                             |          |      |      | 0.12***  | 0.02 | 1.12 | 0.11*** | 0.02 | 1.11 | 0.04*   | 0.02 | 1.05 | 0.04    | 0.02 | 1.04 |
| <i>Family processes (W1)</i>                 |          |      |      |          |      |      |         |      |      |         |      |      |         |      |      |
| Parent–child clos.                           |          |      |      | 0.15***  | 0.03 | 1.17 | 0.09*   | 0.03 | 1.09 | 0.06    | 0.04 | 1.06 | 0.05    | 0.04 | 1.05 |
| Parental control                             |          |      |      | -0.03    | 0.02 | 0.97 | -0.03   | 0.02 | 0.97 | 0.00    | 0.02 | 1.00 | 0.00    | 0.02 | 1.00 |
| Parental educ. asp.                          |          |      |      | 0.01     | 0.03 | 1.01 | 0.00    | 0.03 | 1.00 | -0.03   | 0.02 | 0.97 | -0.04   | 0.03 | 0.96 |
| <i>Family processes (W3)</i>                 |          |      |      |          |      |      |         |      |      |         |      |      |         |      |      |
| Parent–child clos.                           |          |      |      |          |      |      | 0.17*** | 0.04 | 1.19 | 0.14**  | 0.04 | 1.16 | 0.16*** | 0.04 | 1.17 |
| Parent fin. assist                           |          |      |      |          |      |      | 0.07*** | 0.02 | 1.07 | 0.04*   | 0.02 | 1.04 | 0.05*   | 0.02 | 1.05 |
| <i>Role transitions and achievement (W3)</i> |          |      |      |          |      |      |         |      |      |         |      |      |         |      |      |
| Educ. Attainment                             |          |      |      |          |      |      | 0.13*** | 0.02 | 1.14 |         |      |      | –       |      |      |
| HS GPA                                       |          |      |      |          |      |      | 0.22*** | 0.04 | 1.25 | 0.22*** | 0.04 | 1.25 | 0.20*** | 0.05 | 1.23 |
| College student                              |          |      |      |          |      |      | 0.39*** | 0.08 | 1.47 | 0.39*** | 0.08 | 1.47 | 0.25*** | 0.09 | 1.29 |
| Other student                                |          |      |      |          |      |      | 0.06    | 0.10 | 1.06 |         |      |      | -0.02   | 0.10 | 0.98 |





family income are again associated with achievement (see Model 2), and attenuate some of the family structure effects. Model 2 also includes the indicators of adolescent family process. Of the family processes in adolescence we examine, only parent–child closeness is associated with working a career job at age 24–32 (Table 6.3).

We next introduce the measures of parent–child relationships at Wave III. Both closer relationships and parental financial assistance earlier in the transition to adulthood facilitate working in career jobs later. These measures also further attenuate the effects of adolescent family structure. They also reduce the effect of adolescent parent–child closeness considerably, though it remains statistically significant. Importantly, family income is no longer statistically significant when parental financial assistance is added separately to the model (analyses not shown), indicating that income operates by affecting the level of financial support in the earliest part of the transition to adulthood.

In Model 4 we include educational achievements and adult role transitions at age 18–26. These pathway markers account for much of the remaining effects from adolescence and attenuate somewhat the effects of relationships with and financial assistance from parents at this age. Educational achievement, enrollment in a 4-year college or graduate program, full-time employment, and marriage among the 18- to 26-year olds predicted working in a career job at age 24–32. In analyses not shown, we examined whether the effects of relationships with and financial assistance from parents were conditional on the adult role statuses their young adult offspring had entered early in the transition to adulthood. We found two statistically significant interactions. The positive effect of Wave III closeness to parents was weaker among those who had married and among those who had had children. Finally, we again introduced indicators of objective attainment from Wave IV. They strongly predicted working career jobs. Importantly, however, parent–child closeness and parental financial assistance at Wave III had effects independent of these objective achievements.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Family context affects the transition to adulthood in important ways, both operating during the transition and having shaped relationship histories. Like Fingerman and her colleagues, our study speaks directly to the costs and benefits of parent–child relationships, but our work examined the impact of these relationships as embedded in family context and over time. With respect to parent–child relationships, we found that closeness, both in adolescence and in early adulthood, facilitated perceived success later in the transition to adulthood. Relationships in adolescence matter in part because they are maintained to some extent over the years, but they continue to contribute to successful outcomes beyond this continuity (see Model 3). High levels of parental monitoring in adolescence, however, are another matter. It is here we see the potential risk of excessive parental involvement. Perhaps overly involved parents do not provide the context for young people to make decisions on their own and thus develop the necessary confidence and autonomy to successfully

navigate the transition to adulthood. It is also possible, however, that parents monitor at high levels when adolescents are already experiencing problems and appear to be at risk of having trouble successfully navigating the move into adulthood. An important contribution of the Fingerman et al. paper, and one we cannot address ourselves, is that these relationships have implications for parents, too.

Both Fingerman and her colleagues' study and ours also demonstrated important variation in families' capacities to facilitate young adults' successful transitions to adulthood. We extended their consideration of family context as material resources to include family structure as well. The panel design of the Add Health study also allowed us to identify the pathways through which adolescent family structure and processes operate on later achievement. First, growing up with two biological parents (and for one outcome we study, two "adoptive" parents) was advantageous for attainment because it was linked to parental resources as well as educational achievements and role transitions in early adulthood. Second, parental resources during adolescence, particularly family income, anticipated the relationships parents have with their offspring in early adulthood and the financial support they provide. Swartz, Kim, Uno, Mortimer, and O'Brien (2011) also found that parents' socioeconomic status predicts economic and housing support provided to offspring in the transition to adulthood, and Schoeni and Ross (2005) show that high socioeconomic status parents provide far financial greater resources to young adults than low socioeconomic status parents. Importantly, the findings presented here also showed that adolescents who grow up in more economically advantaged households tend to perceive themselves as more successful than their less advantaged peers in part *because their parents continue to provide additional financial support during the young adult transition*. Third, offspring's educational achievements and role transitions in early adulthood further mediate the effects of parental resources, highlighting how economic advantages during adolescence translate into different social pathways in young adulthood.

Parent-offspring ties in early adulthood also matter, in part, because they are tied to early achievements and role transitions. Indeed, we found that financial help in early adulthood is not significantly associated with perceived attainment when these pathway markers are introduced into the model, suggesting either that parental financial help increases perceived success in young adulthood by placing young adults of different pathways in early adulthood or that continued parental support depends on the paths their children take.

The pathways young people take in the transition to adulthood affect their perceived achievement, mediate some of the effects of family context as mentioned above, and in some cases condition the effects of parent-offspring ties in early adulthood. We found that enrollment in college or graduate school and working full-time at age 18–26 foster perceived success 5 years later. Young people's own union formation has mixed effects. Having cohabited by this age is associated with lower perceived attainment later, but having married is associated with working a career job. While young adults today continue to value marriage, they are less likely to marry until they and/or their partners are financially stable or have achieved what family scholars refer to as the "high bar" for marriage (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). As a result, young adults who are not

yet financially secure may choose cohabitation over marriage. Thus, the negative relationship between cohabitation and subjective achievement may reflect cohabitators' relatively precarious economic position. In contrast, those who have chosen to marry may be in more stable employment situations. Other research suggests that the marriage role carries a more serious commitment to providing for one's family and may serve as an incentive to obtain financial stability and consider one's work as a career (Mortimer, Vuolo, Staff, Wakefield, & Xie, 2008). In addition, parents may be less likely to provide economic and housing support to their young adult children who have formed their own families (Swartz et al., 2011).

Fingerman and her colleagues raised the important issue of how parent-child ties may matter differently depending on the pathways taken in early adulthood. We too found that parental support, in this case financial support, only affected perceived attainment for those who were enrolled in college at the time. For college students, both parents and the students themselves may perceive financial support as instrumental, an investment in the young adult's future. The other conditional effects in our analyses indicated that close parent-child relationships in early adulthood matter less for those who had cohabited (perceived attainment), or married, or had children (career status). Young adults with partners may have less need for a close relationship with parents, so that variability makes less difference. In addition, parents tend to favor giving offspring support when they are still single and attending school (Goldscheider, Thornton, & Yang, 2001).

Together, Fingerman and her colleagues' study and ours demonstrated that families provide an important source of economic and social support in the transition to adulthood. Future research is needed on how families promote and impede successful development during the early adult years. In particular, we need to understand how processes within families lead to the production and reproduction of inequality. Research by Lareau and Weininger (2008) suggests that parents and families provide differential levels of social and cultural capital from childhood to adulthood, which has implications for how well young people navigate the transition to adulthood. Thus, more attention is needed on the ways in which socialization within families is linked both to social class position and to later success. In addition, we need to understand how family processes and resources operate across race/ethnicity groups and immigrant status as well. In addition, greater attention should be focused on the families supporting young adults – parents, but also other family members (Chap. 1). Fingerman and colleagues showed that while investment can be important for success in young adulthood, it does not come without consequences for the parents who are providing this extra financial and emotional support.

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# Chapter 7

## Child Well-Being and the Long Reach of Family Relationships

Kelly Musick and Ann Meier

**Abstract** We build on Fingerman and colleagues' emphasis on the multifaceted and variable nature of family relationships while demonstrating the long reach of earlier family context (family structure, relationships, and resources) on young adult well-being. Using three waves of data from the National Survey of Families and Households, we examine links between adolescent family context, young adult schooling and relationships, and young adult psychological well-being. Information from parents and children at various points in the life course provides leverage on temporal order and allows for some progress in sorting out the processes linking parent–child relationships and child well-being. We elaborate on family context by considering family structure and parental conflict in adolescence, specific dimensions of parent–child relationships over time, and constellations of family relationships, i.e., a child's closeness with both, one, or neither parent. Our findings point to strong and persistent links between family relationships and young adult well-being.

As earlier chapters in this volume have made clear, the young adult years are critical in setting the stage for later health and well-being, and parents can be key players in the successful navigation of the many developmental tasks of this period. Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe, Birditt, and Zarit (Chap. 5) set out to describe the nature and implications of parental involvement in the lives of young adult offspring. Using rich data from the Family Exchanges Study, they paint a nuanced portrait of parent–child relationships from the perspective of both generations, emphasizing the importance of variability in these relationships. First, Fingerman and colleagues argue that parent–child relationships may vary by children's personal and situational factors,

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using children's school enrollment as an example. Second, they recognize that parent-child relationships are multidimensional and often ambivalent, examining contact, support, and subjective or emotional qualities of relationships. Finally, they conceptualize parental involvement as a potential help or hindrance, highlighting recent media portrayals of parental over-involvement (or "helicopter parenting") as detrimental to child growth and development. Their work pushes the field to think about the multifaceted nature and implications of young adults' relationships with their parents.

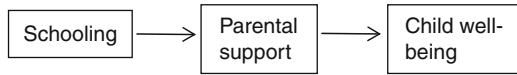
In this chapter, we maintain Fingerman and colleagues' emphasis on variability in parent-child relationships while joining Johnson and Benson (Chap. 6) in shifting attention to how earlier family context plays into later child well-being. We use three waves of data from the National Survey of Families and Households to examine links among adolescent family context, young adult schooling and relationships, and young adult psychological well-being. We elaborate on family context by considering family structure and parental conflict in adolescence, specific dimensions of parent-child relationships over time, and constellations of family relationships (i.e., a child's closeness with both, one, or neither parent). Our findings point to strong and persistent links between family relationships and young adult well-being.

## **Thinking About Parent-Child Relationships and Child Well-Being**

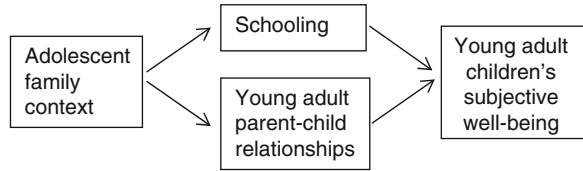
We start by outlining what we understand to be Fingerman and colleagues' basic model of the process linking parent-child relationships and child well-being. We then present an alternative set of assumptions and, ultimately, a different way of thinking about the process, one that reflects our backgrounds in sociology and demography. Fingerman and colleagues argue that personal and situational factors shape parent-child relationships, in particular, that children's schooling shapes parental support. Parents tend to give support to children based on their assessments of success and need, and they rate students as both more successful and in greater need of assistance. Parental support in turn affects child well-being, potentially negatively depending on parents' and children's subjective assessments of support. Figure 7.1 illustrates this idea in very simple terms. The authors acknowledge that school enrollment may also be an indicator of socioeconomic status. By this interpretation, it would be parents' socioeconomic resources – and not children's school enrollment – shaping parent-child relationships, with well-off parents providing more support to their children.

Our thinking about parent-child relationships and young adult well-being is more centrally rooted in a life course perspective that situates children in family contexts that unfold over time. In particular, we posit that early family context (by which we mean family structure, relationships, and resources) affects child well-being into young adulthood, potentially directly, but also indirectly via the child's transitions to adulthood and persistence in the nature of bonds between parents and children (e.g., Booth & Amato, 2001; Sobolewski & Amato, 2007). We also start with a different

**Fig. 7.1** Fingerman et al.'s model relating schooling, parental support, and child well-being



**Fig. 7.2** Mediation model relating early family context and child well-being in young adulthood



set of assumptions about the nature of parent–child relationships, drawing on the idea that these relationships are a form of social capital (e.g., Coleman, 1988; Lareau, 2003). In line with this view, we assume that parents' social capital investments in children facilitate the navigation of complex institutions in ways that promote child well-being and that more social capital (e.g., more parental involvement) is better. Finally, we worry a bit more about the difficulties of establishing causality, especially in (but not limited to) point-in-time studies. The arrows between, for example, children's schooling and parent–child relationships may be pointing in both directions, and innumerable factors may be confounding the link between the two.

Figure 7.2 depicts a model that builds on our prior work (Musick & Bumpass, 1999; Musick & Meier, 2010) on adolescent family structure, relationships, and transitions to adulthood, as well as work by Amato and Sobolewski (2001) on how these transitions in turn affect children's subjective well-being. This is a mediation model in which early family context affects young adult well-being through schooling and later parent–child relationships. This depiction could get much more complicated, with arrows allowing for both direct and indirect influences of early family context, with additional mediators (e.g., marriage or childbearing; see Johnson & Benson, Chap. 6), and with arrows connecting schooling and young adult parent–child relationships. Fingerman and colleagues focus on schooling, parent–child relationships, and subjective well-being in young adulthood, and argue that schooling affects parent–child relationships (and, in turn, well-being). In our model, schooling and relationships are associated, but through adolescent family context. While it is difficult to empirically differentiate competing models, our reliance on data from parents and children at various points in the life course provides leverage on temporal order and allows for some progress in sorting out the processes linking parent–child relationships and child well-being.

## Our Analysis of the NSFH

We used data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), a large, nationally representative panel study conducted in three waves (1987–1988, 1992–1994, and 2001–2002). Multiple respondents from the same household were interviewed, including a randomly selected focal child. For this study, we relied on



parent interviews when the focal child was in adolescence (children aged 10–18), and focal child self-reports on his/her achievements, relationships, and well-being as young adults (children aged 18–34).<sup>1</sup> Parent–child relationships may be especially important in navigating the many developmental changes of adolescence (Call & Mortimer, 2001; Shanahan, 2000), and adolescence itself is critical in setting the stage for transitions to adulthood with consequences for the subsequent life course (Hogan & Astone, 1986; Rindfuss, 1991).

We defined adolescent family context to include family structure, relationships, and socioeconomic status. In addition to who was in the house (i.e., both parents, a single mother, or a stepfather), we examined conflict between parents, as parental conflict tends to “spill over” into parent–child relationships (Erel & Burman, 1995). Averaging reports from mothers and fathers, we differentiated continuously married two-parent families according to how frequently parents disagreed about a range of topics: household tasks, money, time together, sex, children, and in-laws. We examined three dimensions of mother–child relationships, as reported by the mother: closeness to child, time with children, and harsh parenting, including the frequency of hitting and yelling. To tap socioeconomic status, we measured mother’s education and family income. Details on coding are included in the [Appendix](#). For the purposes of this chapter, we treated the adolescent family context as a bundle of properties that tend to covary. We note, however, that various mechanisms have been discussed in the literature suggesting that family structure, parental conflict, and socioeconomic status or social class shape parent–child relationships (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Erel & Burman, 1995; Fauber, Forehand, McCombsThomas, & Wierson, 1990; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Kohn, 1969; Lareau, 2003; Musick & Bumpass, 1999; Sobolewski & Amato, 2007; Thomson, Hanson, & McLanahan, 1994).

Table 7.1 shows how our three dimensions of the adolescent mother–child relationship varied by other aspects of the adolescent family context. Mothers in low-conflict two-parent families reported the closest relationships, the most time with children, and the lowest levels of harsh parenting, relative to mothers in other family types. Mothers in the top quartile of family income had the lowest levels of harsh parenting relative to families with less income, but they did not score highest on closeness or time; the *lowest*-income families scored highest on these dimensions. College-educated mothers spent more time with their children and engaged in less harsh parenting than mothers with less education, but as with family income, the *least* educated mothers reported the highest levels of closeness with their children. We were surprised by this negative association between closeness and family

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<sup>1</sup> Our sample was limited to focal children living with their mothers at the first wave, whose parents reported on family structure and relationships at NSFH1 or NSFH2, and who themselves reported on young adult transitions, relationships, and well-being at NSFH2 or NSFH3. We pieced together information from all three waves of the NSFH but relied on just two waves to construct measures for any given child, corresponding to their adolescent and young adult years. Our baseline sample included 1,963 cases. Samples varied somewhat by outcome due to item nonresponse (see Musick & Meier, 2010, for additional details on the sample and measures).

**Table 7.1** Means on mother–child relationship variables by family context, all measured in child’s adolescence

|                                  | Mother–child closeness<br>(1–7) | Time with mother<br>(1–6) | Harsh mothering<br>(0.8–4) |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>Family structure/conflict</i> |                                 |                           |                            |
| Low-conflict both parents        | 6.40                            | 3.95                      | 1.81                       |
| Medium-conflict both<br>parents  | 6.13                            | 3.78                      | 1.94                       |
| High-conflict both parents       | 6.00                            | 3.93                      | 2.13                       |
| Stepfather                       | 6.07                            | 3.79                      | 2.05                       |
| Single-mother                    | 5.96                            | 3.90                      | 2.10                       |
| <i>Family income</i>             |                                 |                           |                            |
| Q1 (lowest quartile)             | 6.18                            | 3.98                      | 2.12                       |
| Q2                               | 6.12                            | 3.92                      | 2.00                       |
| Q3                               | 6.06                            | 3.95                      | 1.99                       |
| Q4                               | 6.13                            | 3.82                      | 1.86                       |
| <i>Mother’s education</i>        |                                 |                           |                            |
| <HS                              | 6.30                            | 3.63                      | 2.11                       |
| HS                               | 6.10                            | 3.78                      | 2.06                       |
| Some college                     | 6.08                            | 4.03                      | 1.95                       |
| College+                         | 6.17                            | 3.99                      | 1.85                       |

*Note:* Means are weighted

socioeconomic status; it is inconsistent with our understanding of social class differences in parenting styles, in particular, in the intensive mothering and collaborative rule-making characteristic of more educated mothers (e.g., Lareau, 2003). We see more evidence of this negative relationship in analyses reported below.

Multivariate analyses look at how the various aspects of adolescent family context are associated with young adult academic achievement, relationships with parents, and psychological well-being in turn. We examined two indicators of academic achievement: dropping out of high school and poor grades in high school. Indicators of mother–child relationships in young adulthood were reported by the child based on single items assessing closeness, time together in the last 3 months, and frequency of disagreements in the last 3 months. These three measures tap the same relationship dimensions reported by the mother in the child’s adolescence (closeness, time together, and harsh parenting). At the end of the chapter, we incorporate data on father–child relationships and explore constellations of parent–child relationships. Our two measures of young adult psychological well-being included a single-item, global measure of “how things are these days” and an eight-item index of satisfaction in various domains of life, like career and love (again, see [Appendix](#) for details on measures).

We proceeded in a stepwise fashion by estimating pieces of the mediation model depicted in [Fig. 7.2](#). First, using logistic regression, we looked at how adolescent family context is associated with dropping out of school and poor grades in school. Next, altering our set of outcomes and using OLS regression, we looked at how adolescent family context is associated with mother–child relationships in young adulthood.

Finally, putting the pieces together, again relying on OLS regression, we examined how adolescent family context is linked to young adult well-being through schooling and young adult relationships with parents. To more clearly illustrate the relative magnitude of associations, we generated predicted values based on our model estimates, varying key contrasts while holding other variables at their mean levels. All models control for the focal child's age and sex and the mothers' race, childhood family structure, age at first birth, and union dissolution history prior to the focal child's birth.

## Results

Our first step estimated logistic regression models of dropping out of high school as a function of adolescent family context and controls. Complete model results are shown in column 1, Table 7.2. Figure 7.3 shows model-based predicted probabilities of dropping out varying values – one set at a time – on mother–child relationships, family structure and conflict, and mother's education, holding all other variables at their means. We found a statistically significant, negative association between mother–child closeness and dropping out of high school, net of other dimensions of the mother–child relationship, other aspects of the adolescent family context, and controls. The predicted probabilities (Fig. 7.3) demonstrate a relatively large association: Children whose mothers reported low levels of closeness to their adolescents had an estimated 14% chance of dropping out of high school, compared to 8% for those whose mothers reported high levels of closeness (with “low” measured as  $-1$  and “high” as  $+1$  standard deviation from the mean relationship quality). Living in a low-conflict, continuously married two-parent family was associated with a 6% probability of dropping out, compared to approximately 15% for those from single-mother and stepfather families. Children whose mothers dropped out of high school themselves had a 20% probability of dropping out, compared to just 6% for those whose mothers graduated from college.

A similar story emerged from logistic regression models predicting poor grades in high school (column 2, Table 7.2). As with dropping out, higher mother–child closeness, higher family income, and greater maternal education were significantly associated with a lower log-odds of poor grades. In terms of family structure and conflict, however, the only statistically significant difference in the log-odds of poor grades was between low- and high-conflict two-parent families. That is, living with a single-mother or stepfather appeared statistically indistinguishable in its association with poor grades from growing up in a low-conflict continuously married-parent family. This highlights the importance of considering more than family structure in assessing family context.

The next three columns (3–5) of Table 7.2 show predictions from OLS models regressing measures of the young adult child's relationship (closeness, time together, and frequency of disagreements) with his or her mother on adolescent family context and controls. An interesting pattern emerged, with specific dimensions of mother–child relationships in adolescence predicting the same dimensions of these relationships in young adulthood. That is, early closeness predicted later closeness,

**Table 7.2** Coefficients from models of young adult academic success, relationships with mothers, and psychological well-being

|                                       | (1) Logit<br>HS dropout | (2) Logit<br>Poor grades | (3) OLS M-C<br>Closeness | (4) OLS M-C<br>Time together | (5) OLS M-C<br>Disagreements | (6-7) OLS<br>Subjective well-being | (8-9) OLS<br>Life satisfaction |         |         |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------|---------|
| <i>Adolescent family context</i>      |                         |                          |                          |                              |                              |                                    |                                |         |         |
| Low-conflict both parents (reference) |                         |                          |                          |                              |                              |                                    |                                |         |         |
| Medium-conflict both parents          | 0.23                    | 0.04                     | -0.33***                 | 0.06                         | 0.09                         | 0.00                               | -0.03                          | -0.02   | -0.04   |
| High-conflict both parents            | 0.46                    | 0.37*                    | -0.50***                 | -0.03                        | 0.25***                      | -0.04                              | -0.07                          | -0.03   | -0.05   |
| Stepfather                            | 0.99***                 | 0.25                     | -0.45***                 | -0.05                        | 0.17**                       | -0.10                              | -0.03                          | -0.02   | 0.08    |
| Single-mother                         | 0.94***                 | 0.20                     | -0.49***                 | 0.10                         | 0.16**                       | -0.12                              | -0.03                          | -0.14   | -0.01   |
| Q1 family income (reference)          |                         |                          |                          |                              |                              |                                    |                                |         |         |
| Q2 family income                      | -0.77***                | -0.11                    | 0.05                     | 0.08                         | -0.07                        | 0.03                               | 0.04                           | 0.08    | 0.08    |
| Q3 family income                      | -0.54**                 | -0.14                    | 0.09                     | 0.00                         | -0.03                        | -0.12                              | -0.14                          | 0.00    | 0.00    |
| Q4 family income                      | -0.66**                 | -0.35*                   | 0.10                     | 0.06                         | -0.01                        | 0.06                               | 0.05                           | 0.09    | 0.08    |
| Mother's education < HS (reference)   |                         |                          |                          |                              |                              |                                    |                                |         |         |
| Mother's education HS                 | -0.57***                | 0.18                     | -0.28**                  | -0.21**                      | 0.15*                        | -0.14                              | -0.16                          | -0.11   | -0.14   |
| Mother's education some college       | -0.84***                | 0.10                     | -0.48***                 | -0.43***                     | 0.14*                        | -0.22*                             | -0.25**                        | -0.21** | -0.26** |
| Mother's education college+           | -1.31***                | -0.56**                  | -0.61***                 | -0.48***                     | 0.16*                        | -0.26*                             | -0.28*                         | -0.13   | -0.17   |
| Mother-child closeness z-score        | -0.27***                | -0.19***                 | 0.19***                  | -0.01                        | -0.07***                     | 0.08**                             | 0.09**                         | 0.08*** | 0.10*** |
| Time with mother z-score              | -0.12                   | -0.08                    | 0.05                     | 0.09***                      | 0.00                         | 0.06                               | 0.06                           | 0.03    | 0.02    |
| Harsh mothering z-score               | 0.10                    | 0.05                     | -0.06                    | -0.01                        | 0.08***                      | -0.01                              | -0.02                          | 0.00    | -0.01   |
| <i>Controls</i>                       |                         |                          |                          |                              |                              |                                    |                                |         |         |
| Focal child female                    | -0.49***                | -0.69***                 | -0.07                    | 0.37***                      | 0.10**                       | 0.01                               | 0.01                           | -0.04   | -0.03   |

(continued)

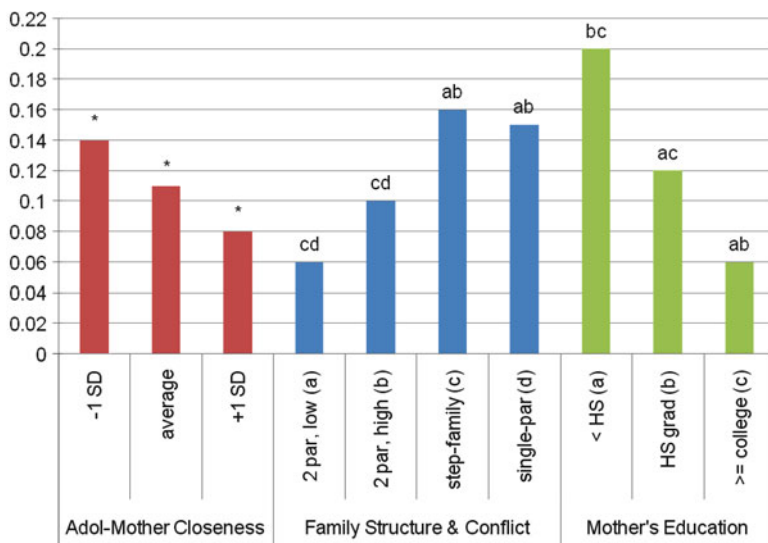
Table 7.2 (continued)

|  | (1) Logit<br>HS dropout | (2) Logit<br>Poor grades | (3) OLS M-C<br>Closeness | (4) OLS M-C<br>Time together | (5) OLS M-C<br>Disagreements | (6-7) OLS<br>Subjective well-being | (8-9) OLS<br>Life satisfaction |
|--|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Focal child 10-14 at<br>adolescent observation<br>(versus 15-18) | 0.20                    | -0.20*                   | -0.16**                  | 0.04                         | 0.14***                      | 0.05 0.03                          | 0.16*** 0.15**                 |
| Mother's race/ethnicity white (reference)                        |                         |                          |                          |                              |                              |                                    |                                |
| Mother's race/ethnicity<br>black                                 | -0.30                   | -0.04                    | 0.46***                  | 0.26***                      | 0.01                         | -0.24** -0.20*                     | -0.01 0.04                     |
| Mother's race/ethnicity<br>other                                 | 0.41*                   | -0.03                    | 0.11                     | 0.37***                      | 0.14*                        | -0.38*** -0.41***                  | -0.04 -0.08                    |
| Mother grew up with<br>single parent                             | 0.10                    | 0.10                     | -0.16*                   | 0.09                         | 0.05                         | 0.08 0.06                          | 0.01 0.00                      |
| Mother had teen birth  | 0.30*                   | 0.26**                   | 0.10                     | 0.04                         | -0.10*                       | -0.10 -0.10                        | -0.06 -0.05                    |
| Mother had union dissolution<br>before focal's birth             | 0.34*                   | 0.20                     | 0.00                     | 0.06                         | 0.07                         | 0.00 -0.02                         | -0.06 -0.09                    |
| <i>Young adult transitions/relationships</i>                     |                         |                          |                          |                              |                              |                                    |                                |
| Focal's education < HS (reference)                               |                         |                          |                          |                              |                              |                                    |                                |
| Focal's education HS   |                         |                          |                          |                              |                              | 0.42*** 0.41***                    | 0.43*** 0.43***                |
| Focal's education some<br>college                                |                         |                          |                          |                              |                              | 0.13 0.10                          | 0.44*** 0.41***                |
| Focal's education college+                                       |                         |                          |                          |                              |                              | 0.59*** 0.54***                    | 0.72*** 0.67***                |
| Mother-child closeness<br>z-score                                |                         |                          |                          |                              |                              | 0.31***                            | 0.29***                        |
| Mother-child time together<br>z-score                            |                         |                          |                          |                              |                              | 0.00                               | 0.00                           |
| Mother-child disagreements<br>z-score                            |                         |                          |                          |                              |                              | -0.06                              | -0.07**                        |

|                                     |          |          |         |         |         |         |         |         |          |
|-------------------------------------|----------|----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|----------|
| Close with both parents (reference) |          |          |         |         |         |         |         |         |          |
| Close with mother only              |          |          |         |         |         |         |         |         | -0.46*** |
| Close with father only              |          |          |         |         |         |         |         |         | -0.73*** |
| Close with neither parent           |          |          |         |         |         |         |         |         | -0.93*** |
| Constant                            | -1.60*** | -1.07*** | 8.91*** | 3.46*** | 1.45*** | 7.18*** | 7.57*** | 6.94*** | 7.34***  |
| N                                   | 1,918    | 1,926    | 1,900   | 1,808   | 1,890   | 1,890   | 1,890   | 1,927   | 1,927    |

Note: Flags included (but not shown) for whether family context measured at NSFH1 or NSFH2, for whether outcomes measured at NSFH2 or NSFH3, and for missing data on adolescent family income, mother's background, and parent-child relationships

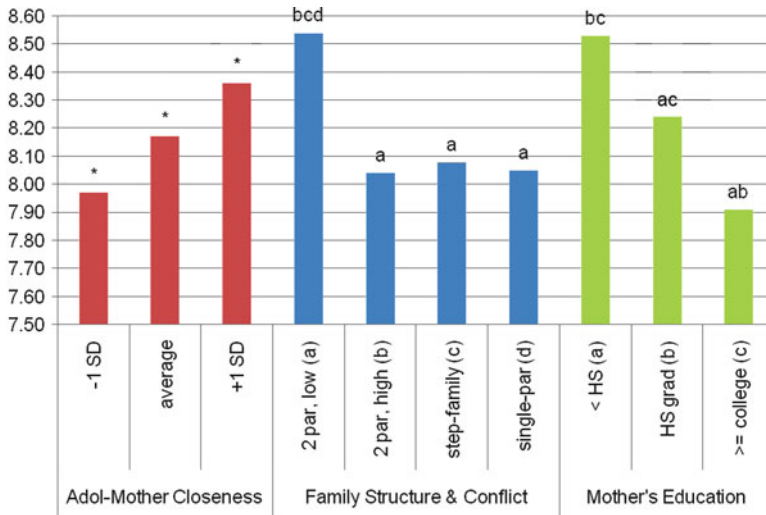
\* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$



**Fig. 7.3** Predicted probabilities of dropping out of high school. *Note:* Predicted probabilities based on logistic regression models shown in Table 7.2, column 1, varying values on adolescent mother–child closeness, family structure and conflict, and mother’s education, holding all other values at their mean levels

early time together predicted later time together, and early negative interactions predicted later negative interactions. Recall that the adolescent measures were reported by mothers and the young adult measures were reported by the children themselves, making this correspondence all the more striking. Assessing dimensions of parent–child relationships separately and longitudinally affords insight into the course of distinct features of parent–child relationships over time.

Figure 7.4 shows predicted levels of mother–child closeness in young adulthood, varying adolescent mother–child closeness, family structure and conflict, and mother’s education. Children scoring high on closeness with mothers in adolescence reported levels of closeness in young adulthood an estimated 0.39 points higher than children scoring low on closeness with mothers earlier in life. Children from low-conflict, continuously married two-parent families reported levels of closeness in young adulthood about 0.50 points higher relative to those from all other family types (high-conflict two-parent, single-mother, and stepfather families). The largest difference in young adult mother–child closeness appeared to be between children whose mothers were at the ends of the education distribution. Children whose mothers did not graduate from high school reported levels of closeness 0.60 *higher* than children whose mothers graduated from college, an unexpected finding but consistent with descriptives reported earlier. Elements of the story are similar for other dimensions of the mother–child relationship. In particular, we also saw a negative gradient in time together by mother’s education (but no relationship between time and adolescent family type). Likewise we found fewer disagreements among children whose mothers

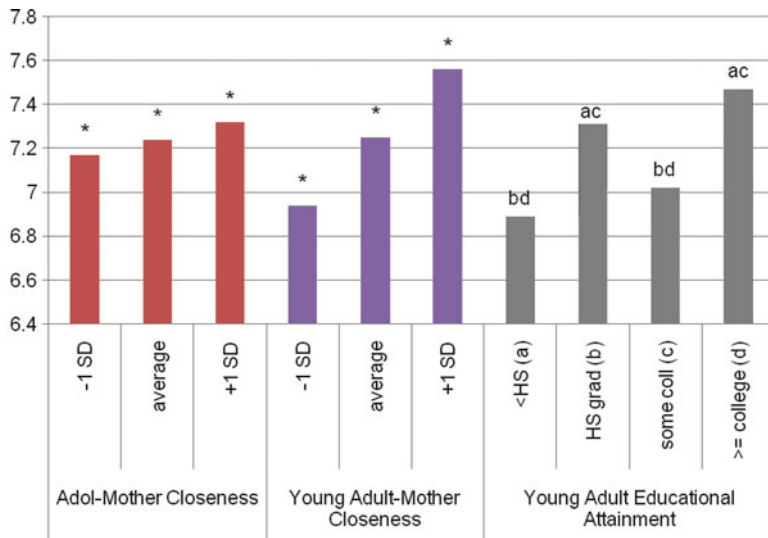


**Fig. 7.4** Predicted levels of young adult mother-child closeness. *Note:* Predicted values based on OLS regression models shown in Table 7.2, column 3, varying values on adolescent mother-child closeness, family structure and conflict, and mother's education, holding all other values at their mean levels

did not graduate from high school (relative to those whose mothers had a high school degree or more) and among children from low-conflict two-parent families (versus all other family types). That parental conflict predicts mother-child closeness and disagreements in young adulthood is consistent with the idea of spillover effects, despite the long window between our adolescent and young adult measures.

Next, putting the pieces of our mediation model together, we ran OLS regressions examining how early family context is associated with young adult subjective well-being through schooling and mother-child relationships. Figure 7.5 shows predicted levels of subjective well-being derived from these regressions, varying adolescent mother-child closeness, young adult mother-child closeness, and young adult educational attainment. We highlight three key results here. First, many of the adolescent family context variables were reduced to insignificance in this full model (columns 6 and 8, Table 7.2). In particular, accounting for the mediating processes of schooling and mother-child relationships in young adulthood, the coefficients on family structure and conflict were close to zero and statistically insignificant. Second, by contrast, adolescent mother-child relationships appeared to have direct and indirect associations (through schooling and later relationships) with well-being. And finally, the association between young adult mother-child closeness and subjective well-being was as strong as the association between young adult educational attainment and subjective well-being. Namely, the difference in predicted levels of subjective well-being moving from -1 to +1 standard deviation in young adult mother-child closeness was comparable to the difference between being a high



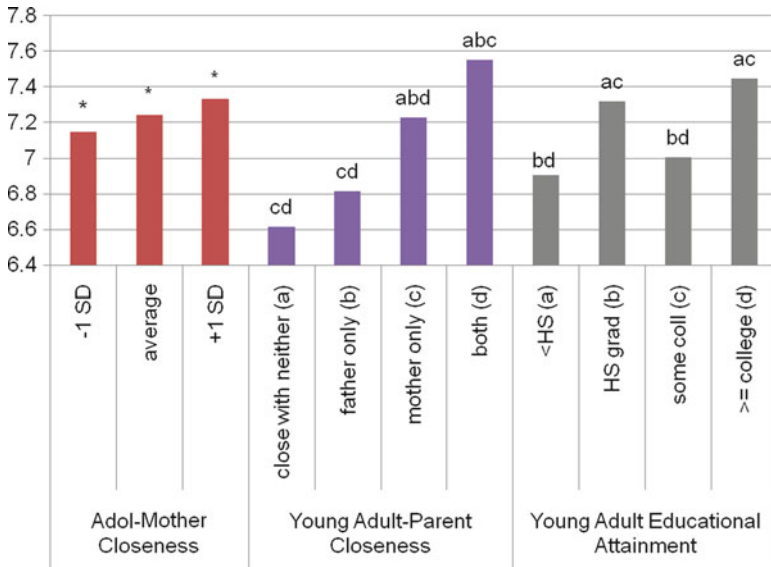


**Fig. 7.5** Predicted levels of young adult subjective well-being. *Note:* Predicted values based on OLS regression models shown in Table 7.2, column 6, varying values on adolescent mother–child closeness, young adult mother–child closeness, and young adult educational attainment, holding all other values at their mean levels

school dropout versus a college graduate (Fig. 7.5). Results were similar with life satisfaction as the outcome.

Last, we explored the potential implications of relationship constellations, that is, whether young adult children are close to both parents, one parent, or neither parent. These constellations are shaped by early family context and matter for well-being (Sobolewski & Amato, 2007). The same questions pertaining to mother–child relationship quality were asked of young adults with respect to their fathers. We coded responses on each parent as “close” if the child rated the relationship as an eight or higher (scale 0–10), and we cross-tabulated close relationships with mothers and fathers to arrive at our four-category classification of closeness to both parents, mother only, father only, or neither parent. We replicated models estimated immediately above, relying on this measure of young adult relationships as opposed to one focusing only on mothers (Table 7.2, columns 7 and 9).

Findings are depicted in Fig. 7.6, showing predicted levels of young adult subjective well-being by earlier mother–child relationships, young adult parent–child relationship constellations, and young adult educational attainment. The well-being gap between children close to neither versus both parents is larger than the well-being gap between children who dropped out of high school versus graduated from college. Being close to both parents was associated with the best outcomes for children, but being close to mothers was especially protective; or perhaps more to the point, *not* being close to mothers placed children at particular risk. While the subjective well-being of children close to their mothers only fell short of those close



**Fig. 7.6** Predicted levels of young adult subjective well-being (exploring relationship constellations). *Note:* Predicted values based on OLS regression models shown in Table 7.2, column 7, varying values on adolescent mother–child closeness, young adult parent–child closeness, and young adult educational attainment, holding all other values at their mean levels

to both parents, this shortfall was much greater for those close to their fathers only. Results were similar for life satisfaction.

## Summary and Conclusion

Our analyses relied on detailed data from multiple members of the same family at various points in the life course, giving us some traction on how the process of parental influence unfolds over time. Results pointed to the long reach of family relationships on child well-being. We demonstrated the importance of adolescent mother–child relationships for young adult schooling, with associations similar in magnitude to factors such as family structure and mother’s education that have received much wider attention in the literature. We showed persistence in the nature of mother–child relationships over the life course, with specific features of earlier relationships, that is, closeness, time together, and negative interactions, carrying into young adulthood. Further, while data suggest that other aspects of early family context operate only indirectly via schooling and later parent–child relationships, early mother–child relationships appeared to have both direct and indirect (via schooling and later relationships) associations with young adult psychological well-being. We found no evidence of the downside of parental involvement, at least not with the measures examined here, although we note that Johnson and Benson (Chap. 6) reported a negative association between parental monitoring and young adult success.

Our emphasis on earlier family context extends Fingerman and colleagues' focus on young adulthood; our results also underscore one of their key contributions, that is, in highlighting the multifaceted and variable nature of family relationships. In addition to parent–child relationship quality, we examined mother–father relationship quality, finding support for “spillover” in the effects of parental conflict on parent–child relationships and children’s academic achievement. We explored, too, how constellations of family relationships matter for child well-being. Findings here suggest that closeness to both parents results in the best child outcomes, although a weak mother–child bond may put children at particular risk. We offered an unexpected and intriguing result with respect to mother’s education and relationships with children, linking *lower* levels of maternal education to *higher* mother–child relationship quality.

What is the nature and developmental history of parent–child relationships, and what are their implications for success in young adulthood? The contributions collected here cast light on somewhat different pieces of this important, yet challenging, set of questions. The coming together of diverse theoretical perspectives, data sources, and methodological approaches is critical to building a nuanced understanding of how families shape the lives of young adults.

## Appendix A

### *Key Measures*

#### **Adolescent Family Context**

*Mother–child closeness* is based on a single question about how the mother would describe her relationship with the focal child, with response choices ranging from *1 = very poor* to *7 = excellent* at NSFH1 and *0 = really bad* to *10 = absolutely perfect* at NSFH2. We rescaled items to range from 1 to 7 for comparability across waves.

*Mother’s time with children* (all children in the household, including the focal child) is an average of four items about how often she spends time with children in leisure activities away from home, at home working on a project or playing together, having private talks, or helping with reading or homework, with responses ranging from *1 = never or rarely* to *6 = almost every day*.

*Mother’s harsh parenting* is constructed from questions about how often she yells at or spansks or slaps her children. The wording of questions and the referent differ across waves, but are comparable. At NSFH1, mothers are asked two questions about yelling and spanking/slapping her children. Response alternatives range from *1 = never* to *4 = very often* and are averaged across items. At NSFH2, questions refer specifically to the focal child. Mothers are asked two questions about how often they yell at the child and spank/slap the child when the focal child does something especially bad. They are asked a third question about how they try to influence the focal child’s behavior, including how often they yell or shout. Responses to the three

items range from 1 = *never* to 5 = *always* and are averaged. We rescaled items to range from 1 to 4 for comparability across waves.

*Family structure and conflict* combines measures of parental conflict and marital histories. For conflict, we use couples' responses to six items concerning frequency of disagreements about: household tasks, money, spending time together, sex, in-laws, and the children. We average all valid responses from mothers and fathers to these six items. We categorize continuously married-parent families by grouping the distribution of average conflict scores into thirds, corresponding to low, medium, and high average conflict. We then distinguish five family types: low-, medium-, and high-conflict continuously married-parent families, stepfather families, and single-mother families.

*Mother's education* is coded as highest level of education prior to the focal child's birth and categorized as less than high school, high school graduate, some college, and college or more.

*Family income* includes all sources of income to family members in the past year. It is adjusted to constant 1992 dollars and modeled as the natural log.

### **Young Adult Parent–Child Relationships and Young Adult Education**

*Mother–child closeness* is based on a single question asked of young adult children: “Taking things all together, on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is really bad and 10 is absolutely perfect, how would you describe your relationship with your mother?”

*Mother–child time together* is based on a single question asked of young adult children: “Over the last 3 months, about how often have you spent time with your mother in leisure activities, working on something together, or just having private talks? Would you say: not at all, less than once a month, 1–3 times a month, about once a week, or more than once a week?” The metric ranges from 1 to 5.

*Mother–child disagreements* are captured using a single question asked of young adult children: “During the last 3 months, how often did you argue or fight or have a lot of difficulty with your mother? Was it: not at all, less than once a month, 1–3 times a month, about once a week, or more than once a week?” The metric ranges from 1 to 5.

*Young adult educational attainment* is coded as less than high school, high school graduate, some college, and college graduate or more.

*Constellations of parental relationship quality* are measured by considering children's relationships with mothers and fathers. Children are asked the same question regarding their closeness with each parent (see question for mother–child closeness described above). Relationships scoring an eight or higher are coded as “close.” We then cross-tabulate mother and father closeness for a four-type classification of close relationships with: both parents, mother only, father only, or neither parent.

## Well-Being in Young Adulthood

*Subjective well-being* is measured with a single question asked of young adult respondents: “Taking all things together, on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means really bad and 10 means absolutely perfect, how would you say things are for you these days?”

*Life satisfaction* is measured with eight items asked of young adult respondents: “Tell me how satisfied you are with each of the following things. Give me a number from 0 to 10, where 0 means extremely dissatisfied and 10 means extremely satisfied.” The domains covered are: school, career, financial situation, leisure time, friendships, health, love life, and physical appearance. We average responses for a range of 0–10.

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## Chapter 8

# Young Adults' "Need": In the Eye of the Beholder?

D. Wayne Osgood and Sonja E. Siennick

**Abstract** This discussion of Fingerman and colleagues' chapter on relationships between young adults and their parents probes the notion of young adults' need for support from their parents and families. We illustrate Settersten's point that our culture treats the transition to adulthood as a "private trouble" for families to manage on their own by contrasting conceptions of young adults' versus children's needs for family assistance in child welfare policy and policies for vulnerable populations of young adults. We offer evidence of how parents' perceptions of need are shaped by offspring behavior and evidence of the connection between parental assistance and broader family dynamics. These factors make relations between parents and young adults a fascinating intersection among social change, social structure, and the agency of the parties involved. It remains to be seen whether and how these norms, our policies, and the lives of young adults will evolve in coming decades.

In discussing Fingerman and colleagues' fine paper on relationships between young adults and their parents (Chap. 5), we devote our response to a probe of the notion of young adults' need for support from their parents and families. We wish to look at some of the implications for families of Settersten's point (Chap. 1) that our culture treats the transition to adulthood as a "private trouble" for families to manage on their own. As a consequence, parents must figure out for themselves what emotional, practical, and financial assistance their adult children need and deserve. We consider the ambiguity surrounding young adults' versus children's needs for family assistance, the manifestation of these issues in policies for vulnerable populations of young adults, and some

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insights from Fingerman and colleagues about how families respond. We also offer some intriguing evidence about how parents' perceptions of need are shaped by offspring behavior and the connection between parental assistance and broader family dynamics. Finally, we present analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health; Harris, 2009) and from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH; Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988).

Perhaps the most forceful insight emerging from the wealth of research on the transition to adulthood in the last 15 years is the importance of early adults' relationships with their parents and families. As Arnett (2000) so effectively articulated, the lengthening transition brings an extended period of autonomy, independence, and freedom that allows many early adults to explore a variety of potential futures. Yet the longer period after high school and before fully adopting adult roles and responsibilities is also a time of limited resources, as young adults must make do without adult incomes of their own, without the emotional support of a spouse, and so forth. Thus, dependence on families continues throughout the transition to adulthood, as needs for various forms of support do not suddenly disappear, but only decline, more gradually for some young adults than for others (Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005).

Fingerman and colleagues begin with examples that illustrate this point well. These three young adults from very different circumstances all receive extensive and valuable assistance from family members. The importance of the support is especially vivid for Eleesha, who is aided by a former stepfather because her biological parents cannot do so.

Yet the continuing dependence of young adults on their parents can also be viewed in a less sympathetic light. As Fingerman and colleagues also note, the national media typically portray this extended dependence as a failure that arises either because over-involved parents are unwilling to let their children grow up or because young adults refuse to accept normal responsibilities.

Both perspectives on parental assistance clearly demonstrate Settersten's point that, in the USA today, managing the transition to adulthood is a "private trouble." Young adults and their families bear the primary responsibility of providing for the needs of daily life in the post-high school years. Various limited forms of governmental or institutional assistance can play a role for some, such as scholarships for college students or TANF for poor mothers, but young adults who must rely on that assistance are at a considerable disadvantage compared to their peers who have abundant family support.

## **Policy as a Window on the Transition to Adulthood as a Private Trouble**

To get a sense of our culture's (and our country's) uncertainty about needs for parental support during the transition to adulthood, consider the contrasting and very explicit standards governing the parenting of children below the age of majority.

Our laws about child neglect require parents to provide food, clothing, shelter, supervision, and education for their children. Though the specifics of how parents accomplish these things may be private matters, these laws make clear that failing to accomplish them is very much a public concern. Parents who do not adequately parent their children in these ways risk being found neglectful in a court of law and losing their parental custody. The state can then act *in loco parentis*, taking over the role of the parent. These legal standards were adopted throughout the USA in the early twentieth century (Whitehead & Lab, 2009), and their continuation shows widespread agreement in the USA that children have these needs and that parents are the ones who should meet them.

We have no such laws about parents' obligations to provide for youth beyond the age of majority, much less what their needs would be. We suspect that the absence of such laws accurately mirrors the sentiments of the public and that there is broad agreement that parents should have no legal obligation to provide for young adult children. At the same time, the public appears to expect families to continue providing at least some support (Schwartz, 2009). Neighbors and friends would likely take a dim view of parents who kicked a son or daughter out of the house for good without another dime the day after high school graduation, especially if that graduate had not been particularly troublesome. There is also evidence of normative expectations for support in arenas such as the financial aid standards applied by colleges, which assume parents will assist at a level depending on their means. Of course parents may or may not choose to meet those guidelines.

In retrospect at least, the lack of guidance about parents' support of young adult offspring did not seem so problematic in the 1950s and 1960s, when the transition to adulthood was quick, and well-paying jobs were available for high school graduates. Parents face a more difficult problem in the lengthening transition to adulthood in recent decades. What is too much or too little help when marriages and well-paying jobs have not arrived by the age of 24 or 27 or 30?

The nature of the disjunction between expectations for support of children versus young adults is dramatically apparent in our policies concerning vulnerable populations. One of us (Osgood) served as lead editor for a volume on the transition to adulthood for vulnerable populations (Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005). The book focused on seven groups served by government agencies or programs as children and adolescents, such as youth in foster care, special education, or juvenile justice and youth with physical disabilities or mental health problems. Those government programs exist because as a society we collectively judge that children with those problems, and by implication their families, deserve assistance. Yet eligibility for that assistance ends upon leaving childhood, typically defined as reaching age 18 or 21.

The major theme emerging from the book was that this eligibility cliff is increasingly problematic as the transition to adulthood grows longer. The vulnerable populations all continue to face greater challenges than other youth through this period. Meanwhile, studies such as that of Fingerhant and colleagues (Chap. 5) and Schoeni and Ross' (2005) financial analyses of families' assistance show that young adults without special problems typically receive very substantial support in many forms.



Though the vulnerable populations have greater needs, they typically come from families with limited resources or families unlikely to provide support.

Interestingly, changes in policies for vulnerable populations suggest a growing recognition that the transition to adulthood is not strictly a private trouble. The first change was in the area of special education; young adults became eligible for educational assistance well into their 20s (Levine & Wagner, 2005). Notably, this is a domain in which middle-class parents have been effective advocates. More recently, federal and state governments have been revising policies for youths in foster care, an especially interesting group because the state has assumed total responsibility for their care (Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010). Hearings on the topic show a growing recognition that a total termination of support at age 18 is not adequate fulfillment of that parental responsibility. Accordingly, various states are now experimenting with ways of extending support for additional years in ways that mix increasing independence for young adults with obligations to be productively involved with work, college, or other training.

## **How Do Families Manage the Private Trouble of the Transition?**

Fingerman and colleagues offer a wealth of information about how families respond to the “private trouble” of their young adults’ transition to adulthood. They show that, fortunately, relations between parents and young adult offspring typically are positive and that they have relatively frequent contact. In fact, relationships become more positive as offspring move out of adolescence and into adulthood. Yet this age range also is especially characterized by ambivalence, with positive feelings accompanied by distress and concern, especially for parents of young adults who are not meeting with success. This ambivalence can be seen as one sign of parents’ continuing to view their young adult children’s success as their own problem as well.

Importantly, Fingerman and colleagues’ research also shows that families differ widely in the quality of relationships between parents and young adults and in the nature and amount of parental support. They find social class an especially important predictor, with wealthier parents providing more financial support, especially to pay for college, as well as more practical support. Because their children often are away at college, wealthier parents also have less direct contact and more telephone contact with them.

We took particular note of Fingerman and colleagues’ observation that differences in perceived need and support of parents toward young adults are not strictly a matter of differences between families, but also track differences among offspring within families. This suggests that we need to understand how parents form perceptions of offspring need and the consequences of those processes for relationships within families. We next turn to the possibility that young adults take an active role in shaping parents’ definitions of their need.

## Grown Offspring as a Source of Parents' Perceptions of Their Need

Past work has revealed both between- and within-family differences in the prevalence and amount of parental support of young adult offspring (Siennick, 2011; Suitor, Pillemer, & Sechrist, 2006). As Table 8.1 shows, among Add Health families containing similarly aged sibling pairs, and whether the measure of help is transfers of money or coresiding with offspring, approximately one-third of the time parents helped one grown child but not the other. Clearly, parents of multiple grown offspring sometimes treat each offspring differently. This suggests that they evaluate different grown children as having different needs. How do parents know what grown children need?

Perhaps parents, like many secondary data analysts, focus on readily observable indicators of offspring need. For example, studenthood, unemployment, and being unmarried are fairly concrete signals of offspring resources and expenses, and all three positively predict parental support and sibling differences in the receipt of support (Hogan, Eggebeen, & Clogg, 1993; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Siennick, 2011; Suitor et al., 2006). Yet not all triggers of parental support are obviously public knowledge. Offsprings' earnings predict support (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Siennick, 2011). So do their health, drug and alcohol, and legal problems (Suitor et al., 2006). Grown children's self-reports of their criminal behavior actually are more robust predictors of parental assistance than are their arrest records or conviction histories, which are more public proclamations of deviance (Siennick, 2011).

Mysteriously, the association between grown children's problems and their receipt of parental assistance is not easily explained by our standard set of "triggers" of support. The left-hand sets of bars in Fig. 8.1 show the advantage in parents' practical support enjoyed by young adults who have versus have not been in trouble with the police, according to their parents. The right-hand sets show the similar advantage in financial support enjoyed by young adults who have versus have not committed a crime in the past year, by their own report. For each data source, we present the bivariate (unadjusted) offender–nonoffender difference and the (adjusted) difference that remains when we account for family characteristics and several "child status" variables, namely, indicators of family formation, employment, and student status (in both data sets) and of offspring earnings, addiction treatment, and

**Table 8.1** Past-year parental assistance received by close-in-age young adult Add Health siblings

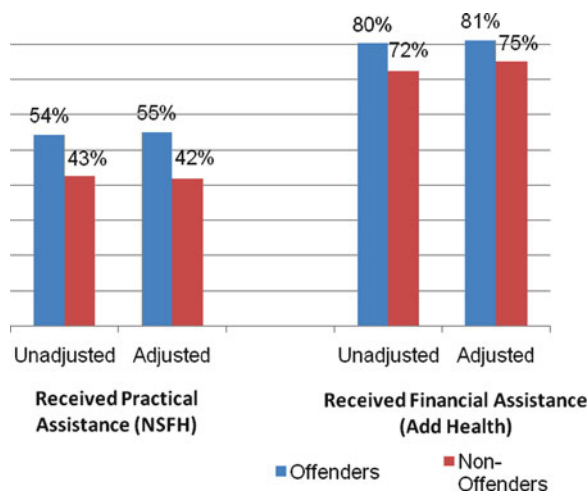
| Siblings receiving assistance | Received money from parents (%) | Lived with parents (%) |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| Neither sibling               | 11.5                            | 36.2                   |
| One sibling                   | 29.9                            | 34.8                   |
| Both siblings                 | 58.6                            | 29.0                   |

*N* = 816 families

Among sibling pairs with age difference <2 years

**Fig. 8.1** Offender–nonoffender differences in receipt of parental assistance, with and without adjustments for offspring demographic characteristics and need.

Note: Add Health analyses adapted from Siennick (2011)



criminal conviction (in the Add Health data). These indicators do little to explain the gap in either type of support. To what else about these children might parents be responding?

We see room for the useful integration of theories of intergenerational exchange and theories of the individual capacities that help youths to harness their environments in navigating this transitional age. As scholars we measure, and thus “see,” parents’ active scaffolding of young adults’ development, but we should not forget that young adults may play an active and evocative role in support transactions. Part of this role may involve shaping parents’ perceptions of their need. Kerr and Stattin (2000) and Stattin and Kerr (2000) suggest that parents know much of what they know about their children only because their children have disclosed it to them. Parents’ perceptions of need could be influenced by grown children’s proclivity to volunteer information, admit failures, or even complain, exaggerate, or lie about their circumstances. The more negative items on this list tend to co-occur with problem behavior (e.g., Warr, 2007), but the general implications need not be negative. Students, who we know receive more support, express more willingness to ask for support in the first place (Amato, Rezac, & Booth, 1995). Perhaps offspring disclosure and sharing are part of why physical distance and parental divorce reduce the odds of parental support (Amato et al., 1995; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Is what looks to us scholars like parental responsiveness really just as much a reflection of offspring control (cf. Cook, 2001)?

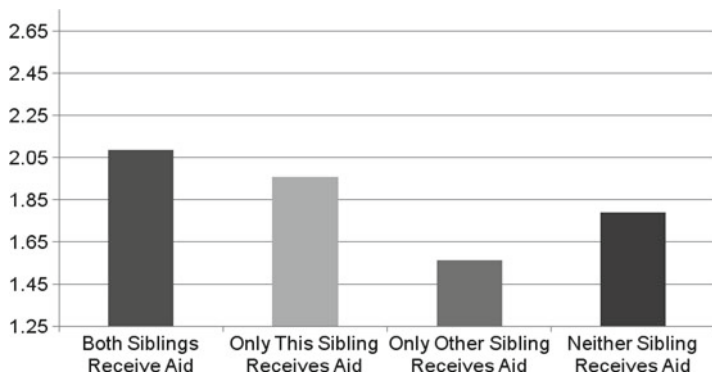
We have much to learn about the actual transactions that underlie our common measures of parental support. Qualitative and mixed-method approaches may be especially helpful for examining who initiates support transactions, the extent of offspring input, and the content and emotional valence of these kitchen table conversations. Such research also could shed important light on the personal qualities or techniques that help young adults activate their latent safety nets.

## How Are Parental Transfers Viewed by Other Family Members?

The above speculation highlights the possible role of offspring's personal qualities in intergenerational exchange, but this exchange typically is studied as a between-household transaction rather than as a dyadic transaction. That strategy has advantages; after all, transfers increase children's total household resources and decrease parents' total household resources regardless of which parent does the transferring (Amato et al., 1995). However, a household-level approach may gloss over differences between the multiple interwoven dyads within the family. If young adults' need is subjective and defined in part through observation and interaction, then might not different relatives arrive at different evaluations of that need? And given Fingerman and colleagues' finding that parental assistance can lower the well-being of the assisting parent, could this assistance have broader implications, even for relatives who are not directly involved in the transfer?

What transpires between two family members, and the extent to which those events are coordinated with the needs of other family members, may well influence broader family dynamics. In divorced and blended families, not only may dyadic relations become more numerous and more complex, but also one biological parent typically ends up shouldering most of the burden of supporting grown offspring (Amato et al., 1995). In intact younger families, spousal disagreement over child-rearing practices predicts marital conflict (Cui & Donnellan, 2009; Cui, Donnellan, & Conger, 2007). By our calculation, 20% of young adult Add Health respondents who live with two parents and received past-year parental transfers say that only one of their parents gave them money. What do the other parents think of these transfers? Are they even aware of them?

Parental support also has implications for recipients' relationships with siblings. In childhood, siblings' acceptance of parental favoritism may depend on whether they perceive legitimate reasons for the inequality (McHale & Pawletko, 1992). Do grown siblings who receive different amounts of support share parents' appraisals of their relative neediness? Even if parental support of grown children is not a zero-sum exercise, and increases in support of one child do not necessarily mean reductions in support of another, unequal treatment still may inspire jealousy between siblings (Brody, 1998; McHale, Crouter, McGuire, & Updegraff, 1995). Adults who report current and historical maternal favoritism in their families feel less loved by their grown siblings (Suitor et al., 2009). By differentially supporting "needy" offspring, do parents unwittingly set the stage for negative relationships among their grown children? The bivariate association shown in Fig. 8.2 suggests that this may be the case. Unequal parental assistance is associated with less supportive sibling relationships, especially in the eyes of the nonrecipient sibling. Siblings also report having less supportive relationships with each other when neither is supported by their parents. By studying parental support within its broader relational context, scholars could enhance our knowledge both of young adult development and of family relations during an important part of the lifespan.



**Fig. 8.2** Individual siblings' reports of sibling supportiveness, by receipt of financial aid from parents. *Notes:* Range=0–4 (never – very often turns to sibling for help); all mean differences are significant at  $p < 0.10$  or lower

## Conclusion

Treating the transition to adulthood as a private trouble presents all families with the problem of determining whether young adults have “enough” or need additional support. Multiple family members may be stakeholders in these transactions, and assistance to one young adult could mean that less is available for another or for parents' retirement accounts. Furthermore, the example of vulnerable populations shows that the stakeholders go beyond immediate relatives to society at large. It is in society's interest not only that vulnerable groups succeed, but that all young adults succeed. But meeting needs comes with costs that the citizenry appears reluctant to pay in the current political climate.

What does public angst about young adults being overly dependent on parents' support tell us? In our view, it indicates a problem with contemporary norms about young adults' needs and parents' obligations, and we see two likely sources of this problem. First, traditional norms are out of synch with the reality of the transition to adulthood because the available opportunities do not allow young adults to provide for themselves at the level traditionally expected. Second, in the face of the lengthening transition to adulthood, agreement has broken down about standards for self-sufficiency versus dependence on parents. What works for some families is unacceptable to others. What some young adults feel they need, their own parents may view as inappropriate and undeserved (perhaps even while providing it). All of these factors make relations between parents and young adults a fascinating intersection among social change, social structure, and the agency of the parties involved. It remains to be seen whether and how these norms, our policies, and the lives of young adults will evolve in coming decades.

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**Part III**  
**Romantic and Sexual Relationships**



## Chapter 9

# Developmental Shifts in the Character of Romantic and Sexual Relationships from Adolescence to Young Adulthood

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**Abstract** This chapter examines ways in which the qualities and dynamics of respondents' romantic relationships change from adolescence into adulthood and also explores the ways in which gender influences the character of romantic experiences during this period. We present findings from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS), a longitudinal study of 1,321 respondents who were interviewed four times, first in adolescence and subsequently as they have navigated the transition to adulthood. A review of other recent TARS findings are included, providing a more comprehensive portrait of the fluidity and range of romantic and sexual relationship experiences that characterize this phase of the life course. For example, we examine the phenomena of breaking up and getting back together and having sex with ex-boyfriends/girlfriends – dynamics that are quite common, but that highlight some of the difficulties of establishing the boundaries of what constitutes a dating relationship. In addition, while young adulthood is generally understood as a time when romantic attachments take on greater weight/significance, this period is associated with increased likelihood of casual sex experiences. Thus, we also include a review of findings about the trajectories of casual sex and factors associated with variability in casual sexual experiences.

## A Comparison of Adolescent and Young Adult Romantic Relationships

Compared to research on romantic relationships, studies of family processes and peer influence have a much longer history within the field of adolescent development. This historical neglect is likely connected to the belief that

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adolescents' dating relationships tend to be transitory and somewhat shallow, thus lessening their potential impact (e.g., Merten, 1996). Nevertheless, recent theorizing has suggested a key role for romantic relationships in adolescent development (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009), and research findings indicate that adolescents themselves often consider these relationships to be an important part of their lives (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006). Consistent with these ideas and findings, more focused investigations have suggested that romantic partners are a potential influence on such consequential outcomes as drug/alcohol use, academic achievement, delinquency involvement, and sexual decision-making (e.g., Cleveland, 2003; Giordano, Phelps, Manning, & Longmore, 2008; Haynie, Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2005). More recently, researchers have begun to explore ways in which these formative experiences influence the nature and timing of later adult relationships (Raley & Sullivan, 2010; Sassler, 2010).

In the contemporary context, adolescent dating relationships do not segue neatly and inevitably into adult marital or cohabiting unions. Increases in the average age at first marriage and the more variable order of key life events create for many an extended period of nonmarital romantic involvement that takes place during the phase of life increasingly referred to as "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005; Settersten & Mayer, 1997). Cohabitation has received attention, as it is increasingly common (in 2002, 58% of 25- to 29-year-old women ever cohabited), in part due to delayed first marriage (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). Yet, cohabitation is not ubiquitous during emerging adulthood, suggesting the importance of exploring the relationship experiences of young adults who are dating and cohabiting. How then do the relationships formed in young adulthood differ from the adolescent romantic relationships that have been the subject of recent research attention? A primary goal of this chapter is to explicitly compare reports of qualities and dynamics within adolescent and young adult romantic relationships, including age-related influences of gender on relationship experiences, and to explore the effects of cohabitation relative to dating on young adult relationship dynamics. An advantage of a longitudinal approach is that we can observe changes in the character of romantic relationships as individuals have matured, rather than relying on a cross-sectional comparison of samples characterized by different age ranges. Another advantage of these data is the measurement emphasis in the TARS study on relationship qualities and dynamics, which allows us to build a developmental perspective on specific characteristics of romantic relationships. An important goal is to determine whether gendered responses observed in prior analyses of adolescents [notably boys' lower scores on perceived power in their relationships (Giordano et al., 2006)] shift as respondents move into young adulthood. We focus on domains included in prior research on adolescent relationships (communication, emotion, and power/influence dynamics), but also include attention to utilitarian concerns, recognizing that these may become more salient as priorities in this next stage of life.

## Prior Research on Developmental Shifts

In an early discussion of developmental progressions in romantic relationships, Dunphy (1963) focused on changes in the nature of the connections between peers and romantic partners. The initial preference for same-gender friendships gives way to the mixed-gender peer group, a forum that provides an entrée to the world of heterosexual interactions and activities. With time and increased experience, couple relationships become common, with more popular youths leading the way in this regard. Connolly and Goldberg (1999) also highlighted that changes within the romantic realm are inextricably connected to peer group relationships and concerns. Initially, young adolescents may develop “crushes” that are discussed in detail with close friends, while the romantic interactions themselves may be fleeting or sporadic (see also Merten, 1996). Their conceptualization also suggests that mixed-sex peer groups provide opportunities for developing feelings of comfort with the opposite sex and fulfill needs for affiliation and companionship. This companionate or affiliative phase is followed by more serious levels of involvement in romantic relationships, eventually leading to phases that include feelings of permanence and commitment. Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, and Pepler (2004) found support for the notion that while such a progression is not inevitable, the move from same-gender relationships to group-based mixed-gender interactions and finally to more serious dyadic relationships was a common pattern within their sample of Canadian youth.

Brown (1999) developed a generally compatible portrait of the development of romantic involvement during adolescence, identifying initiation, status, affection, and bonding phases. His conceptualization stressed teens’ lack of experience and feelings of awkwardness in the early phases of romance, and the strong role played by the peer group as a source of advice and socialization. The inclusion of a status phase also underscores that dating and partner choices can be a source of social capital with respect to fitting in and one’s position in adolescent social hierarchies. Brown argued that the later phases of romantic involvement, by contrast, are marked by deeper levels of caring, sexual intimacy, and eventually a concern with the relationship’s permanence. In support of this idea, Brown noted findings obtained by Roscoe, Diana, and Brooks (1987) who observed that younger adolescents more often listed status and recreation as reasons for dating, while late adolescents more often listed sexual activity, companionship and having “goals for the future” (p. 66) as important considerations. Similarly, Seiffge-Krenke (2003) in a prospective study of 103 German adolescents found that romantic partner’s perceived social support was significantly higher at age 21 compared with responses provided during earlier assessments (at ages 13, 15, and 17).

As many of the studies in this area relied on relatively small, homogeneous samples, Meier and Allen’s (2009) analyses of the three waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) represents an important addition to literature on developmental progressions. Based on the two adolescent waves of data, Meier and Allen identified six overall patterns that took into account number of relationships and durations respondents reported (ranging from not being

involved in any form of dating relationship to casual or multiple relationships to a pattern of steady dating). The authors found considerable stability in a 1-year interval (i.e., 70% of those who reported no relationships at Time 1 also reported no relationship at Time 2), but where changes occurred, progression was more common than regression to an early form. The authors also found that those respondents who were further along in this dating sequence were more likely to cohabit or marry by the time of the third wave of interviews. Meier and Allen noted that a limitation of the Add Health data set is that it contains few measures of relationship qualities, suggesting the utility of our focus here on subjectively experienced dynamics within these early relationships.

The research reviewed above provides a basis for expecting age-related changes in the character of romantic relationships. The current study contributes beyond this prior work, which has focused largely on overall perceptions of partner support or importance of the relationship, by exploring within-individual changes in a range of qualities and dynamics of romantic relationships. Nevertheless, theoretical discussions within this developmental literature have been useful in identifying specific domains that warrant further investigation. For example, Brown (1999) and Connolly et al. (2004) described the awkwardness and lack of confidence characteristic of early adolescent romantic ties but have not directly studied age-related trends in these feelings and perceptions. A secondary objective of this comparative analysis is to examine similarities and differences in male and female respondents' romantic relationship experiences, and how these patterns may shift with maturation. The literature provides a basis for developing hypotheses with respect to gender, but recent findings produce somewhat contradictory portraits. For example, scholars have suggested that both male and female adolescents experience feelings of awkwardness in communication and lack of self-assurance when they begin to develop romantic relationships. However, Maccoby (1990) argued that while "both sexes face a relatively unfamiliar situation to which they must adapt" (p. 517), the transition is accomplished more easily for male youths – who often simply transport their dominant interaction style into this new form of social relationship. A contrasting perspective is that because girls are more experienced than boys with intimate dyadic communications by virtue of their own earlier friendship experiences, boys must make a bigger developmental leap as they begin to learn this more intimate way of relating to another. In support of the latter view, Giordano et al. (2006) found that adolescent boys scored significantly higher than their female counterparts on a scale indexing perceived *awkwardness in communication* with a focal romantic partner.

Movement into romantic relationships involves more than developing a level of comfort while communicating with the opposite gender. It also requires a full complement of relationship skills, most communication based as well. Young people must become familiar with the process of making initial overtures, learn how to communicate their needs to partners, manage conflict, and successfully terminate unwanted relationships. Here too, young women might feel more competent and confident as they have experienced similar social dynamics in prior relationships (e.g., friendship troubles and their repair). While prior research has shown that boys

frequently score higher on scales measuring general self-esteem and self-efficacy (Gecas & Longmore, 2003), in an analysis of these relationship skills among early adolescents, teenage male respondents compared with their female counterparts reported lower *confidence navigating adolescent romantic relationships* (Giordano et al., 2006).

Much theorizing about these communication processes centers on the “newness” of dating, particularly for adolescent boys. However, as young people mature and gain experience within this social arena, perhaps young men in particular are more likely to become the confident actors that Maccoby described. Accordingly, we explore whether age is associated with reduced feelings of communication awkwardness and greater feelings of confidence navigating romantic relationships, considering also whether the gender gap in these communication dynamics and feelings of confidence dissipates as respondents mature into adulthood.

Communication processes comprise a core aspect of close relationships; however, researchers have suggested that heightened emotionality, especially the experience of passionate love, encompass relationship dynamics and emotional rewards that are arguably unique to the romantic context (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2001). Focusing on these domains, studies of adolescent romantic involvement have also theorized about strong gender differences. Some scholars have emphasized that while girls are likely to become highly invested in their romantic entanglements (Eder, Evans, & Parker, 1995), boys are socialized within their peer worlds to avoid or deny softer emotions and are teased and ridiculed by peers if they reveal signs of emotionality (Fine, 1987). In turn, this literature suggests that boys learn to devalue relationships that engender positive emotions and to objectify and denigrate the young women who are their partners in romantic interactions. Overall, much previous research supports the idea of an emotional closing off process, as boys are observed making crude comments in the school lunchroom (Eder et al., 1995), describing their romantic relationships as tedious (Wight, 1994), or constructing relationships as a game perpetrated on young women for the purpose of sexual conquest (Anderson, 1989).

In contrast to these emphases, recent quantitative and qualitative findings support the idea that boys often develop positive emotional feelings toward partners and accord significance and positive meanings to their romantic relationships (Korobov & Thorne, 2006; Tolman, Spencer, Harmon, Rosen-Reynoso, & Striepe, 2004; Way & Chu, 2004). The notion that new attitudes and feelings can emerge from these early romantic experiences is consistent with Thorne’s (1993, p. 133) key observation that “incidents of crossing (gender boundaries) may chip away at traditional ideologies and hold out new possibilities.” To the degree that boys in romantic relationships engage in a distinctive form of intimate self-disclosure lacking within their peer discourse, and receive both positive identity and social support from a caring female partner, it could be argued that boys may be more dependent on these relationships than girls who have a range of other opportunities for intimate talk and social support. Generally consistent with this hypothesis, prior analyses of wave 1 TARS data indicated no gender differences in feelings of passionate love within romantic relationships (Giordano et al., 2006).

We expect that as respondents mature, relationships will become even more intimate and provide greater emotional rewards than those that characterize the adolescent period. Yet it is possible that as young men gain confidence and additional relationship experience, including sexual experience, they may be more likely to engage in dating experiences that are not characterized by strong emotions (i.e., the idea of “scoring” as a competitive game, the notion of “getting over”). We explore the relationship between age and feelings of passionate love directly and whether the data reveal gender and age interactions in reports of these feelings. Some research on college samples suggests that highly gendered patterns may not be observed in young adulthood. For example, Hatfield and Sprecher (1986), relying on a 30-item passionate love scale, did not find strong gender differences in reports of love as reported within a sample of male and female college students. Similarly, using Add Health, Brown and Bulanda (2008) found similar levels of relationship satisfaction and love among dating young men and women.

A third key dimension of relationships is the nature of influence and power. The social influence literature emphasizes that the more highly valued the relationship, the more individuals are willing to accede to influence attempts to maintain or enhance their standing with valued others (Blau, 1964). Given that traditional gender socialization emphasizes the centrality of relationships in girls’ lives, it is conventional to argue that structurally based gender inequalities tend to be reproduced at the couple level, and that on average, the male partner acquires more power and control in the relationship (Komter, 1989). While these ideas originally were applied to adult marital relations, the notion of gendered inequalities of power is also a recurrent theme within the adolescence literature (Eder et al., 1995; Thorne, 1993). Further, if young women’s identities depend on relationships with romantic partners, it follows that these others would be a significant source of reference and influence. By contrast, to the degree that male adolescents’ concerns lie outside the romantic context itself (i.e., where heterosexual success is merely a form of competition and basis for camaraderie with male peers), we may expect the romantic partner’s influence to be (and to be viewed as) rather minimal (see Collins, 2004, p. 238). A contrasting hypothesis is that adolescent girls, due to their greater familiarity with issues of intimacy and skill in communication, would be expected to make influence attempts, while boys (highly interested/engaged in this new relationship form) would often be receptive to such attempts. Theories of symbolic interaction also suggest a more situated, constantly negotiated view of power dynamics, in contrast to a straightforward male privilege argument (see, e.g., Sprey, 1999). Consistent with the latter perspective, we found that boys score higher on perceptions of influence attempts and actual influence on the part of their romantic partners (Giordano et al., 2006).

During adolescence, social forces that are generally understood as fostering adult gender inequalities are at a distance; thus, the reproduction of traditionally gendered power dynamics may be markedly less than complete. This suggests the importance of assessing the nature and extent of developmental changes as respondents have matured into adulthood in the romantic partner’s *influence attempts*, *actual influence* (as perceived by the respondent), and perceptions of the *power balance* within

the relationship (defined as getting one's way, given some level of disagreement). We expect that as individuals spend increased time with their romantic partners, and peer relationships begin to recede somewhat in importance, in general, the romantic partner will increase as a source of reference, support, and influence. A key question, however, is whether the nontraditional gender pattern observed in connection with adolescent romantic relationships continues to be characteristic of the young adult romantic context. For example, Furman and Buhrmester (1992) found a grade-by-gender interaction: older boys scored higher on power, whereas older girls scored lower relative to their younger female counterparts.

McCall and Simmons (1966) noted that while it is typical to evaluate the intrinsic benefits of close relationships and dynamics that center on issues of intimacy, social relationships often provide more extrinsic or utilitarian benefits. Thus, in addition to being an important partner in communication, object of affection, or source of reference and influence, the dating partner may provide tangible benefits. Marriage has often been described in light of these extrinsic elements, particularly as their provision connects to gender inequalities (where men gain power from their historically greater ability to bring such extrinsic benefits to the relationship). In the current analysis, we focus on nonmarital dating partners and ascertain whether there is a developmental shift in the provision of extrinsic rewards and how gender influences observed developmental progressions.

## Dating and Cohabiting in Young Adulthood

As part of the delay of first marriage, cohabitation has become increasingly common. Indeed, in 2002, nearly 60% of women ages 25–29 had ever cohabited, and cohabitation is now the typical pathway into marriage (62% of first marriages are preceded by cohabitation) (Goodwin, Mosher, & Chandra, 2010; Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). Empirical studies of the nature of cohabiting unions have most often compared cohabiters to married individuals, and have found that individuals who cohabit on average report lower relationship quality, less homophily, lower fertility, and less gender equity than married individuals (e.g., Blackwell & Lichter, 2000; Brines & Joyner, 1999; Brown, 2004; Hohmann-Marriott, 2006; Loomis & Landale, 1994; Qian, 1998). Thus, differences between cohabitating and being married are well-documented.

Yet surprisingly, few studies have compared the qualities and dynamics of cohabiting and dating young adults. One recent study using Add Health reported that cohabiting and dating men and women share similar levels of relationship satisfaction (Brown & Bulanda, 2008). While there are gender distinctions in levels of love, cohabiting and dating young adult men report similar levels of love, and cohabiting women report significantly higher levels of love than dating women (Brown & Bulanda, 2008). However, as noted by Meier and Allen (2009), the range of relationship qualities is limited in this particular data set. As such, similarities and differences between young adult daters and cohabiters with respect to dynamics of

communication, feelings of closeness, power, and instrumental concerns are largely unexplored. An examination of how the relationship qualities of dating and cohabiting relationships are similar and different will speak to the issue of where cohabitation fits in the US courtship system. We recognize that while cohabiting and dating relationships are both nonmarital unions, the qualities and dynamics within cohabiting unions may be different than the relationships of young adult daters who do not coreside. Thus, in the analyses we describe below, we include attention to this distinction as we explore basic developmental and gender trends observed in relationship characteristics (relating to issues of communication, emotion, influence, and partner utility) in the transition from adolescence to young adulthood.

## Data and Methods

### *Data*

The TARS sample ( $n = 1,321$ ) was drawn from the year 2000 enrollment records of all youths registered for the 7th, 9th, and 11th grades in Lucas County, Ohio. The following waves of TARS data were collected in 2002, 2004, and 2006. A parent questionnaire was completed at wave 1. The initial sample universe encompassed records elicited from 62 schools across seven school districts. The stratified, random sample, devised by the National Opinion Research Center, includes oversamples of Black and Hispanic adolescents. Unlike school-based studies, school attendance was not a requirement for sample inclusion, and interviews were conducted in the respondent's home using preloaded laptops to administer the interview while maintaining privacy.

We drew on the wave 1 and wave 4 interviews for the descriptive statistics and all four waves for the growth curve analyses. The analytic sample at each wave used in the growth curve analyses was limited to respondents who were dating or cohabiting at the time of that wave's interview ( $n$  ranges from 752 to 952 across the four waves, with a total of 3,550 person-period observations). The current analyses focused on respondents who reported on heterosexual experiences. Although information was collected about homosexual identities, the number of respondents at each wave who reported homosexual experience and/or identities was too small to explore age-related changes in the character of these experiences.

Respondents may be dating or cohabiting with the same or different persons across interview waves. For the descriptive statistics, the sample was further limited so that "adolescent daters" were all aged 12–17 in the wave 1 interview ( $n = 855$ ), while the "early adult daters" ( $n = 672$ ) and "early adult cohabitators" ( $n = 203$ ) were all aged 18–23 in the wave 4 interview. Respondents were asked if they were dating, using the question: "Is there someone you are currently dating—that is, a girl/guy you like and who likes you back?" If respondents answered "yes," then they were coded as dating. The early adult cohabitators reported a cohabiting relationship, either responding affirmatively to the question, "Are you currently living with someone?"



or reporting that they cohabited with their most recent (but not current) romantic partner. In addition to the relationship qualities described below, we included three measures of the relationship context beyond whether the relationship was coresidential versus a dating relationship. We included a dichotomous measure of whether the couple had sexual intercourse. We included a dichotomous measure of whether the relationship was ongoing at the time of interview versus being the respondent's most recent (but ended) relationship. Finally, we included an estimate of relationship duration measured in months. These basic features of the relationship were included as controls to gauge whether the character of these relationships varied systematically by age and were not a simple function of, for example, longer average durations among older respondents.

Our measures of relationship quality focused on the domains of communication, emotion, influence and utility. *Communication Awkwardness* is a scale of four items such as the following: "Sometimes I don't know quite what to say to [PARTNER]" and has alphas across the waves ranging from 0.71 to 0.76 (Powers & Hutchinson, 1979). *Dating Confidence* is a scale created for TARS that includes three items such as the following: "How confident are you that you could breakup with someone you no longer like?" Across the four waves, this scale has alphas that range from 0.70 to 0.74. *Passionate Love* is an abbreviated, 4-item version of Hatfield and Sprecher's (1986) Passionate Love Scale, including items such as "[PARTNER] always seems to be on my mind" ( $\alpha = 0.84-0.85$ ). *Emotional Rewards* is measured by two items: "[PARTNER] makes me feel attractive" and "[PARTNER] makes me feel good about myself" ( $\alpha = 0.75-0.85$ ). *Partner Influence Attempts* is based on two items, "[PARTNER] always tries to change me" and "[PARTNER] tries to control what I do" (Shulman, Laursen, Kalman, & Karpovsky, 1997). Alphas for that scale range from 0.74 to 0.84 across the waves. *Partner's Actual Influence* is measured by three items such as the following: "I sometimes do things because I don't want to lose [PARTNER]'s respect" ( $\alpha = 0.70-0.72$ ). *General Decision-making Power* is measured by a single item from Blood and Wolfe's (1960) index: "If the two of you disagree about something, who usually gets their way?" This is coded so that higher scores indicate greater decision-making power for the respondent. We measured *Partner's* and *Respondent's Instrumental Support* separately, each with three items such as "How often have you done the following for [PARTNER]: paid to see a movie or do some other fun activity?" Alphas range from 0.80 to 0.84 for partner's instrumental support and 0.80-0.83 for respondent's support.

We also included sociodemographic indicators potentially related to relationship quality (see, e.g., Cavanagh, Crissey, & Raley, 2008). *Family structure* was measured by asking at wave 1: "During the past 12 months, who were you living with most of the time?" Adolescents who lived with only one biological parent were coded 1. Those who lived with both biological parents were coded as 2 if his/her parents were married. Adolescents who lived with one biological parent and parent's spouse were coded as 3 to reflect a stepfamily. Respondents whose biological parents were cohabiting and those who lived with one biological parent and his/her cohabiting partner were coded as 4. Respondents who did not fall into one of these categories were coded as 5, "other" (e.g., living with grandparents or other relatives,

foster care, etc.). For multivariate analyses, dummy variables were created with “two biological parents” as the contrast category. *Gender* was self-reported. *Age* was calculated from the adolescent’s date of birth and the date of the interview. *Race/ethnicity* was classified as White, Black, Hispanic, and “Other” race/ethnicity. White was the contrast category in the multivariate analyses. *Parent’s education* was measured from the parent’s questionnaire completed primarily by mothers. We asked the question “How far did you go in school?” and offered seven response options. These options were collapsed into a four-category variable: responses were coded 1 if the parent had less than a high school education, 2 if the parent had a high school education, 3 if the parent had some education beyond high school, but no 4-year college degree, and 4 if the parent had a bachelor’s degree or higher. Dummy variables were created for the multivariate analyses with high school as the contrast category.

## ***Analytic Strategy***

We first present descriptive statistics for the sample, with a focus on the subsets of adolescent daters (wave 1) and young adult daters and cohabitators (wave 4). To assess change over time, we used a multilevel, linear mixed effects model. Each relationship quality was modeled separately, and Tables 9.2–9.5 show two models for each quality. At each wave, we used single year of age as our measure of time, with each respondent contributing up to four relationships (one at each wave) for analysis. Age was modeled linearly for ease of interpretation. The first model was a basic model that included age (time), gender, and an age by gender interaction if such an interaction was significant. The second model shown was a full model, including all covariates and any statistically significant interactions between the covariates and age.

## **Results**

### ***Descriptive Analyses***

Table 9.1 indicates that the qualities of communication, emotional aspects of the relationship, influence, and instrumental support all appear to change as respondents age and as the nature of the union becomes more embedded, as reflected in cohabiting versus dating. For example, communication awkwardness is highest among teens (mean = 9.9), relative to young adult daters (mean = 9.2), with the lowest scores of communication awkwardness being reported by young adults who are cohabiting (mean = 8.6). Similarly, dating confidence is lowest among teen daters (mean = 10.4) and highest among cohabitators relative to adult daters (mean = 12.5

**Table 9.1** Descriptive statistics, teen and young adult romantic relationships

|  | Means/percents |                    |                        |
|--|----------------|--------------------|------------------------|
|  | Teen dating    | Early adult dating | Early adult cohabiting |
| <i>Relationship qualities</i>            |                |                    |                        |
| <i>Communication:</i>                    |                |                    |                        |
| Communication awkwardness                | 10.0           | 9.2                | 8.6                    |
| Dating confidence                        | 10.4           | 11.8               | 12.4                   |
| <i>Emotion:</i>                          |                |                    |                        |
| Passionate love                          | 14.0           | 15.4               | 16.3                   |
| Emotional rewards                        | 7.6            | 8.0                | 8.0                    |
| <i>Influence:</i>                        |                |                    |                        |
| Partner influence attempts               | 3.8            | 4.1                | 4.3                    |
| Partner's actual influence               | 6.4            | 7.4                | 7.7                    |
| General decision-making power            | 2.1            | 2.0                | 2.2                    |
| <i>Instrumental support:</i>             |                |                    |                        |
| P's instrumental support                 | 7.0            | 8.6                | 10.2                   |
| R's instrumental support                 | 6.9            | 8.2                | 10.6                   |
| <i>Relationship context:</i>             |                |                    |                        |
| Is a current relationship                | 58.0%          | 62.5%              | 88.7%                  |
| Relationship duration (est. in months)   | 4.8            | 10.5               | 15.8                   |
| Had sex in relationship                  | 23.0%          | 72.9%              | 94.1%                  |
| <i>Sociodemographic characteristics:</i> |                |                    |                        |
| Age                                      | 15.2           | 20.1               | 20.8                   |
| Gender (Female)                          | 50.3%          | 48.4%              | 64.0%                  |
| <i>Race ethnicity:</i>                   |                |                    |                        |
| Hispanic                                 | 7.3%           | 8.2%               | 16.8%                  |
| Non-Hispanic White                       | 67.2%          | 64.7%              | 56.2%                  |
| Non-Hispanic Black                       | 22.7%          | 23.5%              | 24.1%                  |
| Non-Hispanic other                       | 2.9%           | 3.6%               | 3.0%                   |
| <i>Family structure at W1:</i>           |                |                    |                        |
| Single parent                            | 23.4%          | 22.5%              | 30.1%                  |
| Two biological, married parents          | 47.6%          | 54.2%              | 32.5%                  |
| Cohabiting parents (Bio or Step)         | 6.5%           | 5.7%               | 7.9%                   |
| Stepfamily                               | 14.2%          | 11.3%              | 22.2%                  |
| Other living situation                   | 8.3%           | 6.4%               | 7.4%                   |
| <i>Parent's education at W1:</i>         |                |                    |                        |
| Less than high school                    | 11.2%          | 9.7%               | 14.8%                  |
| High school                              | 32.7%          | 31.4%              | 34.5%                  |
| >High school, no 4-year degree           | 32.7%          | 31.6%              | 40.4%                  |
| 4-Year college degree+                   | 23.5%          | 27.4%              | 10.3%                  |
| <i>N</i>                                 | 855            | 672                | 203                    |

Sources: The Teen Dating column includes data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS), wave 1, age <18; the Young Adult data comes from TARS wave 4, age >17

and 11.8, respectively). Emotional qualities of romantic relationships also appear to increase as a consequence of age and intensity of the romantic relationship, with passionate love scores being lowest for teen daters (mean = 14) and highest for

young adult cohabitators (mean = 16.3). Similarly, the romantic partner's attempts to influence the partner (mean = 3.8, 4.2, and 4.3 for teen daters, young adult daters, and young adult cohabitators, respectively) and actually influencing the partner increase (mean = 6.4, 7.4, and 7.7 for teen daters, young adult daters, and young adult cohabitators, respectively). The most striking increases, however, are associated with receiving and providing instrumental support (partner's provision of instrumental support = 7.0, 8.6, and 10.2, for teen daters, young adult daters, and cohabitators, respectively). Respondents who are cohabiting provide greater levels of instrumental support to their partners (mean = 10.6), relative to young adult daters (mean = 8.2) and teen daters (mean = 6.8).

Aspects of the relationship context also indicated that relationships become more serious as adolescents transition to young adulthood. For example, the average duration of young adult dating relationships (10.5 months) is more than twice as long as the average duration of teen dating relationships (4.8 months), with early adult cohabitators having the longest relationships among the three groups (15.8 months). Likewise, 58% of teen dating relationships are current at the time of wave 1 interview compared to 62.5% of dating relationships reported by young adults at wave 4 and 88.7% of early adult cohabiting relationships. Sexual activity within the relationship is more uncommon among teen daters (23.0%), while most of the early adult daters (72.9%) and virtually all of the early adult cohabitators (94.1%) have had sex in their most recent relationship.

The teen daters at wave 1 are, on average, 15.2 years old. Looking at early adults at wave 4, the daters (20.1) appear to be just slightly younger than the cohabitators (20.8). The racial/ethnic composition of teen and young adult daters appears roughly the same with about two-thirds of those groups being non-Hispanic White; however, it appears that Hispanics are overrepresented among the early adult cohabitators (16.8%, versus 8.2% of young adult daters). There do not seem to be many differences in family structure between teen and early adult daters; however, early adult cohabitators appear to be more likely to have been raised by single parents or in step-families. Parental education also seems similar among the two groups of the daters, with early adult cohabitators being less likely to have a custodial parent with a college degree or higher education.

### ***Multivariate Analyses***

Tables 9.2–9.5 show the results of growth curve analyses regarding communication, emotionality, power/influence, and instrumental support. Graphs depicting these findings are subsequently presented as figures. In all tables the first model consists of coefficients for age and gender, and age and gender interactions if statistically significant. Model 2 includes relational and sociodemographic characteristics and significant age interactions.

Table 9.2 shows growth curve results for two communication-related relationship qualities – communication awkwardness and dating confidence. Results indicated significant decreases in perceptions of communication awkwardness associated

**Table 9.2** Growth curve models, change in communication-based relationship qualities from adolescence to early adulthood

|   | Communication awkwardness |          | Dating confidence |         |
|---|---------------------------|----------|-------------------|---------|
|   | Model 1                   | Model 2  | Model 1           | Model 2 |
|   | B                         | B        | B                 | B       |
| Intercept                                 | 10.59***                  | 11.74*** | 9.08***           | 8.97*** |
| Age                                       | -0.11***                  | -0.10*   | 0.27***           | 0.20*** |
| Gender (Female)                           | -0.16                     | 0.19     | 1.13***           | 1.08*** |
| Gender (Female) × age                     | -0.14**                   | -0.14**  |                   | -       |
| Relationship duration<br>(est. in months) |                           |          |                   | 0.01    |
| Is a current relationship                 |                           |          |                   | -0.01   |
| Had sex in relationship                   |                           |          |                   | 0.38*** |
| Cohabiting (vs. Dating)                   |                           |          |                   | 0.45**  |
| Race ethnicity:                           |                           |          |                   |         |
| Hispanic                                  |                           | -1.22**  |                   | -0.15   |
| Non-Hispanic White (ref.)                 |                           | -        |                   | -       |
| Non-Hispanic Black                        |                           | -0.44    |                   | 0.27    |
| Non-Hispanic other                        |                           | -1.01    |                   | 0.61    |
| Family structure at W1:                   |                           |          |                   |         |
| Single parent                             |                           | 0.09     |                   | 0.06    |
| Two biological, married<br>parents (ref.) |                           |          |                   |         |
| Cohabiting parents (Bio or Step)          |                           | 0.29     |                   | -0.19   |
| Stepfamily                                |                           | 0.21     |                   | 0.31    |
| Other living situation                    |                           | 0.47     |                   | 0.17    |
| Parent's education at W1:                 |                           |          |                   |         |
| Less than high school                     |                           | 0.09     |                   | 0.01    |
| High school (ref.)                        |                           | -        |                   | -       |
| >High school, no 4-year degree            |                           | -0.20    |                   | 0.17    |
| 4-Year college degree+                    |                           | -0.05    |                   | 0.25    |
| <i>Significant interactions with age:</i> |                           |          |                   |         |
| Duration × age                            |                           | 0.01**   |                   | -       |
| Race ethnicity:                           |                           |          |                   |         |
| Hispanic × Age                            |                           | 0.25***  |                   | -       |
| Non-Hispanic Black × Age                  |                           | 0.12*    |                   | -       |
| Non-Hispanic Other × Age                  |                           | 0.21     |                   | -       |

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study, Waves 1–4

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

with age. Both Models 1 and 2 indicate a significant interaction between age and gender. However, contrary to expectations, communication awkwardness decreases more so with age among female relative to male respondents. This association remains in the full model and is illustrated in Fig. 9.1. Although our primary focus was on age and gender effects, results in the models showed associations between other basic relationship features and sociodemographic controls. Relationship duration, reporting about a current relationship, having had sex, and Hispanic ethnicity

**Table 9.3** Growth curve models, change in emotionality-related relationship qualities from adolescence to early adulthood

|   | Passionate love |          | Emotional rewards |          |
|---|-----------------|----------|-------------------|----------|
|   | Model 1         | Model 2  | Model 1           | Model 2  |
|   | B               | B        | B                 | B        |
| Intercept                                 | 12.99***        | 12.29*** | 7.17***           | 6.83***  |
| Age                                       | 0.30***         | 0.15***  | 0.06***           | 0.06***  |
| Gender (Female)                           | 0.46***         | 0.08     | 0.61***           | 0.52***  |
| Relationship duration (est. in months)    |                 | 0.16***  |                   | 0.05***  |
| Is a current relationship                 |                 | 1.44***  |                   | 0.44***  |
| Had sex in relationship                   |                 | 0.75***  |                   | 0.19**   |
| Cohabiting (vs. Dating)                   |                 | 0.15     |                   | -0.11    |
| Race ethnicity:                           |                 |          |                   |          |
| Hispanic                                  |                 | -0.15    |                   | -0.10    |
| Non-Hispanic White (ref.)                 |                 | -        |                   | -        |
| Non-Hispanic Black                        |                 | -0.47**  |                   | -0.28*** |
| Non-Hispanic other                        |                 | -0.26    |                   | -0.09    |
| Family structure at W1:                   |                 |          |                   |          |
| Single parent                             |                 | -0.39*   |                   | -0.19*   |
| Two biological, married parents (ref.)    |                 | -        |                   | -        |
| Cohabiting parents (Bio or Step)          |                 | -0.45    |                   | -0.32*   |
| Stepfamily                                |                 | -0.33    |                   | -0.12    |
| Other living situation                    |                 | -0.55*   |                   | -0.19    |
| Parent's education at W1:                 |                 |          |                   |          |
| Less than high school                     |                 | -0.08    |                   | 0.15     |
| High school (ref.)                        |                 | -        |                   | -        |
| >High school, no 4-year degree            |                 | 0.09     |                   | 0.12     |
| 4-Year college degree+                    |                 | 0.12     |                   | 0.17     |
| <i>Significant interactions with age:</i> |                 |          |                   |          |
| Duration × age                            |                 | -0.01*** |                   | -0.01*** |

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study, Waves 1–4

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

are associated with reduced feelings of communication awkwardness. The next model showed that, consistent with results for communication awkwardness, perceived confidence navigating various aspects of dating relationships increases with age. Female respondents report greater feelings of confidence, and the lack of a significant interaction of gender and age indicates that this gender gap persists in early adulthood. Figure 9.2 displays the relationship between age and gender based on Model 2. Model 2 results also indicate that cohabitators and those who have had sex in their most recent relationship report greater dating confidence.

Table 9.3 shows the results of growth curve analyses for passionate love and emotional rewards, our two measures of emotionality in romantic relationships. Model 1 for passionate love indicated that in general perceptions of passionate love increased as respondents got older. The age results in Model 2 were consistent with those for Model 1 and indicated that age was related to increases in passionate love.

**Table 9.4** Growth curve models, change in influence and power from adolescence to early adulthood

|   | Partner influence attempts |          | Partner's actual influence |          | General decision-making power |         |
|---|----------------------------|----------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------------------|---------|
|   | Model 1                    | Model 2  | Model 1                    | Model 2  | Model 1                       | Model 2 |
|   | B                          | B        | B                          | B        | B                             | B       |
| Intercept                                 | 3.84***                    | 4.01***  | 6.37***                    | 6.80***  | 1.92***                       | 1.82*** |
| Age                                       | 0.07***                    | 0.00     | 0.19***                    | 0.06*    | -0.01                         | 0.00    |
| Gender (Female)                           | -0.54***                   | -0.55*** | -1.13***                   | -1.17*** | 0.38***                       | 0.38*** |
| Relationship Duration (est. in months)    |                            | 0.03***  |                            | 0.01     |                               | 0.00*   |
| Is a Current Relationship                 |                            | -0.09    |                            | -0.27**  |                               | 0.03    |
| Had Sex in Relationship                   |                            | 0.37***  |                            | 0.20     |                               | 0.04    |
| Cohabiting (vs. Dating)                   |                            | 0.19     |                            | 0.48**   |                               | 0.05    |
| Race ethnicity:                           |                            |          |                            |          |                               |         |
| Hispanic                                  |                            | -0.33    |                            | -0.40    |                               | 0.27**  |
| Non-Hispanic White (ref.)                 |                            | -        |                            | -        |                               | -       |
| Non-Hispanic Black                        |                            | -0.39*   |                            | -0.11    |                               | 0.17*   |
| Non-Hispanic other                        |                            | -0.86*   |                            | -0.33    |                               | 0.10    |
| Family structure at W1:                   |                            |          |                            |          |                               |         |
| Single parent                             |                            | 0.23     |                            | -0.23    |                               | 0.08*   |
| Two biological, married parents (ref.)    |                            | -        |                            | -        |                               | -       |
| Cohabiting parents (Bio or Step)          |                            | -0.06    |                            | 0.16     |                               | 0.05    |
| Stepfamily                                |                            | -0.35    |                            | -0.04    |                               | 0.00    |
| Other living situation                    |                            | 0.43     |                            | -0.07    |                               | 0.03    |
| Parent's education at W1:                 |                            |          |                            |          |                               |         |
| Less than high school                     |                            | 0.16     |                            | 0.40*    |                               | 0.04    |
| High school (ref.)                        |                            | -        |                            | -        |                               | -       |
| >High school, no 4-year degree            |                            | -0.08    |                            | 0.16     |                               | 0.03    |
| 4-Year college degree+                    |                            | -0.09    |                            | 0.17     |                               | 0.01    |
| <i>Significant interactions with age:</i> |                            |          |                            |          |                               |         |
| Duration × age                            |                            | -        |                            | 0.01*    |                               | -       |
| Current relationship × age                |                            | -0.07**  |                            | -        |                               | -       |
| Race ethnicity:                           |                            |          |                            |          |                               |         |
| Hispanic × age                            |                            | 0.09*    |                            | -        |                               | -0.04** |
| Non-Hispanic Black × age                  |                            | 0.12***  |                            | -        |                               | -0.02   |
| Non-Hispanic Other × age                  |                            | 0.14*    |                            | -        |                               | 0.01    |
| Family structure at W1:                   |                            |          |                            |          |                               |         |
| Single parent × age                       |                            | -0.01    |                            | -        |                               | -       |
| Cohabiting parents (Bio or Step) × age    |                            | 0.01     |                            | -        |                               | -       |
| Stepfamily × age                          |                            | 0.08*    |                            | -        |                               | -       |
| Other living situation × age              |                            | -0.05    |                            | -        |                               | -       |

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study, Waves 1–4

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

**Table 9.5** Growth curve models, change in instrumental support from adolescence to early adulthood

|   | Partner's instrumental support |          | Respondent's instrumental support |          |
|---|--------------------------------|----------|-----------------------------------|----------|
|   | Model 1                        | Model 2  | Model 1                           | Model 2  |
|   | B                              | B        | B                                 | B        |
| Intercept                                 | 3.79***                        | 2.66***  | 7.54***                           | 7.28***  |
| Age                                       | 0.59***                        | 0.48***  | 0.10**                            | -0.14*** |
| Gender                                    | 4.08***                        | 3.78***  | -3.63***                          | -3.67*** |
| Gender (Female) × age                     | -0.42***                       | -0.43*** | 0.57***                           | 0.51***  |
| Relationship duration (est. in months)    |                                | 0.13***  |                                   | 0.18***  |
| Is a current relationship                 |                                | 0.67***  |                                   | 0.69***  |
| Had sex in relationship                   |                                | 1.89***  |                                   | 0.82***  |
| Cohabiting (vs. Dating)                   |                                | 0.49**   |                                   | 0.63***  |
| Race ethnicity:                           |                                |          |                                   |          |
| Hispanic                                  |                                | 1.01*    |                                   | -0.36    |
| Non-Hispanic White (ref.)                 |                                | -        |                                   | -        |
| Non-Hispanic Black                        |                                | 0.38     |                                   | -0.94**  |
| Non-Hispanic other                        |                                | -0.43    |                                   | -0.24    |
| Family structure at W1:                   |                                |          |                                   |          |
| Single parent                             |                                | -0.52*** |                                   | -0.19    |
| Two biological, married parents (ref.)    |                                | -        |                                   | -        |
| Cohabiting parents (Bio or Step)          |                                | -0.01    |                                   | 0.14     |
| Stepfamily                                |                                | -0.18    |                                   | -0.14    |
| Other living situation                    |                                | -0.53    |                                   | -0.05    |
| Parent's education at W1:                 |                                |          |                                   |          |
| Less than high school                     |                                | 0.97*    |                                   | -0.01    |
| High school (ref.)                        |                                | -        |                                   | -        |
| >High school, no 4-year degree            |                                | 1.04***  |                                   | -0.10    |
| 4-Year college degree+                    |                                | 0.42     |                                   | -0.11    |
| <i>Significant interactions with age:</i> |                                |          |                                   |          |
| Duration × age                            |                                | -        |                                   | -0.01**  |
| Had sex in this relationship × age        |                                | -0.17*** |                                   | -        |
| Race ethnicity:                           |                                |          |                                   |          |
| Hispanic × age                            |                                | -0.14*   |                                   | 0.09     |
| Non-Hispanic Black × age                  |                                | -0.01    |                                   | 0.14**   |
| Non-Hispanic Other × age                  |                                | 0.11     |                                   | 0.00     |

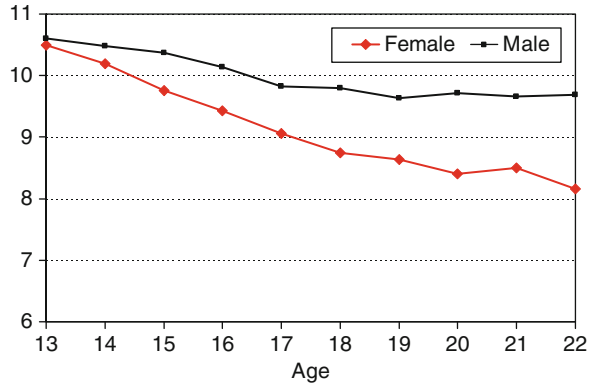
Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study, Waves 1–4

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

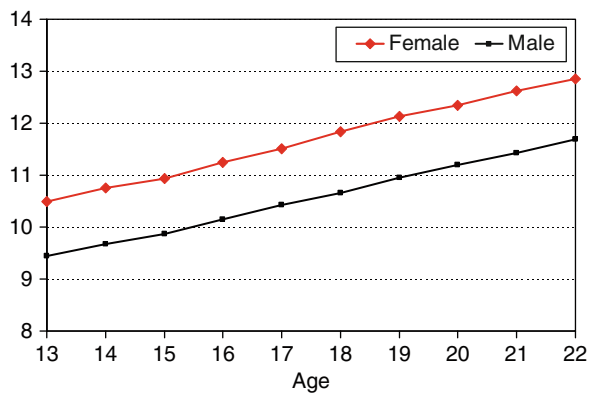
Figure 9.3 illustrates the pattern of findings based on Model 2. In addition, the gender gap is no longer evident in the full model; males and females share similar scores on the love scale. Further analyses indicated that the gender gap in scores on the love scale only existed in cohabiting relationships and not adolescent or adult dating relationships (results not shown). Being in a current relationship and having had sex in the relationship are both associated with higher scores on the love scale.



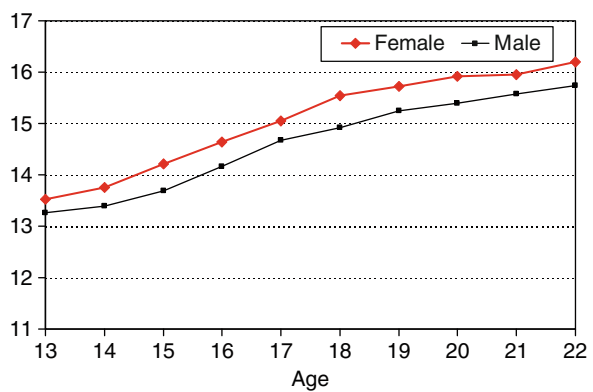
**Fig. 9.1** Communication awkwardness



**Fig. 9.2** Dating confidence

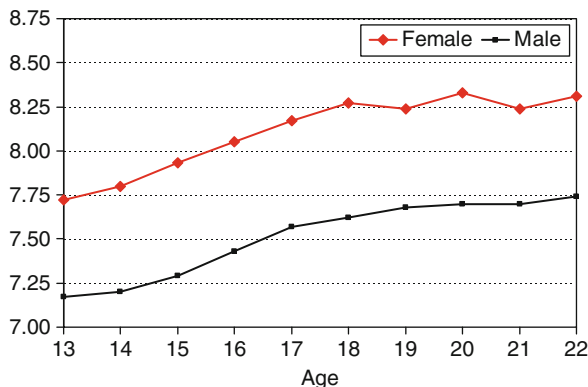


**Fig. 9.3** Passionate love



Non-Hispanic Black respondents scored lower on the passionate love scale than did non-Hispanic White respondents, while those from single-parent and other living situations scored lower than those from two-parent married families.

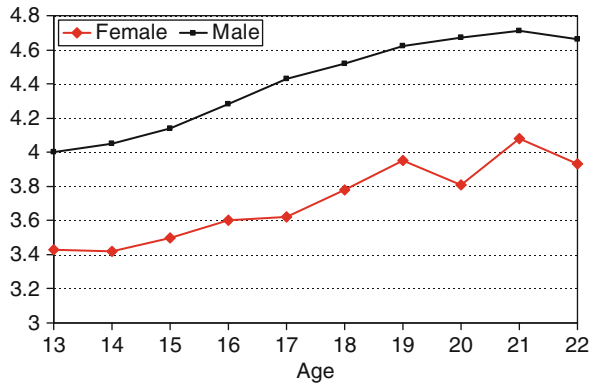
As with passionate love, respondents' ratings of the emotional rewards they received in their relationships increased with age, but females reported that they

**Fig. 9.4** Emotional rewards

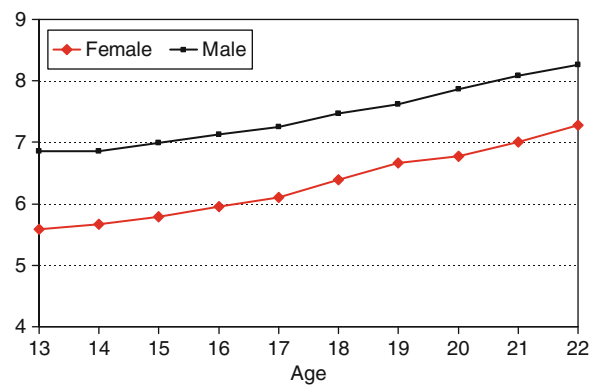
received more emotional rewards consistently throughout the ages observed in our study (Model 1). Results from the full model (Model 2) indicated a similar relationship between emotional rewards and age and gender. Figure 9.4 displays the relationships among age, gender, and emotional rewards. The gender gap persists as respondents move from adolescence into early adulthood. Regarding covariates, we found that relationship duration was associated with emotional rewards among younger respondents in the sample, and those who were currently dating and who had had sex in their relationships reported greater emotional rewards. There were significant differences in perceptions of emotional rewards by race/ethnicity, with non-Hispanic Blacks reporting that they received fewer emotional rewards than did non-Hispanic Whites. There were also significant differences according to family structure during childhood, with those from single-parent or cohabiting parent families scoring lower on the emotional rewards scale than did those from two-parent married families.

The growth curve analyses related to power and influence are shown in Table 9.4. In Model 1, partner influence attempts increased with age. Consistent with prior research on younger adolescents (Giordano et al., 2006), male respondents scored higher on their partner attempting to influence them, and the lack of a significant age and gender interaction term indicated that the effect of gender was consistent across age. In the full model (Model 2), the gender gap persisted, with female respondents experiencing fewer influence attempts than male respondents. Yet in the full model, there was no longer an age gradient due in large part to the inclusion of sexual intercourse into the model. Figure 9.5 illustrates the age and gender relationship. Of the other covariates, duration was positively associated with partner influence attempts, as was having sex within the relationship. On the contrary, being in a current relationship was associated with fewer partner influence attempts as respondents aged. Non-Hispanic Black and “Other” respondents, and to a lesser extent Hispanics, experienced lower levels of influence attempts in early adolescence, but such influence attempts increased in frequency more than they did for non-Hispanic Whites. Respondents who grew up in stepfamilies also experienced larger increases in partner influence attempts with age than did those from two-parent married families.

**Fig. 9.5** Partner’s influence attempts



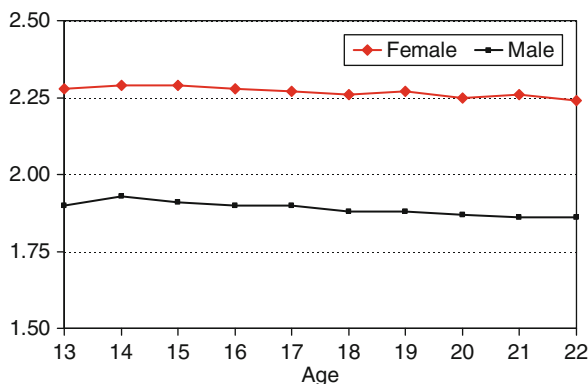
**Fig. 9.6** Partner’s actual influence



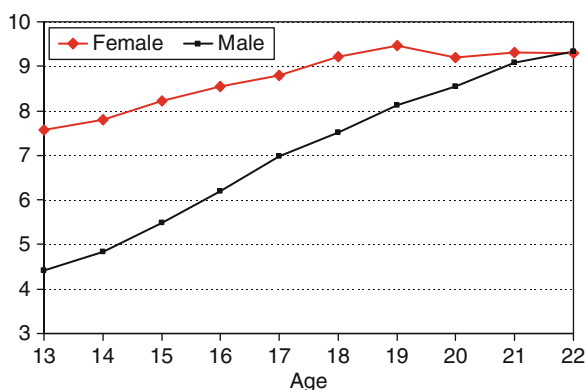
The next two models showed that as with influence attempts, partner’s actual influence increased with age. Consistent with the results for influence attempts, male respondents perceived significantly more actual influence from their partners. The lack of a significant gender and age interaction term indicated that this gender gap did not shift during the age period studied. In the full model predicting partner’s actual influence, there remained an age gradient and gender gap (Fig. 9.6). Relationship duration was positively associated with partner’s influence among older respondents, and partner’s actual influence was also higher within cohabiting relationships and those relationships where sex had occurred. Those in current relationships, on the contrary, reported less actual partner influence. Hispanics reported less partner influence than non-Hispanic Whites, and those whose custodial parent had less than a high school education reported more actual influence from their partners than those whose parents had a high school degree.

The last set of models in Table 9.4 examines general decision-making power. Model 1 indicates that decision-making power does not systematically change with age. Female respondents scored significantly higher, indicating that they perceived a more favorable level of power in their relationships. The interaction of gender and age was not statistically significant, indicating that the effect of gender was similar

**Fig. 9.7** General decision-making power



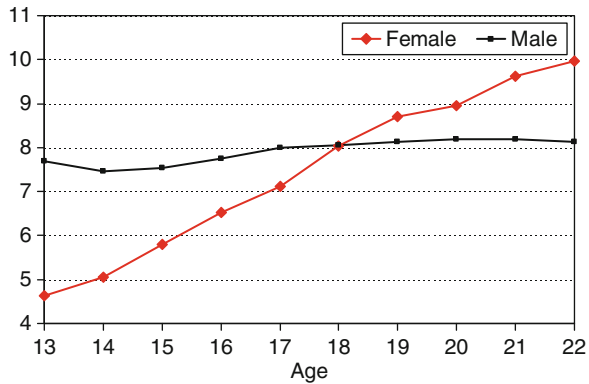
**Fig. 9.8** Partner's instrumental support



from adolescence to early adulthood. In the full model, the gender gap persisted and no age gradient existed (Fig. 9.7). Relationship duration was negatively associated with decision-making power. Hispanics and non-Hispanic Blacks reported greater relationship power than non-Hispanic Whites in early adolescence, but this difference decreased over time. In addition, those from single-parent homes reported greater relationship decision-making throughout adolescence and early adulthood than did those from two-parent married families.

Table 9.5 shows the growth curve analyses of variables related to instrumental support within teen and early adult romantic relationships. Model 1 shows that receipt of instrumental support from partner increased with age, but the interaction term indicated that the increase was much larger for males. The gender gap observed in early adolescence, where females received much more instrumental support from their partners than did males, closed by early adulthood. In the full model, a similar set of age and gender effects was observed (Fig. 9.8). Of the other covariates, longer relationship duration, being in a current relationship, and cohabiting were all associated with increased instrumental support from one's partner. Partner support was higher among sexually active couples in early adolescence, but this gap also closed by early adulthood. Partner instrumental support was higher

**Fig. 9.9** Respondent’s instrumental support



among Hispanics than non-Hispanic Whites in early adolescence. Again, this gap closed by early adulthood. Those from single-parent and “other” living situations during childhood reported lower levels of partner instrumental support than did those from two-parent married families. Respondents whose parent had less than a high school education reported receiving more instrumental support from partners than did those with high school-educated parents, throughout adolescence and early adulthood. Respondents whose parents had some college education also reported more partner instrumental support in early adolescence, but this gap closed by early adulthood.

The last two sets of models in Table 9.5 showed that respondents’ reports about their own provision of instrumental support also increased with age. In early adolescence, female respondents reported that they provided significantly less support to their partners, but with instrumental support increasing more for females, by early adulthood, young women reported providing more instrumental support to their partners than did their male counterparts. Model 2 shows that the gender pattern continued to operate, with female respondents indicating that they provided less support than males in early adolescence, but more support than males by early adulthood (Fig. 9.9). Being in a current relationship, having had sex in the relationship, and cohabiting rather than dating were all associated with higher provision of instrumental support. Longer relationship duration was also associated with higher provision of instrumental support, particularly in early adolescence. Non-Hispanic Blacks reported less instrumental support in early adolescence, but this gap closed by early adulthood.

### Summary: Changes over time in Relationship Qualities and Dynamics

The above analyses reveal significant developmental shifts in the nature of dating relationships from adolescence to young adulthood. As respondents aged, they reported decreased feelings of awkwardness and concomitant increases in perceived confidence

navigating their dating lives. Findings suggest an overall increase in feelings associated with romantic love and other emotional rewards of these relationships. At the same time, as respondents mature relationships also include greater instrumental rewards and support. Together, these findings provide a strong contrast to recent studies decrying the end of romance and rise of a “hookup” culture characterized by a succession of sexual liaisons lacking intimacy and investment in these relationships (Bogle, 2008).

Our analyses also demonstrated that the generally more intimate portrait of relationships among older respondents is not entirely due to the subset of respondents who have begun cohabiting with their romantic partners. The growth curve models control for cohabitation status, and additional analyses indicate that while the cohabiting couples are closer in some respects (cohabiters score higher on dating confidence, partner influence attempts, and instrumental support), cohabiting and dating relationships share similar levels of love and emotional rewards, perceived power, and actual influence. The findings that indicate few emotional differences between cohabiting and dating relationships mirror those reported by Brown and Bulanda (2008) using Add Health data.

It is also of particular interest that many of the gender distinctions in the pattern of responses documented in prior analyses of responses of adolescents continue to be observed when we focus on respondents who are entering the phase of emerging adulthood. Thus, for example, while there is a general upward trend in the direction of greater perceived influence of the romantic partner, male respondents, like their younger counterparts, report higher levels of attempted and actual influence on the part of their romantic partners. Moreover, contrary to traditional theorizing, older males, on average, continue to report a less favorable power balance within their relationships, relative to the reports female respondents provided. Further, while we hypothesized that the gender gap in perceived communication awkwardness might disappear as male respondents gained additional relationship experience, the gender interaction indicates a sharper age-related decline in perceived awkwardness among female compared with male respondents.

Gender differences that warrant further exploration include the utilitarian and emotional rewards findings. Responses of relatively young adolescents indicate that male partners on average provided more utilitarian benefits within these relationships (thus reflecting a traditional gender portrait), but results indicate a sharper increase in older female respondents' reports about the utilitarian support they provide their partners. Male reports about their female partners' provisions of support generally parallel these findings. Although it is not possible to document cohort shifts with these data, such findings appear consistent with Risman and Schwartz's (2002) recent focus on young women's greater levels of participation in higher education and the labor force. The authors argued that this may be associated with enhanced feelings of power and independence, and in turn with changes in the way young women conduct their romantic and sexual lives. The findings reported here suggest that young men may also benefit from the practical or tangible benefits young women can bring to the relationship. It would be useful to develop more refined measures of utilitarian or practical benefits, and to explore how their provision connects to relationship dynamics and decision-making within young adult relationships.

Findings with respect to emotional rewards also need additional research scrutiny. While we do not observe strong gender differences in report of feelings of passionate love, female respondents consistently score higher on the index of emotional rewards of the relationship. This may relate to the specific items that comprise this scale (my partner makes me feel attractive, my partner makes me feel good about myself), as it may be more customary for male than female partners to make positive comments about a partner's attractiveness. The finding may also be viewed as evidence of the survival of traditional gender scripts (wherein young women are more heavily invested in the romantic arena, and more focused on the emotional rewards intimate relationships provide). Yet, the direction of findings does provide a caveat to prior research that has emphasized the decline in well-being of young women and the erosion of self-esteem that often accompanies entry into the romantic realm (Joyner & Udry, 2000; Pipher, 1994). As the other findings we reported indicate that male respondents consistently score higher on partner influence attempts and actual influence (indicating that the female partner may be less than satisfied with some aspects of their behavior), perhaps this is related to males' generally lower scores on items such as "my partner makes me feel good about myself."

Owing to the central role of power in prior studies of gender relations, additional research is needed that relies on more nuanced measures of power, ideally including attention to specific arenas or domains of decision-making, and exploring mechanisms through which partners influence one another. It is also important to conduct longitudinal studies that follow young adult respondents into their mid-to-late twenties to determine whether the movement to marriage and childbearing influences relationship quality, especially the perceived power balance within the relationship, and perhaps a shift to more traditionally gendered patterns.

## **Parenthood and Romantic Relationships in Young Adulthood**

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore fully the role of parenthood as an outcome of relationship dynamics as well as being an influence upon them. However, we recognize that this is a limitation, given that the early adult years are a prime time for transitions to parenthood – 38% of women have a birth by age 24 (Schoen, Landale, & Daniels, 2007). Much attention has been paid to childbearing during the teenage years (prior to age 18); however, there has been a leveling off of teenage fertility. The average age at entry into motherhood in the USA is 25 and there have been small increases in the birth rates among women 18–24 (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2007). Indeed, much unintended fertility (often mistimed births) occurs during the early 20s [the average age at unintended first birth is 23 among recent birth cohort (Wildsmith, Guzzo, & Hayford, 2010)].

Parenthood cannot be equated with other signals of adulthood in part because of the lasting impression a child leaves on the life course, as well as the reality that the bar to achieve this milestone is simply unprotected sexual intercourse. A recent analysis of relationship factors predicting sexual intercourse within a given adolescent

romantic relationship documented that many of the relationship qualities described above are significant predictors of whether intercourse occurred (Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2010). Although sex becomes more ubiquitous within the context of young adult relationships, it is reasonable to hypothesize that some of these same dynamics are associated with experiencing a pregnancy, whether intended, mistimed, or unintended. Relationship seriousness and duration have been linked to inconsistent or nonuse of a condom (Manning, Flanigan, Giordano, & Longmore, 2009), and young adults may evaluate both partners and the costs of pregnancy experience differently during this phase of the life course. It would be useful to explore more systematically whether relationship qualities and dynamics are more powerful predictors of young adult as contrasted with adolescent pregnancies.

The transition to parenthood has also been found to *change* the nature of relationships; however, the findings depend on the timing and relationship context of parenthood (Umberson, Pudrovska, & Reczek, 2010). These studies rely on change indicators of relationship satisfaction and well-being and examine whether those who had children between interview waves shifted in their reports of well-being. For example, unmarried and married mothers do not experience many negative implications of parenthood, while cohabiting mothers experience more costs to parenthood (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003; Woo & Raley, 2005). Given that the majority of young adult mothers entered parenthood outside of marriage it is important to consider the relationship context of parenthood (Schoen et al., 2007). Although the length of time between interview periods precludes a fine-grained analysis of relationship qualities pre-and postbirth, the TARS protocol includes a direct question asking parents to indicate how having a child has changed their relationship. In response, 54% agreed or strongly agreed that their child brought the parents closer together. This suggests considerable variability in the effect of childbearing on relationship qualities during this period, and highlights the need to further explore the role of such dynamics as both an influence on and consequence of these childbearing experiences.

## **Beyond Romantic Relationships: Recent Research on Relationship “Churning,” Sex-with-One’s-Ex, and Casual Sex**

The statistical analyses described above are longitudinal and thus, relative to cross-sectional examinations, provide a useful window on respondents’ romantic experiences across time and development. Nevertheless, the focus on one’s current or most recent romantic relationship does not provide a completely comprehensive portrait of the full range of young adults’ romantic and sexual experiences. While the findings indicate a general trend toward deepening levels of intimacy and interdependence, dating and even cohabiting relationships are not marital unions, and thus instability and breaking up are also part of the dynamics that characterize many relationships. In addition, sexual behavior does occur outside the traditional dating context, and



thus information about these more casual liaisons will not be captured by analyses focused solely on dating relationships. Below, we briefly review recent TARS findings focused on these experiences that serve to round out and complicate the portrait of romantic and sexual relationships that are forged during the young adult years.

## Evidence of Relationship “Churning”

Americans are waiting longer to get married. The average age at marriage is at a historical highpoint of 26 for women and 28 for men (US Census Bureau, 2009). These delays in marriage have afforded young adults more “life course space” for an increasing number of premarital sexual partners, dating opportunities, and cohabiting partners (Cohen & Manning, 2010). Thus young adults are potentially involved in the starting and ending of many relationships. Prior research has shown that marriages may involve separations and reconciliations (Binstock & Thornton, 2003), and the endings of young adult relationships may also be complex. Breaking up for young adults relative to adolescent daters may be especially “hard to do,” given the findings described above, indicating longer average durations and higher levels of intimacy associated with the relationships of the older respondents. Consistent with this observation we find a greater proportion of young adult than adolescent relationships involve reconciliations. In young adulthood approaching half (44%) of young adult respondents reported at least one instance of a breakup followed by a reconciliation, and just under a quarter have experienced more than one such disruption (Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano & Longmore 2010). These “failed breakups” are more common in cohabiting unions (50%) than dating relationships (43%). Among the TARS respondents, having experienced at least one disruption is the majority experience for Black daters and cohabitators as well as for Hispanic and other/mixed race cohabitators. Thus, the endings of young adult relationships are not straightforward and suggest the importance of further exploring these more fluid processes of ending and starting relationships. Certainly, basing our understanding of young adult relationships on a model of marriage may not be appropriate.

A consequence of relationship churning or breaking up and getting back together is that sex may occur with an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend. We find that among adolescents a large share of casual sexual experiences are in fact instances in which respondents reported having sex with exes (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). Halpern-Meekin et al. (2010) examined a related phenomenon in early adulthood. The TARS data indicate that about half of young adults who had broken up with a partner reported having had sex with their ex. Similar proportions of male and female respondents reported such an experience, while cohabitators were significantly more likely to have had sex with an ex; nearly three-quarters (72%) of cohabiting young adults who broke up experienced sex with an ex – 41% of daters reported that they had been sexually intimate with a former boyfriend or girlfriend. Older respondents relative to their younger counterparts were significantly more likely to report having had sex with an ex.

Typically, analyses of relationship instability focus on the duration of relationships and contrast couples in stable relationships with those who have “broken up.” However, these examples of “failed” breakups and having sex with an ex underscore the difficulties in drawing clear, distinct boundaries when considering the careers of young adult dating relationships. Not surprisingly, those who had experienced a relationship disruption reported greater relationship conflict; however, it is also important to note that such respondents also reported higher levels of intimate self-disclosure within their relationships – a dynamic often associated with the progression of feelings of intimacy and interdependence, and that may be linked to the couple’s inability to completely sever ties. Thus, both negative and positive features of these relationships are associated with increased odds of experiencing this type of relationship dynamic. It is important to explore these blurred boundaries in more detail, not only because this more fully characterizes the way in which individuals “do” romance during the period, but also because of possible health risks associated with these patterns. The breakup period may expose either or both partners to new sexual partners, but the level of intimacy and trust that exists may limit the perceived need to be consistent in using condoms when there is a reconciliation period, or when the opportunity arises to become sexually intimate with a former partner.

## Casual Sex

Even though a large percentage of young adults are dating or cohabiting, many young adults have also had sexual experiences outside one of these more traditional contexts. The majority (73%) of sexually active young adults in the TARS have reported ever having had sex with at least one “casual” partner (that is, with someone the respondent did not consider a “dating” partner), and 49% of sexually active young adults did so in the 2 years prior to interview. On average, young adults who had a casual sex partner in the last 2 years reported having had three casual sex partners. Men were more likely to have experienced casual sex (men report an average of 3.5 partners in the last 2 years versus women who report an average 2 casual sex partners). Multivariate analyses indicate that the gender gap in casual sex experience is explained by men’s more liberal sexual attitudes (Lyons, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2010).

Young adults are more likely to experience casual sex than are adolescents. The TARS indicate that 23% of sexually active 16-year olds reported casual sex, in contrast to 79% of 23-year olds. Growth curve analyses indicate gender differences in the trends in involvement in casual sex across the four waves of interviews—reflecting the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. The gender gap is minimal at ages 15 and 16. During this period, males do not have more casual sex partners; however, males increase the number of casual sex partners over time at a significantly faster rate than females. We could not explain the greater increase in casual sex partners among males with the inclusion of mediators such as substance use, peer behavior and attitudes, social psychological well-being, traditional beliefs, and

family measures. Casual sex appears to be normative part of the young adult life course stage, and casual sex often has complex meanings and motivations associated with the behavior.

Much of the prior research on casual sex in young adulthood has been limited to studies of college students. Some researchers have argued that the college environment is particularly conducive to involvement in these more casual experiences (Bogle, 2008). However, recent analyses of the TARS data indicate that noncollege youth are significantly more likely to report such experiences relative to those who attend colleges or universities (Lyons et al., 2010). We do find, however, that the gender gap in casual sexual experience is greater among young adults at the lower educational levels. In fact, men and women enrolled in college (4-year institutions) experience similar numbers of casual sex partners.

The respondents' reports of casual experience are consistent with the emerging adulthood literature in that young adulthood is often seen as a time for sexual exploration (Arnett, 2004). Overall, nearly half (47%) of all young adults agree or strongly agree that sex should occur with someone they love, suggesting that casual sex is acceptable to about half of young adults (results not shown). As the multivariate results described above suggest, there appears to be a gender element to the acceptance of casual sex, with 38% of male young adults and 55% of female young adults indicating that sex should only occur with someone they love. And, even though a majority of sexually active young adults thus have some experience with casual sex, similar to reports of sexually active adolescents (Manning et al., 2006), young adults are not typically having casual sex with individuals they have just met (i.e., the idea of a one-night stand). The vast majority of young adults who reported recent casual experiences had sex with friends or ex-partners.

A subset of TARS respondents participated in in-depth qualitative interviews that provided insight into the ways in which these young adults understand such experiences. Respondents reported traditional motivations for casual sex, such as physical pleasure, enjoyment, and the influence of situations involving alcohol, but also focused on unique concerns of the young adult phase of the life course. Kelly, a college sophomore, indicated that her involvement with one casual sex partner was "just for fun kind of ... both people understand that there's not going to be an emotional attachment." Consistent with this notion, only 17% of respondents state they have casual sex because they think it will bring them closer to their casual sex partner.

However, other motivations for engaging in casual sex behavior described by these young adults actively reflect on the transitional nature of the young adult phase of the life course, as some respondents emphasized busy schedules, residential moves, and feeling too young to be tied down to a committed relationship. For instance, Sara, a 20-year-old female with two casual sex partners and who dropped out of community college, described her recent experience: "No. I knew it wasn't – It was just gonna be a casual – that I knew was going to be a casual thing ... Because he lives in (another state) and I lived up here. I knew that I was never gonna' live there, and he was never gonna' live here. And the long-distance thing would have never worked." Kaleb, a 21-year-old male who reported involvement

with two casual sex partners, explained that his sexual relationship remained casual because his partner was moving away to college: “Uh ... she was going ... it was her last year of high school, and she was about to go to college. So, I mean we could have worked out ... But, it wouldn’t have worked out cause, she was going to college.”

## Conclusion

Although a majority of young adults in the TARS study reported some experience with casual sex, dating and cohabiting relationships were nevertheless more common relationship forms. Our data indicated that about 50% of the sample reported having sex only with a romantic partner, an additional 40% reported romantic as well as casual sex experience, and less than 10% indicated that sexual behavior only occurred within the context of casual rather than dating relationships. Results reviewed above also suggest that when compared with earlier dating relationships, those formed in young adulthood tend to be characterized by increasing levels of intimacy and interdependence. A challenge for future research is to provide a more fully developed portrait of the sequencing and connections between these varied experiences. For example, while some casual sexual liaisons (about 20% at wave 4) overlap with more serious relationships (i.e., reflecting a pattern of cheating or concurrency), in many instances these experiences follow a breakup (sex with ex), or may be a substitute when the individual simply has not found a suitable longer-term intimate partner.

Others may consciously declare a moratorium on serious relationships, but most often this is viewed within the context of the young adult phase of the life course, rather than being seen as an alternative lifestyle decision. That a majority within the sample expect to eventually marry (Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2007) and/or to cohabit suggests the continuing cultural impact of norms favoring the development of a close, stable relationship, rather than involvement in a succession of casual liaisons. It is interesting to note that even those within the sample who suggested that others would see them as “players” often developed rationalizations about their behavior, including the idea of simply being too young to be “tied down” yet, or suggesting that they were still looking for “the right girl” (Giordano, Longmore, Manning, & Northcutt, 2009). Other motivations for lack of serious involvement with a romantic partner challenge further the notion that higher levels of attachment and intimacy always represent “progress” from a developmental standpoint. Thus, some within the sample had bracketed off concerns with dating and romance because of real or potential negative influences on their education and work goals (Manning, Giordano, Longmore, & Hocevar, 2009). Although the most common reason provided for not dating was the desire to avoid drama (56%), this was followed closely by the idea that they were too involved in work/school (48%). These findings are supported by the qualitative data. An 18-year-old female respondent recently quit dating her boyfriend to catch up with school work in hopes of attending a local

community college: “Ahh, it [the relationship] stopped because I don’t want a boyfriend now that I’m studying. I want a clear mind [laughs].” When asked why he is not currently dating, 18-year-old Jamal replies, “I’m worried about school,” while Brandy emphasized that she wanted “to be into school more than [into] boys.”

Further follow-ups of the sample will allow us to explore the longer-term implications for well-being, relationship formation, and achievement, and of having chosen these varied relationship paths in adolescence and early adulthood. The influence of childbearing on the qualities and dynamics of young adults’ dating lives and the influence of dating on variations in parenting experiences also warrant greater research attention. Finally, although our sample size did not permit a separate examination, more research is needed on the dating and cohabiting experiences of sexual minority youths as they navigate the transition to adulthood.

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# Chapter 10

## Challenges in Charting the Course of Romantic Relationships in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood

Frank D. Fincham

**Abstract** The emergence of research on romantic relationships in adolescence and in emerging adulthood raises the question of how these relationships are similar/different across the two developmental periods. Giordano and colleagues (Chap. 9) provide useful information on this question. This commentary elaborates on the two contexts that inform their work, the prevalence of cohabitation, and casual sex. It is argued that contemporary romantic relationships lack the clear, universal progression of previous generations and data are provided to show that many contemporary relationships begin with a physical encounter or hook up. Several challenges in understanding romantic relationship development are also discussed. These include the need for dyadic research, the use of appropriate analytic tools to deal with interdependence in the data, and attention to the issue of measurement invariance to show that measures are functioning in the same way for males and females and across people in different phases of development.

Attempts to document the significance of romantic relationships in adolescence and among emerging adults “often have been short-circuited by erroneous and unsubstantiated beliefs” (Collins, 2003, p. 2), especially the view that they are not particularly important or formative. However, recent data have made clear that such an assumption is no longer tenable and the study of romantic relationships in adolescence (see Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Connolly & McIsaac, 2009) and emerging adulthood (see Fincham & Cui, 2011) have surfaced as areas of research in the last decade. The emergence of these areas of inquiry raises the question of how romantic relationships are similar (or different) across these two developmental periods. On the one hand, the life course perspective (Elder, 1985) posits that people’s life trajectories are determined by a series of linked stages in which transitions from

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one state to another are always embedded in and have an impact on those trajectories. From this perspective, one might expect considerable continuity in romantic relationships. On the other hand, the substantial biological, social, and emotional changes that occur between the early teens and the mid-20s suggest possible qualitative changes. Not surprisingly, leading theorists have proposed that relationships in adolescence (e.g., with friends, parents, romantic partners) follow different and discrete trajectories but transform into “integrated interpersonal structures” in the early 20s (Collins & Laursen, 2000, p. 59). Ultimately, the course of romantic relationships in adolescence and emerging adulthood is an empirical question, but to date very little data address this issue (for an exception, see Seiffge-Krenke, 2003).

The context just described emphasizes the importance of Giordano, Manning, Longmore, and Flanigan’s contribution (Chap. 9). Their study provides much needed descriptive information on romantic relationships across these two developmental periods and the largely descriptive focus is both timely and appropriate since the first stage in any new area of inquiry is to document the phenomenon under study. The analysis they provide is also particularly commendable for its attention to contemporary phenomena relevant to understanding romantic relationships, namely, cohabitation and casual sexual encounters. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to elaborating on their findings and outlining challenges faced in charting the course of romantic relationships in adolescence and emerging adulthood.

## **A Brave New World of Romantic Relationships?**

An initial challenge is to capture the context of romantic relationship development in our research. Giordano et al. do so with their attention to two contexts relevant to understanding contemporary romantic relationships. Each is discussed in turn.

### ***Cohabitation***

As Giordano et al. note, cohabitation is now not only normative but may be associated with different qualities and dynamics than dating relationships. Their data are among the first to address this issue, which they believe will speak to where “cohabitation fits in the American courtship system.” To date, research on cohabitation has documented that couples who cohabited before marriage, and especially before engagement, are at greater risk once married: the so-called cohabitation effect (more accurately, the “pre-engagement cohabitation effect”).

Stanley, Rhoades, and Fincham (2011) offered an analysis that addresses the gap in the literature that Giordano et al. seek to fill. The analysis begins by offering quantitative data that are consistent with previous qualitative research showing that the majority of cohabitators report not talking or deliberating about cohabiting with the partner before moving in together (Manning & Smock, 2005). Recognizing that commitment may arise from constraints as well as internal motivation, Stanley et al. (2011)

argued that it is harder to end a cohabiting relationship than a noncohabiting one. The upshot is that some cohabiting couples likely remain together (e.g., get married) who would not have done so had it been easier to break up. Thus, cohabitation without a clear public commitment (e.g., engagement to marry) increases risk for poorer relationship health. One might expect such relationships to differ in quality from those of noncohabiting, dating couples.

Stanley et al. (2011) related the upsurge in cohabitation to a preference for ambiguity as this is an ambiguous form of union (Lindsay, 2000). They argued that ambiguity is preferred to clarity when clarity is perceived to be associated with increased risk of rejection or loss and that such a perception is not unlikely in a generation which has witnessed a high rate of marital instability. Although the fate of such theorizing lies in the evaluation of its testable predictions, it nonetheless appears that contemporary romantic relationships lack the clear, universal progression of previous generations (see Sassler, 2010). If correct, this provides new challenges in forming and maintaining romantic relationships.

## **Hooking Up and Friends with Benefits: Shaky Foundations for a Relationship?**

Giordano et al. reported that, overall, 73% of their sexually active participants had engaged in casual sex, a percentage that increased to 79% by 23 years of age. Like cohabitation, this behavior is now a normative part of the context in which romantic relationships occur during adolescence and emerging adulthood. How might this be relevant?

Young people use the term *hooking up* to refer to casual sex as it is generally more reflective of the ambiguity in the boundaries of encounters and the variety of physical intimacies involved (ranging from kissing to intercourse; Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Fincham, 2010). Notwithstanding the fact that hooking up is commonly understood to involve a physical encounter on one occasion without expectations of future physical encounters or a committed relationship, recent research shows that a majority of women (65%) and a substantial minority of men (45%) privately hoped that their hooking-up encounter will become a committed relationship (Owen & Fincham, 2011). Consistent with such data, I have found that 67% of emerging adults in college who are in an “exclusive dating relationship” reported that the relationship began as a hook up.

Another form of casual sex is referred to as *friends with benefits* (FWB). FWB is a relationship style that blends aspects of friendship and physical intimacy (prevalence rates range from approximately 33 to 60% among emerging adults; Bisson & Levine, 2009). The physical intimacy aspect of FWB (“with benefits”) is more similar to a romantic relationship (e.g., sexual activities); however, there are no labels or implied commitments of a romantic relationship (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). My work shows that some 20% of college students in an “exclusive dating relationship” reported that the relationship began as a FWB relationship.

The data therefore suggest that the traditional relationship sequence (get to know other → romantic relationship → marriage → sex) has been replaced by one where sex serves as the (initial) foundation of the relationship (sex → know other → relationship). This raises a particular question; whether relationships that begin with sex differ in qualities and dynamics from those that do not, and a general question; whether, analogous to married individuals, emerging adults in committed romantic relationships experience greater well-being than singles. To date, there does not appear to be data on the first question.

Addressing the latter question, Braithwaite, Delevi, and Fincham (2010) found partners in committed relationships experienced fewer mental health problems and were less likely to be overweight/obese. Further, being in a committed romantic relationship decreased problematic outcomes largely through a reduction in sexual partners, which in turn decreased both risky behaviors and problematic outcomes. This finding, however, needs to be viewed in light of data showing high rates of extradyadic sex in both marital (see Fincham & Beach, 2010) and dating relationships (see Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). In addition to the challenge it poses for relationships (e.g., infidelity is the leading cause of divorce; Amato & Previti, 2003), this behavior poses a public health problem as it places partners at risk, both directly and indirectly, for contracting sexually transmitted diseases (because of inconsistent condom use in extradyadic encounters). It is therefore worth noting that relationship education designed for emerging adults has been shown to reduce rates of extradyadic sexual behavior (Braithwaite, Lambert, Fincham, & Pasley, 2010).

## **Challenges in Understanding Romantic Relationship Development**

A second set of challenges pertain primarily to methodology. Three challenges are briefly outlined for future research.

### ***The Need for Dyadic Research***

There can be no doubt that a great deal of progress has been made in research on close relationships using the individually oriented approach represented in this volume. Individuals can, and do, provide us with a great deal of useful information about their relationships. However, it behooves us to recognize the role of impression management, motivated distortion, and the limits of self-awareness in such data. In addition, just as the native speaker of a language is often unable to articulate its underlying grammar, individual's reports are poor sources of information about relationship dynamics. Such dynamics are often revealed through observation of the couple or by obtaining reports from both partners over time. After all, Lederer and Jackson's (1968)

view that happy marriages are characterized by the reciprocal exchange of positive behaviors held sway until observational research showed that this is not the case. Instead, distressed marriages are characterized by the reciprocal exchange of (negative) behaviors. As the literature on the development of romantic relationships matures, the challenge of collecting information about both partners will become increasingly important to advance understanding. Obtaining data from both partners also addresses the single-source data problem while supplementing self-report data with observational data addresses the mono-method limitation of most extant data.

### ***Dealing with Interdependence***

As we gather data relating to both dyad members, it is important to recognize that such data are nested within couples and to apply analytic tools that take this interdependence into account. Toward this end, it is worth noting that two family journals have recently offered special issues focused on methods (*Journal of Family Psychology*, 2005; *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 2005).

Application to dyadic data of procedures like structural equation modeling and multilevel modeling has been often discussed in the context of growth-curve modeling (e.g., Kashy & Donnellan, 2008; Newsom, 2002). In addition, specialized procedures have been introduced specifically for examining relationship data, such as the Social Relations Model (SRM; see Eichelsheim, Dekovic, Buist, & Cook, 2009) and the Actor Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; see Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). The APIM allows analysis of actor and partner effects in which each refers to regression paths between a characteristic of one spouse with another characteristic of the same spouse (an actor effect) or with a characteristic of the partner (a partner effect). Since the SRM uses data from more than two people (e.g., three or four family members), actor effects in this context refer to the unbiased estimates of an individual's perception or behavior toward others in general, and partner effects denote unbiased estimates of an individual's tendency to be perceived or behaved toward by others in general. The APIM can be considered a special case of the SRM in which the mean levels of dyadic behavior for both the actor and partner cannot be determined (there is no information beyond individual behavior in the specific dyad).

For general advice and practical tips in working with dyadic data, it is difficult to imagine a gentler, more accessible introduction than that provided by Ackerman, Donnellan, and Kashy (2011). Kurdek (2003) offered a very accessible and helpful discussion of methodological issues in using growth-curve analyses with married couples.

### ***Measurement Equivalence***

It has become increasingly recognized that whenever research deals with samples that differ, whether by sex, age, or any other variable (e.g., culture), researchers bear

the responsibility of demonstrating that their measures are functioning in the same manner in each group. For example, there is no guarantee that items designed to tap relationship commitment perform in the same manner when administered to men as compared to women. Similarly, it is a challenge to measure a construct in an equivalent manner across different developmental stages. Phenotypic equivalence, using the same items, does not necessarily yield measurement equivalence. Without demonstrated measurement equivalence across groups, substantive cross-group comparisons (e.g., tests of group mean differences, invariance of structural parameter estimates) are necessarily ambiguous as they reflect an unknown combination of measurement and substantive differences. In short, measurement equivalence requires the use of operations that yield measures of the same attribute under different conditions (e.g., different mediums of measurement such as paper and pencil vs. online, different populations, measurement at different time points).

In practice, this has been accomplished in several ways. Commonly, an omnibus test of covariance matrix equality is first conducted (Vandenberg & Lance, 2000). If this test shows no differences, some researchers are content to move on to substantive questions even though the usefulness of this test has been questioned. It is advisable to conduct more specific tests that can identify particular sources of difference. Typically, this is done in a confirmatory factor analysis framework in which data from both groups are included to establish a baseline model. Then factor loadings are constrained to be equal in each group and the model is again estimated. The difference between the models yields a chi-square statistic (with degrees of freedom equal to number of freed parameters) that provides a test of measurement equivalence. Further, more specific tests can be done to examine particular items or subsets of items.

Reflective of classical test theory, the approach described assumes that the manifest response is a linear combination of a latent construct, item intercept, factor loading, and error. By contrast, the item response theory (IRT) framework in modern test theory posits a log-linear model of the relationship between manifest item responses and an underlying latent trait (for a very brief rudimentary introduction, see Reise, Ainsworth, & Haviland, 2005). The field of standardized testing has long used IRT to craft nonidentical but nevertheless equivalent forms of tests that evaluate academic ability and competency; it is now being increasingly used to study personality and relationship variables. When an item is evaluated with IRT in a sufficiently large and diverse sample, the results obtained can be expected to replicate almost identically in all future samples. This provides insight into how that item will perform across a range of situations and clarifies exactly how much information it will provide for assessing the construct of interest ( $\theta$  or theta in IRT). This also means that a score for a measure developed using IRT should have an identical meaning across samples. Although mastery of IRT is challenging, quantifying the information provided by each item at various levels of  $\theta$  allows for development of more accurate (and maximally informative) measures comprising fewer items. An informative comparison of CFA and IRT methods for establishing measurement equivalence is provided by Meade and Lautenschlager (2004).

## Conclusion

Charting the course of romantic relationships in adolescence and emerging adulthood is as important as it is difficult. Under the best of circumstances, longitudinal research can be challenging. Giordano and colleagues deserve commendation for taking on this challenge and in doing so have provided valuable initial data. As we move forward in the endeavor to understand romantic relationships in adolescence and emerging adulthood, it will be increasingly important to address not only the context in which contemporary romantic relationships exist, but also the complexities of relationships and how to adequately measure relationship constructs.

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# Chapter 11

## I Just Want Your Kiss? Sexual Relationships in Young Adulthood

Kelly Raley

**Abstract** The goal of this chapter is to present a descriptive picture of young adult relationships using data from the recently released 2006–2008 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). The strength of this analysis is that it employs nationally representative data on both men and women and considers the broad spectrum of relationships experienced by young adults ages 18–23, including marriage, cohabitation, non-coresidential sexual relationships, the sexually inactive, and the sexually inexperienced. Because much of the research on the “hook-up” culture has focused on college students, I also describe how relationship experiences differ between college students and other young adults. I find that more young adults are forming steady relationships than are just hooking up and having sex. This is true of college students as well as those who never went to or are no longer enrolled in college. In fact, a distinctive aspect of college students, both men and women, is the high proportion who are not sexually active.

Giordano and colleagues have, here and in a series of papers published in peer-reviewed journals, demonstrated the deep relevance of “dating” relationships for both boys and girls in the transition to adulthood. The strength of this work lies in their mixed-method approach, which allows them to illustrate the meaning of these relationships in the youth’s own words while at the same time using a probability sample to present quantitative measures for comparison by gender or other important characteristics. Their data make clear that in young adulthood relationships not only involve strong emotions of affection, but also can be a source of instrumental support. As Giordano and colleagues argue, their analysis provides “strong contrast to recent studies decrying the end of romance, and rise of a ‘hook-up’ culture” (Chap. 9).

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Although young adults (and social scientists) use the term “hook-up” to describe a wide range of sexual activities, an accepted common understanding is that it involves a physical relationship in which no further social or emotional connection is expected. While these relationships are by definition physical, they do not always involve sexual intercourse. In fact, one attraction of the term is that it is ambiguous in this regard (Bogle, 2008; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). Some argue that casual sexual encounters “have become a primary form of intimate heterosexual interaction” (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009, p. 590) and that hooking up has replaced dating on college campuses (Bogle, 2008; Burdette et al., 2009; England, Shafer, & Fogarty, 2007; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). Others suggest more broadly that courtship and serious dating are dead (Kass, 1997). Obviously, the Toledo Adolescent Relationship participants who consider themselves in dating or cohabiting relationships are too strongly attached to be considered hooking up, but are only a small minority of young adults in “dating relationships?” Are these unusually conservative or traditional individuals, is Toledo unusually romantic, or do these dating couples actually represent the typical experiences of young adults in the United States?

My intention is to supplement Giordano et al.’s work with a descriptive picture of young adult relationships using data from the recently released 2006–2008 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), which includes a sample of 1,621 women and 1,393 men ages 18–23. The strength of this analysis is that it employs nationally representative data on both men and women and considers the broad spectrum of relationships experienced by young adults ages 18–23, including marriage, cohabitation, non-coresidential sexual relationships, the sexually inactive, and the sexually inexperienced. Because much of the research on the “hook-up” culture has focused on college students, I also describe how relationship experiences differ between college students and other young adults.

## **Why Do We Care If Young Adults Are Forming Relationships or Hooking-Up?**

To help guide my analysis of young adult relationships, I first want to consider why we might care about this subject. One reason emerges from the belief that the rise in casual sexual relationships represents an increase in sexual exploitation of young women. Descriptions of adolescent relationships in impoverished neighborhoods depict men duping young women into having their babies by promising a picket fence (Anderson, 1989). A popular account of teenaged hook-ups that appeared in the *New York Times* described a scene in which girls talked tough but were really depressed – and not sexually satisfied – after hook-ups (Denizet-Lewis, 2004). Some descriptions of the gender politics of college hook-ups are similar. The consistent theme is that women typically want relationships and men would rather only have casual sex. In fact, some argue that sexual liberation has in some ways enhanced men’s power over women as evidenced by the fact that men are getting what they

want and women are not (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001; Stepp, 2007). Others are not as certain that women, particularly college women, want relationships. Women do want to avoid the social stigma associated with too many hook-ups, but they enjoy physical intimacy and some feel they do not have the time to maintain a relationship (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). A weakness of most of these accounts is that they rely on reports only from women, leaving unchallenged the notion that men are not interested in relationships.

While some are concerned about the gender imbalance in power, other scholars are interested in the growth in hook-ups because they reflect a broader process of individuation and weakening of social ties. Compared to 25 years ago, today adults living in the United States see friends less, are less likely to join an organization, and have smaller conversation networks (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006, 2009; Putnam, 2001). They also are delaying marriage; many who do marry will eventually divorce (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001; Martin, 2006). Instead of marrying, many cohabit – living together and delaying any long-term commitment. Hook-ups seem to be the last step in the deinstitutionalization of intimate relationships, and some are concerned about the implications for family life (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001; Kass, 1997). Whether these concerns are supported depends to some extent on whether hook-ups are in fact the dominant form of relationship formation among young adults today. That is, the presence of hook-ups is not necessarily the issue; it is the lack of attachments.

A public health reason to worry about the growth in hook-ups is the spread of sexually transmitted disease. As the number of sexual partners increases, so does the risk of becoming infected, especially when youth do not always use effective protection. Finally, some might note the rise in the percentage of children born outside of marriage and believe that this is somehow related to the growth in hook-ups. I'll dismiss this possibility right away. By far the majority of nonmarital births are to women who are in romantic relationships (Chap. 12) and births to cohabiting women account for much of the increase in nonmarital fertility (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008).

## Young Adult Relationships

The first panel of Fig. 11.1 presents data from the NSFG describing men's and women's marital, cohabitation, and virginity status. Most men and women ages 18–23 are not in a coresidential union (marriage or cohabitation) and about one in four have never had sex. Nearly 50% of women and 56% of men are sexually experienced and not in a coresidential union. This is the group who may be “hooking up.” To explore this issue further, I looked at these men's and women's responses to questions about the number of sexual partners they had had over the past year and the number of current sexual partners. The results are shown in the second and third panels of Fig. 11.1.

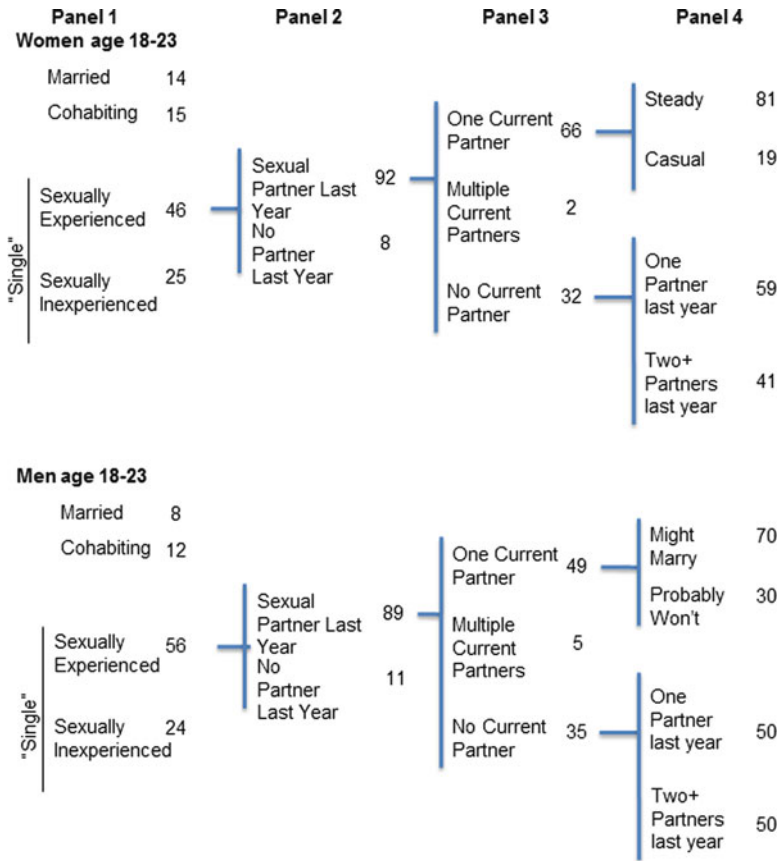


Fig. 11.1 Breakdown of relationship types of young adults by gender

Panel 2 shows that most of the single sexually experienced respondents had had sex in the last year – 92% of women and 89% of men. Panel 3 of Fig. 11.1 describes the current status of those who had had sex in the last year and were not in a coresidential union. Very few – 2% of women and 5% of men – had had multiple ongoing sexual relationships at the time of the survey. Many more – two-thirds of the women and about one-half of the men – had one current partner at the time of the survey. About one-third of sexually active men and women not in a coresidential relationship had no ongoing sexual relationship.

Previous research suggests that often “hook-ups” are with former romantic partners or with friends (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). It is likely that at least some men and women would report these as ongoing relationships. For this reason and others, some young adults may be in an ongoing sexual relationship with someone they do not view as a steady romantic partner. Panel 4 of Fig. 11.1 presents additional information on the relationship characteristics of respondents with one current (non-coresidential) partner. The NSFG asked women in a relationship at the

**Table 11.1** Current and Recent Relationship Type of Men and Women Ages 18–23

|                | Women | Men |
|----------------|-------|-----|
| Casual         | 12    | 21  |
| Steady         | 31    | 29  |
| Marriage/Cohab | 29    | 20  |
| No Sex         | 29    | 30  |

time of the survey to report the type of arrangement they have with their current partner. Four out of five currently monogamous women are either engaged to or going steady with their partner (mostly going steady). This leaves about 19% of women with one current non-coresidential partner (or 5% of all women ages 18–23) who are engaged in more casual relationships, relationships that fit within the rough parameters of what we consider to be “hook-ups.”

I cannot do a similar analysis for men, who were instead asked about the chances that they would marry their current partner. Seventy percent of men who are currently in a monogamous relationship say that there is an even chance or greater that they will marry their current partner. This leaves 30% of men with one current non-coresidential partner (or 8% of all men ages 18–23) who are in relationships that they do not anticipate will lead to marriage, and under a generous definition these might be considered hook-ups. Generally, those men and women who are in ongoing monogamous sexual relationships are romantically involved, or in TARS terms in dating relationships.

Those with no current partner but who are sexually active might be having hook-ups or they might be in a romantic relationship that dissolved. The NSFG does not ask respondents to report their relationship to their most recent sexual partner if the relationship is not ongoing, but the NSFG does provide information on the number of sexual partners over the last year. If respondents had multiple sexual partners in the past 12 months, then it is less likely that these were committed relationships. Among sexually active women with no current partner, 41% had more than one partner in the past year. About 50% of sexually active men with no current partner had more than one partner in the last year. Some of these might have been serious relationships from at least one partner’s perspective, but many of them likely were not.

Overall, these results suggest that a minority of young adults are hooking up and having sex and not forming relationships. Combining those in multiple ongoing sexual relationships with those currently with one casual partner and those who have no current partner but had multiple sexual partners over the past year, 12% of young adult women and 21% of young adult men probably have had a recent casual sexual relationship (see Table 11.1). Note that this is an inclusive definition, incorporating some who probably had two serious sexual relationships in the past year. Among both men and women ages 18–23, about 30% are in steady relationships or had a single sexual partner over the past year. Some of those in current monogamous or steady relationships have hooked-up in the past. The TARS data indicate that most young adult men and women have had at least one hook-up (Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2010). The NSFG data indicate that both women

and men in this “steady” group have typically had three sexual partners (median) in their lifetime. Nonetheless, casual relationships are not the dominant form of sexual activity among young adults. Fewer young men and women have had only casual relationships over the past year than have been in a steady relationship. Note also that an additional 29% of women and 20% of men are in a coresidential union (marriage or cohabitation).

## The College Experience in Comparative Perspective

Most of the literature on the emergence of hook-up relationships has studied college students. This focus is motivated by a number of factors. First, they are a convenient population for university-based researchers to study. Also, as Glenn and Marquardt argued, college students are the group from which future social leaders emerge. Most importantly, one’s college years are normatively a time of exploration and experimentation. College students are expected to put off marriage and other adult roles even though physically they are adults. Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) noted that many of the college women whom they studied, especially those from privileged backgrounds, were not interested in a steady relationship, favoring instead a focus on their personal development. Quotes from some of the TARs participants echo the sentiment. This might lead us to expect college students to be especially likely to engage in casual sexual relationships. Finally, some have expressed the belief that the hook-up culture is generated by the imbalance in the gender composition of colleges. As women’s educational attainment has surpassed men’s, college campuses have increasingly skewed sex ratios. Some argue that this gives men more power in sexual bargaining on college campuses.

Figure 11.2 presents an exploration of how college women’s current or recent relationships compare to the relationships of women who are no longer enrolled in school. As before, I limit the sample to women ages 18–23. I do not include those who have graduated from college or those still enrolled in high school, making each education group roughly the same age. (The mean age of those with some college and not enrolled is about one year older than the other groups.) As before, I establish four categories of relationship type. At the extremes there are those who have had no sexual relationship in the last year and those who are in a coresidential union. Figure 11.2 shows that a distinctive characteristic of women enrolled in college is the low percentage currently in a coresidential union (black bar) and the high proportion who were sexually inactive in the past year (white bar). Some might find the large proportion of college women who were sexually inactive surprising, but this figure is consistent with other studies (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001; Morgan, Shanahan, & Brynildsen, 2010).

I divide those women who are sexually active and not in a union (gray bars) into two groups: those having only casual sexual relationships and those whose current or most recent relationship was likely more serious. The casual group includes women not in a current relationship and who had two or more sexual partners in the

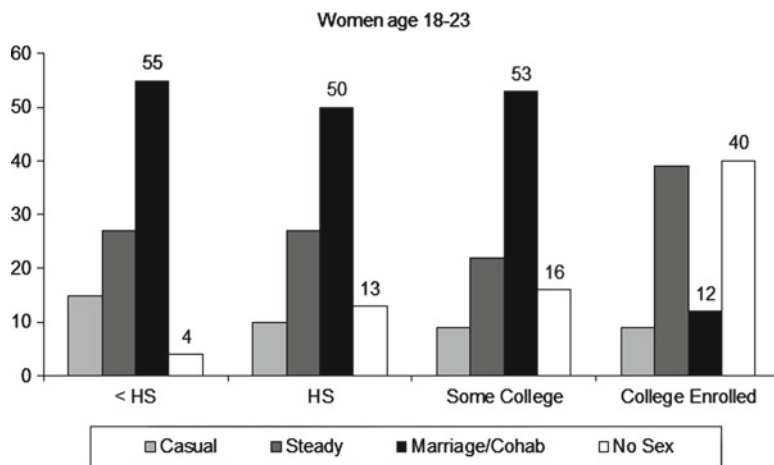
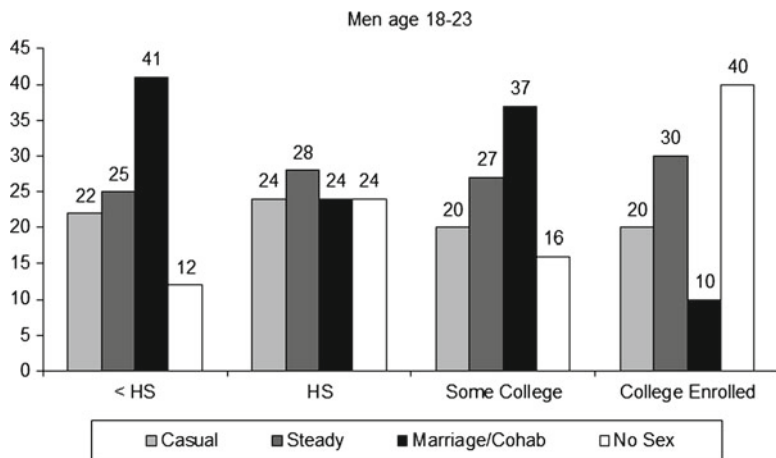


Fig. 11.2 Women’s relationship status by educational attainment

last year, those who are in an ongoing casual relationship, and a small number who have multiple current partners. The “steady” group is mostly made up of women with a current partner who they identify as a steady boyfriend or fiancé, but also includes some who are not currently in a relationship but had only one sexual partner in the last year.

Across all education groups, the percentage of women with only casual relationships was smaller than the percentage with steady relationships. Those enrolled in college were much less likely than women in the other groups to be in a coresidential union and much more likely not to be sexually active. Women with less than a high school degree were the group most likely to have casual relationships (15%). Only 9% of college women had had only casual relationships in the past year.

Figure 11.3 presents a similar analysis for men. One difference is that, as I mentioned earlier, the NSFG asked men a different question to assess the seriousness of their current relationship. We considered men who believed that there was a 50% chance or greater that they would marry their current partner to be in serious relationships. Patterns for men resembled those for women, except that across all groups more men were in casual relationships. Even so, more men had steady relationships than only casual ones. Moreover, again, men enrolled in college had the lowest percentage with casual relationships (20%) and the highest percentage sexually inactive (40%). This is not consistent with the idea that college is an especially ripe context for casual sexual relationships. Importantly, this analysis focused only on relationships involving sexual intercourse. Thus, it did not fully cover the range of relationships that might be considered hook-ups. England’s analysis suggests that fewer than half of college hook-ups involve intercourse or oral sex (England et al., 2007). It may be that college students are having more casual physical relationships that stop short of sex.



**Fig. 11.3** Men's relationship status by educational attainment

While there appears to be no difference by educational attainment in the percentage of young adults in casual sexual relationships, one big difference is the percentage in serious relationships, largely because college students are much less likely to be in coresidential unions. A nontrivial proportion of the lower education groups have even married (20% of women with just a high school degree), suggesting that they have achieved at least one adult status. An even larger proportion had had a child. Among women ages 18–23 with just a high school degree, 38% had had at least one child. An even higher percentage of women without a degree were mothers – 69%. Thus, it is clear that college students are experiencing delayed transitions into some adult family statuses, while their age peers who are no longer in school are already forming families through marriage or, more often, parenthood.

## Conclusion

Earlier I suggested a few reasons why we might be concerned about hook-ups. One was that it represents sexual exploitation because women tend to want relationships while men want only sex. Giordano's work suggests that men get a lot out of their dating relationships and that women have substantial power and influence in these relationships as well. Yet, this does not mean much if most are hooking up, that is, if most of the action is outside of a dating relationship. My results indicate that steady relationships are more common than hook-ups for both men and women, although this is truer for women than men. When young men form relationships they may be as committed as young women but they are more likely than women to have hook-ups. Altogether these results suggest that most sexually active young adult men are in relationships where they appear to respect their sexual partners and



this is true across education groups. This does not deny that sexual exploitation happens, just that this is not the typical relationship experience of young adults, even college students.

These results also suggest that despite substantial increases in sexual freedom, young adults still form relationships. Other research indicates that the large majority expect to marry some day. This is a social tie that at least so far is enduring. Nonetheless, we need to better understand the implications of casual sexual relationships on marriage timing and stability. Previous research suggests a link between number of sexual partners and risk of marital dissolution (Teachman, 2003). Hopefully, TARS will continue to follow its respondents to help provide further insight into this question.

Finally, even if in any 1 year most young adults are in relationships with substantial romantic content, most will experience a hook-up at some point in young adulthood (Manning et al., 2006). Although social ties are enduring, casual sexual relationships can increase the immediate risks of sexually transmitted diseases. While this is important, it is a much narrower concern than if we had evidence that casual sex had replaced the usual precursors to stable relationship formation.

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**Part IV**  
**Family Contexts and Timing of Fertility**

## Chapter 12

# Becoming a Parent: The Social Contexts of Fertility During Young Adulthood

Kathryn Edin and Laura Tach

**Abstract** Using quantitative data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, as well as qualitative data from an in-depth study of low-income fathers in Philadelphia, this chapter describes the characteristics of young adults who transition to parenthood before 25 and the family contexts into which their children are born. Most births to young adults occur outside of marriage, but unmarried parents typically rally around the birth of their child, claiming a commitment to making their relationships work. Yet, the responsibility of providing for a family of their own before they have achieved financial stability proves to be an enormous strain for most. Perhaps because the children of young adults are seldom explicitly planned, and because economic hardship and parenthood strain even the most committed relationships, young parents break up at higher rates than couples who delay childbearing. Young parents who break up with their partners do not remain single for very long, however, and quickly enter into new romantic relationships, many of which produce additional children. The churning of romantic partners, and the birth of additional children who result, create a complex web of economic obligations and negotiations that complicate paternal access to nonresident children, compromise maternal parenting, and create unstable family environments for young children.

Ralph, age 22, awakens each morning at 5:30 to get his 13-month-old daughter a bottle and change her Pamper. Once she's "situated," he returns to bed until it's time to wake and dress his son. The two eat a leisurely breakfast while watching cartoons. When 8 a.m. comes it's time to take the boy to the daycare center around the corner. When Ralph returns home, Stefanie is up and in the shower. While she dons her uniform and prepares for the day,

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Ralph does “a little bit of housework...you know, cleaning up stuff. That’s the kind of stuff that makes my girl happy.” The couple then enjoys a couple of hours together before Ralph puts the baby in her stroller and walks Stefanie to the bus stop. Ralph returns home for lunch and then decides to visit his friend Derek, another unemployed “house husband” with a child the same age. Derek leaves to run errands and Ralph watches the kids for a couple of hours. Then, Derek takes his turn. Ralph plays a pickup game of basketball at the park and “chills” with a couple of friends.

At 6 p.m., it’s time to collect his daughter and pick his son up from daycare. The three return home and Ralph prepares dinner and puts his daughter to bed. Ralph and his son pass the rest of the time before Stefanie returns home – at 10 p.m. – enjoying each other’s company. “We always play a game like Monopoly, whatever. At 8:00 p.m. he likes to watch a whole bunch of cartoons and stuff.... When my girl gets home, we just have time together. I just spend a whole lot of time with my family.”

Ralph has just gotten fired from his job at Bertucci’s, where he had been clearing between \$200 and \$300 a week, over some “stupid shit.” (The stupid shit was 2 days of missed work while Ralph was locked up.) Before that unfortunate turn of events, Ralph’s typical day was as follows: “It was finding a babysitter [for my daughter], go to work, come home and do everything... After 7:00 p.m., I cook for the kids. Then spend time with my girl.” Both now and then, though, Ralph says, “weekends is the best time for me. My girl stays home all day on the weekends, so we have a whole bunch of family time.”

Half of a credit is all that stands between Ralph and a high school diploma – the credential he needs to get into a program in “computers.” He’s dedicated to pursuing that goal, though has no concrete plans for how to do so. Meanwhile, he watches his daughter and does a little construction work on the side for his uncle, a contractor. He hates the construction work – the heavy lifting exacerbates a sports injury, plus it is under the table and only part-time. He’s desperate to find a “real” job and claims he is willing to work anywhere, even McDonalds, to help make the money his family needs to get by. When the bills loom especially large, he admits he sometimes sells “reefer.” “I try to stay away from it [but], I mean, I got to get money somehow.”

Recently, Ralph spent 2 days locked up “on state road” for getting into a fight with a guy who pulled a knife – this is what cost him the job at Bertucci’s. Ralph says he struggled with the man, confiscating the knife by the time the police came. But his possession of the weapon meant he, rather than his attacker, was charged. The missed days of work resulted from the fact that it took several days for his mother to scrape the bail money together. Ralph is still awaiting trial on that charge but is cautiously optimistic that he’ll beat it, as he doubts that the “other guy” will show up to testify against him. The 2 days in jail – where he saw two fellow inmates stabbed – were the worst in his life.

Despite the recent hard times, Ralph revels in his relationship with Stefanie. “When I come home I have my girl to come to and I just love coming home to her. I can’t believe it. And we’re so young, I can’t believe we’re staying together so long!” he exclaims, as if their 3-year relationship sets some sort of record. Ralph sums up the relationship as follows: “It’s more good than bad. We don’t have that many problems as far as arguing and stuff goes. When she gets to arguing, I roll out. So when I come back, she’s calmed down and we’re cool again.... We have fun almost every day, ‘cause I spend time with them as much as I can.”

Ralph met Stephanie and her 1-year-old son, whom he treats as his own, when he was 18 and a junior in high school – she was a year younger. This African American couple conceived their daughter, Shanea, 13 months later. Giving birth to a girl gave Stefanie the “rich man’s family” she desired – the local colloquialism for a family with just one boy and one girl. Ralph had been playing daddy to Stefanie’s son with enthusiasm, but becoming a “real” father was something else entirely. Ralph says he was happy when he heard the news of the not quite planned, but hardly accidental, pregnancy. Stefanie had both an abortion and a miscarriage in the 13 months before she and Ralph conceived Shenea. Ralph had tried to talk her out of the abortion, though he eventually agreed that the pregnancy, occurring just 3 months after the two got together, simply came “too soon.” At that time, both Ralph and Stefanie were couch-surfing among relatives and friends – Ralph didn’t get along with his step-father and

Stefanie's mother, a drug addict, moved away to New York – and both were struggling to finish high school. Once the two finally secured a stable place to live together, in the basement apartment of Ralph's mother's new home (a purchase she had just made after years of scrimping and saving while living in the projects), the two felt the minimum criteria had been met. Ralph tells us he “actually...felt confident about having a child. So we just went on and did it.”

The pregnancy put added financial pressure on Ralph, who was trying to complete the requirements for his GED. He was already working part-time construction on weekends, plus going to school, but given all the things the baby would need the money just wasn't enough. Lacking the half credit he needed to graduate, Ralph enrolled in summer school to try and make up his missing coursework. But August came before he could finish, and Stefanie was due with Shenea. “My daughter was on the way. I had to start making some money somehow, so I had to find a job,” he explains. “I got a job [at Bertuccis] and starting stacking some money. Just tried to make the best of it.” After Shenea was born, Ralph decided to stay at his job so that Stefanie could finish school.

What does Ralph feel he gave up by having a child so young? “I know I would have had my diploma faster... because I didn't have the time to actually go to the classes 'cause my girl had to go to school and she was already missing a couple years because of having [her son] and whatever.... So I let her get her stuff back on track. If I didn't have [my daughter], I know I'd have my diploma by now and I know I'd be in [college] right now doing something.” Yet in Ralph's view, having Shenea has been more good than bad. For one, it has made Ralph and Stefanie love each other even more. “I don't even know how to put this in words. But to see your child, knowing it's your child, come out like that man, it just made me love her even more, man.... Once it came out and it was over, she gave me all the hugs and kisses in the world.”

When we interview Ralph for the first time, Stephanie's son is about to turn four and Shenea has just celebrated her first birthday. Ralph has exhausted his remaining savings from the time he spent working two jobs at one time – Bertucci's and construction – on a rented clown, pony rides, and a trip to Chuck E. Cheese. At 21, Stefanie has finally graduated from an alternative high school and has a job cleaning office buildings in the afternoons and evenings. She plans to take one year off of school before enrolling in a local technical college to work toward her chosen degree, in medical office training. Ralph is determined to use this time to make up his needed half credit; this is all that separates him from his dream – to enroll in a 2-year program in computer technology.

Meanwhile, Ralph and Stefanie struggle to keep things together. She has a childcare voucher for the 3-year-old, which saves the couple a lot of money. Just after Shenea's birth, Stefanie qualified for a subsidized apartment so she pays only a third of her income for rent (Ralph isn't on the lease, though he lives there). The blended family situation is a struggle as well. Due to the animosity between Stefanie and her son's biological father, who “put her out” of his house while she was pregnant because he decided that he didn't want the child, Ralph now plays an intermediary role with the boy's father. The father has been absent from his son's life until recently, which gives Ralph, whose earnings have helped to support the boy, the perceived right to control access to him. Ralph can't imagine finding himself in the same situation – seeking another man's authorization to see his own child. “He asks my permission to see his own son! Which I can understand 'cause he hasn't been there. I was there and he wasn't.”

## Introduction

Like Ralph, about half of all young Americans become parents before 25. In the 1950s early parenthood was the norm for all Americans, rich and poor and White and non-White alike. But in recent decades, a dramatic divide has emerged by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

Thus, our story is of a much narrower slice of young adults than are described in the other chapters in this volume. In this chapter, we use quantitative data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) and the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to describe the characteristics of young adults who transition to parenthood before 25 and the family contexts into which their children are born. We supplement this with qualitative data from an in-depth study of low-income fathers in Philadelphia to illustrate what parenthood means to young adults. Their narratives reveal how early parenthood affects the texture of their daily lives, the quality of their relationships, and their expectations for the future.

## Characteristics of Young Parents

Ralph's transition to fatherhood is typical of that of many young men who have children as young adults. Nationally representative data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) in Table 12.1 reveal that about one half of women and almost one in three men have their first child before 25.<sup>1</sup> But, as indicated earlier, non-Hispanic Whites are quite a bit less likely to become parents during young adulthood than either Hispanics or Non-Hispanic Blacks.<sup>2</sup> Forty-five percent of White women had their first birth by age 25, compared to 69% of Hispanic women and 68% of Non-Hispanic Black women. There is also a strong education gradient in who becomes a parent during young adulthood, with a particularly large gap between those with a college degree and those without one. For those with less than a high school, parenthood before age 25 is normative for men (52.6%) and nearly ubiquitous for women (81.5%). For college graduates, by contrast, the experience is fairly rare for women (25.1%) and nearly nonexistent for men (6.1%). There is also an income gradient, although this is weaker than the association with education. Among women in family households with earnings under \$20,000, 73% had their first birth as a young adult, compared to just 39% of women in family households where earnings exceeded \$50,000. We observe a similar pattern for men, as the experience of parenthood during young adulthood is twice as common for men in low-income family households (\$20,000) as for men in high-income family households (>\$50,000).

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<sup>1</sup> The National Survey of Family Growth 2006–2008 is based on a sample of the household population of the USA between the age of 15 and 44. Since June 2006, the NSFG has implemented a continuous survey procedure, in which interviews are done during 48 weeks of every year. Each year is nationally representative, and samples may be accumulated across years. The public use data file for 2006–2008 has a sample size of 13,495. For more information on the NSFG, please see the technical documentation at <http://www.cdc.gov/NCHS/nsfg>.

<sup>2</sup> A majority of Hispanics in the NSFG are of Mexican origin.

**Table 12.1** Percent of men and women who become parents by age 24

|                                      | Men   | Women |
|--------------------------------------|-------|-------|
| All                                  | 29.76 | 52.93 |
| Hispanic                             | 42.39 | 69.49 |
| Non-Hispanic White                   | 24.65 | 45.08 |
| Non-Hispanic Black                   | 41.24 | 68.56 |
| Non-Hispanic other                   | 21.99 | 52.95 |
| Less than high school                | 52.55 | 81.52 |
| High school graduate                 | 44.08 | 71.17 |
| Some college education               | 31.93 | 60.65 |
| College graduate or more             | 6.06  | 25.14 |
| Income less than \$20,000            | 40.51 | 73.12 |
| Income between \$20,001 and \$50,000 | 36.42 | 59.79 |
| Income above \$50,000                | 21.80 | 39.35 |
| Unmarried at first birth             | 59.78 | 64.75 |

*Notes:* Values are percentages. Sample based on all men and women over age 24 in NSFG 2006–2008. Data are weighted using national sampling weights. Income and education are measured at the time of interview, not at the time of birth

Furthermore, among men and women who had their first child during young adulthood, *nonmarital childbearing is normative*: a majority of mothers and fathers were unmarried at the time of the birth. Almost 60% of first births to young adult men, and almost 65% of first births to young adult women occurred outside of a marital union. These proportions are even higher among parents younger than 20. In 2007, 82% of births to women ages 18–19 were nonmarital (Hamilton et al., 2009). These patterns are partly the result of a class-based divergence in age at first birth that has occurred since the 1960s. While age at first marriage has increased for women across the education spectrum, less-educated women have not delayed childbearing nearly as much as more-educated women have. As a result, fewer highly educated women have children as young adults, and the proportion of highly educated single mothers has remained very low. By contrast, most poorly educated women do transition to parenthood in young adulthood, and the proportion of their births occurring outside of marriage increased dramatically (Ellwood & Jencks, 2004; McLanahan, 2004).

Ralph's story, drawn from an in-depth qualitative study of low-income fathers in Philadelphia, highlights the challenges associated with fathering with little education. He had to quit school to find a job. While he hopes to get a 2-year technical degree, which would provide much-needed additional earnings, he put his career aspirations on hold after the baby was born. He bounced around among construction, restaurant work, and some drug-dealing on the side to make ends meet. Stefanie also put her high school degree on the back burner while she had two babies, and at 21 she has only recently finished her degree and found steady employment. While Ralph enjoys the experience of parenting and embraces his role as "house husband," taking a certain amount of pride in spending time with his family, he still recognizes the price he paid for becoming a young parent in terms of his education and career.



## The Nonmarital Relationship Contexts of Parenthood

Much of the survey evidence we now have about the content and quality of young parents' marital, and especially nonmarital, relationships comes from a new longitudinal survey, the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, which follows a cohort of nearly 4,000 children born to unmarried parents in the late 1990s, with a companion sample of about 1,000 children born to married parents. The study was designed to be representative of children born in large US cities with populations over 200,000. The study interviews mothers and fathers at the time of the child's birth and again after 1 year, 3 years, and 5 years. The survey continues to interview both the mother and father at each follow-up, regardless of their relationship status. Because the majority of births to young adults occur outside of marriage, and because we know less about the quality and texture of such nonmarital relationships, the Fragile Families Study is a valuable new source of information about the relationships between unmarried young parents.

### Pregnancy Intentions

The relationships in which young adults first conceive children are typically short in duration and casual in nature. Using data from the Fragile Families Study, we found that couples knew each other less than a year, on average, before getting pregnant (Table 12.2).<sup>3</sup> Young married parents knew each other 7 months longer, on average, than unmarried parents. The relationships of young parents were considerably shorter than the relationships of their older counterparts, both married and unmarried, who knew each other at least several years before having a child.

The short duration and informal nature of romantic relationships during young adulthood is consistent with previous qualitative research that documents young men's and women's descriptions of their own relationships. One study, based on in-depth longitudinal qualitative interviews with a subsample of 48 unmarried couples drawn from the Fragile Families Survey (almost all of whom became parents before age 25), found that fully half of unmarried fathers rated their relationships with the mothers of their children as "casual" prior to conception, and they were more likely to describe their preconception relationships as casual than their female partners were (Edin, England, Shafer & Reed 2007; see also Furstenberg, 1976; Roy, 2008).

Not surprisingly, then, the children who result from these relationships are seldom explicitly planned. Previous research has found that unmarried women are more likely to report that a pregnancy was unintended than are married women (74% vs. 27%, respectively) (Finer & Henshaw, 2006; Henshaw, 1998; Musick, 2002).

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<sup>3</sup> Romantic relationships were likely even shorter than these figures suggest, because the question on relationship duration in the Fragile Families Study asked mothers, "how long have you known the baby's father?," not how long they were in a *romantic* relationship with the baby's father.

**Table 12.2** Personal and relationship characteristics of young adult mothers at time of child's birth

|  | Mother 24 or younger |                        | Mother over 24     |                        |
|--|----------------------|------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
|  | Married<br>(N=254)   | Unmarried<br>(N=2,345) | Married<br>(N=933) | Unmarried<br>(N=1,362) |
| <i>Relationship status at birth</i>                |                      |                        |                    |                        |
| Cohabiting   | –                    | 46.3                   | –                  | 61.3                   |
| Romantic nonresident                               | –                    | 33.3                   | –                  | 24.4                   |
| No relationship                                    | –                    | 20.3                   | –                  | 14.2                   |
| <i>Economic status</i>                             |                      |                        |                    |                        |
| Mother received welfare in past year               | 19.6                 | 40.6                   | 7.9                | 37.5                   |
| Father employed at birth                           | 93.5                 | 73.5                   | 92.9               | 83.7                   |
| Father's education: less than H.S.                 | 30.6                 | 42.1                   | 14.8               | 28.5                   |
| H.S. graduate                                      | 31.2                 | 40.9                   | 19.4               | 39.9                   |
| College graduate                                   | 6.5                  | 2.5                    | 39.3               | 6.4                    |
| Mother's education: less than H.S.                 | 49.1                 | 51.3                   | 10.7               | 32.3                   |
| H.S. graduate                                      | 28.1                 | 34.7                   | 23.9               | 43.3                   |
| College graduate                                   | 10.1                 | 0.6                    | 43.4               | 2.9                    |
| Father's earnings                                  | \$28,342             | \$16,010               | \$44,610           | \$22,571               |
| Mother's earnings                                  | \$6,775              | \$4,512                | \$18,011           | \$8,376                |
| <i>Behavioral characteristics</i>                  |                      |                        |                    |                        |
| Maternal drug problems in past year (y/n)          | 0.3                  | 6.6                    | 2                  | 7.7                    |
| Paternal drug problems in past year (y/n)          | 0.1                  | 7.1                    | 2.3                | 7.9                    |
| Father ever in jail                                | 18.2                 | 42.3                   | 3.5                | 34.4                   |
| <i>Relationship characteristics</i>                |                      |                        |                    |                        |
| Domestic violence                                  | 2.4                  | 2.1                    | 2.7                | 3.4                    |
| Father suggested abortion                          | 0.2                  | 11.6                   | 1.4                | 10.7                   |
| Distrust of men (1=low, 3=high)                    | 1.91                 | 2.12                   | 1.86               | 2.2                    |
| Maternal traditional attitudes (1=low, 4=high)     | 2.29                 | 2.05                   | 2.16               | 2.14                   |
| Relationship duration in years                     | 3.5                  | 2.2                    | 8.3                | 4.6                    |
| Relationship duration for first births only        | 2.5                  | 1.8                    | 6.6                | 3.4                    |
| <i>Prior fertility</i>                             |                      |                        |                    |                        |
| Prior shared children                              | 44.4                 | 24.3                   | 60.2               | 43.8                   |
| Mother has prior nonshared children                | 15.6                 | 22.1                   | 11.4               | 59.9                   |
| Father has prior nonshared children                | 14.0                 | 20.0                   | 10.0               | 27.2                   |
| <i>Nonmarital relationship commitment</i>          |                      |                        |                    |                        |
| Father provided financial support during pregnancy | –                    | 73.5                   | –                  | 82.7                   |
| Father visited hospital                            | –                    | 74.7                   | –                  | 78.4                   |
| Mother's predicted likelihood of marrying, 50/50   | –                    | 27.4                   | –                  | 21.4                   |
| Mother's predicted likelihood of marrying, certain | –                    | 52.9                   | –                  | 59.4                   |

*Notes:* Data are from baseline wave of Fragile Family Survey. All values are percentages unless otherwise indicated. Data are weighted using national sampling weights. Mother's age is measured at the time of child's birth. All measures taken from mother's survey

Similar patterns hold for men, with 70% of men who were married at the time of the birth characterizing the pregnancy as wanted, compared to just 36% of men who were not living with the mother at the time of the birth (Martinez et al., 2006). Furthermore, in the Fragile Families Study, we found that 11% of young unmarried mothers reported that the father suggested she have an abortion after he found out that she was pregnant, compared to less than 1% of married mothers (Table 12.2).

Pregnancy intentions are difficult to measure, however, and previous qualitative research suggests that most pregnancies to unmarried parents are neither fully planned nor avoided (Augustine, Nelson, & Edin, 2009; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Edin et al., 2007; see also Waller, 2002). In their study of the fertility histories of 183 poor fathers, Augustine et al. (2009) found that while few men actively planned or consistently took actions to avoid pregnancy, a large minority reported an ambivalent desire to have children and used little if any contraception, even though they knew what might result from such actions. The rest – about one half of the total – were not using regular contraception either, and said they were just “not thinking” about the consequences of their actions at the time. These results are consistent with those drawn from the fertility histories of the 48 unmarried couples in the qualitative subsample of the Fragile Families Study (Edin et al., 2007), where women were somewhat more likely to describe an ambivalent desire for pregnancy while men’s responses were more likely to fall in the “not thinking” category.<sup>4</sup>

## Disadvantaged Circumstances

Young parents have low human capital and are economically disadvantaged at the time of their children’s birth. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, we found that 20% of young married mothers and 40% of young unmarried mothers had received welfare benefits in the past year, and annual earnings for both groups of women were well under \$10,000 during the year prior to the birth (Table 12.2). Around one half of mothers had not earned a high school diploma, and virtually none had completed college. Young fathers’ education and earnings were also quite low compared to those of older fathers. Children born to young adults enter economically vulnerable families regardless of their parents’ marital status, but unmarried parents face a particularly acute set of economic disadvantages.

Young parents are also more likely to have used drugs or spent time in jail, although these experiences are much more common for unmarried parents than they are for married parents. We found that 6% and 7% of unmarried mothers and fathers, respectively, reported having problems related to drugs in the year before the child was born, and fully 42% of unmarried fathers had spent time in jail or prison. By

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<sup>4</sup> Though these estimates are based on complete fertility histories (including miscarriages and terminations), none of these studies include men who had conceived but not fathered at least one child.

contrast, less than 1% of young married parents reported drug problems and a comparatively low 18% of young married fathers had spent time in jail or prison. These disparities between married and unmarried parents are just as large for parents who are older than 25 when their child is born.

## Fragile Families, Not Single Parents

The fact that the majority of births to young adults occur outside of marriage does not mean that young unmarried mothers are parenting alone. Previous research has found that young men often readily acknowledge paternity rather than contest it (Edin, Tach & Mincy, 2009; Furstenberg, 1995; Sullivan, 1993; Waller, 2002) and many eagerly embrace the role of father (Hamer, 2001; Waller, 2002; Young, 2004). In contrast to popular images, most unmarried men are not eager to flee their parental responsibilities as soon as the child is conceived (Achatz & MacAllum, 1994; Augustine, Nelson & Edin, 2009; Hamer, 2001; Nelson, Torres, & Edin, 2002; Nurse, 2002; Waller, 2002), though this certainly does sometimes happen.<sup>5</sup>

In Table 12.2, we describe the relationship characteristics of unmarried parents 24 or younger in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Fully 46% of children born to unmarried young adults occurred to a couple who was cohabiting, living together all or most of the time. Another 33% of nonmarital births occurred to young adults who were romantically involved but not living together. Just 20% of nonmarital births occurred to young adults who were no longer romantically involved with one another. An overwhelming majority of unmarried fathers (74%) offered financial support to the mother during her pregnancy, and roughly seven in ten visited her and the child in the hospital (Table 12.2). While marriage is not a normative context in which young adults experience parenthood, being in a romantic relationship clearly is and parents are optimistic about their future together. Eighty percent of unmarried mothers claimed that there was at least a 50–50 chance that they would marry the baby's father (Table 12.2), and rates for fathers are just as high as they are for mothers (see also Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, 2003).

We know little about couple relationship dynamics during pregnancy, as most existing work is based on retrospective data collected after the child was born. A few scholars offer retrospective accounts of this pregnancy period, drawing mainly on qualitative data from women (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; but see Reed, 2008, who interviewed couples), which suggest that this period may be fraught with turmoil and plagued with serious relationship problems such as domestic abuse and infidelity.

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<sup>5</sup> No representative survey we know of asks men whether they denied a pregnancy, but Edin and Kefalas (2005), in their in-depth qualitative study of 165 low income single mothers in Philadelphia, found that paternal denial occurred in only a small fraction – 9% – of women's most recent conceptions.

Most couples reconcile by the time of the birth, though, because a shared child offers a strong motive to stay together for the betterment of the child (Edin, Kefalas, & Reed, 2004).

Using qualitative data drawn from an in-depth qualitative study of low-income men in Philadelphia, we describe how one man, Jones, experienced the path to young parenthood. Like many young unmarried parents, Jones' story reflects common features of many of these men's stories, an ambivalent desire for children and relationship tensions that result from an unplanned pregnancy.

Jones, a white 19-year old, is in his first semester of community college. He grew up with both his father – a postal worker – and mother, a nurse for the family physician. Jones was engaged to his girlfriend, Jessie, when they conceived their first child. Jones didn't exactly intend for Jessie to get pregnant, but he wasn't against it either; and for Jessie, it was definitely part of her plan. Even while Jessie was still in high school, she "wanted a baby and she always talked about it," he recalls. Around the time of conception, Jones' older, unmarried sister had just had a child, which spurred that desire even further.

One evening while Jones and Jessie walked together down the aisle at Walmart, they browsed through some racks of baby clothes and accessories, and Jessie almost casually informed Jones that she hadn't taken her birth control pill for nearly 2 months. Although Jones was surprised, he took the news in stride, recalling later that he didn't think it was "really any big thing. Like I wasn't saying, 'Uh-oh, better get back on the pill.' And we totally knew the consequences, I mean, there's no doubt about that. I don't need sex education, I know how it works." In sum, this couple was "fully aware, but I guess you could say we weren't really worried about it." After all, Jones and Jessie had been an on-again-off-again couple ever since middle school and had been serious since their junior year in high school, living together at her dad's house. It was shortly after graduation that Jones got Jessie "that ring on her finger."

About 2 months after the Walmart conversation, Jessie was checking a home pregnancy test when Jones walked into the bathroom. "This test is negative," she told him, "but I've got to take another one tomorrow morning." Jones looked over her shoulder at the indicator and exclaimed, "This says you are pregnant!" "No it doesn't", Jessie argued, but looked at it again to make sure. "No, it says you are," he persisted, and when she realized he was right, she burst into tears – of happiness, he thought at the time, but later he isn't so sure. When we ask about how he felt at that moment, Jones replies, "I was like, 'Oh, wow, this is a little early in my life,' but I was excited – I was really happy.... I thought, 'Wow, I'm going to be a dad!' I was real excited about it." When we ask him if he was worried at all, he says, "No, 'cause I figured that we'd find a way. If there was any problems, we'd find a way."

Despite Jones' bravado, problems did arise. After the baby came, Jones and Jessie got their own place, but she left him after only 3 weeks, telling him she'd decided to seek sole custody of the child. Jessie explained she just wasn't ready for a serious relationship and didn't want to share access to the baby. "I was pretty bitter about that. Yeah, because, like..., I didn't do anything [wrong] at all! I was working.... I didn't leave the girl because she was pregnant. I didn't want anything more than to be there, make money, have a family. And here I am, I get screwed because I get left, I get like, my feelings torn away from me," Jones explains. "I took a wrong turn and I became a dad. And I went through all this fucked up shit with my [girlfriend]." "So being a dad was a wrong turn," we ask? "I think ...the wrong turn was getting involved with Jessie," he concludes, "cause I'm sure I'm going to have more kids."

Jones' story revealed how ambivalent young unmarried couples can be about unplanned pregnancy. Even though he thought it was a bit early, Jones was prepared to take responsibility for his child, and was "really happy" at the thought of

becoming a dad. Despite the fact that Jones and Jessie had known each other for a while, their relationship was on again, off again, and their attempts to make the relationship work, including moving in together, fell apart when Jessie realized, shortly after the child's birth, that she did not want a "serious relationship." Only in retrospect did Jones realize that their transition to parenthood had been based on a tenuous relationship foundation.

## Young Parents' Romantic Relationships

Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, we traced the relationship trajectories of young parents and show them in Table 12.3. By the time their child was 5 years old, 56% of mothers who were married at the time of the birth were still married to their baby's father, which is consistent with other work showing that marriages that begin at younger ages are less stable than marriages among older couples. Similarly, over one half of the young mothers (53%) who were cohabiting with the father at the time of the birth were still in a romantic relationship with him 5 years later. Relationships were much less stable among the couples who were romantically involved but not living together at the time of the birth: just 27% of these relationships remained intact 5 years later. Many married and cohabiting couples, and even some romantic nonresident couples, went on to have more children together.

## Reasons for Breaking Up

Previous research has identified large socioeconomic and racial differences in the experience of family instability. Cohabiting and marital unions are especially unstable among Blacks (Manning, Smock, & Majumdar, 2004), whereas marriages are more stable among Hispanics, especially Hispanic immigrants (Bean, Berg, & Van Hook, 1996) than they are for the population as a whole. Marriages among young adults of low socioeconomic status are also more prone to instability (Graefe & Lichter, 1999; Martin, unpublished calculations). Analyses that examine the dynamics of couple behavior within disadvantaged populations identify men's behaviors as a key source of relationship instability, particularly drug use and physical abuse (Waller & Swisher, 2006). Wilson and Brooks-Gunn (2001) found that, relative to married fathers, unmarried fathers were more likely to have used drugs, drank alcohol, smoked, or physically abused the mothers of their children. These behaviors were common reasons women cited for ending relationships or failing to enter into new relationships (Amato & Previti, 2003; Amato & Rogers, 1997; Cherlin, Burton, Hurt & Purvine, 2004; Reed, 2007).

Incarceration is also deeply implicated in the romantic relationships of young unmarried parents, particularly for African Americans (Western & Wildeman,

**Table 12.3** Young adult mothers' relationship and fertility 5 years after the birth

|   | Relationship status with baby's father at baseline |                       |                                    |                            |
|---|--|-----------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|
|   | Married<br>(N=218)                                 | Cohabiting<br>(N=927) | Romantic<br>nonresident<br>(N=732) | No relationship<br>(N=349) |
| Percent in relationship with baby's father                | 56.6   | 53.86                 | 27.3                               | 9.3                        |
| Percent who had new child with baby's father              | 42.5   | 46.8                  | 31.8                               | 14.9                       |
| One child   | 33.8   | 33.6                  | 25.2                               | 12.7                       |
| Two children  | 8.7  | 12.7                  | 5.4                                | 2.2                        |
| At least three children                                   | 0.0  | 0.5                   | 1.2                                | 0.0                        |
| Percent not in relationship with baby's father            | 43.4   | 46.1                  | 72.8                               | 90.7                       |
| Percent who had new romantic partner <sup>a</sup>         | 64.3   | 76.1                  | 81.4                               | 87.0                       |
| One partner   | 38.6   | 39.7                  | 36.1                               | 20.3                       |
| Two partners  | 15.7   | 29.7                  | 28.6                               | 37.2                       |
| Three or more partners                                    | 10.0   | 6.7                   | 16.7                               | 29.5                       |
| Percent who had new child with different romantic partner | 20.7   | 26.1                  | 35.1                               | 40.5                       |
| One child   | 12.4   | 20.7                  | 21.6                               | 23.6                       |
| Two children  | 8.3  | 4.9                   | 11.8                               | 16.7                       |
| At least three children                                   | 0.0  | 0.5                   | 1.7                                | 0.2                        |

*Notes:* Data come from four waves of Fragile Families Surveys. Sample is restricted to mothers who gave birth to focal child at age 24 or younger. Data are weighted using national sampling weights. Sample is restricted to those who are in the sample at both the baseline and 5-year follow-up surveys, and those who have nonmissing information on subsequent romantic partners and fertility at both waves

<sup>a</sup>Sample restricted to mothers who have ended romantic relationship with baby's father

2009). These relationships are undermined by men's absence from the family and the community, the logistical problems of visitation, and the shame fathers feel as a result of their incarceration (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Arditti, Smock, & Parkman, 2005; Edin, Nelson, & Paranal, 2004; Roy & Dyson, 2007; Waller, 2002). Men's absence during incarceration, for example, imposes both economic pressures and opportunities for women to move on to new partners. Even when this does not occur, the physical separation and lack of ability to monitor one another's behavior fuels suspicion and mistrust (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). One in-depth study of 40 incarcerated men in a work release program found that partner relationships were marked by confusion and conflict during the period of incarceration, and deteriorating commitments between partners continued to worsen after the men were released (Roy, 2005). Other ethnographic work suggests that disadvantaged minority men experience persistent supervision and threat of imprisonment in their communities, which undermines their already tenuous family and romantic relationships (Goffman, 2009).

Women often learn the mother role by participating actively in the care of their younger siblings and cousins, but they learn far less from their family of origin about how to enact successful partner roles (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Men sometimes participate in such care, but must usually learn how to parent from their partners; few can point to strong role models in the parenthood realm (Nelson & Edin, [forthcoming](#)). These tentative conclusions come from qualitative studies; more systematic research is needed to understand how young adults learn to parent.

## Reasons for Marrying

Not all nonmarital unions end in dissolution. About one quarter of young adults who were cohabiting at the time of the birth had married by the child's fifth birthday, and another fifth of cohabiters remained stably living together 5 years later. Marriage rates for young adult cohabiters are similar to the rates for older cohabiting couples (Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, 2007).

In-depth qualitative research reveals that the standards that low-income unmarried parents of both genders have for marriage closely resemble the standards that their middle-class counterparts hold, even though their chances for meeting them are far lower. For the typical low-income unmarried father or mother, a prerequisite for marriage is a set of financial assets that demonstrate that the couple has "arrived" economically. Most say that before they can marry, they will need a mortgage on a modest home, a car note, furniture, some money in the bank, and enough left over for a wedding. Without these marks of personal and collective couple achievement – often called the "marriage bar" by researchers – it would not be right to get married (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Gibson-Davis, 2007). Both the in-depth interviews with 48 unmarried fathers and mothers drawn from the Fragile Families Survey (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005) and qualitative work in Toledo with 115 working- and lower-class cohabiters without children (Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005) found that these views were expressed by both women and men.

Clashing with the reality of poor economic prospects, these standards lead to an indeterminate delay in marriage for many couples (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Marriage is more likely if a couple is able to improve their economic prospects, while becoming poorer decreases the likelihood of marriage (Osborne, 2005; Smock & Manning, 1997). However, neither earnings nor income is associated with additional fertility (Gibson-Davis, 2009). Men's economic standing is particularly important; those with less education, low earnings, and weaker attachment to the labor force are less likely to marry (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001; Lichter, LeClere, & McLaughlin, 1991; Lloyd & South, 1996; Manning & Smock, 1995; Oppenheimer, 2000; Sweeney, 2002).

Many studies have documented a positive relationship between male employment rates and marriage in low-income communities (Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992; Manning & Smock, 1995; Sullivan, 1989; Testa, Astone, Krogh, & Neckerman, 1989). Wilson and Neckerman (1986) linked low marriage rates



among poor African Americans to the shortage of “marriageable men” in these communities. In this thesis, low male employment rates and high rates of imprisonment depleted the supply of suitable marriage partners for Black women in poor urban neighborhoods. Combining Fragile Families data with data on local marriage market conditions, Harknett and McLanahan (2004) also found that an undersupply of employed African American men could explain some of the racial and ethnic differences in marriage rates following a nonmarital birth. In a similar analysis, McLanahan and Watson (2009) found that, conditional on their own incomes, unmarried parents were more likely to marry if their incomes were the same or higher than the median income in the city in which they lived. These studies provide further evidence that local contexts in the availability of suitable marriage partners may influence marriage rates among disadvantaged couples, even after they have become parents.

## Repartnering and Multiple-Partner Fertility

Experiences of relationship instability and family complexity are common among young parents, particularly when they are unmarried. Among the couples who ended their relationships, we found that transitions to new romantic relationships occurred quickly. Table 12.3 shows that almost two thirds of young mothers who ended their marriages, and over three-fourths of young mothers who ended their cohabiting relationships, had engaged in a new romantic relationship by the time the child was 5 years old. Many had even had two or more different partnerships during that time period, although this pattern of “churning” through partners was more common among unmarried mothers than among divorced mothers. Rates of partner churning were particularly high for mothers who were not involved with the focal father when the child was born.

Furthermore, many of these new relationships produced children. Twenty-one percent of divorced young mothers and 26% of formerly cohabiting mothers had a new child by a new partner within 5 years of the focal child’s birth. Over 35% of mothers who were in romantic nonresident relationships with the father prior to splitting up had new children by new partners, and fully 40% of mothers who were not involved with the baby’s father at the birth had new children by new partners. This, combined with the high rates of multiple-partner fertility that mothers and fathers brought with them to many of their relationships (shown in Table 12.2), even at young ages, resulted in exceedingly complex family structures, with children experiencing two, three, or even more different father figures and a host of different resident and nonresident half-siblings. Table 12.3 considers just mothers’ relationships and fertility transitions, because the quality of the data for mothers is better than the quality of data for men, but the data on families would be even more complex if fathers’ subsequent relationship and fertility transitions were included. Other work shows that fathers’ rates of these transitions are at least as high as mothers’ (Tach, Mincy, & Edin, 2010).

For a subset of young parents, there is extraordinary churning through a number of very weak partnerships, leading to high rates of multiple-partner fertility and highly complex family forms. Prior research has shown that parents are more likely to experience multiple-partner fertility when they have a first sexual experience or a first child at a young age or have children outside of marriage, whereas having more than one child with any given partner is associated with reduced odds. There are also racial and economic disparities in the likelihood of multiple-partner fertility. Blacks and Hispanics have greater odds of experiencing multiple-partner fertility than Whites, and less-educated parents are more likely to experience multiple-partner fertility than highly educated parents (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006; Guzzo & Furstenberg, 2007a, 2007b; Manlove, Logan, Ikramullah, & Holcombe, 2008; Mincy, 2002). Estimates from the NSFG indicate that almost 33% of fathers under age 25, and 47% of Black young fathers, have children with multiple partners (Smeeding, Garfinkel, & Mincy, 2011).

Unmarried mothers who repartner typically do so with men who have considerably more human capital and fewer behavioral problems than their prior partners (Bzostek, 2008; Graefe & Lichter, 2007), but we know next to nothing about the quality of the subsequent partnerships in which fathers are involved. Nor do we know much about how stable these subsequent unions are. Drawing on other research showing that complexity is strongly associated with dissolution (Cherlin, 1992; Kreider & Fields, 2005; National Center for Health Statistics, 2002) and that the unions of serial cohabitators – who engage in multiple sequential cohabitations – are quite unstable (Lichter & Qian, 2008), we can infer that these new pairings among young parents are likely quite fragile.

## Implications for Family Relationships

Multiple-partner fertility has many repercussions for the dynamics of family life. Having children from a previous union reduces the prospects that parents will marry (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Mincy, 2002; Stewart, Manning, & Smock, 2003; Upchurch, Lillard, & Panis, 2001). Harknett and Knab (2007) also found that parents' kin networks provide less social support to them when they have children by other partners. Prior partners, who often continue to engage with the mother via child visitation, are a significant source of tension in new couple relationships, as the prior partner's visits to see the child fuel jealousy from the current partner (Classens, 2007; Hill, 2007).

Multiple-partner fertility means that fathers' scarce resources must be spread across several households; this presents a challenge to maintaining meaningful involvement with all of the households to which they may be obligated. Fathers' relationships with the mothers of their children become increasingly complicated when they and their former partners take on new partners and have subsequent children. This may lead to a "crowding out" effect, reducing fathers' investments and involvement with any one family. Furstenberg and his colleagues suggested that

fathers' priorities may shift as they move from one family to the next, taking on commitments and obligations with a new romantic partner (Furstenberg, 1995; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Furstenberg & Harris, 1992). Indeed, fathers visit their nonresident children less frequently (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2007; Manning & Smock, 1999; Tach et al., 2010) and provide less economic support to them via formal and informal arrangements (Manning & Smock, 2000) when they have children with new partners. Fathers with children in different households are also less intensively involved with their current residential children (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008), causing strain for current couple relationships (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2007; Classens, 2007; Hill, 2007). Upon starting new romantic relationships, men also become more involved in the lives of the other children who live in the household, to whom they are not biologically related, taking on the role of "social fathers." Biological fathers often see these new partners as competition, asserting the primacy of the biological father-child role (Edin, Tach, & Mincy, 2009).

Maintaining high-quality relationships between parents is crucial for the intensity and quality of fathers' involvement with their children, both in the context of romantic relationships and after those relationships have ended (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000). In other words, "good partners make good parents" (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006). Cooperative coparenting – the ability of mothers and fathers to actively engage with one another to share childrearing responsibilities (Ahrns, 1981; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991) – is relatively uncommon, but it predicts more frequent and higher-quality father-child contact (Sobolewski & King, 2005). Custodial mothers play an important role as "gatekeepers," either facilitating or hindering a nonresident father's involvement (Arditti, 1995; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996), and mothers are more likely to restrict access when the two have a troubled relationship, regardless of whether they are currently romantically involved with another partner (Waller & Swisher, 2006).

The story of another young man from the qualitative study of low-income men in Philadelphia reveals the difficulties young unmarried parents face in negotiating parenting rights and roles once their romantic relationships have ended. Like many young unmarried parents, Misel's story reflects the tensions that emerge between biological and social parents, the tenuous relationships with present and past romantic partners, and the challenges this poses for maintaining parent-child relationships.

Misel, a 28-year-old father of two biological children and two more he loves like his own, is now 28, but had his first child at 24. Each weekday, he must punch in at work by 7 a.m. at the maternity clothing factory where he works as a cutter. He works 40 h each week and makes \$8.50 an hour – about \$18,000 per year, \$2.50 more than he made when he started 2 years ago. He knows this job is a good one, given his education (a GED). He has insurance and a dental plan, and is insured against disability, but he dreams of becoming a long-haul trucker, an occupation that pays far more.

Before landing this job, Misel was in prison for "doing things I shouldn't be doing." This meant he missed out on three precious years of his daughter's life. Misel was 20 when

he met Alejandra – she was only 15. External events compelled the two to begin living together almost immediately – Alejandra’s mother kicked her out of the house, and she moved in with Misel and his mother. The two fell in love and had high hopes of a future together, but waited 4 years to start a family so that Alejandra could finish high school. After a difficult pregnancy, Alejandra gave birth to twin girls, but only one of them survived.

Right after the birth, the two married. Misel remembers this as an exceptionally happy time. This Puerto Rican father says he treated his daughter like a “princess.” But he was “more in the streets than at home,” selling drugs and holding up convenience stores for money because the slow money from his conventional jobs, working as a laborer for a construction company and as a landscaper, just wasn’t enough for Misel, who now laments his “ignorance” at the time. Predictably, only 3 months after his daughter’s birth, Misel “got in trouble with the law” and went to prison. “It was like after 3 months that I got incarcerated for 3 years.” This was the beginning of the end of the marriage. “When [Alejandra] came to visit me [in prison] I told her that I wasn’t going to be able to do anything for her since I was in jail so I told her to take care of our daughter and to go on with her life.” Alejandra waited 2 years, visiting him regularly, before moving on.

Now that he is out of prison and has a stable job, Misel takes his daughter most weekends, but her mother is possessive and doesn’t want to give her up for too long. It would be much harder to be involved if he didn’t own a home (purchased for \$32,000 the year before, through a special program offered by a neighborhood nonprofit); this gives him a place to spend time with his daughter on his own and have overnight visits. Most fathers his age don’t have their own apartments, much less homes, and have to intrude on their ex-girlfriends’ households – and their ex-girlfriends new partners – to visit their children.

Misel has moved on too, with Elena, who has just given birth to Misel’s son. Elena, the baby, and Elena’s two older children have lived with Misel since Elena’s middle child, by another partner, was in infancy. Misel currently provides nearly all of the support for the five-person family with his wages – Elena receives no child support, though her food stamps help somewhat. Misel is proud of his provider role. “Well here I run the show,” he says, chuckling. “That means that I take care of all the expenses. I pay the rent, electricity, water, gas, cable, telephone. I’m the one who makes the money for now so it’s my responsibility.”

Taking responsibility for four children has made fathering extra difficult. “I have two that are mine and two that are not mine and for me it’s very difficult, understand, to be able to buy everything they need.... I take care of [her children] and love them as if they were my own children understand but like I said, it’s difficult.... You have to make a lot of sacrifices in order to put them first.” The pair has cut expenses to the bone. When we ask him if he ever treats the kids to fast food, he replies, “McDonalds, that’s on hold for a couple of years.”

Misel’s fathering challenges go far beyond finances, however. “It is hard for me to be a real father for [Elena’s older two children] since they are not mine. I don’t know how I should act towards them and how to deal with them...because they are not my children, and I can’t control them like if they were mine. I can control my [own] children by [disciplining] them if I have to, if they deserve it. With the others it’s different, because there will always be problems with their father. And coming up against him wouldn’t be good, for him or me.”

In the year and a half Misel and Elena have lived together, they have only had phone calls from Elena’s prior partner, but the man wants more contact, and Misel fears he’ll “come here demanding things from me. I won’t let him come to my house looking for trouble.” The trouble Misel fears can come in several forms – sexual jealousy between Misel and Elena, rekindled attraction between Elena and her ex, or competition between Misel and the ex over the children, who look to Misel as their father because he’s the only one they have really known Misel feels he deserves that designation since he’s been the one supporting them financially and emotionally. Yet Misel struggles to be understanding, because “I was in his shoes at one time, just like he is now. I was on the other side of the fence before with my daughter.”

Misel's story highlights the many challenges faced by young parents who have children by multiple partners and live in blended family households. Despite their initial optimism for their future together, and the fact that they waited for several years to have a baby, Misel's incarceration led to the demise of his relationship with Alejandra. After he was released, Misel worked hard to see his daughter and is fortunate that Alejandra has been largely supportive of that goal. His new romantic relationship with Elena, which came with new social father roles for Elena's two boys, spread his modest salary thin. Misel was threatened by the possibility of the boys' biological father trying to come back into their lives, but at the same time he could relate to the man because he was in a similar position with his first daughter with Alejandra. Misel also struggled with how he should parent his new partner's children and how he should interact with his nonresident daughter, unsure what his rights and responsibilities should be.

## The Consequences of Parenthood for Young Adults

Most young adults who become parents do so in the context of a nonmarital relationship, with few economic resources at their disposal. Even though the transition to parenthood typically occurs within a tenuous romantic relationship, most mothers and fathers try to make their relationships work, and fathers generally accept responsibility for their children. Because the children born to young adults are seldom explicitly planned, and economic hardships and parenthood strain even the most committed relationships, young parents break up at higher rates than couples who delay childbearing. These breakups are followed by new romantic relationships, many of which produce additional children, as was the case with Elena and Misel. The churning of romantic partners and the multiple-partner fertility that results create a complex web of economic obligations and negotiations that lead to uncertainty about the rights and responsibilities of each parent to their biological and social children. Elena, Misel, and Misel's ex-partner Alejandra manage the complexity better than most, but with Elena's ex about to reenter the scene difficult times may well lie ahead.

While some young adults wait until they have completed their educations to become parents, many do not and postpone their educations and careers, sometimes indefinitely. Young couples were often excited when they found out they would become parents and thought that they would be able to make it work, but in retrospect many recognized that they'd had to put their own aspirations on hold to provide for their family. These families were quite fragile and many saw their relationships end in the years following the birth. While it is unclear whether the transition to parenthood outside of marriage has a *causal* effect on the future economic or relationship trajectories of young adults, the instability of employment and relationships that follows is likely to detract from both parental and child wellbeing.

Thus, young adults who transition to parenthood typically do so in challenging circumstances, and their children often end up in family constellations that are highly unstable and enormously complex. While this is less true for those who

marry than those who do not, young parents are still far more likely to divorce than those who wait until they are at least 25. As the pioneering research of Heatherington (2003) first revealed, most children show surprising resilience in the face of parental breakup, often bouncing back after about a year. But the repeated transitions many children of young adults face is historically unprecedented in the US, as is the complexity that results from high rates of multiple partner fertility for both parents. It also seems to be unique among rich nations (Andersson, 2002).

What policy response ought to flow from these findings? First, as most pregnancies to young adults are unplanned (though not unwanted), continued attention should be paid to preventing unplanned pregnancy, and should recognize that a considerable number of unplanned pregnancies are to young adults, not just teens. Extant evidence suggests that while access to birth control can occasionally be a problem (Kearney & Levine, 2009), many young adults facing limited economic prospects lack sufficient motivation to take the steps necessary to avoid pregnancy, though they may worry somewhat about whether the timing or circumstances are right (Augustine et al., 2009; Edin et al., 2007; Edin & Kefalas, 2005).

Second, more should be done to support young adults who have children, recognizing that most are together with their partner at the time of the birth and desire to stay together. Currently, interventions with such couples focus heavily on teaching relationship skills, and given the behavioral problems so often associated with breakup – particularly infidelity, criminal behavior, substance use, and domestic abuse – such approaches are not unwarranted. Experimental evaluations of such interventions offer mixed results, though African Americans do seem to benefit (Wood et al., 2010). In addition, one state program shows considerable promise – Oklahoma’s Family Expectations, a voluntary program that provides relationship skills education and supportive services to both married and unmarried pregnant women on Medicaid and their romantic partners. An experimental evaluation conducted 15 months after random assignment shows gains in relationship quality, fathers’ economic support, coresidence, and mothers’ mental health among experimental couples relative to controls (Devaney & Dion, 2010). However, no intervention we know of helps young parents meet the considerable economic challenges they face, challenges that, when met, often allow young parents to forge lasting family relationships. In the coming decade, this is a key challenge that must be addressed.

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# Chapter 13

## Childbearing Among Cohabiting Women: Race, Pregnancy, and Union Transitions

Daniel T. Lichter

**Abstract** The current economic downturn – a coda on the slow economic growth period of the 2000s – has prompted new questions about the current state of America’s families, including its fragile families. This chapter argues that the issues and policy raised by the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) are more important than ever. America’s rapidly changing ethnoracial composition is giving demographic impetus to new fragile families. Newly released data from the 2006–2008 *National Survey of Family Growth* now show that nearly 60% of nonmarital births are to unmarried couples living together. Nonmarital births to cohabiting couples are overrepresented among historically disadvantaged populations. Finally, previous research from the FFCWS typically emphasizes the *prospective* transitions of new mothers among singlehood, cohabitation, and marriage over successive survey waves. This chapter provides new estimates of the incidence of relationship transitions among *pregnant* women, i.e., evidence on how nonmarital pregnancies segue into cohabitation and marriage. The past decade has brought significant growth in “shot-gun cohabitations” – the so-called fragile families – and a continuing movement away from “shot-gun marriages.”

### Introduction

The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study (FFCWS) has been enormously useful in helping us better understand the changing relationship context of nonmarital fertility among poor, cohabiting, and minority couples. Edin and Tach (Chap. 12) highlight many of the new insights from the FFCWS, while putting a human face on the sterile statistical information that sometimes preoccupies demographers.

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Edin and Tach describe the complicated living circumstances of so-called fragile families in early adulthood – premature childbearing and transitory relationships, ambivalence about unintended childbearing, serial cohabitation and multiple partner fertility, father absence and incarceration, and chronic poverty and economic insecurity (which place tremendous stress on these relationships). They also remind us that a large share of all unmarried childbearing occurs to cohabiting couples and to women in committed rather than casual intimate relationships (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002). The growth of fragile families has encouraged efforts to promote marriage by the federal government through its new “Healthy Marriage Initiative” (Lichter, Graefe & Brown, 2003; Manning, Trella, Lyons, & Du Toit, 2010). Indeed, recent research has centered on marriage patterns among unwed mothers – whether they eventually marry (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Harknett & McLanahan, 2005), stay married (Graefe & Lichter, 2007; Roberts & Martin, 2010), or marry economically attractive men that can lift them out of poverty and off welfare (Graefe & Lichter, 2008; Lopoo & Carlson, 2008).

Data from the FFCWS were first collected from a sample of births between 1998 and 2000 – at the tail end of one of the largest economic expansions in the post-World War II period. It also was a period of unprecedented declines in welfare caseloads that followed the landmark welfare reform bill in 1996 (Blank, 2002). The current economic downturn – a coda on the slow economic growth period of the 2000s – has prompted new questions about the current state of America’s families, including its fragile families. This chapter starts with a straightforward assumption, i.e., that the issues and policy concerns first raised by the FFCWS are more important than ever, but perhaps also more difficult to address from a public policy standpoint. Edin and Tach (Chap. 12) acknowledge that the FFCWS is disproportionately drawn from a sample of births to urban minority women, which sometimes limits the generality of key findings. But as reported here, the racial and ethnic diversity of new births has accelerated over the past decade. One-half of all births today are minority births (Johnson & Lichter, 2010), who are overrepresented among fragile families and the poor. America’s changing ethnoracial composition is giving demographic impetus to new fragile families.

Edin and Tach (Chap. 12) also report that cohabitation is an important context for childbearing and childrearing. In fact, about 45% of all births in the FFCWS were to cohabiting women at the time these data were first collected over a decade ago. In this chapter, newly released data from the 2006–2008 *National Survey of Family Growth* show that this percentage is now nearly 60%. Fertility among cohabiting couples is especially high among America’s historically disadvantaged population. Emerging adulthood today, especially for minority women, is increasingly marked by childbearing outside of marriage, but within co-residential cohabiting relationships.

Finally, previous research from the FFCWS, as well as from Edin and Tach (Chap. 12), typically emphasizes the *prospective* transitions of new mothers among singlehood, cohabitation, and marriage over successive survey waves. How couples became fragile families is less clear. Here I report the incidence of relationship transitions among *pregnant* women and mothers, i.e., evidence on how nonmarital

pregnancies segue into cohabitation and marriage. The past decade has brought significant growth in “shot-gun cohabitations” – the so-called fragile families – and a continuing movement away from “shot-gun marriages.”

## Race and Fragile Families

Fragile families are here to stay. America’s families are being remade today by unprecedented changes in the nation’s racial mix and ethnic diversity (Johnson & Lichter, 2010; Lichter & Brown, 2009). Only 17% of the births in FFCWS were to non-Hispanic White women in the late 1990s (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004). The U.S. Census Bureau’s projections show that the U.S. will become a majority–minority country by 2042. But we do not have to wait until 2042 to witness firsthand the implications of ethnoracial diversity in America. For children and youth, the future is now. In many ways, the FFCWS and its conclusions have been prescient; they anticipated demographic changes over the ensuing decade. The results – such as those presented by Edin and Tach (Chap. 12) and others (Carlson et al., 2004; Hummer & Hamilton, 2010) – tell us that fragile families, as a context for childbearing and childrearing, are likely to make up an increasing share of all families if current racial and ethnic disparities continue or if the putative causes of racial and ethnic disparities in family life are not addressed.

Between 2000 and 2008, for example, the number of minority children grew by 4.8 million (15.5%) (Johnson & Lichter, 2010). Hispanics alone accounted for more than 80% of this increase. In contrast, the number of young people in other minority groups (primarily Asian) grew by only 18%. The populations of Black children (–0.9%) and White children (–5.3%) actually declined over the same period. The demographic implications are clearly revealed in rapidly increasing shares of children who are racial and ethnic minorities (see Fig. 13.1). As a result, the proportion of the young population that was non-Hispanic White declined from 61 to 57% percent between 2000 and 2008 (see Fig. 13.1), and even more rapidly among children under age 5. Two-thirds of this change was attributable to growth in the number of minority children. One-third was due to absolute declines in non-Hispanic White children, which reflected below-replacement fertility rates and absolute declines in the number of White women of reproductive age (Johnson & Lichter, 2010).

These numbers make a straightforward demographic point: In another generation, emerging adulthood, as a life course stage, will look very different racially than it does today. There is substantial demographic momentum for increasing numbers and shares of children born into and raised by fragile families. The next generation of fragile families also is likely to be made up disproportionately of Hispanics. Among Hispanics today, nonmarital births represent about 50% of all births (Martin et al., 2009). About 90% of the rise in the nonmarital fertility ratio among Hispanics between 1994 and 2005 was due to declines in marriage (DeLeone, Lichter, & Strawderman, 2009). Over the next generation, race and ethnicity will become an

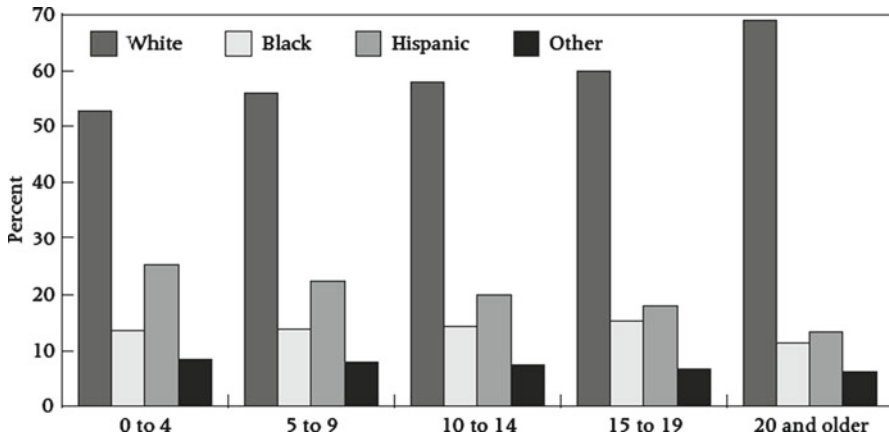


Fig. 13.1 Share of population by race/Hispanic origin and age, 2008 (Source: Johnson & Lichter, 2010)

increasingly important axis of differentiation as today’s newborns and children make the transition – or not – into productive adult roles.

## Cohabitation and the Rise in Nonmarital Fertility

The share of all U.S. births to unmarried women is now at its highest level ever – over 40% (Martin et al., 2009). Nonmarital fertility ratios are especially high among minority families, including Blacks (70%) and Hispanics (50%). The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unintended Pregnancy estimates that the economic costs of out-of-wedlock children, especially among teenagers, are enormous for the nation (Hoffman, 2006). Families headed by a single parent, usually the mother, are five times more likely than families headed by both parents to be poor; they also are more dependent on welfare or other in-kind public assistance, such as food stamps. Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that children do less well on average when raised by single mothers than in married-couple families (Waldfogel, Craigie, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010).

To be sure, the economic implications of rising nonmarital fertility ratios have been made ambiguous by increases in cohabitation (Musick, 2007; Sassler, Miller, & Favinger, 2009). Nonmarital cohabitation has become an important, but sometimes unrecognized, context for childbearing, which can distort conventional interpretations of out-of-wedlock childbearing. Rising nonmarital fertility ratios do not necessarily indicate growth in the number of mothers raising children on their own (Raley, 2001; Sweeney, 2010). In fact, a large share of children born outside of marriage live with both biological parents who are cohabiting. However, most of these fragile families do not become married-couple families (Chap. 12; Lichter, Qian, & Mellott, 2006). Cohabiting unions are often short-lived, which places large shares of minority children “at risk” of living with a single mother

**Table 13.1** Percent of births to cohabiting women

|                          | Percent of births to cohabitators | Percent of nonmarital births to cohabitators |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| All women                | 21.1                              | 58.5   |
| Age                      |                                   |  |
| <25 years old            | 34.2                              | 56.3   |
| 25 or older              | 14.0                              | 61.6   |
| Race/ethnicity           |                                   |  |
| Hispanics                | 34.8                              | 70.2   |
| Non-Hispanic white       | 14.9                              | 61.3   |
| Non-Hispanic black       | 24.6                              | 37.7   |
| Education                |                                   |  |
| <High school             | 33.5                              | 57.9   |
| High school/some college | 25.1                              | 58.4   |
| College graduate         | 3.8                               | 64.3   |

and becoming poor (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Graefe & Lichter, 2007; Manning, 2004).

Edin and Tach (Chap. 12) indicate that 46% of new parents (under age 25) were living together all or most of the time. Over 60% of older new unmarried mothers were cohabiting. During the early 1990s, 39% of all babies born outside of marriage had cohabiting parents (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). In the 1997–2001 period, this figure increased to roughly one-half. Now, my updated analyses of the 2006–2008 NSFG indicate that nearly 60% – 58.5% – of all nonmarital births (over the past 5 years) were to cohabiting couples (see Table 13.1). More than one in five recently born babies had cohabiting parents.

Patterns of childbearing among cohabiting couples reveal substantial variation across population groups. Among young adults (under age 25), one-third of *all* births – marital and nonmarital – were to cohabiting women during the 2000s (Table 13.1). The percentage is much lower among older mothers (14%). At the same time, nonmarital births among older mothers were only slightly more likely to occur in cohabiting unions. Children born to older women are much more likely than children born to younger women to live with both parents.

Ethnoracial differences in fertility among cohabiting couples also are large. For example, compared with Hispanics and Blacks, non-Hispanic White cohabitators accounted for only a small fraction of all births – about 15%. Yet, 61% of all non-Hispanic White out-of-wedlock babies were born to cohabiting women. These data also clearly suggest that Hispanics may be the new “fragile families”; cohabitators accounted for 34.8% of all Hispanic births and 70% of all nonmarital births. For Blacks, cohabitators accounted for a much smaller share of all nonmarital births (38%). Nonmarital childbearing among Black women is far less likely than among Hispanics to occur with both parents living together and raising children together. The relationship context of nonmarital childbearing is clearly different between Hispanics and African Americans.

The new NSFG data also reveal substantial disparities by socioeconomic status, at least as measured by completed schooling. Among high school dropouts, for

example, one-third of all births were to cohabiting couples. In contrast, only a small fraction (4%) of births to college graduates were to cohabiting women, even though a large majority of all nonmarital births were to cohabiting women. Most fertility is “partnered fertility” – either in marriage or in cohabitation (if not married). Education differences in union transitions reinforce inequality and amplify the prospect of “diverging destinies” among America’s children (McLanahan, 2004).

## Nonmarital Pregnancy and Shot-Gun Cohabitation

The FFCWS collected data at the time of the birth of the child; these newly formed fragile families were then followed prospectively (Chap. 12). To be sure, some new mothers were single and living alone both at the time of pregnancy and childbirth, while others cohabited throughout the entire pregnancy. But other new mothers experienced changes in living arrangements after conception. Some may have been living alone at the time of pregnancy but moved in with the fathers by the time of the birth (i.e., “shot-gun cohabitations”). Other single and cohabiting pregnant women may have gotten married before the birth of their children – these are the so-called “shotgun weddings” (Manning, 2001; Raley, 2001). The federal government defines these as marital rather than nonmarital births, which illustrates the conceptual difficulties of neatly disaggregating births into their marital, nonmarital, and cohabiting shares. Living arrangements can be highly fluid between the time women become pregnant and birth.

This fact is easily illustrated with data from the new 2006–2008 NSFG. Data in Table 13.2 show that 20.8% of non-cohabiting single women at pregnancy were cohabiting at the time of the birth of their child. These shot-gun cohabitations far exceeded the percentages of shot-gun marriages (7.4%). Not surprisingly, shot-gun weddings are much more common among cohabiting than single mothers. At the time of pregnancy, cohabiting women were more likely than other single women to become married before the birth (15.7% vs. 7.4%). These pregnant women also were more likely to marry than to break up between conception and childbirth (15.7% vs. 6.5%). Such transitions raise new conceptual issues about whether childbearing and marital decisions are made sequentially or jointly (i.e., that cohabiting women decide to have a baby, which leads them to the altar).

Union transitions between pregnancy and birth often reveal substantial variation across population groups. For example, although differences between younger and older pregnant women are comparatively small (Table 13.3), differences in union transitions are substantial across ethnoracial groups (Table 13.4). Pregnant non-Hispanic White women living alone were over ten times more likely to marry (by the date of the birth) than were their Black counterparts. White women also were roughly three times more likely than Hispanics to marry after conception. On the other hand, shot-gun cohabitations were highest among Hispanics (31%) and lowest



**Table 13.2** Relationship status at birth by relationship status at conception

| Relationship status at birth | Relationship status at conception |                           |            |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|------------|
|                              | Married                           | Non-cohabiting, unmarried | Cohabiting |
| Married                      | 99.3                              | 7.4                       | 15.7       |
| Non-cohabiting, unmarried    | 0.7                               | 71.8                      | 6.5        |
| Cohabiting                   | 0.0                               | 20.8                      | 77.8       |
| <i>N</i>                     | 1,455                             | 786                       | 752        |

**Table 13.3** Relationship status at birth by relationship status at conception by age at birth

| Relationship status at birth | Relationship status at conception |                           |            |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|------------|
|                              | Married                           | Non-cohabiting, unmarried | Cohabiting |
| <i>&lt;25 years old</i>      |                                   |                           |            |
| Married                      | 98.4                              | 7.8                       | 17.3       |
| Non-cohabiting, unmarried    | 1.6                               | 70.8                      | 7.5        |
| Cohabiting                   | 0.0                               | 21.4                      | 75.2       |
| <i>N</i>                     | 304                               | 497                       | 422        |
| <i>≥25 years old</i>         |                                   |                           |            |
| Married                      | 99.5                              | 6.6                       | 13.5       |
| Non-cohabiting, unmarried    | 0.5                               | 73.7                      | 5.1        |
| Cohabiting                   | 0.0                               | 19.7                      | 81.3       |
| <i>N</i>                     | 1151                              | 289                       | 330        |

**Table 13.4** Relationship status at birth by relationship status at conception by race/ethnicity

| Relationship status at birth | Relationship status at conception |                           |            |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|------------|
|                              | Married                           | Non-cohabiting, unmarried | Cohabiting |
| <i>Hispanics</i>             |                                   |                           |            |
| Married                      | 98.6                              | 4.6                       | 7.7        |
| Non-cohabiting, unmarried    | 1.4                               | 64.4                      | 4.7        |
| Cohabiting                   | 0.0                               | 31.0                      | 87.6       |
| <i>N</i>                     | 353                               | 200                       | 251        |
| <i>Non-Hispanic Whites</i>   |                                   |                           |            |
| Married                      | 99.5                              | 13.1                      | 23.4       |
| Non-cohabiting, unmarried    | 0.5                               | 67.2                      | 6.2        |
| Cohabiting                   | 0.0                               | 19.8                      | 70.4       |
| <i>N</i>                     | 844                               | 234                       | 284        |
| <i>Non-Hispanic Blacks</i>   |                                   |                           |            |
| Married                      | 99.2                              | 1.2                       | 9.2        |
| Non-cohabiting, unmarried    | 0.8                               | 84.8                      | 12.7       |
| Cohabiting                   | 0.0                               | 14.0                      | 78.1       |
| <i>N</i>                     | 152                               | 331                       | 179        |

**Table 13.5** Relationship status at birth by relationship status at conception by educational attainment

| Relationship status at birth | Relationship status at conception |                           |            |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|------------|
|                              | Married                           | Non-cohabiting, unmarried | Cohabiting |
| Less than high school        |                                   |                           |            |
| Married                      | 98.0                              | 3.0                       | 13.8       |
| Non-cohabiting, unmarried    | 2.0                               | 78.9                      | 5.4        |
| Cohabiting                   | 0.0                               | 18.1                      | 80.8       |
| <i>N</i>                     | 235                               | 261                       | 274        |
| High school/some college     |                                   |                           |            |
| Married                      | 99.3                              | 7.3                       | 14.3       |
| Non-cohabiting, unmarried    | 0.7                               | 71.2                      | 7.5        |
| Cohabiting                   | 0.0                               | 21.6                      | 78.3       |
| <i>N</i>                     | 700                               | 486                       | 436        |
| College graduate             |                                   |                           |            |
| Married                      | 99.8                              | 31.2                      | 41.2       |
| Non-cohabiting, unmarried    | 0.2                               | 40.9                      | 3.4        |
| Cohabiting                   | 0.0                               | 27.9                      | 55.4       |
| <i>N</i>                     | 520                               | 39                        | 42         |

among Blacks (14%). Non-Hispanic White pregnant cohabiting women also were far more likely to marry (23.4%) than their Hispanic (7.7%) and Black (9.2%) counterparts.

On the other hand, Blacks (12.7%) were over twice as likely to break up between pregnancy and childbearing as Whites (6.2%) and Hispanics (4.7%). One interpretation is that nonmarital pregnancies among Whites occur in more highly committed relationships than is the case among Blacks, if measured by transitions into cohabitation and marriage and by low dissolution rates following pregnancy. Of course, racial differences in relationship stability or marriage may be rooted in persistent disparities in education, employment, and income (see England & Edin, 2007). They may also result from distinct patterns of relationship formation. For example, sexual involvement occurs more rapidly among minority than White couples, which may elevate the risk of conception, reduce relationship quality, and affect subsequent union transitions (Sassler, Addo, & Hartmann, 2010) (Table 13.5).

Finally, college-educated pregnant single (31.2%) and cohabiting women (41.2%) were far more likely to marry by the time of the birth than were their least-educated single and cohabiting counterparts (3.0% and 13.8%, respectively). Highly educated pregnant single women were also more likely than high school dropouts to cohabit before the birth (27.9% vs. 18.1%). Clearly, shot-gun weddings and cohabitations are far more likely among pregnant women who were the most highly educated. Like Edin and Tach's (Chap. 12) analysis of the FFCWS, data from the new NSFG imply that partnered fertility is much more normative among higher- than lower-SES women.

## Conclusion

Emerging adulthood, especially for America's historically disadvantaged minority populations, often begins with nonmarital pregnancy and childbearing, and then segues into cohabitation and family instability over the marital life course (Chap. 12; Lichter & Qian, 2008). Whether we should be sanguine or not about rising nonmarital fertility ratios ultimately depends on the changing share of nonmarital births to cohabiting couples and on the institutionalization of cohabitation as a normative context for childbearing and childrearing. It also depends on the stability of cohabiting unions, i.e., whether these relationships proceed (or not) into healthy marriages that last.

Edin and Tach (Chap. 12) provide discouraging evidence in this regard. Only about 50% of the cohabiting mothers at birth were still in relationships with the biological fathers 5 years later. We cannot fully understand the social and economic implications of recent increases in nonmarital fertility in early adulthood without first acknowledging the growing incidence of childbearing and childrearing among cohabiting couples. Indeed, my analyses revealed that over 20% of all U.S. births today and nearly 60% of all nonmarital births occur within cohabiting unions. These emerging patterns, based on newly released data from the 2006–2008 NSFG, are driven disproportionately by younger, economically disadvantaged minority populations.

The economic and developmental implications for children and America's future are potentially large. Hispanic children – most of whom have immigrant parents – arguably represent the next generation of America's children born into and raised by fragile families (Hummer & Hamilton, 2010; Johnson & Lichter, 2010). Yet, the willingness of the American people and its political leaders to address poverty and support strong families arguably has waned with the rise of nativism, growing anti-tax and antigovernment sentiment (e.g., the Tea Party), and an economy that has been slow to recover. The past 2 years have brought significant increases in poverty among children (17.6% to 20.1% between 2007 and 2009). At the same time, poverty declined among America's elderly population (9.7–8.9%); this is the population group that has arguably benefited most from government antipoverty legislation over the past 50 years (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010). The question today is whether a disproportionately White elderly population will support, both with their votes and tax dollars, a growing population of minority families in early adulthood who are now raising a disproportionate share of America's children. Unlike the past, the generational divide today has a large racial dimension that may thwart effective public policy on behalf of fragile families and their children.

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# Chapter 14

## Understanding Young Fertility in the Context of Economic Disadvantage

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**Abstract** This chapter notes the strong association between young fertility and economic disadvantage. Three research areas are described relating to young fertility that I believe may warrant additional attention. First, it would be useful to know more about the process and antecedents of young fertility, particularly in light of the gap between the perceived financial prerequisites for marriage among low-income couples and the lack of such prerequisites for childbearing. Second, it is important to understand more about the nature and dynamics of young childrearing in the context of complex personal and family circumstances, such as multipartnered fertility, high rates of paternal incarceration, unstable couple relationships, and likely repartnering. Third, the broader implications of young fertility are not well understood, particularly the extent to which young fertility may be part of the process of growing stratification and inequality, both within and across generations.

### Introduction

Edin and Tach (Chap. 12) provide a rich description of the circumstances under which contemporary, young (defined as under age 25) fertility occurs in the U.S. Using qualitative data (collected by the first author and colleagues), as well as quantitative data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001), the authors show that most young births occur in the context of significant socioeconomic disadvantage. Most young parents are unmarried, have low economic resources, and experience unstable couple relationships; also, a nontrivial proportion have socio-behavioral problems, including substance abuse, domestic violence, multipartnered fertility (MPF), and paternal

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history of incarceration. Given the high correlation between young births and unmarried births, the Edin and Tach description closely mirrors the findings about unmarried parents and their children that have emerged from the first 5 years of the Fragile Families Study (McLanahan, 2009, 2011; McLanahan, Garfinkel, Mincy, & Donahue, 2010; Waldfogel, Craigie, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010). This chapter highlights several areas where I believe additional research efforts are warranted in order to better understand the circumstances and consequences of young fertility and young parenting in the U.S. (1) the process/antecedents of young fertility; (2) the nature and dynamics of young childrearing; and (3) the broader implications of young fertility for inequality both within and across generations.

## Process/Antecedents of Young Fertility

A growing literature has focused on the barriers to marriage perceived by unwed couples with children. Both qualitative and quantitative studies have suggested that (low-income) unmarried parents aspire to middle-class ideals of marriage with respect to both economic status and relationship status, but since they cannot meet these ideals, they do not marry (Cherlin, 2009; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Gibson-Davis, 2009; Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). Economic expectations include being able to afford a wedding and to buy a house, and that the man has a steady job; relationship expectations include having a high-quality relationship that is free from problems of violence and substance abuse.

Particularly notable in light of the “marriage bar” is that there appears to be no corresponding “fertility bar,” i.e., the notion that fertility should be postponed until one is able to afford the costs of raising a child, among this demographic group. Young parents hold middle-class views of marriage, but they do not appear to hold similar views about the prerequisites of becoming a parent. This contrast is especially striking since marriage could potentially *save* money (given the economies of scale), while children objectively *cost* money. In fact, college-educated individuals who can *most* afford to live and/or raise a child independently are today the least likely of all education groups to be single parents, the most likely to marry, and the least likely to divorce when they do marry (Martin, 2006; McLanahan, 2004).

The fertility behaviors of young, disadvantaged parents are in striking contrast to the U.S. population overall and to fertility patterns in other countries. For example, a recent study suggested that the birth rate across 25 states declined from 69.9 to 68.8 births per 1,000 women ages 15–44 between 2007 and 2008 – the first year of the Great Recession, when significant declines in per capita income were also observed (Taylor et al., 2010). While one cannot be certain of the causality, the authors noted that “the analysis suggests that the falloff in fertility coincides with deteriorating economic conditions” (p. 1). A similar pattern – and the growing importance of economic conditions for fertility (in a procyclical direction) – has been noted across OECD countries (Örsal & Goldstein, 2010). By contrast, one empirical investigation comparing the role of earnings and income in predicting

marriage versus subsequent childbearing among unmarried parents in the U.S. found that changes in earnings were associated with a greater likelihood of marriage, but neither changes in earnings nor income were linked with having another child (Gibson-Davis, 2009). In other words, fertility decisions among this demographic group do not appear to be responsive to economic resources.

Taking the population overall, we know that most young births occur to parents with high school education or less. As summarized by Edin and Tach (based on the Fragile Families data for urban areas), for births to unmarried women under age 25, 86% of mothers and 83% of fathers had a high school education or less; the figures are only slightly better for young births to married women: 77% of mothers and 62% of fathers had a high school degree or less. Considered from the other direction – the proportion of low-educated individuals who will have a young birth – fully 78% of women who have dropped out of high school and 64% of women with a high school degree will have a child by age 25 (Ellwood & Jencks, 2004). Therefore, young fertility is clearly associated with low education and socioeconomic disadvantage.

In light of this strong association between disadvantage and fertility – combined with the reticence to marry at low income levels, I think additional research is warranted about the attitudes, values, and expectations that young, low-educated individuals bring to their decisions (whether explicit or implicit) to have a child, and why it is that financial resources do not seem to be an important consideration. In other words, what is it about education that differentiates birth patterns? In a recent paper exploring fertility behaviors by education, Musick, England, Edgington, and Kangas (2010) found that the key difference between low- and high-educated women is in their *unintended* childbearing, which the authors could not explain by either differences in fertility desires or in opportunity costs across education groups. Therefore, what else could it be about education that reduces unintended fertility (highly correlated with unmarried and young births)? In a paper in progress exploring male nonmarital fatherhood, I found (with several coauthors) that education – but not earnings – is strongly linked to a lower likelihood of nonmarital fatherhood (Carlson, VanOrman & Pilkauskas, 2011). We also found that the link between education and nonmarital fatherhood cannot be accounted for by early life attributes that likely differentiate those who go on to achieve higher education versus those who do not, such as educational aspirations, occupational expectations, traditional family attitudes, expected age at marriage, locus of control, and self esteem. Therefore, it is important to understand what it is about education that deters young/unintended/low-educated/nonmarital births? From a policy perspective, we might then question how to increase education – or to increase the motivation that comes from education – in order to deter such births. At the same time, it is important to note a major demographic implication surrounding this issue, which is that the overall U.S. fertility rate would likely be reduced if young/unmarried births were reduced. In recent years, U.S. fertility has remained around replacement precisely because of young/nonmarital fertility. Preston (2004) noted that we would be closer to the fertility levels of southern Europe without nonmarital fertility and poignantly inquired, “would



we as a society be better off if the children being born and raised out of wedlock were never born?" (p. 264). Given European concerns about the consequences of low fertility for supporting the elderly and sustaining culture, language, and national identity (e.g., Kohler, Billari, & Ortega, 2006), it seems important to at least acknowledge the role of young births (which are primarily nonmarital) in maintaining the replacement-level U.S. fertility rate.

## **Nature and Dynamics of Young Childrearing**

Even with major changes in family life and other social institutions in recent decades, we still expect families to take primary responsibility for the rearing and socialization of children. Edin and Tach (Chap. 12) identify several aspects of family complexity for young parents, and I agree that we need to better understand how these and other factors play out over time for the quality of family functioning and the well-being of individuals (especially children) within families.

### **Multipartnered Fertility**

Estimates from the Fragile Families data suggest that in fully 59% of unmarried couples who had a child together in the late 1990s, one or both parents already had at least one child by a previous partner (Carlson & Furstenberg Jr, 2006). Moreover, this is a lower-bound estimate of completed fertility, since unwed parents are typically only in their 20s, and the proportion with children by multiple partners can only increase over time as mothers and fathers may repartner through the remainder of their childbearing years. Multipartnered fertility has important implications for children's well-being because it likely affects the organization of family life and kinship networks, particularly as concerns the rearing and socialization of children. In the context of MPF, the navigation of parenting, income sharing, child support, and marriage are much less clear than in the "simple" situation of biological parents with only their common child(ren).

### **Paternal Incarceration**

Incarceration (more often fathers than mothers) also affects family life and may compound the already complicated situation faced by parents having children by multiple partners. While not all incarcerated men are fathers, many are: in a 1997 Bureau of Justice survey on incarceration and parenthood (Mumola, 2000), the majority of incarcerated men (63% in federal prison and 55% in state prison) reported having children under the age of 18. From the perspective of children, 1 in 25 White children born in 1990 – and fully 1 in 4 Black children – had a parent imprisoned (Wildeman, 2009); the risk is even higher at the intersection of Black race and low education,

with about half of Black children born to high school dropouts having a father imprisoned by age 14 (Wildeman, 2009). Until recently, there has been limited research about how incarceration affects family relationships and individual well-being (Western, Lopoo, & McLanahan, 2004). Fortunately, this is changing (e.g., Eddy & Poehlmann, 2010; Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper, & Mincy, 2009).

### **Unstable Couple Relationships, Coparenting, and Repartnering**

As described by Edin and Tach, a significant fraction of young parents' relationships will end by their child's fifth birthday. Since most children will live with mothers after union dissolution, seeing fathers will have to be coordinated with mothers; ideally, parents will work together (or "coparent") in rearing their common child. Although fathers' involvement typically declines once parents separate, cooperative coparenting helps keep nonresident fathers connected to their children (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). Yet, this may become even more difficult once one or both of the child's biological parents repartner. Understanding the nature of mother–father and parent–child relationships – and how they affect child well-being – amidst union instability and change is an important topic for additional research.

Taken together, MPF, paternal incarceration, and instability and change in couple relationships – particularly in the context of low economic resources – may create serious challenges for families headed by young parents. Understanding how these factors, both individually and conjointly, affect family functioning and the well-being of children over the long term is an important topic for future research.

### **Broader Implications of Young Fertility for Inequality**

Given the disadvantaged circumstances that typically surround young (and especially unmarried) births as compared to older (and especially married) births, it is important to consider the longer-run implications of young childbearing for stratification and inequality, both within and across U.S. generations, as well as in cross-national perspective. McLanahan usefully described how diverging demographic patterns by education over time are contributing to growing inequality in family resources and "diverging destinies" for children (McLanahan, 2004); in particular, mothers with higher education (as compared to their counterparts with low education) are increasingly likely to be older at the time of birth, to be employed, to get and stay married (and hence avoid becoming single mothers), and to have higher median family income. Over time, these trends suggest a growing disparity by parental education in the resources available to children in the U.S. and perhaps across other countries (although to my knowledge, the latter has been little explored).

To the extent that education (particularly obtaining a college degree) is an important factor that differentiates family behaviors, as noted earlier, increasing educational attainment may encourage delayed childbearing. Yet, recent data from the

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) indicate that the U.S. has essentially made no progress in recent decades in college degree attainment: the proportion of Americans obtaining at least an associate's degree has remained essentially flat across recent cohorts, with 38% of those ages 55–64 having obtained such a degree, 40% of ages 45–54, 41% of ages 34–44, and 39% of ages 25–34 (OECD, 2008); this is in sharp contrast to the majority of other Western industrialized countries that have seen a dramatic rise in the proportion of individuals obtaining at least an associate's degree over the same time period. For example, the fraction of those with an associate's degree or higher in France has risen from 16% of those ages 55–64 to 41% of those ages 25–34, and comparable figures for Canada are 37% and 55%, respectively (OECD, 2008).

Without a rise in educational attainment – and assuming that family patterns remain or become even more differentiated by education level – we should expect that stratification and inequality will continue to increase within the U.S. Also, the gap may grow between those who are young and low-educated having births in the U.S. as compared to others in similar circumstances in other countries, particularly in light of the greater union formation and instability here combined with our less progressive social policies (Cherlin, 2009).

## Conclusion

In sum, Edin and Tach have provided a very useful description of young childbearing in the U.S., including the characteristics and circumstances of young parents. They have illuminated the various aspects of disadvantage that complicate life for young parents, who are typically unmarried and economically disadvantaged and have poor-quality and unstable relationships. Further research would usefully shed light on the process and antecedents of young fertility, the nature and dynamics of young childrearing in the context of complex personal and family circumstances (including MPF, paternal incarceration, and unstable couple relationships and repartnering), and the broader implications of young fertility for increasing stratification and inequality, both within and across generations.

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**Part V**  
**The Study of Young Adulthood**

# Chapter 15

## New Horizons in Research on Emerging and Young Adulthood

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett

**Abstract** In this chapter I present some ideas about the future of the field of emerging adulthood. First, I explain my reasons for coining “emerging adulthood,” focusing on the vast changes that have taken place in the nature of the 18–24 age period over the past century. Next, I propose some new areas of inquiry for the years to come. These include exploring the next developmental stage beyond emerging adulthood – young adulthood – which I suggest is distinguished by *role immersion*. I also advocate greater exploration of the many paths through emerging adulthood. Within countries, variations by social class and ethnicity are notable. Between countries, there are many potential variations in the experience of emerging adulthood in Europe and Asia. Perhaps most compelling of all in the decades to come will be to examine the birth of emerging adulthood in developing countries, as those countries move increasingly toward the demographic patterns that have led to a new life stage of emerging adulthood in economically developed countries: longer and more widespread education and later ages of entering marriage and parenthood.

### Introduction

This is an exciting time to be involved in the study of the 18- to 24-year-olds who are the focus of this book. Vast changes have taken place in the past half-century in how ages 18–24 are experienced, as participation in postsecondary education has become longer and more widespread and as ages of entering marriage and parenthood have risen into the late 20s and beyond across industrialized countries. Consequently, there is a rich range of new research questions to be addressed on attitudes and experiences regarding work (as it takes longer to settle into a stable job), on romantic and

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sexual experiences (as age 18–24 has become a time of exploration rather than commitment for most people), and many other areas.

In this chapter I will propose some ideas about where the field of emerging adulthood is headed, especially with regard to the family issues that are the focus of the book. First, I present my reasons for conceptualizing the field as emerging adulthood, rather than young adulthood, early adulthood, or other terms that have been used to characterize the age period from the late teens through the 20s. Then I propose two areas of focus that may be especially fruitful for exploration in the years to come: the contrast between emerging adulthood in the 20s and young adulthood in the 30s and early 40s, and cultural and international variations in the experiences of emerging and young adulthood. Finally, I defend the usefulness of stages in helping us understand the course of human development, especially with respect to emerging adulthood.

## Why Emerging Adulthood?

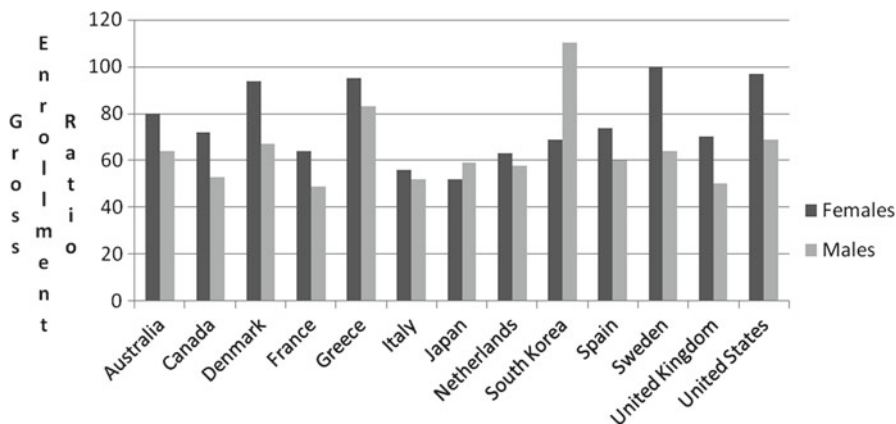
Many different terms have been used in reference to the life stage that includes ages 18–24. “Young adulthood” is the term primarily used in this book, mixed occasionally with “early adulthood” or “emerging adulthood.” Other terms include “youth,” “late adolescence,” and “the transition to adulthood.”

It will surprise no one to hear that I prefer the term “emerging adulthood,” given that I coined it and have been seeking to build up a field of study under that term over the past decade (Arnett, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2011; Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011; Arnett & Taber, 1994; Arnett & Tanner, 2006). Many other scholars have adopted the term in recent years and are using it in their own work, mainly in psychology but also in fields such as sociology, anthropology, education, and medicine. The article that originally sketched the theory (Arnett, 2000) has been cited over 2,300 times (as of October, 2011), according to Google Scholar.

Of course everyone should use whatever term they believe best suits their purposes in describing and researching this life stage. Here, I would like to explain my reasons for coining and using “emerging adulthood,” especially contrasting it with “young adulthood.”

## A New Term for a New Life Stage

My primary reason for proposing “emerging adulthood” was my sense that a new term was required to describe a new life stage. By the turn of the twenty-first century the age period from the late teens through mid-20s was different in industrialized societies than it had ever been before, in any previous era of human history (Arnett, 2004). Education had never lasted so long for such a broad proportion of the population. The age of entering marriage had never been so high. The age of entering parenthood had never been so late, and the birth rate had never been so low. Premarital sex and cohabitation had never been acceptable. Women had never been



**Fig. 15.1** Gross enrollment ratio in tertiary education, selected OECD countries. *Note.* Gross enrollment ratio is the number of persons enrolled in tertiary education divided by the number of persons aged 18–22 in the population

allowed so many educational and occupational opportunities, and they had never exceeded men in educational attainment – as they do now in every Western country (Fig. 15.1; UNdata, 2010).

Another distinctive change that makes the years 18–24 different today than in the past is the change in how young people view adulthood. This observation is necessarily more speculative, as we do not have survey or interview data from 100 or more years ago about how young people viewed adulthood, the way we have demographic data on the age they entered marriage and how much education they obtained. Still, it appears from the historical record that until quite recently adulthood was a status young people looked forward to and strived toward (Modell, 1989). However, today there is a great deal of ambivalence about reaching adulthood among 18- to 24-year olds. They look at the lives of their parents and other adults, and they see comfort and stability but also stagnation and a narrow range of possibilities (Arnett, 2004). Consequently, at age 18–24 most are in no hurry to enter adulthood, although most will take on adult responsibilities of marriage, parenthood, and stable work by age 30.

All together, the changes in the length and breadth of education; the rising ages of entering marriage and parenthood; more tolerant views of premarital sex and cohabitation; the opportunities open to women; and how people think about adulthood have made the years from age 18–24 different today than they have ever been before, and consequently in need of a new term and a new conceptualization.

## **New Horizons: From Emerging Adulthood to Young Adulthood**

Part of the value of a new term for a new life stage is that it has the potential to draw the attention of researchers interested in human development and looking for something new to study. Over the past decade the study of development during the



20s has burgeoned, and one of the contributors may be that this new conception of emerging adulthood has inspired many researchers to think about all the possibilities of uncharted territory for research. Attendance at the five conferences on emerging adulthood has risen steadily each time, indicating an expanding community of scholars. Currently, plans are in progress to form a Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood (see <http://www.ssea.org>), including an *Emerging Adulthood* journal.

The burgeoning of interest in emerging adulthood is part of a long trend in developmental psychology toward steadily expanding the proportion of the lifespan receiving research attention. Early developmental psychologists working a century ago, such as Arnold Gesell and Jean Piaget, focused mainly on infancy and childhood. Infancy and early childhood still dominate in developmental psychology today – just pick up any issue of the journal *Developmental Psychology* if you doubt it – but beginning in the 1970s and 1980s there was a surge of interest in adolescence, inspired by pioneers such as Erik Erikson (1968) and Daniel Offer (1969) and given a boost by the formation of the Society for Research on Adolescence in 1984. Now, the age span of interest to developmentalists has expanded still further to include the life stage from the late teens through the mid-20s.

One important new horizon for research in the years to come will be to expand the age span of interest yet again, to include the 30s and early 40s. What happens developmentally during the 30s and early 40s? This question hardly appears to have been asked before, and it certainly has received little to no research or theoretical attention. Here I would like to initiate the theoretical conversation in the hope of inspiring research as well.

I propose that the term “young adulthood” would be best applied to the life stage of the 30s and early 40s (roughly 30–45). For the most part, the chapters in this book have used “young adulthood” for the age period 18–24 that is the focus of the book, but in my view this is problematic in several ways. First, as noted, what occurs today in the 18–24 age period is in many ways unprecedented, but “young adulthood” is not a new term and provides no sense that what occurs in the years 18–24 today is different than in the past. Second, “young adulthood” implies that the entry to adulthood is complete, but for most 18- to 24-year olds this is not the case. In terms of transition events, few have entered marriage, parenthood, and a stable occupational path, all events traditionally associated with adult status. In terms of their own subjective perceptions, most feel neither adolescent nor adult but somewhere in-between, on the way to adulthood but not there yet, which is partly what inspired me to coin the term “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 1998, 2004). Third, using “young adulthood” to refer to 18- to 24-year olds raises the problem of what to call the 30s and early 40s. It is unfeasible to refer to the entire span of 18–40 as “young adulthood.” Whatever the differences in views about the best term for the age period 18–24, I think we could all agree that 18–24 is vastly different than the 30s and early 40s for most people and that these two periods should be understood as two separate life stages or phases of the life span. But if 18–24 is already young adulthood, what then is the life stage of the 30s and early 40s? Not-so-young-adulthood?

Young adulthood makes more sense as the term for the life stage that follows emerging adulthood. The term “young adulthood” has been around for a long time, and it makes sense to apply it to the life stage that entails settling into the adult roles that have also been around for a long time: a stable occupational path, marriage (or other long-term partnership), and parenthood.

Indeed, the outstanding developmental feature of “young adulthood” in the 30s and early 40s is that it is a life stage of what I propose to call *role immersion*. The requirements and demands of roles in these years are greater than in any other stage of life, for most people. This is true for both love and work, the two primary areas of human functioning (Erikson, 1950). In love, the great majority of young adults take on marriage or another long-term romantic partnership by their 30s. Seventy-four percent of Americans are married by their early 30s and 88% by their 40s (US Bureau of the Census, 2001). Similarly, 75% of Americans have had at least one child by age 30, rising to nearly 90% by the end of the 30s. These new family roles entail daily requirements and obligations. Marriage involves coordinating your daily activities with another person and making joint decisions about everything from what to have for dinner to whether to buy a house. Parenting, especially parenting of young children, requires relentless attention to children’s many needs for food, clothing, love, and protection.

The role requirements of work, too, become more demanding in the 30s. The jobs emerging adults take are often temporary or part-time. According to the US Department of Labor, the average number of job changes from age 20–29 is *seven*. It is not until about age 30 that most people find a job that they will stay with for at least 5 years (Yates, 2005). Once people find a job they will stay in for many years the role requirements increase, because it is likely to be a job the young adult wants to keep and develop into a long-term occupational path.

The role immersion of young adulthood provides a sharp contrast to the emerging adulthood that preceded it. Role demands are often greatest in young adulthood of the entire life span, whereas in emerging adulthood role demands reach their nadir for most people. In love, romantic relationships in emerging adulthood tend to be temporary and unstable, as shown by Edin and Tach (Chap. 12) and by Giordano and colleagues (Chap. 9). Even relatively long-term romantic relationships in emerging adulthood are unlikely to involve the daily role requirements and joint decisions that marriage entails. Role demands in relation to family of origin are also low in emerging adulthood, compared to childhood or adolescence. With regard to work, jobs taken in emerging adulthood are often temporary, as noted. Emerging adults tend to regard the jobs they acquire during age 18–24 as a means to an end, a way to make it by while they keep an eye out for a better job or while they pursue education or training that will prepare them for something more enjoyable, remunerative, and enduring. Consequently, they tend not to be personally invested in the jobs they have during the 18–24 age period the way they will be in the job they have during their 30s.

What about people who do not marry or have children, or people who leave the work force in their 30s to devote themselves full-time to the care of young children? Role immersion may nevertheless apply to them. Young adults who do not marry or

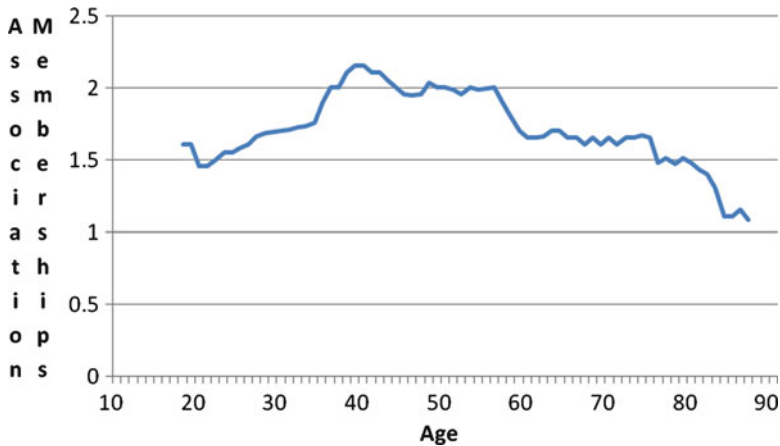


Fig. 15.2 Age and association membership, the USA

have children in their 30s may be all the more immersed in their work role. For example, in Hewlett's (2003) study of high-achievers, 33% of women and 25% of men had no children by age 40, primarily because they had been too devoted to developing their careers to make time for the responsibilities of parenthood. Similarly, young adults who leave the workforce to care for young children will no longer have the role obligations of a job but will be all the more immersed in the role obligations of parenting and running a household.

Role immersion during young adulthood may be evident not only in love and work but also in terms of community involvement. In Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen's (2001) analysis, membership in community associations rose steeply during the 30s and peaked around age 40, then declined through the rest of the lifespan (Fig. 15.2; Putnam et al., 2001, p. 249). Young adults are often driven toward community roles by parenting. The 30s and early 40s are the period that is most likely to include coaching a child's sports team, joining the parents' association at a child's school, or serving as a Boy Scout or Girl Scout leader in the child's troop. Again, the contrast with emerging adulthood is stark. Not only do 18- to 24-year olds have the lowest rates of voting participation of any adult age group, but as Fig. 15.2 shows, a low point in involvement in community associations occurs in the early 20s, not reached again until nearly age 80.

If the age period 18–24 is emerging adulthood and the 30s and early 40s are young adulthood, where does that leave the late 20s? The period 25–29 is not easy to characterize. For many people it is the time when the role immersion of young adulthood begins. Currently the median age of marriage in the USA is 26 for women and 28 for men (US Bureau of the Census, 2010), and as noted 75% of Americans have at least one child by age 30. By the late 20s most people also have entered a job they will have for at least 5 years, although this is more likely for persons who have obtained a college degree than for those who have only a high school education or less (Day & Newburger, 2002). Subjectively, too, most 18- to 24-year olds do not

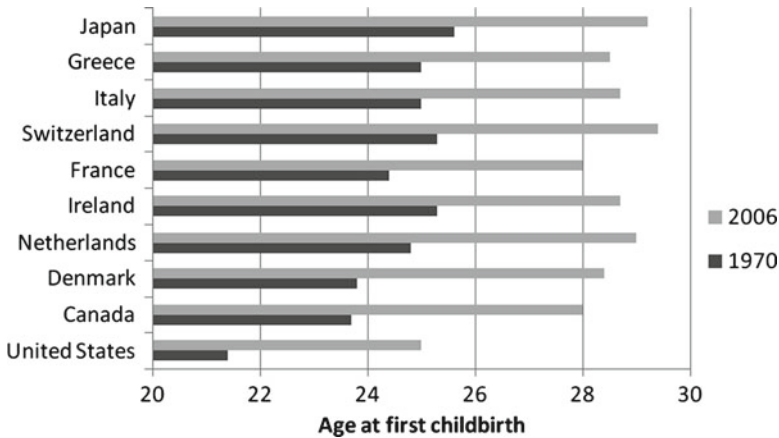
feel they have reached adulthood, whereas most 25- to 29-year olds feel they have (Arnett, 2001, 2003).

For all these reasons, I have mainly used the age period 18–25 when describing emerging adulthood. However, there are many people for whom emerging adulthood extends through the end of the 20s, in all of the ways just described. Furthermore, the USA is unusual among industrialized countries in having relatively low median ages of entering marriage and parenthood. In Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, and all over Europe, the median ages of entering marriage and parenthood are closer to 30 than to 25 (Arnett, 2011; Douglass, 2007). Consequently, when it is necessary to specify at least rough age ranges for emerging adulthood and young adulthood, 18–25 and 25–45 may be more fitting in the USA, and 18–29 and 30–45 more fitting in the rest of the industrialized world.

What about young people who become parents relatively early, such as those vividly described in Edin's and Tach's chapter (Chap. 12)? Do they have a different kind of emerging adulthood, or a shorter emerging adulthood, or no emerging adulthood at all? Certainly, their age period 18–24 is different than for emerging adults who do not have child during this period, as having a child greatly restricts the range of possibilities young people have for pursuing their own goals in education and work. Young persons who have children relatively early also tend to feel adult earlier than their peers due to the sudden relentless responsibilities of parenting (Arnett, 1998). Yet, in the accounts of the lives of young parents presented by Edin and Tach, there is much that looks like the lives of other emerging adults, particularly the instability of their lives and frequent changes in education, work, and (for most) love, similar in many ways to the identity explorations that I have proposed as a common part of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004). Alternatively, young parents could be seen as having a shortened emerging adulthood that ends when the first child is born, especially the young mothers who are most likely to end up with the long-term responsibility for child care. Or in some cases people may make the transition from emerging adulthood to young adulthood at different times in different aspects of their lives – parent at 22, stable romantic relationship at 27, stable work at 32 – one aspect of the in-between character of emerging adulthood. And some may be considered to have no emerging adulthood at all, particularly those who become parents while still in their teens. These are questions that merit further contemplation and investigation.

## **New Horizons: The Many Forms of Emerging Adulthood**

One of the fascinating aspects of the rise of emerging adulthood over the past half century is how the same demographic changes have taken place across the world: longer and more widespread education, lower birth rates, and later ages of marriage and parenthood. These changes have occurred in English-speaking countries – the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand; all over Europe, and in the Asian industrialized countries of Japan and South Korea. Figure 15.3 provides an illustration,



**Fig. 15.3** Median marriage age, selected OECD countries

showing the rise in the median age of entering parenthood (for women) that has taken place since 1970 (Mathews & Hamilton, 2009). Similar demographic changes have also taken place in developing countries around the world, although at present postsecondary education is less common in these countries than in economically developed countries and ages of entering marriage and parenthood are not yet as high. Some social changes contributing to the rise of emerging adulthood have also been worldwide. Most notably, 50 years ago all over the world young women were substantially less likely than young men to obtain higher education; today, young women obtain more education than young men in nearly every country in the world (UNdata, 2010).

Yet along with these similarities, there are also vast differences in how emerging adulthood is experienced worldwide. This is perhaps the richest and most promising horizon of all for future research on emerging adulthood. Beneath the similarities, there are differences both within countries and between countries that offer virtually limitless opportunities for curious researchers.

### **Within Countries: Social Class and Ethnicity**

Within countries, there are differences to be explored with regard to characteristics such as social class and ethnicity. Social class has a substantial influence on the path through emerging adulthood, especially as it influences education (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006). Although participation in postsecondary education has expanded greatly over the past half century, across industrialized countries 5–50% do not receive education beyond secondary school (UNdata, 2010). Obviously, it is a quite different experience of emerging adulthood to spend one's late teens and early 20s in university than to spend those years working or looking for work. Also, it is well established that educational attainment is the strongest predictor of future earnings

throughout adult life (Day & Newburger, 2002). However, we know much less about possible social class differences during emerging adulthood in family relations, romantic relationships, friendships, and plans for the future, among many other areas (Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011).

Ethnicity is another area of great potential research in emerging adulthood. We know there are, in all countries, substantial ethnic group differences in opportunities and in educational and occupational achievements in emerging adulthood. However, much less is known about the personal experience of ethnic group membership during the years 18–24. For example, a literature has accumulated in recent decades on ethnic identity in adolescence. However, very little is known about ethnic identity development in emerging adulthood (Phinney, 2006). Given the prominence of other identity issues during emerging adulthood, it might be expected that ethnic identity would also change in important ways during these years. Another promising area of inquiry is how emerging adults in ethnic minority groups reconcile the often collectivistic values of their culture of origin with the often individualistic value of the majority cultures they live in, particularly as they reach emerging adulthood and enter a wider and more diverse ethnic milieu in their education, workplace, and personal lives (Phinney, 2006).

## **Between Countries: Europe and Asia**

The focus of the previous chapters in this book is exclusively on the USA, but emerging adulthood is an international phenomenon. Yet, even though there are cross-national consistencies in demographic trends such as rising ages of marriage and parenthood and in social trends such as greater educational and occupational opportunities for women, there is also immense variation in the paths taken through emerging adulthood in different world regions.

Across Europe, the median age of entering marriage is now around 30. The age of entering parenthood is also near 30, as shown in Fig. 15.3. However, there is also considerable regional variation among Northern, Southern, and Eastern Europe (Douglass, 2005, 2007). In Northern Europe, emerging adults leave home early, right after the completion of secondary school, due to a cultural tradition of establishing independence and state support for housing and education. Many emerging adults have a “gap year” between the end of secondary school and further pursuit of education and training, during which they enjoy leisure with friends and decide what path to follow next. Nearly all emerging adults in Northern Europe cohabit before marriage. By contrast, Southern European emerging adults typically remain in their parents’ household until marriage, and cohabitation is still taboo. Unemployment is much higher in Southern than in Northern Europe, and many emerging adults struggle for years before finding a stable job. In Eastern Europe, emerging adults today have grown up in a period of astounding and sometimes difficult social and economic changes since the fall of communist governments in 1989–1990, but increasingly their lives in emerging adulthood resemble the lives of

their counterparts in Western Europe, in terms of education, leisure, and the timing of marriage and parenthood (Macek et al., 2007).

Two of the most intriguing and under-researched countries in the world with respect to emerging adulthood are the two Asian industrialized countries, Japan and South Korea. Like the other industrialized countries, Japan and South Korea now have high ages of entering marriage and parenthood, around age 30. However, several other factors make these two countries distinctive (Rosenberger, 2007). First, premarital sex remains strongly proscribed. Second, roles for women have changed but not as much as in the West. In every Western country young women now exceed young men in educational attainment, but in Japan and South Korea young men are still highest, and there is still preferential treatment for young men over young women in universities and in the workplace (Rosenberger, 2007). Third, there is strong pressure on emerging adults, especially women, to marry by about age 30 in order to be considered fully adult by others.

In all these regions, the demographic patterns indicating emerging adulthood are clear, but relatively little is known about how emerging adulthood is experienced in terms of educational experiences, work experiences, romantic relationships, and hopes for the future, among many other areas of life. There is much to be learned, and a virtually limitless horizon of research opportunities.

## **The Birth of Emerging Adulthood in Developing Countries**

Emerging adulthood is primarily a phenomenon of industrialized countries. It is these countries that have the demographic hallmarks of emerging adulthood: education and training into the twenties and timing of marriage and parenthood around age 30. However, developing countries all over the world appear to be headed in the same direction. Although their median levels of education and their median ages of entering marriage and parenthood are still nowhere near as high as in developed countries, virtually all developing countries have a small but growing urban middle class whose lives from the late teens through the 20s look similar to the lives of emerging adults in developed countries.

Two examples of this trend can be found in China and India, the two most populous countries in the world. Both countries have experienced rapid economic growth in recent years and both countries have a rapidly growing urban middle class. Both countries are also experiencing a massive migration from rural to urban areas, especially among young people seeking new opportunities for education and work.

China has a relatively low marriage age – 23 for women, 25 for men – and only 20% of young Chinese obtain a college education after high school, much lower than in any developed country (Nelson & Chen, 2007). However, among urban middle-class Chinese, the median marriage age is much higher, as is the likelihood of obtaining postsecondary education. Little is known thus far about emerging adulthood in the Chinese urban middle class, but there are some intriguing clues. In two

studies of Chinese college students, Nelson and colleagues examined their views of adulthood (Badger, Nelson, & Barry, 2006; Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004). In some of their top criteria they were similar to American and European emerging adults, specifically *accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions*, *make independent decisions*, and *become financially independent*. However, they also valued highly *learn to have good control over your emotions* and *become capable of taking care of parents*, two criteria that reflect traditional Chinese values and that have ranked very low in American and European samples (e.g., Arnett, 2001, 2003; Macek et al., 2007). In a global survey, young Chinese aged 18–29 were highly optimistic about their personal futures, even more than American emerging adults or older Chinese adults, perhaps reflecting their historical circumstances of entering adult life in an economically rising country (Pew Research Center, 2005).

Like China, India has a booming economy and a rapidly expanding urban middle class. India has become a world leader in technological development, and young people have migrated to India's urban areas in search of education, training, and jobs in the new economy. However, even less is known about India's nascent emerging adults than about China's. In a recent study, Nelson (2011) examined views of adulthood among college and non-college 18- to 26-year olds in India. Only 10% of the students were married, compared to 47% of the nonstudents. The results showed that, contrary to studies in many other countries, the majority of young Indians believed they had reached adulthood, both students (61%) and nonstudents (59%), and only 26% gave the ambiguous "in some ways yes, in some ways no" response, far lower than in other countries. The top criteria for adulthood also differed from other studies. *Accept responsibility for your actions* ranked high, as in other studies, and *Learn always to have good control of your emotions*, as in studies of Chinese college students (Nelson et al., 2004), but also near the top were *Become capable of keeping a family physically safe* (for both men and women) and *Drive an automobile safely and close to the speed limit*. Furthermore, the young Indians were optimistic, with 80% of students and 53% of nonstudents believing their quality of life would be higher than their parents' quality of life. These initial results offer the promise that there would be much to be gained from further investigations of emerging adulthood in India and other countries.

## One Stage, Many Paths

Given all this diversity in paths through emerging adulthood, by SES, ethnicity, nationality, and more, does it make sense to call emerging adulthood a life stage? I think it does, as long as we recognize the diversity within it. Stage theories earned a well-deserved stigma in the twentieth century, as theorists such as Freud, Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg proposed one-size-fits-all programs that all persons were supposed to follow or be deemed unhealthy or inadequately developed. They made the mistake of conceptualizing stages as *universal* and *uniform* – universal in that all humans were supposed to experience them, and uniform in that all persons following



a course of healthy development were supposed to experience them in the same way. By the end of the twentieth century developmental theorists were rejecting stages all together in favor of processes of development that apply at all ages (e.g., Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006; Lerner, 2006).

Now that we have turned the page to a new century, perhaps it is also time to turn a page both on the old way of thinking about stages as well as on the understandable but also rather extreme rejection of all stage theories. Stages can be useful frameworks for understanding human development, as long as we recognize they are neither universal nor uniform but always shaped by contexts of social class, ethnicity, culture, nationality, and other influences. I know I have found many, many times, that the concept of emerging adulthood is helpful not only to researchers but to emerging adults and their parents for understanding what occurs during the age period from the late teens through the 20s. People find great relief and consolation in learning that uncertainty and identity struggles in the twenties are common and that the road to a stable adulthood is longer than in the past for most people. For researchers, it is necessary to have some way of talking about different periods of the life span, otherwise discussions solely in terms of “processes” soon become amorphous and opaque (Arnett et al., 2011). Since we need stage terms in order to talk about human development, let us think carefully about what terms we use and why rather than simply picking randomly and interchangeably from the available terms.

It is not just emerging adulthood but all life stages that should be recognized as having multiple paths. There is not just one emerging adulthood but many emerging adulthoods within and between countries, just as there are many adolescences, infancies, and late adulthoods (Arnett, 2011). Yet for each life stage there are common features across contexts that justify conceptualizing it as a life stage. For infancy it is heightened dependency and inability to walk or talk; for adolescence it is puberty; for emerging adulthood it is the state of being beyond adolescence but not yet fully adult, trying out adult roles but not yet immersed in them, on the way to adulthood but not there yet. What else may be common features of emerging adulthood across cultures and other contexts – perhaps instability, perhaps identity struggles, perhaps a resilient optimism – remains to be established and promises many new research adventures in the years ahead.

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# Chapter 16

## The Role of Family Context in Early Adulthood: Where We've Been and Where We're Going

Jessica Halliday Hardie and Christine E. Stanik

**Abstract** Public and scholarly interest in early adulthood has increased over the past decade, spurred by the dramatic social and developmental changes young people experience during this period and the consequences of their missteps. The family context – both the family of origin and family of procreation – has emerged as key settings shaping young adults' success in navigating this period of the life course. While prior research has illuminated relationships between various family contexts and young adult outcomes, the chapters in this volume move the field forward in considering the dynamic interplay between family context, early adult development, and a range of outcomes. In this chapter, we synthesize four emergent themes from this volume: the role of family in pathways to adulthood, cumulative advantage and disadvantage in early adulthood, individual differences in young people's skills and capacities for negotiating early adulthood, and the role of institutions in shaping early adulthood. We conclude by delineating the remaining gaps in the literature and by offering suggestions for how the field should move forward.

### Introduction

Early adulthood is a critical period in the life course marked by tremendous emotional, cognitive, and physical development. This phase is characterized by both reliance on and growing autonomy from the family of origin and the development of self-identity in multiple domains (Arnett, 2000). Popular accounts depict one

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sanctioned path through adulthood starting with entry into a residential four year college and followed by graduation, entry into the labor market, financial independence, and family formation. Yet, a growing body of literature demonstrates increasing variability across the population in terms of the timing, sequencing, and co-occurrence of these events (see Shanahan, 2000). For instance, although nearly 40% of high school graduates do not enroll in college right after high school (Snyder & Dillow, 2010), a significant proportion of young people receive some form of post-secondary training during their mid- to late-20s (Oesterle, Hawkins, Hill, & Bailey, 2010). Additionally, over one half of young adults in their early 20s and about one fourth of those in their mid-20s live with their parents (Swartz, 2009). Family formation behaviors also vary. Many young men and women enter into romantic relationships and have children before their mid-20s. Further, family formation often precedes marriage; nearly one half of all children born in the United States today have single or cohabiting mothers (Chap. 13). Given this extension of transition events across early adulthood coupled with variability in the sequencing, many young adults juggle multiple and sometimes conflicting roles.

In light of the diversity and complexity of early adulthood, understanding the family context in this period is particularly important. Early adulthood is bookended by family processes that set the stage for successful adult years. Families of origin launch their children into adulthood, and they continue to be sources of support throughout these early adult years. The ability to prepare young people for this period is vital to their success. Furthermore, early adulthood is a time when young people form families of their own. Economic conditions shape young adults' transitions into romantic relationships and parenthood; in turn, these families provide the foundation for future economic and emotional well-being.

The authors of this volume have advanced the literature on the role of the family context in early adulthood. These chapters have fulfilled two aims: elucidating the role of family resources and constraints in young adults' lives and identifying precursors to romantic relationship stability and family formation behaviors. In this chapter, we synthesize the major themes arising from these chapters, delineate remaining gaps in the literature, and offer suggestions for how the field should move forward. In the sections that follow, we discuss four emergent themes: the role of family in pathways to adulthood, cumulative advantage and disadvantage in early adulthood, individual differences in young people's skills and capacities for negotiating early adulthood, and the role of institutions. We conclude with suggestions for the direction of future research.

## **The Role of Family in Pathways to Adulthood**

In this section, we describe the role family context plays in preparing young people for adulthood and shaping their experiences throughout this period. In the United States the process of becoming an adult has been characterized as a move from dependence on one's family of origin to establishing economic independence and

a family of one's own (Marini, 1984). This is accomplished by reaching several benchmarks: living independently, completing one's education, finding secure employment, establishing an identity, and forming a family through marriage and parenthood (Chap. 1). Accomplishing each of these, often in a proscribed order, is perceived as a marker of success. Yet pathways to adulthood vary, and as the chapters in this volume show, the resources young adults obtain through their families play a key role in shaping these pathways. Family members – particularly parents – can provide a safety net for young adults by offering emotional, practical, and financial assistance. Parental support can take many forms, including money for college or living expenses, a place to live, babysitting assistance, sympathy for failed romantic relationships, and guidance in choosing colleges. These forms of support pay off for young adults. As several chapters in this volume demonstrate (Chaps. 5–7), parental support is an important predictor of achievement, attainment, and well-being in early adulthood.

Parents' ability to provide support for their children is shaped partly by economic and social resources. Middle- and upper-middle-class parents are more likely than working-class and poor parents to provide financial and practical assistance (Chap. 5) and advice on college enrollment, course-taking, and careers (Bloom, 2007; Lareau & Weininger, 2008; McDonough, 1997). Working-class and poor families have fewer resources to provide and do not possess the same access to certain types of information. Despite this, Musick and Meier (Chap. 7) found that low-income families reported higher parent–child closeness and time spent together than high-income families. In some cases, therefore, a lack of economic resources may be compensated for through other, nonmonetary forms of support.

Family structure also affects youth's outcomes in early adulthood. Johnson and Benson (Chap. 6) demonstrated that growing up in families without two biological and married parents predicts lower subjective attainment. Furthermore, they demonstrate that this association is explained by parents' diminished economic resources, strained parent–child ties, and youth's early adult transitions. Previous literature supports the link between family structure and disadvantage, finding that divorce diminishes parents' economic resources while weakening parent–child bonds and parents' feelings toward intergenerational obligations (Swartz, 2009).

Immigrant status and race/ethnicity are also important factors associated with parents' ability to provide certain kinds of support for their children. Immigrant parents often do not possess the social and economic capital necessary to help their children through the transition to adulthood. Instead, immigrant youth may provide support for their parents during this period, reflecting a cultural orientation toward familism, characterized as “strong feelings of identification, loyalty, and solidarity” with family members (Harrison et al., 1990, pp. 351–352), within many immigrant communities (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Hardway & Fuligni, 2006; Tseng, 2004). Additionally, racial and ethnic wealth disparities – particularly between Black and White families – may impact the financial assistance minority youth receive, and exacerbate preexisting disparities. However, prior research suggests that minority families are more likely to offer in-kind support, such as coresidential living arrangements, which can ease economic strain (Swartz, 2009).

Family dynamics influence the resources parents provide for their children. Parents may respond to their *perception* of their child's needs or the costs and benefits of providing assistance. Several factors may play into parents' perceptions, including how close they feel to their child, their assessment of their child's potential success, their predictions regarding other offspring's future needs, and their child's own assessment of his or her needs (Chap. 8). The child's gender may also affect parent-child relationships and in turn can influence the type and amount of support parents provide. These dynamics are difficult to disentangle. Close parent-child relationships may explain why some parents provide assistance, or they may arise from the provision of assistance. Similarly, student status may be both a consequence and predictor of parental support.

The consequences of family background for early adulthood are substantial. Middle-class and upper-middle-class youth are more likely to follow what Mortimer (Chap. 2) describes as a "normative" transition to adulthood: moving away from home, attending and completing school, finding stable employment, and marrying before the age of 30. Prior research has shown that poverty, minority status, and fragile family structures in childhood predict "disordered" transitions to adulthood, such as dropping out of high school, young parenthood, and incarceration (Chap. 14; Oesterle et al., 2010). As we describe below, these early life circumstances set the stage for increasing inequality between the relatively advantaged and disadvantaged.

## **Cumulative Advantage and Disadvantage in Early Adulthood**

Early adulthood is a time in which young people balance multiple and sometimes conflicting roles within the domains of family, work, and school. As Macmillan (Chap. 3) points out, research on this topic requires both careful attention to social roles and the "complex interplay of roles within and across time" (page 37). Furthermore, young adults' successes or failures in each of these domains hold implications for the others. This, combined with young adults' dependence on families who offer variable levels of financial, practical, and emotional support, contributes to a process of cumulative advantage and disadvantage in the transition to adulthood.

The term "cumulative advantage" refers to the process by which advantages cluster and grow over time (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006). This is readily seen throughout early adulthood. Parents' social and economic capital facilitates young adults' access to college, while youth's educational attainment positively predicts earnings and employment status throughout the life course (Danziger & Ratner, 2010). Disadvantages also cluster and build throughout early adulthood, a point well made by Mortimer's discussion of findings from the Youth Development Study (Chap. 2). In this chapter, Mortimer identified work as a key role that links early life circumstances to young adults' well-being. Indeed, over one half of teenage dropouts reported being unemployed in 2007 (Bloom, 2010), and those who graduate from

high school but do not enroll in college also face an increasingly restricted labor market. Recent research has found that nearly one fifth of young people between the age of 16 and 24 are “idle,” meaning that they are not engaged in either school or work (Danziger & Ratner, 2010). Even for those who are employed, wages paid to high school dropouts have fallen precipitously since the 1970s (Settersten & Ray, 2010). As a result, over one fifth of young adults between the age of 18 and 24 live below the poverty line (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2010). In comparison, returns to a college education have been growing over the past few decades, further increasing income disparities by educational attainment (Long, 2010).

As several chapters in this volume demonstrate, disadvantage clusters not only progressively throughout the life course, but also across family, education, and work domains in early adulthood. College-educated young adults delay marriage and parenthood until their mid-20s or later, while socioeconomically disadvantaged youth are the most likely to become parents at a young age. These disadvantaged young adults form “fragile families,” characterized by unmarried, cohabiting parents; relationship instability; and few economic resources (Chap. 13). As Carlson (Chap. 14) notes, the association between socioeconomic disadvantage and these family forms contributes to growing inequality. Low educational attainment predicts both young parenthood and dim labor market prospects, while young children further deplete scarce resources. Furthermore, both economic disadvantage itself and the factors associated with it (e.g., incarceration, drug and alcohol use, long-term unemployment) can contribute to romantic relationship instability. Early relationship-churning can leave disadvantaged young women to raise children mostly on their own while negotiating their children’s access to paternal figures (Chap. 12). The experiences of these fragile families stand in stark contrast to those of privileged young adults, whose educational attainment and job security provide ample resources with which to raise children.

## Individual Characteristics

In addition to the practical and emotional support provided by parents, young adults’ own psychological skills and capacities contribute to their variable success in traversing the transition to adulthood. Given the present social and economic climate in the United States, Settersten (Chap. 1) notes several characteristics (e.g., planfulness coupled with flexibility and reflective capacity) that may be particularly crucial for contemporary young adults. Here, we add to these another crucial skill: the ability to delay gratification. We first describe how this skill contributes to a successful transition to adulthood. We then discuss how this characteristic interacts with different contexts of young adulthood.

The ability to delay gratification requires foregoing a short-term desire to reap a larger reward in the future. This capacity has been shown (including in children as young as age 3) to be positively related to school achievement. It is also negatively related to drug use and other risky behavior during adolescence (Romer, Duckworth,



Sznitman, & Park, 2010). Although most research on delayed gratification concerns children and adolescents, we also expect it to play a role in young adults' behaviors. Exerting self-control in the face of immediately attractive options may be even more crucial during this period because the nature of many young adults' choices can have dramatic and long-lasting consequences. Delaying gratification may be particularly relevant to young adults' well-being in light of the recent economic recession. For example, securing a stable and high-paying job increasingly requires a post-secondary degree. Some young adults also need to invest in low-paying internships or residencies in the short term to establish careers. Spending time as students and in low-wage jobs or on borrowed funds requires foregoing luxuries such as expensive clothing and entertainment in the short-term. Further, individuals who can depend on parents for financial assistance or housing are more equipped to utilize a long-term perspective by delaying a complete launch from their family of origin to build a promising future. The combination of the capacity to delay gratification along with a supportive family safety net can lead to young adults establishing more secure economic roots that will provide a solid foundation as they begin to build their own families.

Demographic traits such as race and class influence the context of young adulthood and by doing so may moderate the link between young individuals' psychological capacities and their experiences during the transition to adulthood. Two integral aspects of life-course trajectories, the pursuit of education and early parenthood are both associated with ability to delay gratification, but differ tremendously across race /ethnicity and class. One source that may explain low educational aspirations and attainment among low-income and minority students (Arbona, 2000) is the belief that because of high costs a college education, while desirable, is not a realistic goal (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). Experimental work has provided support for this; interventions designed to deliver information about the availability of need based financial aid for college students have led to improvement in academic engagement (Destin & Oyserman, 2009). This example illustrates that individual skills and capacities may be less relevant when a long-term goal is deemed by an individual to be completely unattainable.

Finally, the institutional context in which young adults pursue their goals may have implications for the usefulness of delaying gratification. Students attending 2-year public colleges, for example, are less likely to complete a degree of any kind within 5 years of enrollment than are those who enrolled in 4-year colleges (Horn & Berger, 2004). While many of these institutions offer degree programs leading to stable employment, they can entrench unprepared students in remedial coursework that do not lead to a degree (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002). The ability to delay gratification may therefore be less relevant – or even detrimental – for young people who risk becoming sidelined by less advantageous educational pathways.

Similarly, although delaying parenthood until establishing a career and getting married is the proscribed path for some Americans, not all young women may share a similar vision for the future. Steps to attaining adult status, such as completing education and financial stability, may seem so far out of reach that the immediate desire to have children may override long-term planning (Chap. 12). Some research

even suggests that having children at a young age is rational for poor and minority young women whose health declines more rapidly with age than that of White, middle-class women (Geronimus, 1996; Geronimus, Bound, & Waidmann, 1999). Thus, while delaying gratification may be an important skill for all young adults, it is important to understand the context in which young people make decisions and the degree to which “gratification” may be reasonably expected in the future.

Understanding how certain skills and capabilities are distributed across the population and how they manifest within different contexts will shed light on the reasons behind young people’s choices, and subsequent pathways through, the transition to adulthood. Taking into account how families may play a role in the expression and utilization of these traits is also necessary.

## **Institutional Affiliations**

One remarkable feature of early adulthood is the diversity (and for some young adults, scarcity) of institutional attachments. This differs from both childhood and later adulthood. Children under the age of 18 are socialized within overlapping family, school, religious, and neighborhood communities. Although the resources available within these settings differ, their institutional structures provide a cultural cohesiveness to the experience of childhood. Adults’ lives are similarly structured by their relationships to institutional affiliations through their jobs, religious institutions, families, and communities. In early adulthood, on the contrary, young people vary in their attachment to institutions and this has implications for both the kind of support they receive from their families of origin and their family formation behaviors. In this section, we describe how three institutions shape early adulthood and its family context: school, the military, and prison. We then discuss how institutional staples of children’s or adults’ lives – religious organizations, local communities, and the labor force – weaken in their influence during this period.

Undoubtedly, the growth of college enrollment has had one of the greatest influences on early adulthood. A major divide exists between the experiences of students and nonstudents in emerging adulthood (Sandefur, Eggerling-Boeck, & Park, 2005). As noted above, family resources and support are predictive of entry into the student role. Once attained, student status continues to have implications for parent–child relationships. As Chaps. 5 and 6 in this volume show students report better relationships with their parents than do nonstudents and appear to benefit more from the support their parents provide. Furthermore, college attendance influences the frequency and type of parent–child communication: nonstudents report more frequent in-person contact with parents and are more likely to coreside with their parents, whereas students report more frequent telephone and e-mail communication (Chap. 5). College students also have greater access to multiple forms of online communication forums, including e-mail, social networking, and programs such as “Skype” (Chap. 4), which may continue to change parent–child communications in the future.

College attendance also influences young adults' entry into romantic relationships and their family formation behaviors. Students report fewer casual sexual partners and may be more likely to avoid romantic relationships entirely while they complete their studies (Chap. 9). They also experience different pathways to adulthood than nonstudents, typically delaying cohabitation, marriage and parenthood while pursuing a degree (Oesterle, Hawkins, Hill, & Bailey, 2010; Thornton, Axinn & Teachman, 1995). Yet once obtained, educational attainment and its corollary – financial independence – are strong predictors of entry into stable marriages (Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, & Lim, 1997; Sweeney, 2002; White & Rogers, 2000).

Military service is a particularly popular choice among young men from disadvantaged families who have moderate levels of academic achievement and a record of behavioral problems in school (Elder et al., 2010). Enlistment confers a degree of prestige and offers these young adults an alternative path to educational opportunity and career development. Military service members and their families receive numerous forms of support, including housing assistance, good pay and health benefits, low-cost child care, and monetary incentive to continue their postservice education (Gifford, 2006). These benefits structure their transition to adulthood; most military service members marry earlier and report more stable family lives than their civilian peers (Keltz, Kleykamp, & Segal, 2010). The long-term benefits of military service, however, are unclear. Prior research finds that military veterans do not experience an income premium compared to their civilian peers (Teachman & Tedrow, 2007), and they fare worse on measures of educational attainment (Teachman, 2007).

Finally, a significant proportion of young men spend time in prison during the transition to adulthood. According to recent estimates, approximately 3% of White men and 20% of Black men had been incarcerated by their early 30s (Pettit & Western, 2004). Once released, these young men face tremendous difficulties in finding employment, and this is particularly true for Black men (Pager, 2003). Their incarceration also has a ripple effect on low-income communities and women, as a greater number of incarcerated young men remain idle after leaving prison, do not marry, and provide little support for children and former partners (Huebner, 2005; Waller & Swisher, 2006). For those who do return to family life, as Carlson (Chap. 14) pointed out, we know little about how past incarceration affects family dynamics.

Young people's ties to other institutions are frequently weak during the transition to adulthood, relative to other periods of the life course. Participation in religious congregations dips in young adulthood, compared to childhood and adulthood (Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007). Young adults usually have only transitory attachments to communities because their living situations are temporary, whether living at home, at a residential college, or renting. Labor force attachments are also weak in this period because young adults frequently have not established long-term employment (Danziger & Ratner, 2010).

Consequently, early adulthood provides openings for young people to slip through the cracks. Many young adults are unprepared for life after high school and flounder, moving in and out of college and work (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). Others may become stuck in dead-end educational tracks, accruing debt while not making progress toward a marketable degree (Danziger & Ratner, 2010). For those who do not

attend college, economic opportunities have shrunk over the past three decades, leaving many young people idle. As Settersten and Mortimer (Chaps. 1 and 2) point out, better and more consistent institutional structures are needed to provide all young people with the support they need to move through adolescence into adulthood. In particular, bridging mechanisms that connect schooling, military service, and incarceration to later work opportunities would provide essential assistance for young people, particularly for those whose families do not have the means to support them. Furthermore, these resources may help young people to form committed, stable relationships that will provide firm economic foundations for adulthood.

## **Moving Forward/Call to Researchers**

Research on the transition to adulthood has expanded over the past decade. A cursory examination of articles on ISI's Web of Knowledge reveals a nearly tenfold increase in articles referencing either "emerging adulthood" or the "transition to adulthood" between 2000 and 2010. The chapters in this volume speak directly to how the surge of research on this period of the life course has yielded new insights into the role the family of origin plays in the choices and experiences of young adults. Further, they illustrate the steps researchers could – and should – take to build upon the body of knowledge on this important topic moving forward. First, researchers need to consider how social context shapes early adulthood. Second, we need better measures to ensure that we are able to incorporate all available information into our research. In the sections that follow, we discuss each of these suggestions in more detail.

## **Examining Social Context**

Early adulthood is characterized by multiple and overlapping social contexts, including peer, neighborhood, family, regional, and national contexts. These social contexts shape young adults' aspirations, values, and priorities; economic resources; and social capital, which in turn influence their behavior. The chapters in this volume testify to the importance of the family context in young adults' lives. Future research is needed in this area. In addition, we encourage research on the role of school, community, and national contexts in early adulthood. While these are not the only influences on young adults' lives, identifying differences across these social contexts will improve our understanding of how young people make decisions in this period of their lives.

First, more research is needed on the role of the family of origin in early adulthood. Race, socioeconomic factors, and immigration status shape the context in which individuals develop and the opportunities available to them. As they transition to adulthood, young peoples' choices are influenced by the resources their

families can provide for them and the values they impart. By examining the intersection of these family characteristics with individual traits, researchers can better understand how the family of origin contributes to young adults' success or failure in navigating early adulthood.

Second, although early adulthood is in large part shaped by whether or not a young adult attends college, major differences among students can be overshadowed by a general indicator of student status. As Settersten (Chap. 1) points out, residential college campuses offer young adults extensive support and guidance as they begin the transition to adulthood while community colleges and vocational schools provide significantly less support. More research is needed to understand how these differences impact students' lives. For example, do community college students' experiences with casual sex and romantic relationships resemble those of 4-year college students, or nonstudents? Are they more likely to cohabit with a romantic partner during school? What about part-time students, or those completing a degree through online coursework? Answering these questions will provide some insight into what it is about the college experience that affects young adults' behaviors in early adulthood.

Third, more attention to community context in studies of early adulthood is needed. Concentrated poverty, racial and ethnic segregation, and the presence or absence of institutions in a neighborhood can influence the resources available to young people and shape their perceptions of future opportunities and barriers. For instance, a young adult living within a community in which few others have gone to college may view this path as out of reach. This may well be compounded by peers, who are likely to come from the same neighborhood. Neighborhood context may also moderate the influence of family context. Young adults from poor families may have greater opportunities to obtain jobs and go to college if they live in a mixed-income community than if they reside around others in similar impoverished circumstances.

Lastly, cross-national studies can inform our understanding of how social context affects young adults' decisions (Chaps. 2 and 15). Economic opportunities and social policies differ across nations, and this offers an opportunity to learn about how population behavior varies across economic climates. For example, research on Germany and the United States has revealed how close educational and labor market links can assist less-educated young people find stable jobs (Jacob & Weiss, 2010). Studies of the transition to adulthood across national contexts have demonstrated that the timing and sequencing of events in this period respond to employment opportunity, housing availability and economic scarcity (e.g., Fussell, Gauthier, & Evans, 2007; Golsch, 2003).

## **Methodological Recommendations**

Answering the call to recognize the importance of diverse experiences and social context requires better methods, samples, and measures. We turn now to some methodological recommendations for future research. First, incorporating methods

from multiple disciplines will greatly enhance our understanding of young adults' lives. Communicating effectively across disciplines is challenging. However, psychologists and sociologists share an interest in this topic and a super-ordinate goal of improving the lives of young people. In many ways, the strengths and weaknesses of the two disciplines complement each other. Cross-disciplinary work could move the field forward at a faster pace than either discipline could achieve in isolation. Demographic studies are equipped to gather information about large sections of the population and are essential for identifying the many pathways through the transition to adulthood. Furthermore, they can more easily capture diverse samples of young people. After identifying differences between population subgroups, more focused work using small subsamples can be utilized to capture the subtleties of the individual pathways. Additionally, experimental work is essential for (1) supporting causal arguments and (2) effecting substantive change. Finally, ethnographic studies and qualitative data can offer deep description of young people's lives and offer explanations for their decisions at the microlevel.

For each type of analysis, sampling with an eye toward diversity is important. This can be challenging. Qualitative researchers who do not utilize random or large-group sampling must ground their research in the specificity of the group they are studying. Their consideration of diversity must arise in the planning stages, where they can make efforts to include understudied populations. Psychologists must take care they do not trade generalizable findings for ease of access to residential, 4-year college students. Even demographers, who routinely use large and representative data sets, must be mindful of populations that may be poorly sampled in such studies, such as immigrants and the incarcerated.

Research on the transition to adulthood also needs to employ better measures. First, to understand how young people make decisions about schooling, work, and family life, we need better data on their attitudes toward these domains and their goals for the future. This must go beyond traditional aspiration questions, given that most young adults have unrealistically high educational and occupational aspirations (Reynolds, Stewart, MacDonald & Sischo, 2006). Better information about young people's perceptions of schools as institutions and the value of schooling in their own lives, their knowledge of the labor market, and their beliefs about family roles and traditions will expand the field in important ways. In particular, data on young people's attitudes and perceptions can be combined with studies of social context to understand how these subjective measures are shaped by context and how context shapes how these perceptions guide young people's actions.

Second, we need better measures of young people's intimate relationships, both with family members and romantic partners. Family members provide important economic, practical, and emotional support for young adults. However, the provision of assistance is moderated by children's relationships with their parents (Chap. 6). Explaining how these relationships develop throughout the transition to adulthood will improve our ability to explain differences in young adults' transitions during this period and, hopefully, to create interventions that will help build strong parent-child relationships. In addition, better measures of attitudes toward and experiences with romantic relationships – the precursors of family formation – will improve

research in this area. In particular, longitudinal data will help to sort out causal pathways between young people's skills and capacities, their entry into romantic relationships and these relationships' stability, and other outcomes (e.g., job entry and educational transitions).

Finally, as Fincham notes (Chap. 10), we need to construct and use measures that are equivalent across groups and periods of the life course. Many surveys of young adults began as studies of children (e.g., NELS, NLSY79 and NLSY97, Add Health, TARS, etc.). It is important to employ measures that test the same concepts over time within these populations, to understand how young people change during the transition to adulthood. Doing so will improve our ability to trace developmental trajectories in young people's psychological capacities, relationships with significant others, and perceptions of barriers and opportunities.

## Concluding Remarks

Dramatic social and developmental changes take place during the transition to adulthood. The success with which young adults navigate this period is shaped to a large extent by several aspects of their family of origin including the practical and emotional support they provide. Further, at what point young adults transition to parenthood themselves greatly impacts the trajectory of their life course. By advancing our knowledge regarding the challenges facing today's young adults, key elements of the parent-child relationship that facilitate a successful transition, romantic and sexual relationships of young adults, and the transition to parenthood the chapters in this volume provide a solid groundwork for the growing body of literature in this field. This research paints a picture of tremendous variation in the paths young adults take through this critical life stage. Continued careful description, with an emphasis on the role of social context, can inform our understanding of young adults' choices and provide a strong foundation for developing social policy. By summarizing the state of the field, presenting the seminal research, and laying out suggestions for future research, this volume is a fundamental step in this direction.

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