

# **National Symposium on Family Issues**

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Editors

# Early Adulthood in a Family Context

 Springer

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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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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.

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