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Early Adulthood in a Family Context

 Springer

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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

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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

parents provide for their children, child's needs or the costs and benefit play into parents' perceptions, assessment of their child's potential offspring's future needs, and their gender (p. 8). The child's gender may also influence the type and amount of assistance provided. Close parents provide assistance, or they may not. Student status may be both a con-

straints in early adulthood are substantial. Children are more likely to follow what parents expect in their transition to adulthood: moving from school, finding stable employment, and so on. Research has shown that poverty, minority status, and low education predict "disordered" transitions to adulthood. As we describe below, these early transitions are inequally distributed among the relatively

Disadvantage in Early Adulthood

Children face a balance of multiple and sometimes conflicting demands in work, school, and family. As Macmillan (1998) notes, "Children receive both careful attention to socialization within and across time" (page 37). Children's experiences in each of these domains hold implications for young adults' dependence on family, financial, and emotional support, contributing to disadvantage in the transition to

adulthood. The process by which advantages and disadvantages are distributed (p. 6). This is readily seen throughout the literature: capital facilitates young adults' success; employment positively predicts earnings in adulthood (Danziger & Ratner, 2010). In early adulthood, a point well made in the Youth Development Study (Chap. 2), the family role that links early life circumstances to later outcomes (over one half of teenage dropouts are from low-income families, 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

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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 popu-
 lation 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 fam-
 ily, school, religious, and neighborhood communities. Although the resources avail-
 able 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 institu-
 tions, 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 behav-
 iors. 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 influ-
 ences on early adulthood. A major divide exists between the experiences of stu-
 dents 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 influ-
 ences 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 com-
 munication (Chap. 5). College students also have greater access to multiple forms
 of online communication forums, including e-mail, social networking, and pro-
 grams 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 (Kely, 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

adults' entry into romantic relationships report fewer casual sexual relationships entirely while they experience different pathways to adulthood, marriage and parenthood (Hirschi & Gottman, 2002; Thornton, Axinn & Michaud, 2002; White & Rogers, 2000).

Choice among young men from disadvantaged backgrounds and a record of low academic achievement and a record of military service (0.10). Enlistment confers a degree of stability and provides an alternative path to educational opportunity. Military veterans and their families receive numerous benefits, including financial assistance, good pay and health benefits, and the ability to continue their postservice education. Military veterans also have a higher transition to adulthood; most military veterans live in more stable family lives than their civilian counterparts. Military veterans also receive long-term benefits of military service, including access to healthcare. Military veterans do not experience an increase in incarceration rates (Teachman & Tedrow, 2007), and they have higher employment rates (Teachman, 2007).

Men spend time in prison during the transition to adulthood, approximately 3% of White men and 10% of Black men by their early 30s (Pettit & Western, 2004). The tremendous difficulties in finding employment for young men (Pager, 2003). Their incarceration rates are higher than for women, as a greater number of young men are in prison, do not marry, and provide less support for their families (Huebner, 2005; Waller & Swisher, 2005). As Carlson (Chap. 14) pointed out, we need to understand family dynamics.

Family support is frequently weak during the transition to adulthood. Participation in religious activities is lower compared to childhood and adulthood. Young adults usually have only transitory attachments to family. Living situations are temporary, whether in the family or in a shared living arrangement. Labor force attachments are also temporary. Young adults frequently have not established long-term

attachments. Opportunities for young people to slip through the cracks of the transition to adulthood for life after high school and flounder, often leading to homelessness (Kessler & Stevenson, 1999). Others may be in debt, accruing debt while not making progress toward financial stability (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

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shaped by whether or not a student can be overshadowed (Chap. 1) points out, provide support and guidance as they attend colleges and vocational schools. Research is needed to understand how these relationships resemble those of young adults who are likely to cohabit with a partner, or those completing college. These questions will provide some insight into how these factors affect young adults' behavior.

of early adulthood is needed. The presence or absence of resources available to young people varies. For instance, a young person who has gone to college may view their situation differently than those who have not. These differences may also moderate the extent to which these factors affect young adults' behavior in a mixed-income community.

Understanding of how social and economic opportunities and resources affect young people's opportunity to learn about these resources. For example, research on how these factors affect young people's educational and labor market outcomes (Jacob & Weiss, 2006) shows that these factors have demonstrated to respond to employment (e.g., Fussell, Gauthier,

these experiences and social resources. We turn now to some methods, 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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data will help to sort out causal capacities, their entry into romantic and other outcomes (e.g., job entry

to construct and use measures that life course. Many surveys of young (LSY79 and NLSY97, Add Health), studies that test the same concepts over time with young people change during the course. Our ability to trace developmental capacities, relationships with significant opportunities.

take place during the transition to adulthood. How this period is shaped to a large extent by origin including the practical and social point young adults transition to adulthood. The history of their life course. By advancing today's young adults, key elements that facilitate a successful transition, romantic relationships, the transition to parenthood the chapter for the growing body of literature in this area. A tremendous variation in the paths young adults take. Continued careful description, with an aim to inform our understanding of young adults. Our goal for developing social policy. By building on the seminal research, and laying out a fundamental step in this direction.

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