

Changing Adulthood Changes Childhood

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In her provocative essay on adulthood, Ann Swidler insightfully captures a major change when she notes a shift in moral emphasis in recent decades “from life-long commitments to a lifetime of choices” (Swidler 1980: 143). Never before in American history have adults confronted such an array of choices in all spheres of life, nor have they experienced so much freedom to follow whatever adult lifestyles they prefer. John Modell arrives at a similar conclusion in his history of the transition from youth to adulthood in the United States between 1920 and 1975. He writes,

Young individuals have gained more control over the resources that allow them to choose timing of their own life course events and have come increasingly to value the expression of personal choice in this as in other aspects of their own lives. (Modell 1989: 330).

If attainment of adulthood in earlier American history meant stability, commitment and self-sacrifice, it does so no longer. The adult years now involve a lifetime of choices in pursuit of self-fulfillment.

Swidler concludes that the new understanding of adulthood as a lifetime of choices, rather than as a one-time accomplishment, presents adults with both dangers and opportunities. On the one hand, we

...have an ideal of the self cut off from meaningful connections to others, from any danger of commitment, attachment, sacrifice, or self-restraint.

This is a model of human relationships in which people are not willing to take the risks of disappointment and defeat that inevitably accompany meaningful love or work (Swidler, 1980: 144).

On the other hand, she also sees this shift providing great opportunities for continuous growth and richness in the adult years.

Further risks, further choices, further efforts are demanded, and further opportunities for self-knowledge, intimacy, and joy await us (Swidler, 1980: 144).

Both of these scenarios, however, focus only on implications of changes in adulthood for adults. But adult behavior also has profound implications for the experiences of children. How is the changing nature of adulthood affecting childhood?

Because children are dependent upon adults, the choices that adults make have consequences for childhood as well as adulthood. Inevitably, if the behavior of adults, parents and non-parents, changes, the experiences of children also change. Consider, for example, changes over the second half of the twentieth century in the family environments experienced by American children. Why has the proportion of infants born to unmarried mothers increased? Why have increasing proportions of children seen their parents' divorce? Why has nonmaternal care for young children increased? The immediate answer to each question is, of course, because adult behavior has changed since 1950.

In addition to affecting the family environments within which children develop, adult choices and behavior also determine the financial resources available to children, the level of human capital investment made in children, and the amount of social capital available to children. Human capital investment consists of the education, skills, and capabilities to become productive citizens acquired by children. Parents, teachers, employers, and other adults who provide the education, discipline and training of children

are determining the quantity and quality of human capital that the next generation will possess as it reaches adulthood. Social capital is now recognized as a resource of equal importance to human capital in providing children with the opportunity to succeed. This also is controlled by adults. Social capital exists in relationships of trust, cooperation, and responsibility between individuals (Coleman 1988). When parents, kin, neighbors, and church members integrate children into social networks of adults, they provide children with access to a variety of resources controlled by adults. To the extent that adults segregate themselves from children, however, children are excluded from social relationships that facilitate access to potentially critical resources.

Still another way in which adults affect the experience of childhood is through the dominant adult values they establish and maintain. Through habituation, children acquire values and preferences and a life view from the social context within which they live. Although there may be a great deal of inconsistency in the cultural values and standards expressed in different social contexts, the influence of the lifestyles and values expressed by elite entertainers and athletes have an increasingly significant impact on children. Through the mass media, movies, and CDs, most children and youth have tremendous exposure to the popular culture communicated by American celebrities. Whether intended or unintended, the values of adults shape the culture within which children develop and mature.

The proliferation of choices confronting individuals throughout the life course is commonly viewed as an expansion of freedom for adults to pursue whatever lifestyle they prefer. It is important to recognize, however, that the choices made by adults have profound consequences for the experiences of children who are dependent upon adults in

the society. To understand how childhood is changing and how it is shaping the lives of the next generation of adults , one must examine what is happening to contemporary adulthood. The remainder of this paper looks at several critical aspects of adult behavior that affect children. The first area concerns family-related behavior.

Family Change

Through the first half of the twentieth century there was general consensus in the United States regarding the preferred family life course for adults to follow, and normatively approved alternatives were few. Both men and women were expected to enter into heterosexual marriage and married adults enjoyed social and economic rewards compared to their nonmarried counterparts. Premarital sex and, especially, premarital childbearing were viewed as morally wrong and negatively sanctioned. Married couples were expected to have children. Within the family it was assumed that the husband would be the primary breadwinner and that the wife would have primary responsibility for caring for the home and children. Finally, marriages were expected to last until one spouse died and divorce was strongly discouraged in all but dire circumstances. To be sure, not everyone conformed to these standards and some adults viewed this family model as overly rigid and confining. Nevertheless, there was widespread acceptance of this “traditional” family form as ideal and there was widespread conformance to this pattern.

Each of the standards specifying the preferred family behavior has been challenged by changes in adult behavior and attitudes since the 1950s. The magnitude of the change in family behavior of young adults over a few decades suggests a remarkable

societal shift. What social changes enabled adults to so rapidly alter the typical life course? And how did these changes in adult behavior affect children?

retreat from marriage. The propensity of young adults to marry early in life increased over most of the first half of the twentieth century, but after 1960 the trend reversed as age at marriage was advanced. The proportion of females aged 20-24 who had married fell from 72% in 1960 to only 33% in 1995; the corresponding proportion of males who had married fell from 47% to 19%. Equally large declines in likelihood of being married occurred among those aged 25-29. By 1995, more than half of the men and one-third of the women aged 25-29 had never entered into marriage. Indeed, it was less likely that a woman aged 25-29 in 1995 had married than a woman aged 20-24 in 1960. The retreat from marriage by young adults has not, however, been accompanied by a decline in sexual activity.

growth of premarital sex. As age of entering marriage went up after 1960, age at initiating sexual activity went down. In 1970 fewer than 5% of 15 year old girls reported ever having premarital sexual intercourse -- by 1988 over a quarter had. The proportion of 19 year olds having experienced premarital sex jumped from 48% in 1970 to 75% in 1988. It has become relatively uncommon for young people to wait until marriage to begin having sexual relationships. But viewing premarital sex as a dichotomy -- had or did not have -- fails to capture the extent of the change that has occurred. A further question concerns the frequency of premarital sex and the number of different sexual partners. Both of these also increased in recent decades.

Cohabitation may be used as an indicator of regular sexual relationships before marriage. About 3% of the women born in 1940-1945 (and reaching age 25 in 1965-69) report having entered a cohabiting relationship by age 25, compared to 37% of the women born 20 years later. Among men the comparable comparison shows an increase from 8% to 33% (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989). Data from a large, nationally representative sample of the population provide evidence of changes in the proportion of young adults who have had multiple sexual partners (Laumann, Gagon, Michael & Michaels, 1994). The proportion of women reporting that they had had 5 or more sexual partners before age 30 increased from 3% of the women born in 1937-42 to 22% of those born in 1953-62. The proportion of men with 5 or more sexual partners before age 30 increased from 38% to 49% between these two birth cohorts. Compared to young adults in the 1950s, contemporary young men and women are more likely to have initiated sex when they were teenagers and to have had higher levels of premarital sex before entering marriage. The link between being married and having sex has disappeared for most of the population.

nonmarital childbearing. Between 1960 and 1975 the rate of childbearing among married women dropped by more than 40%, while the rate among unmarried women increased by 13%. The rate of childbearing among unmarried women continued to increase after 1975 (McLanahan & Casper, 1995). The growing percent of young women who were unmarried, combined with the divergent trends in childbearing by married and unmarried women, led to a dramatic increase in the proportion of new mothers who were not married. In 1950 about 4% of all women giving birth were unmarried, compared to 33%

in 1994. Although information on the fathers of babies born to unmarried women is sparse, it is clear that a growing proportion of young men have become fathers of babies for whom they assume little or no responsibility. The growth in childlessness among married persons and in childbearing among unmarried persons indicates a growing separation between reproduction and marriage.

increasing divorce. The rise in marital instability between 1960 and 1980 is reflected by the doubling of the divorce rate over these two decades. The number of divorces per 1000 married women jumped from 9.2 in 1960 to 22.6 in 1980. Since 1980 the divorce rate has remained at roughly the same high level (above 20). In combination with decreasing marriage and remarriage rates, the increase in divorce has led to a significant change in the ratio of divorced to married adults. In 1960 there were 6 divorced or separated persons aged 25-44 for every 100 married persons; in 1990 there were 20 for every 100.

female labor force participation. No indicator captures changing gender roles over the past five decades better than the rate of female labor force participation, especially that of mothers with young children. In 1950 about 12% of married women with children under age 6 were employed outside of the home. In the 1980s labor force participation rates for mothers of young children surpassed 50%, and in 1995 nearly two-thirds (64%) of married women with children under 6 were working outside of the home. There has, of course, been no symmetric increase in the proportion of married men with young children who are homemakers. A large majority of both married men and women are in the labor

force and contributing to family income. Consequently, the role of nonparents in caring for dependent children has been increasing.

Why? The five family-related behaviors discussed above are closely interrelated; a change in any one area exerts pressure or facilitates change in other areas. Underlying each change, however, has been a proliferation of choices confronting individuals as they make the critical transition from adolescence to adulthood. Three shifts in American society since mid-century have expanded options available to young people. First, the spread of affluence and education have provided the resources necessary for making choices. Second, normative changes have increased societal tolerance for individuals who choose to follow alternative lifestyles. Third, changes in laws and government programs have removed important constraints on adult behavior.

The spread of affluence across the American population after World War II is remarkable. In 1940 almost two-thirds of the population lived below the poverty level (as currently defined), and only 10% could be considered middle-class or higher (living in households with incomes at least twice the poverty level). By 1970 only 12% of the population lived in poverty and two-thirds were above the middle-class cut off (Farley, 1996: 65-66). Despite stagnation of wages, per capita income continued to increase after 1970 -- in constant dollars per capita income was 23% greater in 1993 than in 1973 (Farley, 1996: 73). Average incomes continued to increase in this later period because more women entered the labor force and families had fewer dependent children. This spread of affluence has provided most adults with the economic resources to make choices that were not possible in earlier time periods. As Daniel Yankelovich argues, this

profound increase in personal income had an “affluence effect” which led people to view the world differently and to

relish their new freedom to choose careers and lifestyles in accord with their individual bent, not in conformity to the expectations of others or as concessions to economic constraints (Yankelovich, 1994: 18).

Parallel with growing personal incomes after World War II were increasing levels of educational attainment which further enhanced choices. The proportion of adults aged 25-29 who had completed a high school education increased from 38% in 1940 to 87% in 1994, and the proportion who were college graduates increased from 6% to 25%. These increased years spent in school not only enlarged career choices and earning potentials of young adults, but also increased their exposure to new ideas and alternative views on life. Higher education for females is closely linked to their liberation from social pressure to follow traditional career scripts dominated by marriage, housekeeping, and childrearing. Some argue that diminished economic opportunities since 1970 have been a key factor in the retreat from marriage and the increase in out-of-wedlock childbearing and mother-only families (Grant Foundation, 1988). They suggest that the inability of young men to support families is behind changing family behavior of adults. There is, however, little evidence to support this position. Comparing adults aged 25-34 in 1988 with the same age group in 1960, Sabelhaus and Manchester conclude that, “Some fictions about baby boomers are commonly espoused but not supported by the data” (1995: 792). Compared to their parents at the same stage of life, the baby boomers had median incomes 48% higher than their parents. They also had greater wealth and higher levels of consumption. Further, changes in family behavior have occurred among all education and income

groups of young adults. McLanahan and Casper (1995) examined the hypothesis that a decline in the quality of potential men to marry might explain the retreat from marriage, and found little empirical support.. Indeed, the earnings of young men since 1970 have been negatively affected by their choices to stay out of marriages. Numerous studies have documented that marriage and fatherhood encourage men to be more productive workers. As summarized by Korenman and Neumark,

That married men earn more than otherwise comparable single men is among the most robust findings of human capital wage equations (1991: 284).

A second important change affecting family behavior after the 1960s was a rapid change in public opinion regarding appropriate standards. Pollsters were not sufficiently prescient to ask all of the right questions before attitudes began to change, but existing evidence on the changing views of American adults reflect major shifts. The proportion viewing sexual relationships before marriage as “morally wrong” declined from 68% in 1969 to 33% in 1990 (Yankelovich, 1994). Agreement with the statement, “For a woman to remain unmarried she must be “sick”, “neurotic”, or “immoral”” fell from 80% in 1957 to 25% in 1978 (Veroff, Douvan & Kulka, 1981). The Detroit Area Study found that in 1962, 49% of the new mothers in their sample responded yes to the question, “When there are children in the family, should parents stay together even if they don’t get along?”. When the daughters of these women were asked the same question 18 years later, only 17% endorsed the idea (Thornton, 1985). The annual survey of college freshmen conducted by researchers at UCLA reports that agreement with the statement, “The activities of married women are best confined to home and family” fell from 57% in 1967 to 20% in 1986 (Dey, Astin & Korn, 1991). These remarkable shifts in public

opinion over a short time period all indicate a growing social tolerance for individuals to choose among alternative lifestyles. Whatever the causes of this marked cultural shift, it is clear that individuals gained increasing freedom to reject “traditional” standards of family behavior without concern for widespread social disapproval.

A final factor contributing to the expansion of choices regarding sexual relationships, childbearing, child rearing and divorce involves legal and political changes. After 1960, laws restricting access to contraception and abortion were successfully challenged in the courts, and the government began to subsidize family planning services. Among other things, these changes increased the opportunity for unmarried persons to have sexual relationships without concern for pregnancy and/or childbearing. The implementation of “no fault” divorce laws throughout the country made it easier for couples to solve the problem of unsatisfying marriages by divorcing. The growth of Aid to Families with Dependent Children and expansion of other welfare programs (Food Stamps, Medicaid, subsidized housing) increased the feasibility of women to have children without being married. Government enactment and enforcement of equal opportunity laws for women in higher education and employment increased opportunities for women to delay or forgo marriage and for mothers to work outside of the home. These various changes in laws, programs and policies no doubt reflect shifts in public attitudes, but once in place they further expand the lifestyle options available to individuals.

Social changes since World War II have largely removed constraints that kept most young adults from veering far from the “traditional” family model -- marriage before sex, wives bearing and caring for children, marriage as a lifetime commitment.

Lifting the constraints of poverty and less education provided young adults with the resources to choose from an expanded array of options. As constraints of disapproval for alternative lifestyles gave way to tolerance, individuals gained more freedom to engage in once stigmatized behaviors. As government efforts to restrict individual choice in the area of sexual relations was replaced by government welfare programs for single parent families, the advantages associated with entering and staying in stable marriages were reduced. Before these changes occurred, one might have expected that without extensive social support for the “traditional” family many would choose to follow different pathways through life. After all, many did violate the normative standards for adult behavior despite the strong negative sanctions they incurred. But there is no longer a need to speculate.

The massive social experiment in expanding choices available to adults demonstrates that relatively few will opt for the traditional script when alternative courses are easily accessible. More than three-fourths of unmarried persons choose to initiate sexual relationships before age 20, and a majority now cohabit before entering into marriage. About half of those who enter marriage subsequently divorce. About two-thirds of all young mothers leave their children to be cared for by others while they work outside the home. The question of how adults will respond to increasing freedom of choice in family-related behavior has been answered.

adult choices and the next generation. After examining a broad range of statistical data from recent decades, Reynolds Farley concludes that individuals in the United States are better off now than in the past. He writes:

The most important indicators show that we are a healthier, better educated, richer nation than we were a quarter-century ago and a nation that provides more nearly equal opportunities to a larger share of the population (Farley, 1996: 334-335)

In her book interpreting recent family change, Arlene Skolnick writes:

No other people ever lived longer or healthier lives, or experienced so much choice about life's central dramas: work, marriage, parenthood (Skolnick, 1991: 18).

The unprecedented freedom that adults have to choose the life course they wish to follow would seem to be a major accomplishment that would bring widespread satisfaction. Still, something does not fit. Farley notes that "An ever-expanding array of books contends that this nation is in decline" (Farley, 1996: 334). And there is widespread public concern about the future quality of life among the American population. A 1996 poll of votes found that 60% did not believe that their children's generation would live better than their own (reported in Gill, 1997: 193).

Expanding choices certainly provide adults with greater freedom of behavior, but the choices they make affect the well-being of everyone in the society. In particular, the choices made by adults have consequences for the current generation of children. The dependency of children upon adults for support, care, and guidance means that adult behavior inevitably shapes the experiences of children. The recent shifts in adult family-related behavior has produced large changes in the family structures within which children develop. The increasing prevalence of nonmarried women having babies has led to an eight-fold increase in proportion of babies born into mother-only families since

1950 (from 4% to 33%). The entrance of mothers into the labor force has led to a five-fold increase since 1950 in proportion of children under 6 left to nonmaternal care (from 12% to 64%). The increasing tendency of adults to end unsatisfying marriages has led to a tripling of the proportion of children experiencing a broken home each year (from 6 per 1000 in 1950 to 17 per 1000 in 1990).

These changes in the family structure experienced by children are troubling to a large majority of American adults, as recent Gallup polls clearly reveal. When asked about “the number of divorces involving young children,” 81% felt that this was a “critical” or “very serious” problem for the country; 2% thought it was “not” a problem. Regarding “the number of children born to single parents, 85% felt that this was a critical” or “very serious” problem for the country. And 82% of the population think that the women’s movement has made it “harder for parents in this country to raise children” (Roper Center Review, 1997). As empirical evidence on the effects of family structure on children has accumulated, social scientists have somewhat reluctantly come to agree that recent trends are adversely affecting American children.

Several different researchers have carefully reviewed and discussed the various studies that demonstrate the increased risk of negative outcomes for children who are born to unmarried mothers or who experience a parental divorce (Blankenhorn, 1995; Kamarck & Galston, 1990; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Popence, 1996; Zill, Morrison & Coiro, 1993). Because these reviews have so thoroughly discussed the findings, only a brief summary is included here. Perhaps the most extreme contrast between children who have two parents compared to those with only a mother is likelihood of living in poverty. Among families with children under age 18 in 1993, 11% of those with two parents were

below the poverty line, compared to 38% of those headed by a divorced mother and 64% of those headed by a never-married mother. Children living with their two biological or adoptive parents are found to be advantaged in a number of ways besides income: they are more likely to do well in school and less likely to get in trouble or to drop out; they are less likely to get in trouble with the law; they have fewer developmental, emotional, and behavioral problems; and, among girls, they are less likely to experience a teen-age pregnancy.

After considering the consequences for children of the changes in adult family behavior, different conclusions can be drawn about the most desirable response. One view, well argued by Arlene Skolnick, suggests that nothing should be done to restrict or alter the choices that adults make.

If we care about children, we need to focus less on the form of the families they live in and more on ways of supporting their well-being in all kinds of families. We need to accept the fact that while the family is here to stay, so are divorce, working mothers, and single-parent families (Skilnick, 1991: 212). Others, also concerned with the plight of children, doubt that calling for the government to fix the problems that unstable families created for children will produce positive outcomes. They believe that it is desirable to explore ways to alter family behavior in ways that would improve the quality of life.

Work Change

Along with family-related decisions, adulthood involves choices about work. As in the past, few young men feel that they have a choice of whether or not to work.

Increasingly, the same is true for young women. Most men and women, however, can choose from a wide range of possible jobs or careers, and they increasingly can change careers as they move through the early years of adulthood. Around 1990 a number of social scientists argued that economic transitions in the United States were producing a bleak job market for young adults, one with relatively few new well-paying, stable jobs (Grant Foundation, 1988). Except for the least educated adults, this interpretation of economic change no longer has widespread support. More careful analyses of trends in job characteristics have been reported in recent years, and the picture presented is not one of deteriorating work options for young adults. Reviewing this literature, the 1995 Report on the American Workforce states:

Several types of statistics are available that indicate whether there have been shifting trends in job stability. These include data on job tenure, retention rates, job turnover, and part-time work. All suggest that there has been little change in overall job stability (U.S. Department of Labor, 1995: 11).

Regarding the quality of new jobs, the Council of Economic Advisors is upbeat in their 1997 report::

Recent research finds that most of the new positions created in the 1990s are 'good jobs.' Most of the available evidence suggests that the U.S. labor market is quite robust, with significant job growth in higher paying sectors, some evidence of reduced job loss, and a level of job stability that probably is no different today from what it was 20 years ago (pp. 142, 162).

As with life style choices, the work options available to contemporary young adults are remarkably diverse.

If work options for young adults had deteriorated over the 1980s and 1990s, one would expect to find growing pessimism among those about to embark on work careers. Such is not the case. “Monitoring the Future” is an annual survey of high school seniors that since 1976 has been collecting information on student attitudes on many issues. Between 1976 and 1993 an increasing proportion of students have indicated that they are confident that they will get the work they want (Monitoring the Future, 1976, 1993). Further, students are more likely to believe that their work will be “very” or “extremely” satisfying (an increase from 65% to 68% for males, from 71% to 75% for females). The annual survey of college freshmen shows a similar trend, as the proportion saying that chances are “very good” that they will find a job in their major field increased from 52% in 1972 to 69% in 1995 (Dey, Astin, & Korn, 1991; American Council on Education, 1995). Overall, there is little doubt that opportunities for young adults to pursue work careers that they find attractive are greater now than they were 50 years ago. Despite short-term fluctuations, the economy has expanded and levels of educational attainment for men and women have increased. In addition to these positive influences on work options, women have experienced decreasing sex discrimination in employment and decreasing sex segregation of jobs.

aspirations. Most people work to earn money, but everyone does not place the same value on earning a high income. Over time it is possible that the value placed on having high incomes (to allow high consumption of material goods) has changed. The best data

available to track changing preferences of young people in this area in recent decades comes from the “Monitoring the Future” surveys.. An analysis of these data from 1976-1986 shows an interesting pattern of change in attitudes toward family, work, and goods aspirations. (Crimmins, Easterlin, & Saito, 1991). Desires to marry and have children did not change very much, desires for leisure increased moderately, and desires for goods for oneself increased substantially. Over these 11 years the proportion of high school seniors who rated “Having lots of money” as “quite” or “extremely” important increased from 46% to 63%. Over the same time span, “Working to correct social and economic inequalities” declined slightly as a life goal (from 33% to 32%). Materialism as an important factor guiding the career choices of young adults has remained fairly steady over the past decade (“quite” or “extremely” important to 60% in 1995).

The annual survey of college freshmen permits another source of information on changes in material aspirations of young adults over a slightly longer time span. When asked in 1966 how important they felt it was to “be very well off, financially,” 44% gave the response of “essential” or “very important.” By 1980, 63% of the students expressed this aspiration, and by 1996 it was up to 74%. Meanwhile, the proportion indicating that to “develop a philosophy of life” was “essential” or “very important” plummeted from 84% in 1966 to 42% in 1996. Despite widespread affluence, or perhaps because of it, young adults aspire more than ever for greater material goods and view being well off as necessary for living a “good life.” Given this situation, it is likely that financial rewards from a job have taken on increasing importance over time. In light of this, it is interesting to consider how economically attractive jobs are that involve caring for and educating children.

nonparental work with children. Besides parents, the adults who have regular contact with children are day care workers and school teachers. The difficulty of recruiting skilled and talented adults to work in these fields is not a recent phenomenon, but increases in adult work choices and changes in their aspirations may have increased the challenge. Because teaching was one of the few professions open to college-educated women before 1960, many talented, well-educated women chose to be teachers despite the relatively low wages it offered them. In 1959-60, 46% of the Bachelors degrees and 47% of the Masters degrees awarded to women were in the field of education. By 1993-1994 the comparable percentages were 13% and 36%. Contrasting with this trend, the proportion of women whose Bachelors degree was in business increased from 2% to 18% over this time period. As women's career options proliferated, their aspirations for high-income jobs steadily increased. The proportion of first-year college women reporting that it was "very important" or "essential" for them to be financially well-off jumped from 28% in 1970 to 73% in 1995. Unless salaries for jobs involving working with children are competitive with other types of work, we should not expect schools and day care centers to be staffed with our most talented adults.

In response to a growing concern over the quality of day care centers in the 1980s, the National Care Staffing Study examined job characteristics of child care teachers (Whitebook, Hower, & Phillips, 1989). Two-thirds of the teachers were found to have at least some college education, but their wages averaged less than half of those of all similarly educated women in the labor force. For example, women with Bachelors or higher degrees had average wages of \$26,000 in 1987, but women in this educational

category who were child care teacher earned an average of only \$11,600. The study reports that not only were salaries for child care teachers low, but also fringe benefits and career advancement possibilities were minimal. Given these job characteristics, it is not surprising that there was a 41% turnover of staff in child care centers in just one year, 1988. Clearly adults have not chosen to use economic incentives to recruit and retain the most competitive young adults to work as nonparental caregivers for young children.

Teachers of school age children receive higher salaries than day care workers, but lower salaries than workers with comparable education in their jobs. The high-profile members of the Task force on Teaching as a Profession commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation observed in their 1986 report that:

Teaching is a high turnover, early exit occupation. Working conditions leave much to be desired. The typical salary schedule puts teaching as a career at an extraordinary disadvantage if it hopes to compete for the best young people with other professions (p. 98).

Among workers employed full-time one year after receiving a Bachelor's degree in 1979-1980, salaries of those who majored in education were at the bottom of all majors -- 75% of the average of their peers. Among 1989-90 graduates the situation was essentially the same; salaries of education majors were 77% those of their college peers who chose other careers. Equally important, as the Carnegie Report discusses, is that a teacher can anticipate little real growth in her salary over a long career. Not surprisingly, the teaching profession attracts a disproportionately large share of the least competitive students. In 1995, students intending to major in education had average SAT scores 55 points lower

than the average of all students (855 vs. 910), and their scores were on average lower than those of students intending to pursue any other major.

As young adults face an array of choices regarding work careers, the option of working with children is not very attractive. The immediate and, especially, the long-term economic rewards for choosing jobs in business, medicine, engineering, or many other areas are far greater than for choosing to care for or educate children.

Disproportionately, those who occupy the positions which involve transmitting human capital to the next generation are selected from the occupationally least competitive adults. Work-related choices by both parents and nonparents have consequences not only for adults, but also children. Just as family structure affects childhood, so does occupational structure.

Adult Culture

Having and rearing children places significant constraints upon adult behavior. First, children are expensive. The direct expenditures by middle-income parents to raise a child to age 18 in 1995 was close to \$200,000 (Burggraf, 1997). This is a serious underestimate of the total economic cost of raising a child because it does not include wages forgone to care for the child nor expenditures on the child after he or she reaches age 18 (which can be large, as parents of college students know). Because they are expensive, children constrain the discretionary spending of parents for other goods and services. Second, as every parent knows, caring for children requires a great deal of time and energy. Time is needed for interacting with children -- talking, reading, teaching, training, playing. In addition to time interacting, parents also find heavy demands on

their time for cleaning up messes, preparing food, washing clothes, shopping, arranging activities, driving, attending school functions, etc. This time devoted to meeting needs of children constrains parental behavior because it reduces time available for other activities. Third, parents typically experience constraints on what they do because they feel responsible for modeling pro-social behavior. Taken together, these various constraints greatly limit the options of adults who are parents to pursue activities outside of work that are not related to the family.

Compared to parents, adults without children have a great deal more freedom to choose what they will do and how they will spend their money. Moreover, nonparents have seen their options for nonwork activities expand in recent decades as they have become more affluent and social tolerance has increased. Under these conditions, we might expect an “adult” culture to develop, a culture centered around meeting the desires of single adults. This development would be especially likely if the number of single adults unencumbered with children increased, thereby creating an expanding market.

adults without children. As fewer young men and women have married and had children, the proportion of adults not attached to families has grown. The retreat from marriage was discussed earlier. Between 1960 and 1995 the proportion of men who were married and living with a spouse fell from 57% to 30% for those aged 20-29, and from 89% to 62% for those aged 30-39. Over this time period, the likelihood that those who were married had children in their households also declined. In 1960, 85% of the married couples aged 20-29 had children; by 1990 the figure had fallen to 77%. Finally, the proportion of unmarried adults who live with a family of orientation in which younger

children are present has declined. As a result of these several changes, the number of men and women in their 20s and 30s living in households with no children present has burgeoned. [I will soon have good statistics to fill this picture out].

childfree adults. The rapid growth in number of adults not attached to children in a materialistic and socially tolerant society must have cultural consequences. One likely effect is a decline in the general level of societal concern for and interest in children. To be sure, one does not need to be a parent to be concerned for the well-being of children in the society. Nevertheless, it would be surprising if daily interaction with and responsibility for children did not increase awareness of children's needs and vulnerability. As the daily lives of more adults are segregated from those of children, the overall saliency of child-related concerns will diminish. It is increasingly possible for adults in their 20s and 30s to pursue personal life goals with no or only peripheral interest in matters affecting children.

How do young men tend to behave in situations where they have no family responsibility and where community social controls are weak? In Violent Land, David Courtwright provides compelling evidence that in past times these conditions were conducive to high levels of violence, gambling, drunkenness, and prostitution. He writes,

In the broadest terms, marriage and family life restrain men because they change the mix of significant others, roles, expectations, resources, and consequences, and so change behavior... When stable family life has been the norm for men and boys, violence and disorder have diminished (1996: p. 280).

Drawing from the frontier, mining camps, and Chinatowns, he discusses how the concentration of young men not attached to families consistently produced extremely high levels of violence and socially disruptive behavior. The effects of family-involvement on the behavior of young men is still relevant. No doubt the retreat from marriage since the 1960s has contributed to the four-fold increase in the violent crime rate in recent years (from 16 per 100,000 in 1960 to 68 per 100,000 in 1995). Equally interesting, however, is what role the attraction of unattached men to public violence and sex may have had upon the entertainment industry.

There is no question that the rapid increase in number of adults unencumbered with children expanded the market for adult entertainment and recreation. Predictably, business has responded by expanding the entertainment options available to adults in various areas -- movies, videos, CDs, video games, radio, television, and the Internet. No where is the proliferation of choices more obvious than in opportunities to be entertained by sex and violence. Indeed, these are now the themes that identify entertainment as “adult.” The distinctiveness of “adult” entertainment versus “family” entertainment is highlighted by the rating of movies and television programs and adding “parental advisory” labels to selected CDs and video games. An adult entertainment culture has developed, and it is generally considered to not be appropriate for children. The rise of this culture, with a focus on the themes of violence and sex, may be a current manifestation of the historical phenomenon described by Courtwright in places where many unattached men lived without strong social controls. The advantage of the current form is that a young adult can experience vicariously the thrill of violence, aggression,

and promiscuous sex, while he pursues a career which makes possible a life of security and comfort.

children and adult culture. It is clear that the “adult” culture does not pay much attention to children. It is equally clear that children give a great deal of attention to “adult” culture. Much of this culture, designed to satisfy the desires of unattached adults, is appealing to children entering puberty. And, regardless of adult intention, this culture is readily accessible to children. Very few 14 year-olds are unaware of what “adult” entertainment is, and few have not been exposed to it through music, television programs, movies, and videos. Even if it were somehow possible to exclude adolescents from “adult” entertainment, it would not, of course, be in the interest of adult producers of entertainment to restrict their market in this way.

One example of how the “adult” culture has altered childhood involves the modeling of sexual behavior. Parents may, as in the past, discuss sex with their children on occasion, and schools may include sex education as a small part of their curriculum. But through watching adult entertainment most young adolescents are exposed daily to models of sexual behavior. A study of the content of television programs and movies watched by ninth and tenth graders (mostly 14 and 15 year-olds) in the mid 1980s is revealing (Greenberg, Brown, & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1993). In the 19 most-watched prime-time television programs, sexual intercourse occurred an average of 1.14 times per hour. Based on viewing habits of these children, it was estimated that they would be exposed to over 450 acts of sexual intercourse per year from just the prime-time programs they watched. In these programs, 5 times out of 6 the couples involved were not married

to each other. The content of 19 R-rated movies watched by these young adolescents (a majority of the films had been seen by more than half of these 14 and 15 year-olds) included a great deal more sexual intercourse, and average of 8 occurrences per film. The ratio of unmarried to married intercourse in these films was 32:1. Through adult entertainment children are habituated to a lifestyle in which casual sex is both pervasive and normative -- it is expected of normal people.

Conclusion

Adulthood has changed markedly over the past 50 years. Young adults have unprecedented choice in lifestyle options, and only a minority choose to follow the “traditional” family pathway. Young adults face an expanded array of work options, and desire for high incomes is an increasingly salient determinant of which one they choose. These conditions make the choice of work involving the care of and education of children relatively unappealing to most talented adults. A large “adult” entertainment industry has developed which provides young adults with greatly increased options for how they utilize their leisure time. In multiple ways the freedom of adults to choose how they will live have expanded. As a number of social commentators have noted, few adults today would prefer to go back to an earlier era in which choices were more constrained by lack of resources and stronger social sanctions on behavior.

But changing adulthood changes childhood. The lifestyle choices made by adults results in fewer children growing up in stable families with both biological parents present. The work choices of adults result in more children being left in nonparental care. Those who fill the jobs of caring for the children in our society are selected from a pool of

adults who tend to be less academically and occupationally competitive than their peers. The “adult” culture created by the expanded entertainment options desired by young adults habituates children to levels of violence and casual sex that are detrimental to healthy development. In short, the social milieu for children that emerged as adult choices proliferated is one that few adults, whatever their personal political or lifestyle preferences, consider positive.

Several responses to this curious dilemma of expanding freedom of choice for individual adults leading to deteriorating conditions for children are common. Perhaps the most widespread response is simple refusal to grapple with the issue. This would characterize those who believe that adults should be free to make the choices they prefer, and parents should care for their children. The issue of how adult choices impact children is sidestepped. Among social scientists a common response is that adult choices in the areas of family, work and entertainment cannot be significantly altered in a democracy that values freedom of individual choice. Therefore a collective solution is needed to the problems that adult choices create for children. “Child advocates” place the burden of improving the conditions of children on schools, government programs and policies, and business. A concern of many thoughtful observers is that this has been the approach tried over the past 30 years, and childhood conditions have deteriorated. A third response argues that the social milieu of children cannot be significantly improved unless there is a shift of adult focus from self-fulfillment toward greater self-sacrifice and commitment to children. This change would require restoration of “traditional” family values and increased government constraint on adult behaviors that are harmful to children. An important question facing those who favor increasing constraint on adult behavior is:

How can these changes occur in a democratic society where the view of adulthood as lifelong commitment to self-sacrifice in a family has given way to a view of adulthood as a life time of individual choices?

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