

GENDER, RACE, CLASS, AND THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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INTRODUCTION

Within the past twenty years, the transition to adulthood has become a burgeoning area of research. The status attainment process, an early model for transition to adulthood research, has given way to research focusing on singular outcomes such as completing formal education, leaving home, obtaining employment, forming a union through marriage or cohabitation, and becoming a parent. As young adults continue to delay family formation, some argue that one's first experience of heterosexual intercourse is also a symbol of adult status (Meier 2001). Although most scholars agree that these outcomes along with chronological age symbolize being an adult, relatively few empirical studies examine them as inter-dependent transitions. A recent comparison of these indicators by gender, race, and social class is also needed.

Contemporary theories of social inequality fail to address the transition to adulthood as a distinct subject matter deserving attention (see England 1993; Grusky 1994; Howard and Hollander 1997; Schwalbe, Godwin, Holden, Schrock, Thompson, and Wolkomir 2000). Instead, they focus on childhood experiences or socio-economic inequality in later adulthood. In contrast, the life course perspective has garnered attention as a developmental theory with great import for this period (Elder 1998). However, a recent review of the transition to adulthood literature from the life course perspective indicates that a systematic analysis of gender, race, and social class differences is needed (Shanahan 2000). Further, the developmental perspective in psychology is just beginning to take into consideration the diversity of subgroup experiences (Aber, Gephart, Brooks-Gunn, and Connell 1997; Crockett 1997; Graber, Brooks-Gunn, and Galen 1998; Sherrod, Haggerty, and Featherman 1993).

Since Hogan and Astone's (1986) review of the transition to adulthood literature, there has been a growing emphasis on the influence of multiple social contexts rather than an exclusive focus on family background (Feldman and Elliott 1990). With improvements to multi-level modeling, quantitative research has been able to “nest” adolescents within neighborhoods, schools, families, and peer networks to determine and compare their influence (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Aber 1997a; Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997; Feldman and Elliott 1990; Furstenberg 2000; Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Glen Elder, and Sameroff 1999; Mortimer and Finch 1996; South and Crowder 1999). At the same time, few ethnographic studies of the transition to adulthood exist. Several exceptions are Luttrell's (1997) retrospective analysis of white and black working class women's experiences, Anderson's (1999) study of inner-city Philadelphia youth, White's (1999) investigation of black adolescent girls' experiences living in the shadow of AIDS in New Haven, and MacLeod's (1995) study of working class, black and white men in Boston. Multi-method, interdisciplinary approaches like that of Furstenberg et al. (1999) are uncommon.

Although studies of the transition to adulthood are growing, few scholars critically examine this process from a gender, race, and class perspective. By this, I mean incorporating a theoretical perspective and a methodology that examines how ideology and social institutions create as well as reproduce gender, race, *and* class inequality during the transition to adulthood. This perspective reflects the paradigm shift described by Hill Collins (1991) as the matrix of domination. From this perspective, gender, race, and class are defined as inter-dependent forms of oppression. Baca Zinn and Thorton Dill (1996) elaborate this paradigm as multiracial feminism and assert that

Class, race, gender, and sexuality are components of social structure and social interaction. Women and men are differently embedded in locations created by these cross-cutting hierarchies. As a result, women and men throughout the social order experience different

forms of privilege and subordination, depending on their race, class, gender, and sexuality...intersecting forms of domination produce both oppression and opportunity (p. 325).

Weber (2001) presents a similar, more concrete elaboration of this perspective.

In the social stratification literature, inequality and oppression are distinct concepts. Oppression refers to the process by which one group achieves power, material resources, and opportunities by exploiting other groups to acquire and maintain their dominant position. Inequality means that one group has different experiences from another group, fewer opportunities to achieve status, power, or material resources, and this access depends on the group's location in the social hierarchy. The difference between the two perspectives is the assumption of oppression-based theories that dominant groups engage in ongoing exploitation to maintain power whereas inequality-based theories place less emphasis on power struggles and more emphasis on differences in hierarchical positions. A gender, race, class perspective from either framework has yet to be integrated in transition to adulthood studies. I alternate between both concepts when describing a gender, race, and class perspective because both frameworks are necessary for future research in this area.

Few ethnographic studies of young adult experiences integrate a gender, race, and class perspective. Instead, they typically emphasize gender, race, or class (Luttrell 1997; MacLeod 1995; White 1999). Advances in quantitative data collection and statistical modeling have begun to provide a multi-contextual perspective on the opportunities and constraints created by social structure. In terms of applying a gender, race, and class perspective, however, this analysis falls short because researchers often choose to control for race, sex, and social class as variables and ignore their interaction with social context. Power relations are frequently taken for granted rather

than modeled. As a result, we learn very little about how these structures contribute to and reproduce gender, race, and class inequality during the transition to adulthood.

The purpose of this review is to establish a new direction for transition to adulthood studies by drawing on a gender, race, and class perspective to frame our understanding of this transitional experience and to call for a multi-method, inter-disciplinary approach. From this perspective, we would go beyond finding that gender, race, and class independently affect the process, timing, and outcomes associated with becoming an adult. The documentation of such differences is important and necessary. Yet, by exploring the inter-dependent systems of oppression, we stand to gain an explanation of the transition to adulthood that is: attentive to the creation and reproduction of gender, race, and class oppression through social institutional and ideological influences, informed by rich understandings cultivated through inter-disciplinary, multi-method work, and relevant to social policy development.

Moreover, this theoretical perspective would elaborate how gender, race, and class are embedded in definitions of what it means to be an adult. This perspective would examine how current social policies incorporate gender, race, and class to create opportunities for some youth to achieve adulthood while denying others a chance to achieve normative definitions of adult status. Although I focus primarily on gender, race, and class as inter-dependent systems of oppression, sexual orientation, ethnicity, national origin, religion, and disability are also dimensions of this system. I devote less discussion to these dimensions because demographic measures of adult status outcomes are infrequently available for these groups. The fact that we have very little population level information about them suggests that their experiences have been obscured, one sign of oppression.

In the remaining sections of this review, I cover pertinent demographic data but limit my review to outcomes traditionally associated with becoming an adult: family formation and socio-economic attainment. Topics such as health, violence, social psychological measures of adjustment, and biological changes are not covered. I briefly discuss issues of identity development. I find that there is sufficient empirical evidence to support a gender, race, and class perspective although a more systematic, comprehensive research agenda is required to explain these differences and fill the current gaps in literature.

I describe several theories that have been used to study the transition to adulthood: status attainment, gender stratification via human capital development systems, oppositional culture, structural-cultural, cultural capital, and life course. Although none specifically incorporates the gender, race, class perspective to which I referred earlier, I describe them because they provide a starting point for a re-orientation of transition to adulthood studies. I discuss other shortcomings of the transition to adulthood literature: methodological and disciplinary divisions. These barriers prevent us from coherently and comprehensively documenting, critiquing, and altering the influence of social institutions on adolescent and young adult lives. To the extent that gender, race, and class inequalities can be remedied through social policy initiatives, I address how social policies might be designed to more effectively meet their goal of improving the life chances of youth.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE: A FOCUS ON DEMOGRAPHIC PATTERNS

In the contemporary United States, adulthood is associated with at least completing high school, securing stable employment, leaving home to establish an independent residence, marrying or cohabiting, and having children (McLaughlin, Melber, Billy, Zimmerle, Wings, and Johnson 1988). These indicators reflect a dominant, cultural belief that being an adult means being

economically self-sufficient and establishing a family of one's own. Age is also important to this definition, but lacking formal rites of passage, the age at which someone becomes an adult is subjective. National debates over prosecuting juvenile offenders as adults and adolescent, non-marital childbearing point to the ambiguity of this definition.

Notwithstanding, many social scientists are interested in the transition to adulthood because it represents the acquisition of roles that are essential to society such as worker, spouse, and parent. Recent concerns over adolescent risk taking behaviors have rekindled an interest in the transition to adulthood because of the impact of these behaviors on the individual and society (Jessor 1998). Although much research has been done on this developmental period, few studies place gender or race at the center to systematically examine and explain how the process of becoming an adult is different for young women and men or how this process differs by race and ethnicity. Instead, this body of research typically controls for sex and race or proposes conceptual and analytic models that ignore the ways in which gender and race are embedded in our social arrangements.¹

In contrast, social class has received more attention in part because the transition to adulthood literature in sociology developed from status and income stratification studies (Haller and Portes 1973; Sewell, Haller, and Portes 1969; Sewell and Hauser 1975; Sewell, Hauser, and Wolf 1980). Social class inequality continues to dominate transition to adulthood studies from the United Kingdom although race and gender inequalities are also explored (Furlong and Cartmel 1998; Wyn and White 1997). Nevertheless, the current fragmentation of the literature, now divided into specialties like educational attainment, residential independence, and family formation makes systematic comparisons by gender, race, and class difficult.

The following sub-sections provide an overview of the demographic characteristics of youth in the United States and young adult outcomes by sex, race, and class. This is not an exhaustive list

of differences in transition to adulthood outcomes. I provide this summary to establish the relevance of a gender, race, class perspective and encourage researchers to elaborate the interdependence of these transitions.

Demographic Characteristics of Adolescents and Young Adults in the United States

Thirty-nine million young adults ages 15-24 lived in the United States as of the 2000 census (U.S. Census 2000). I use this age group to represent youth who are making the transition from adolescence to adulthood. They currently comprise 14% of the total population and no change in their representation is expected by 2100 (U.S. Census 1999a). According to population projections for 2000, 66% of 15-24 years olds are white, non-Hispanic, 15% are Hispanic, 14% are black, non-Hispanic, 4% are Asian/Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic, and 1% are American-Indian/Alaska Native, non-Hispanic (U.S. Census 1999b). Similar projections for 2000 indicate that 49% of youth ages 15-24 are female (U.S. Census 1999a).²

By 2100, a substantial shift in the racial/ethnic distribution of young adults is expected whereas no change is expected in the sex distribution (U.S. Census 1999a; U.S. Census 1999b). At the beginning of the 22nd century, an equal share of youth ages 15-24 will be either Hispanic or white, non-Hispanic (37%). Similarly, an equal share of young adults in this age group will be black, non-Hispanic or Asian/Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic (13%), and the remaining 1% will be American Indian/Alaska Native, non-Hispanic. These numbers do not sum to 100 because of rounding.

Trends in Achieving Adult Status: The Import of a Gender, Race, Class Perspective

Sex, race, and ethnic differences in adult status outcomes are more readily documented by U. S. census reports than social class differences although some reports use the categories above and below poverty line to classify youth outcomes (see Statistics 2000). However, “at or above the

poverty line” masks the variation in this category. In contrast to “official reports,” scholars frequently demarcate social class differences empirically through composite measures of parental education, family income, or income/needs ratios. This method has been criticized because it ignores the power and relational dimensions of social class (Wyn and White 1997). Short of relational measures, I mention social class differences as researchers report them.

Table 1 provides a summary of sex, race/ethnic, and social class differences in the outcomes associated with adult status. Most of the findings refer to “baseline” differences prior to controlling for other factors that might account for these differences. The evidence suggests that sex, race, and social class as *independent* categories do not have a constant, pervasive effect on the outcomes measured. Rather, they jointly influence the achievement of adult status. For example, Hispanic males have the highest status drop-out rate of all sex/race/ethnic groups (U.S. Census 2002). However, they also have the highest employment rate (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2002a; 2002b) and their earnings exceed those of Hispanic women at every educational attainment level (U.S. Census 2002, p. 140).

A race, class, gender perspective would examine the extent to which social structure and culture create different opportunities for Hispanic (Latino) males and females to achieve adult status, and this perspective would investigate whether social class shapes the opportunities of Hispanic males and females differently. The lower socio-economic achievements and early family formation of Hispanic females shown in Table 1 supports the assertion that these young women are socialized to place men at the center of their lives and to value motherhood above all other social roles and achievements (Fine, Roberts, and Weis 2000; Moraga 1994). This literature does not explain Hispanic males’ adult status outcomes nor does it indicate how social class influences these outcomes.

Table 1. Sex, Race/Ethnic, Class, and Adult Status Outcomes

Outcome	Sex, Race/Ethnic, and Class Differences
Educational attainment	
High school completion	36.4% of Hispanic males, 31.1% of Hispanic females, 16.3% of black males, 15.7% of black females, 13.9% of white males, and 11.8% of white females were not enrolled in school and had not completed high school as of 1999 (U.S. Census 2002, 162). Youth who live in poverty are less likely to finish high school net of other factors (Haveman, Wolfe, and Wilson 1997). Hispanic adolescent mothers are less likely to complete high school than black and white adolescent mothers (Bae, et al. 2000). White females have the highest high school completion rate (95.2%) relative to white males, black youth, and Hispanic youth (Wirt, et al. 2001, p. 150).
Post-secondary degrees conferred	White, non-Hispanic graduates earned 73.7% of Associate's, 77.5% of Bachelor's, 79.9% of Master's degrees, 76.3% of first professional degrees, and 82.0% of doctor's degrees awarded to U.S. citizens in 1999-2000 (Snyder 2002). Females earned 60% of Associate's, 57% Bachelor's, 58% Master's, 45% of first professional, and 44% of Doctor's degrees in 1999-2000 (Snyder 2002).
Income Attainment	
Earnings	Females have lower earnings than males regardless of their educational level or race (Bae et al. 2000; U.S. Census 2002, p. 140; Clery, Lee, and Knapp 1998). Young adults from high-income families are more likely to have earnings in the top quartile vs. young adults from the lowest income families net of other factors (Clery, Lee, and Knapp 1998).
Labor Force Participation	
Employment-population ratios for young adults ages 20-24, 2001	79.9% of Hispanic males, 77.5% of white males, 69.8% of white females, 59.5% of black females, 58.9% of Hispanic females, and 57.6% of black males are employed (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2002a; 2002b).
Residential Independence	
	56% of males vs. 43% of females ages 18-24 lived at home in 2000 (Fields and Casper 2001). Black, Hispanic, and Asian youth leave home at a later age than white youth (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1999). Males from high SES families are more likely to live independently, but family SES has no effect for females net of other factors (Mahaffy 1999).
Union formation	
Percent of adults ages 18 and older who are married, 2000	63.5% of white males, 60.7% of Hispanic females, 60.2% of white females; 59.6% of Hispanic males, 46.7% of black males, 38.3% of black females (U.S. Census 2002, p. 47).
Timing of marriage	Median age at first marriage was 26.8 years for males and 25.1 years for females in 2000 (Fields and Casper 2001). Females from high SES families in 1980 were less likely to marry four years post high school than females from lower SES families and less likely to do so than females of similar social standing in 1960 (Buchmann 1989). Males from low SES families in 1980 were less likely to marry four years post-high school than males of similar social standing in 1960 (Buchmann 1989).
Cohabitation, 1995	42.6% of white non-Hispanic, 40.1% of black, non-Hispanic, 36.7% of Hispanic, and 31.7% of other non-Hispanic females ages 15-44 have ever cohabited (U.S. Census 2001, p. 53).
Parenthood	
Birth rate for females ages 15-19, 2000	94.4 for Hispanic females, 81.9 for black, non-Hispanic females, 67.8 for American Indian females, 32.5 for white, non-Hispanic females, 21.6 for Asian/Pacific Islander females (Martin, Hamilton, Ventura, Menacker, and Park 2002, p. 4).
Timing of entrance into parenthood	Mean age at first birth was 29.8 for males and 24.6 years for females in 2000 (Martin, et al. 2002). Females from high SES families in 1980 were less likely to become mothers four years post high school than females from lower SES families and less likely to do so than females of similar social standing in 1960 (Buchmann 1989). Males from lower SES families in 1980 were less likely to become fathers four years post-high school than males of similar social standing in 1960 (Buchmann 1989).
Sexual activity	
Percent of high school students who ever had heterosexual intercourse, 1999	75.7% of black, non-Hispanic males, 66.9% of black, non-Hispanic females, 62.9% of Hispanic males, 45.5% of Hispanic females, 45.4% of white, non-Hispanic males, 44.8% of white, non-Hispanic females (Kam, Kincher, Williams, Ross, Lowry, Grunbaum, and Kolbe 2000, p 75).

To the extent that comparisons can be made with other racial/ethnic groups, a gender, race, class perspective would examine similarities and differences in transition to adulthood experiences. However, comparing Hispanic achievements to those of other race/ethnic groups needs to be done cautiously because the category Hispanic includes members of all racial groups in some research and is a distinct classification in other studies. Further, Hispanic is a broad term that encompasses racial/ethnic groups with very different immigration experiences and histories of oppression (Fernandez, Paulsen, and Hirano-Nakanishi 1989; Velez 1989; White and Glick 2000; Wojtkiewicz and Donato 1995). While some might claim that such variations render comparisons impossible, I argue that greater attentiveness to within group differences can lead to more useful comparisons and an opportunity to investigate the similar as well as different paths that youth travel to achieve adult status.

Considerable attention has been paid to girls' academic achievements because of their history of lower achievements relative to boys (AAUW 1991; AAUW 1998; Bae, Choy, Geddes, Sable, and Snyder 2000; Phillips 1998). Table 1 indicates that women earn less than men at all educational levels regardless of race/ethnicity (Bae et al. 2000; U.S. Census 2002, p. 140; Clery, Lee, and Knapp 1998). The gender gap in earnings persists even as young women exceed men in terms of educational achievements except at the highest degree levels and as women of all marital statuses, including those with children, increase their labor force participation (U.S. Census 2002). Other measures of adult status suggest that gender inequality is more nuanced than previously theorized (Acker 1992). In terms of labor force participation, black females have higher rates of employment than Hispanic females and black males; however, their employment rates are lower

than those of white youth and Hispanic males. A gender, race, class perspective would be useful to describe and explain these differences in the transition to adulthood.

According to Table 1, social class also affects young women's achievements. Earlier studies find that women from more affluent families are less likely to marry and become mothers four years post-high school than women from less affluent families and affluent women are less likely to enter these family roles than similarly privileged women from an earlier generation (Buchmann 1989, p. 162). Moreover, adolescent mothers from high socio-economic status (SES) families are more likely to finish high school than adolescent mothers from middle and lower SES families (Bae et al. 2000). The contemporary socialization processes of white, middle and upper classes females are less likely to be examined critically. Social class differences in the transition to adulthood for black and Latino youth have also been the focus of less research. The experiences of Asian/Pacific Islander and Native American young women (and men) are often excluded from demographic analysis because their population sizes are smaller. These are many of the shortcomings of current research.

How do we explain the relatively lower educational achievements of males, their residential dependence, later marriage and childbearing, and higher earnings as shown in Table 1? A gender, race, and class perspective would elaborate how young men are both privileged and constrained by social structure and culture. A decline in the real value of men's wages and the higher rates of joblessness among black males suggest that some men experience difficulty achieving adult status (Farley 1996). Given the inter-dependence of gender relations, the importance of critically analyzing their experiences cannot be overstated (Hall 2000).

Last, the sex, race, and ethnic differences among high school students who have ever had sexual intercourse as noted in Table 1 may reflect economic and cultural factors that make it easier

for white females to maintain their virginity (Lichtenstein 2000). In sum, the demographic data described in this section indicate that a gender, race, and class perspective would provide a useful explanation of the differences in adult status outcomes. How are these differences in the transition to adulthood explained at present? The next section reviews several theories that contribute to our understanding of these differences, but none provides a comprehensive explanation using a gender, race, and class analytical framework.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

“. . . [A]t every phase of developmental theorizing we must consider the critical issues of diversity in developmental pathways, contexts, processes, and outcomes” (Aber, Gephart, Brooks-Gunn, and Connell 1997, p. 51). In sociology, the transition to adulthood became the focus of research with the creation of the Wisconsin (social psychological) model of status attainment (Hogan and Astone 1986). This perspective emphasizes the influence of family socio-economic background, intellectual ability, significant others’ influence, and socio-economic aspirations in adolescence on socio-economic outcomes in adulthood (Sewell and Hauser 1975; Sewell and Hauser 1980). The Wisconsin model and related research made an important contribution to the study of social mobility by concluding that family background is not the only determinant of socio-economic achievement. Instead, an adolescent’s educational and occupational aspirations as well as academic performance are also significant predictors of these outcomes (Alexander, Eckland, and Griffin 1975; Campbell 1983; Featherman and Hauser 1978; Jencks, Crouse, and Mueser 1983; Otto and Haller 1979; Sewell, Haller, and Ohlendorf 1970; Sewell, Hauser, and Wolf 1980; Wilson and Portes 1975).

On the whole, the model has been better at explaining white men’s achievements than white women’s (Kerckhoff 1995; Sewell, Hauser, and Wolf 1980). A recent test of the model using

the National Longitudinal Study of the Class of 1972 indicates that the status attainment process is the same for women and men even when family formation is taken into account (Inoue 1999). However, this model has several limitations. Although status attainment research purports to explain structural inequalities, the primary use of individual characteristics minimizes the importance of differential access to resources, opportunities, and rewards (Horan 1978; Kerckhoff 1976; Kerckhoff 1995). This model does not explain the gender (or race) gap in earnings (England 1992). Last, not enough attention has been given to the actual contexts and pathways through which subgroup differences in socio-economic aspirations and intellectual abilities develop and influence educational and occupational achievements (Mortimer 1996).

More recent conceptualizations of the transition to adulthood do not put gender, race, or social class at the center (e.g., Elder 1998; Evans and Poole 1991; Hurrelmann and Engel 1989; Poole 1989). This is not to say that research based on the life course and other developmental theories has not found gender, race, or social class differences. Rather, the conceptual framework that informs this work does not begin by asking *how* gender, race, and class inequalities are created during the transition to adulthood or *whether* the social identities change (or remain the same) from adolescence to adulthood in ways that would affect the transitional process. Alternative theoretical perspectives that emphasize gender, race, and class are discussed below. The majority of these theories focuses on social inequality in adulthood, but are relevant to this developmental period. I end this section with a discussion of the life course perspective because it has received so much attention in terms of its applicability to the transition to adulthood.

Gender Oriented

Gender theories of socialization and social inequality encompass an array of perspectives: economic, structural, developmental, intra-psychic, biological, and cultural. Feminist scholarship,

which investigates and explains the pervasiveness of gender inequality, informs each of these perspectives (e.g., Chodorow 1978; Eagly 1987; England 1993; Folbre 1983; Gilligan 1982; Goldin 1990; Riley 1999; Risman 1998; Rossi 1984; West and Zimmerman 1987). A strength of this vast body of literature is its emphasis on explaining gender inequality across a variety of analytical levels: interactional processes (micro), groups and proximal contexts (meso), as well as ideological, historical, and societal (macro). While explanations across these levels are numerous, the process of becoming an adult has been neglected. Developmental perspectives that are attentive to gender differences focus primarily on gender identity development (Archer 1989; Chodorow 1989; Erikson 1968; Peterson 1987). Feminist research on and with adolescents exists, but it primarily explores micro-level interactions situated within a particular school or community (Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995; Griffin 1993; Martin 1996; Nava 1992; Orenstein 1994; Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan 1995).

A more complete analysis of gender inequality exists for mid-adulthood. As such, research on the division of household labor (Bittman, England, Folbre, and Matheson 2000; Brines 1993; Cunningham 2001; Shelton and John 1996), earnings, promotions, and authority (Clery, Lee, and Knapp 1998; England, Farkas, Kilbourne, and Dou 1988; Reskin and Padavic 1994; Seibert, Fossett, and Baunach 1997), as well as educational experiences (AAUW 1998; Jacobs 1996) cumulatively indicate that gender is deeply embedded in social arrangements. How might the gender differences in adult status outcomes noted here and in the previous section develop from childhood to early adolescence and young adulthood? I discuss Brinton's (1988) theory of gender stratification as one explanation.

Brinton (1988) posits a human capital development system that “not only explains the conditions under which women and men *acquire* different amounts of human capital, but the

conditions under which their human capital is *evaluated* differently” (p. 308). Human capital refers to the education, knowledge, and skills that an individual possesses. This system comprises two dimensions:

- (1) the social-institutional context of human capital development and evaluation, reflected by the structure of the educational system and the labor market, and
- (2) the structure of exchanges and investments, especially intergenerational ones, within the family as the supplier of labor (Brinton 1988, p. 305).

The educational system and labor market are important because they determine whether the timing of decisions about human capital investments is diffuse or condensed across the life cycle (Brinton 1988, p. 305). In condensed timing societies like Japan, decisions about human capital investments are made at specific, crucial points in the child’s life cycle and these choices foreclose other opportunities. The United States represents a diffuse timing society because its educational system and labor market are less rigid. Participants may enter, exit, and return to these social institutions with fewer negative consequences relative to the institutional arrangements in Japan. Japan’s tightly linked school to work transition, strong norms regarding women’s family responsibilities, and limited financial support for the elderly contribute to parental decision making make it an exemplary case study of gender stratification (Brinton 1988).

According to Brinton (1988), Japanese parents are more likely to invest their resources in a son’s education because he will obtain a greater return on the investment as his career matures. Parents provide sons with extra tutoring to prepare them for school entrance exams and enroll them in the best schools to increase the chances that a “good” company will hire them. When companies hire based on a school’s reputation and referral rather than a competitive system that

rewards individual achievement, enrolling in the “right” school becomes a near guarantee of occupational success.

On-the-job training in Japan has been the dominant mode of skill formation and usually occurs in early adulthood (Brinton 1988). Consequently, investments made by the company increase the employee’s human capital. While sons are groomed for future success, Brinton argues that women receive fewer investments from parents and employers because they are expected to leave the work force once they give birth to a child. Strong norms governing women’s age at marriage and childbearing also conflict with the timing of company training thereby reducing women’s ability to advance in the internal labor market. Even if women return to work, their earnings hardly match men’s.

In sum, cultural norms regarding women’s and men’s responsibilities influence parental, school, and employer investments to create very different stratification processes for women and men. The strength of Brinton’s theory is its integration of gender ideology, norms, social policies, and multiple social institutions to explain the gender stratification process from childhood to adulthood. Yet, the child appears complicit throughout the life course. What forms of social control enforce compliance to these gender norms on a daily basis? How does active resistance to these expectations influence social structure? How can gender inequality be reduced in societies with a condensed timing of decision making? These dimensions of gender stratification and social change require elaboration.

Race/Ethnicity Oriented

Race and ethnic differences in adult socio-economic achievements and family formation have been documented thoroughly (e.g., Browne 1998; Cardoza 1991; Cassirer 1996; Corcoran and Duncan 1979; Forste and Tienda 1996; Kao and Tienda 1995; Kaufman 1986; Klepinger,

Lundberg, and Plotnick 1995; Krein and Beller 1988; Kuo and Hauser 1995; McLennan and Averett 2001; Reskin and Padavic 1994; Stier and Tienda 1997; Wojtkiewicz and Donato 1995). I focus on two theories that are relevant to the transition to adulthood: the oppositional culture explanation (Ogbu 1987) and a structural – cultural theory based on job loss in urban areas (Anderson 1991; Wilson 1996). In this context, the experiences of immigrant children are briefly mentioned. A more thorough discussion is found in (Zhou 1997).

To explain differences in minority group academic achievement, Ogbu (1987) proposes a theory of oppositional culture. He argues that these differences are related to the “nature of the history, subordination, and exploitation of the minorities, and the nature of the minorities’ own instrumental and expressive responses to their treatment, which enter into the process of their schooling” (p. 317). Ogbu (1987) also claims that society and schools contribute to these differences. By creating barriers to job opportunities and denying equal rewards for their education and experience, American society discourages minorities from investing in education. In addition, denying minorities equal access to good education reduces their ability compete with better educated students and further limits their opportunities.

In the school setting, teachers have lower expectations for minority children (Ogbu 1987). The cultural differences between dominant group teachers and minority group families cause school personnel to misunderstand and disrespect the students’ cultures in ways that interfere with education. Another dimension of this process is the dominant group’s belief in the collective inferiority of minorities. This belief is expressed through the scapegoating of minorities during a weak economy, residential segregation, and the association of undesirable traits with minority group members (Ogbu 1987, p. 320).

In response to the dominant culture's treatment, some minority groups rebel and create their own oppositional culture. This oppositional culture eschews everything associated with the dominant culture including education. Ogbu defines this as cultural inversion. Minorities who are most likely to create an oppositional culture are involuntary minorities who were subjugated through slavery, conquest, or colonization. Immigrant minorities groups who come to the United States voluntarily are least likely to develop an oppositional culture and are more likely to perceive their culture as merely different from the dominant culture.

Although both groups experience discrimination, they respond to it differently. Immigrant minorities do not believe that discrimination is permanent or institutionalized and attempt to accommodate (Ogbu 1987, p. 325). In contrast, involuntary minorities perceive discrimination as systemic and distrust social institutions that affirm the dominant culture's norms and ideologies. Members of involuntary minority groups who willingly participate in the dominant culture's activities and institutions are accused of "acting white" and being disloyal to the minority group. Ogbu's theory was developed primarily to explain the differences in educational achievement among minority groups.

Contemporary research using nationally representative samples of youth including high school drop-outs does not support Ogbu's theory (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Green, Dugoni, and Ingels 1995; Mahaffy 1999; Morgan 1996). They find that recent cohorts of black youth report higher educational expectations than white youth although these expectations do not lead to greater educational attainment. Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) argue that more attention needs to be given to the material conditions that prevent black youth from achieving their plans. In contrast, Waters (1996) finds that race, ethnicity, and gender affect the social identities that adolescents embrace and have consequences for socio-economic achievements. Young black

men are more likely than young black women to eschew academic success because masculinity and an oppositional black identity are inextricably linked whereas the definition of femininity for young black women is not as closely tied to an oppositional black identity (Waters 1996). Others also find that black females have higher educational expectations than black males (Morgan 1996).

Wilson (1987; 1996) articulates a structural - cultural theory that provides an alternate explanation for the aspirations, achievements, and family formation patterns of urban black youth and adults by focusing on the material conditions of inner-cities. Wilson suggests that the lack of job opportunities for these residents has a negative effect on the transitions to education and gainful employment for black adolescents. The decline in low-skill employment has been detrimental to black men in particular, and the percent of unemployed black men has increased since the 1970s (Wilson 1996, p. 26). In addition, the loss of manufacturing jobs that often provide higher wages has contributed to the decline in men's income. On the other hand, an increase in service sector work has meant that black women who have traditionally been employed in this segment of the labor market are more likely to be employed relative to black men although a growing number of black men have turned to this work (Wilson 1996).

As a result of the suburbanization of job opportunities, the flight of working and middle class families, the dwindling number of neighborhood social institutions (banks, churches, medical establishments, stores), and concentrated poverty, inner-city black residents have few role models with legitimate employment. Thus, they develop ghetto-related behaviors and attitudes that often contribute to their economic marginalization (Wilson 1996, p. 52). Youth from neighborhoods that lack social integration and have low levels of social control, like these inner-city neighborhoods with high jobless rates, are

at risk because of the lack of informal social controls...they are also disadvantaged because the social interactions among neighbors tends to be confined to those whose skills, styles, orientations, and habits are not as conducive to promoting positive social outcomes (academic successes, pro-social behaviors, etc.) as are those in more stable neighborhoods (Wilson 1996, p. 63).

Moreover, black men have a more difficult time obtaining employment than black women because of persistent, negative stereotypes held by employers (Wilson 1987; 1996). Additional empirical work further elaborates the connection between concentrated poverty, job loss, and family formation among inner-city black residents (Anderson 1991; Fernandez Kelly 1994; Wilson 1996). When these young women and men believe that continuing their education has no effect on their ability to get a good job, they turn to early parenthood as a means of achieving adult status (Anderson 1991; Fernandez Kelly 1994). Growing up in a community plagued by persistent joblessness reduces young black men's commitment to marriage and makes them less desirable as husbands thereby prompting young black women to "make it" on their own as single parents (Fernandez Kelly 1994; Wilson 1996).

Although inner-city black youth verbally reinforce mainstream values, structural constraints limit their ability to achieve them (Wilson 1996). Of course, not all inner-city black youth are school drop-outs and teen parents. Wilson (1996) and Anderson (1991) suggest that youth with positive role models, close parental supervision, fewer ties to street culture, and aspirations of higher education and/or work are more likely to resist the pressure to bear children as teens and leave school. In addition, young black women may have higher educational expectations than young black men because they perceive greater occupational opportunities. This hypothesis remains to be tested.

The oppositional culture and structural-cultural theories explain race and ethnic differences in adult status outcomes. Both theories stress the importance of structural constraints as factors influencing young adult development, and suggest that these conditions contribute to subcultures that do not endorse the dominant culture's norms and values. However, significant declines in births to black adolescent girls, declining births to white adolescent girls, and declining but still higher birth rates of Hispanic adolescent girls require explaining (Martin, Hamilton, Ventura, Menacker, and Park 2002). Have the economic opportunities for inner-city black women improved enough to account for this change? How do gender, race, ethnicity, structural opportunities, community, and culture interact to influence teen births? Fernandez Kelly (1994) argues that social and cultural capital have an important effect on whether inner-city young women from Baltimore bear children as teens. Moreover, the acquisition and loss of social and cultural capital depends on time, social and physical locations, social networks based on norms of exclusion and inclusion, and the positions of individuals within hierarchies of domination (p. 98).

Similarly, Denner, Kirby, Coyle, and Brindis (2001) conclude that cultural norms, strong ties to the homogeneous community, traditional values about family and gender roles, and intergenerational support appear to reduce teen childbearing rates in high poverty, Latino communities in California. Traditionally, these concepts have been associated with studies of social class and are elaborated next.

Social Class Oriented

The inter-generational transmission of socio-economic status came under close scrutiny with Blau and Duncan (1967) study of social mobility. Blau and Duncan (1967) found that father's education and occupation has direct and indirect effects on son's socio-economic achievements. The Wisconsin (social psychological) model of status attainment developed by Sewell and

colleagues includes adolescent's educational and occupational aspirations, significant others' encouragement to attend college, mental ability, and academic performance as well as family socio-economic status. The purpose of adding measures of intelligence, academic performance, and social psychological factors is to determine the mediating processes of these factors on family socio-economic status and sons' achievements (Haller and Portes 1973). Both models confirm that child's educational and occupational achievements are dependent on family socio-economic status.

However, research conducted with the Wisconsin model also notes that family socio-economic status operates indirectly on child's achievements by influencing significant others' expectations which in turn shape adolescents' aspirations. Academic performance also has a positive effect on significant others' expectations of the young adult as well as a positive effect on educational attainment (Sewell and Hauser 1975). Further, educational and occupational aspirations have a direct influence on their respective outcomes. In short, children from high socio-economic status families are more likely to report that significant others (parents, peers, teachers) expect them to attend college and they are more likely to aspire to college and high status jobs than youth from lower status families. These aspirations contribute to differences in educational and occupational attainment. As noted earlier, there have been numerous criticisms of this model (England 1992; Horan 1978; Kerckhoff 1976; Mortimer 1996).

More recent studies of socio-economic inequality and the transition to adulthood have drawn on Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social reproduction to explain class inequality (Buchmann 1989; MacLeod 1995). This theory seeks to overcome the dichotomies of objectivism (associated with structural perspectives) and subjectivism (associated with phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology) by focusing on the dialectic relationship between the dynamic actor and the social structures of which "practice" is the outcome (Bourdieu 1977).

The concept of *habitus* becomes the link between social structure and actor by providing the actor with a set of skills, tastes, knowledge, and worldviews associated with her/his social position.

However, *habitus* does not determine the actions of the individual, but provides the actor with a framework from which to proceed.

A second fundamental concept is *field*, which is a “network of relations among objective positions within it” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 in Ritzer 2000). Field serves as a forum for the competition between social positions, the marshalling of various forms of capital (social, cultural, symbolic, and economic), and the structuring of power relations (Ritzer 2000). There is a sense of an active, ongoing, struggle between members of various social positions, especially class positions, to achieve their interests and dominate the social hierarchy. This struggle for dominance is manifest in transition to adulthood studies through an analysis of the ways in which schools and family perpetuate class inequality (Buchmann 1989; MacLeod 1995).

As applied to the United States, the educational system is infused with the cultural capital (tastes, dispositions, skills, and knowledge) of the dominant class and rewards conformity to these forms of cultural capital through educational credentials (MacLeod 1995). In addition, families expose children to the forms of cultural capital associated with their social position. These forms of capital become part of their *habitus*. The dominant class’s cultural capital is also necessary for occupational success. Because youth from lower classes do not have the linguistic patterns, knowledge, dispositions, or tastes associated with the dominant class, expressions of their cultural capital are devalued and unrewarded by the educational and occupational structures that reflect the dominant class. Subsequently, these youth are “channeled” to other forms of education (vocational or business) and lower status occupations.

Some argue that Bourdieu's theory focuses exclusively on class inequality and ignores the ways in which social relations, dispositions, and capital are gendered (McCall 1992). Empirical studies indicate that gender shapes dispositions to a greater extent than social class (Looker and Magee 2000). Other research suggests that race has an important effect on these dispositions as well (Luttrell 1997). A more complete theory of the transition to adulthood would depict gender, race, and class as inter-dependent systems of oppression.

Life Course Perspective

The life course perspective has gained much attention in part because of its usefulness for studying the transition to adulthood (Shanahan 2000). According to Mayer and Tuma (1990:3), the life course refers to the

social processes extending over the individual life span or over significant portions of it, especially [with regard to] the family life cycle, educational and training histories, and employment and occupational careers. The life course is shaped by, among other things, cultural beliefs about the individual biography, institutionalized sequences of roles and positions, legal age restrictions, and the decisions of individual actors (quoted in Settersten and Mayer 1997, p. 20).

As a theory of the transition to adulthood, life course has tremendous potential. Attentiveness to the historical and social contexts in which decision making and role transitions occur is one principle associated with this theory (Elder 1998). The life course perspective would explain 20th century, women's socio-economic achievements and delayed family formation by noting that these came about because of the availability of effective, legal contraceptive methods, the implementation of social policies that prohibited discrimination against women in terms of

education and work, changes in gender role attitudes, and the decline in real income which required wives to work in order to supplement husband's income.

The impact of social change and life events also depends on its timing in the life course (Elder 1999). For instance, early marriage among the Depression era cohort tended to produce socio-economic hardship and reduce educational attainment (Elder 1998). In addition, Berkeley children (especially boys) who were younger when the Depression occurred experienced substantial adverse psychological effects relative to the older, Oakland cohort (Elder 1999).

Another principle of life course theory is the idea of linked lives (Settersten 1999). Under conditions of severe economic loss during the Depression, the power within the family transferred to the mother, weakened the father's role, and encouraged dependence on others outside the family (Elder 1999). A final principle of life course theory is human agency. Individuals construct their own life course within the context of historical and social constraints and opportunities. Families who experienced economic deprivation during the Depression adapted by sending adolescent sons to work and transferring domestic responsibilities to adolescent daughters (Elder 1999). Both experiences hastened the entry into adulthood for these children.

A strength of the theory is its recognition that lives develop within social and historical contexts. Like Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social reproduction, life course theory addresses the constraints of structure and the potency of human agency. However, the attentiveness to social and historical change often demotes explanations of whether and how women's and men's life courses develop differently. To be sure, Elder (1999) documents gender differences in Depression era life course experiences. Yet, why and how these differences develop are not given as much attention. For instance, the greater psychological adjustment problems of the Oakland boys relative to Oakland girls can be understood from a feminist psychoanalytic perspective (Chodorow 1978).

More needs to be known about how racial/ethnic inequality is embedded in the transition to adulthood (Shanahan 2000). An analysis of historical and social contexts, the timing of events and social roles, the inter-dependence of lives, as well as human agency are important contributions of life course theory. However, the theory requires additional elaboration to explain gender, race, and class inequality during the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Most of the theories described above have not been developed to address the transition to adulthood specifically, but they help explain gender, race, and class differences in adult status outcomes. Yet, questions remain. How are gender, race, and class inequalities constructed and reproduced during the process of becoming an adult? How have historical and social changes contributed to or reduced these inequalities? How do gender, race, and class shape the definition of what it means to be an adult? For instance, if being an adult means being economically self-sufficient and this definition derives from the dominant culture, then particular groups that have had difficulty obtaining economic self-sufficiency are more likely to be labeled “dependent” and “children”—groups such as women, racial-ethnic minorities, and the poor. What are the implications of this in terms of theorizing about the transition to adulthood? If being an adult were defined in terms of one’s ability to be inter-dependence, then what are the implications?

Although stratification theories are diverse in scope, the transition to adulthood has received insufficient attention. Instead, I have described several theories of inequality that are relevant to the transition to adulthood, but these theories do not address the inter-dependence of gender, race, class, and the process of becoming an adult.

CRITICAL REVIEW OF TRADITIONAL THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

In this section, I claim that methodological and disciplinary divisions have hindered our ability to critically investigate inter-connected systems of stratification during the transition to adulthood. Further, the focus on contextual analysis is often at the expense of explaining how gender, race, and class oppression is created in the transition to adulthood.

Gender, Race, Class and the Influence of Social Context

Conceptual models of the transition to adulthood recognize that young adult outcomes are achieved within the contexts of family, community, school, and work (Connell, Aber, and Walker 1995). Empirical studies typically examine these sources of influence as independent of one another. As such, there is a body of research that focuses on the influence of family context (Aquilino 1997; Astone and McLanahan 1991; Hauser and Sewell 1986; Pimentel 1996), school context (AAUW 1998; Alexander, McDill, Fennessey, and D'Amico 1979; Ehrenberg and Brewer 1994; Marsh 1991; Mayer 1991), neighborhoods (Connell and Halpern-Felsher 1997; Crane 1991), and peers (Evans, Oates, and Schwab 1992; Hallinan and Williams 1990). Other studies juxtapose parents and peers as competing forces in adolescents' lives (Biddle, Bank, and Marlin 1980; Davies and Kandel 1981; Wilks 1986).

Alternatively, a flourishing body of literature recognizes that youth are shaped simultaneously by these contexts and aims to examine the influence of each (Aber, Gephart, Brooks-Gunn, and Connell 1997; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, and Sealand 1993; Connell, Aber, and Walker 1995; Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997; Ku, Sonenstein, and Pleck 1993; Phelan, Davidson, and Cao 1991; Upchurch 2001). Advances in multilevel modeling, especially hierarchical linear modeling, have contributed to these efforts (Pong 1997; Ribar 1994; South and Crowder 1999; Sucoff and Upchurch 1998). For instance, hierarchical linear modeling permits the researcher to “nest” the influence of family background on young adult outcomes within

neighborhoods to determine whether the influence of family background varies by the neighborhood characteristics. The same technique can be used with schools, larger geographic units, or individual-level outcomes that are measured over time (Bryk and Raudenbush 1992).

Nevertheless, the emphasis of this research is to describe and explain the influence of social context rather than elaborate how social context, gender, race, and class interact to affect the process of becoming an adult (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, and Dowsett 1982; Mahaffy 1999 are exceptions). The theories cited earlier indicate that resources and opportunities are distributed differently based on gender, social class, and race. Along these lines, South and Crowder (1999) demonstrate that neighborhood disadvantage has a different effect on black and white women's premarital childbearing and marriage rates. "[Yet], neither neighborhood quality nor individual and family SES [socio-economic status] can fully explain the pronounced racial differences in premarital childbearing or marriage timing" (South and Crowder 1999:128). As this body of literature on contextual effects expands, theories that explain gender, race, and class inequality must be taken into account.

Persistent Methodological and Disciplinary Divisions

Most of the studies mentioned throughout this review have relied on quantitative methods. This is due in part to the availability of data sets that have been collected from nationally representative samples of youth such as the High School and Beyond, 1980 sophomore and senior cohort studies, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, Monitoring the Future study, National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, and National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, to name a few. These data sets provide a multitude of measures pertinent to the transition to adulthood.

However, this type of research has been criticized for its “variable” approach to gender studies in particular (Hall 2000; Scott 1988; West and Zimmerman 1987). Although some argue that these studies provide little more than “difference in means” explanations (Thorne 1993), quantitative work that examines interactions between gender, race, class, and contextual factors is able to investigate whether and how the transition to adulthood varies by these social statuses (Mahaffy 1999). For example, research on adolescents’ plans for the future finds sex differences in family formation expectations, but no differences in expected socio-economic achievements (Greene and Wheatley 1992; Mahaffy and Ward 2000a; Mahaffy and Ward 2000b). These studies suggest that anti-discrimination policies which address the domains of education and work may have closed the gender gap in educational and occupational expectations, but “pro-family” policies appear to have done little to change expectations of a gendered division of household labor. Historical research linking social policies, economic changes, and adolescents’ plans would provide a more complete analysis of gender and adolescents’ plans.

Quantitative research on the transition to adulthood typically examines the influence of social context and childhood or adolescent experiences on young adult outcomes. Less is known about the everyday experiences of youth as they age. How do adolescents construct their social identities and how do they actively shape (and resist) their environment as they become adults? How is the meaning of adulthood shaped by gender, race, and class? Qualitative approaches are well suited to address such questions, but they are often limited to brief periods of an adolescent’s life (e.g., Connell 1997; Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995; Martin 1996; Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan 1995). To analyze longer periods, retrospective reports are used, but they are subject to selective recall of events (Luttrell 1997). Few researchers observe their participants through adolescence and young adulthood (MacLeod 1995; Phelan, Davidson, and Cao 1991 are exceptions). Research

using qualitative methods could enhance our understanding of the everyday experiences and structural constraints that contribute to gender, race, and class inequality. These methods can be combined with the longitudinal, survey studies already underway.

Previous studies indicate that combining methodological approaches is a fruitful way to examine the influence of neighborhoods on youth development (Furstenberg et al. 1999; Wilson 1996). Wilson and colleagues' (1996) study of inner-city Chicago residents and employers as well as Furstenberg and colleagues' (1999) study of families in Philadelphia reflect promising inter-disciplinary strategies for future research on the transition to adulthood. Wilson's (1996) and Furstenberg's (1999) studies are examples of collaborative, inter-disciplinary efforts yet these collaborations are uncommon among scholars interested in the transition to adulthood. Although edited, inter-disciplinary collections are growing (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Aber 1997a; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Aber 1997b; Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997; Feldman and Elliott 1990), they tend to privilege one method over another (Leadbeater and Way 1996 in an exception). A comprehensive, inter-disciplinary study of the transition to adulthood that is grounded in a gender, race, and class perspective has yet to be conducted. The Society for the Study of Human Development (SSHD), currently supported by the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, may forge new alliances in this respect, but that remains to be seen.

CONCLUSION

We can expect substantial changes in the racial-ethnic composition of young adults by the 22nd century. At that time, white, non-Hispanic young adults will no longer comprise the majority and nearly half of the young adult population will be female. Whether young adults will be able to achieve economic self-sufficiency in the 22nd century is uncertain, but there is little reason to believe that the growing income inequality will reverse any time soon (Shapiro, Greenstein, and Primus

2001). Moreover, current racial and gender disparities in earnings put women and racial ethnic minorities at risk for tenuous economic circumstances. These conditions may also delay marriage and residential independence. To the extent that educational attainment has an effect on economic self-sufficiency, the disengagement of some Latino groups warrants further investigation and remedy. The inequality indicated in these trends calls for a change in the way that we theorize, conduct research, and develop social policies related to the transition to adulthood.

Future research needs to address the question: How do structural constraints, gender, race, and class *jointly* influence the process of becoming an adult? Answering this question requires more than variable analysis or explorations of subjective meaning. We also need to critique the dominant definitions of adulthood to illumine how gender, race, and class are embedded and explore the implications. If adulthood means economic self-sufficiency, residential independence from family of origin, and heterosexual marriage, then numerous groups are excluded from this definition and may attempt to achieve adulthood through alternative means. For example, many poor, inner-city black youth who attend schools with few resources and live in areas with limited economic opportunities achieve adult status through early parenthood because motherhood and children are still valued in U.S. society and these are the only legitimate means within reach (Anderson 1991; Fernandez Kelly 1994). In response, social policies have been created to reduce the number of youth who become disengaged from school and bear children early and out-of-wedlock (e.g., truancy fines, child exclusion laws, stay at home and in school policies) while failing to address the greater problem of economic, racial, and gender oppression.

Devising social policies that eliminate these forms of oppression among youth is a formidable task. Targeted programs and policies based on findings of inequality in outcomes could potentially do the most good. The summer youth employment program created by the Job

Training Partnership Act aims to provide economically disadvantaged youth academic enrichment and employment opportunities through federally subsidized wages. Yet, support for this program fluctuates depending on economic and political climates. Moreover, the elimination of targeted policies and programs (e.g., affirmative action, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, public funding for family planning clinics) has become a popular political agenda. However, we would be naïve to think that all youth need the same kinds of support as they become adults.

I recommend that we consider the relational nature of social policy development. We might ask, if this particular initiative is implemented, which young adults acquire power, privilege, and resources? Whose experiences are excluded from these policy initiatives and to what end? Who are the stakeholders and power brokers? On whose behalf do they work? Empirical research developed through collaborative efforts that bridge methodological and disciplinary boundaries has the potential for being more comprehensive, creating a larger power base from which to shape social policy, and maintaining a critical perspective on the extant power relations that influence youth policy development.

Although I have limited my discussion of the transition to adulthood to gender, race, and class inequality, the current stratification literature also recognizes that (dis)ability, sexual orientation, and national origin shape the experiences of young adults (Baca Zinn, Hondagneu-Sotelo, and Messner 1997; Weber 2001). Greater attention needs to be given to the experiences of these youth as they finish school, enter the workforce, and form families. How do structural constraints influence their transitions? How do they subjectively experience the achievement of these outcomes? Studies of youth with disabilities indicate that they make the transition to adulthood successfully (Gortmaker, Perrin, Weitzman, Homer, and Sobol 1993; Malloy, Cheney, and Cormier 1998). Yet, the experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth suggest that schools

and families often provide negligible support (Friend 1993). How do their educational, work, and family transitions vary? What aspects of social context foster their development? To what extent do these experiences depend on other systems of oppression such as gender, race, and class?

There is clearly a need for additional research on the transition to adulthood as evidenced by this and other reviews (Furstenberg 2000; Shanahan 2000). This body of literature could be enhanced through a theoretical and empirical agenda that recognizes gender, race, and class as inter-dependent stratification systems as well as identifies strategies to eliminate oppression. What we gain from adopting this perspective is a more complete understanding of the experiences of youth and the development of social policies that improve the life chances and opportunities for all youth.

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ENDNOTES

1 I make a distinction between sex and gender. Sex is the socially agreed upon classification of biological differences whereas gender refers to our identities as “women” and “men” as well as the ways in which differences between women and men are created and embedded in our social arrangements (Hall 2000; West and Zimmerman 1987). When I refer to the indicator male/female in quantitative analysis, I use sex. When speaking of cumulative, pervasive differences between adolescent males and females (regardless of method), I use gender to denote that gender is embedded to social arrangements and the paths to outcomes associated with adult status are different for males and females.

2 Population projections are used for 2000 because the 2000 Census data for these statistics were not publicly available at the time of this writing. Percentages reported in this section were calculated by the author from the population projections in five-year age groups.