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The Markers and Meanings of Growing Up: Contemporary Young Women's Transition from Adolescence to Adulthood*

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Abstract

Growing up in the shadow of the women's movement has created contradictory life course and identity possibilities for young women. Although prior research has examined the formal markers of adulthood, we know little about how young women themselves perceive these markers. Forty-two in-depth interviews revealed that the subjective meanings of young women's transition to adulthood are actually far more complex than previously assumed. While becoming a parent and becoming financially independent were seen by interviewees as reflecting an adult orientation, completing schooling was tied to class-differentiated views of growing up. In addition, beginning full-time work was subjectively linked to future career uncertainty, and getting married did not diminish young women's emphasis on self-development and independence from men. Taken together, these findings indicate that there is a disjuncture between women's objective and subjective transition to adulthood. This study suggests that our previous understandings of the transition to adulthood do not reflect the full complexity of how young women subjectively experience it or the extent to which class impacts these perceptions.

Keywords

adolescence; transitions; adulthood; young women; identity; life course; class differences; feminism; women's movement

Introduction

Prior research has focused on the timing, sequencing, and effects of five key life events during the transition to adulthood: completing education, entering the labor force, becoming financially independent, getting married, and becoming a parent (Mortimer and author, 2000; Shanahan, 2000). The emphasis on these formal markers relies on the assumption that completing these role transitions signifies the acquisition of an adult status and social identity (Hogan, 1978; Marini, 1984; Buchmann, 1989). But what do young adults themselves think? Although recent studies have considered aspects of the subjective transition to adulthood, those that have taken a survey approach have not been able to fully capture the complex meanings that young people attribute to the process of growing up (e.g. Arnett, 1997; Benson and Furstenberg, In Press; Shanahan et al., 2005). Nor have interview studies on this topic

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systematically examined how young people think about each of the formal markers, and the gendered and class-based dimensions of growing up (e.g. Hartmann and Swartz, In Press). Scholars have, in fact, called for research on the identity construction process during early adulthood (Furstenberg, 2000), as well as the subjective meanings of formal role transitions during this life phase (Shanahan, 2000). The present study addresses these gaps through an analysis of in-depth interviews with young women.

Contemporary young women face contradictory life course and identity possibilities as they come of age in the shadow of the women's movement.¹ Although their identities may be influenced by many external factors (such as current economic conditions), the women's movement profoundly altered all areas of women's lives, including education, work, marriage and parenthood. Many young women, especially those who are more advantaged in their class backgrounds, have high achievement in education and employment, expect to "have it all" with respect to work and family, and have "semiconsciously incorporated feminist principles into their gender and kinship expectations and practices" (Stacey, 1991: 262). At the same time, although supportive of feminist goals, women in today's "postfeminist" era often reject or qualify a feminist label, and their identities reflect an ambiguous relationship to feminism (author, 2003). Women's life course expectations are also more discontinuous than men's, as they are more likely than men to express career ambivalence and to expect to leave employment when they become a parent (Moen and Orrange, 2002; Orrange, 2003). Furthermore, class differences greatly impact this life phase (Furstenberg et al., 2004; Hill and Yeung, 1999; Mortimer, 2003).

In this context of new life course possibilities, it is vital that we study the full complexity of young women's identities and the meanings that they themselves associate with moving into adult roles. An identity-oriented approach to the study of young women's lives is especially important in an era of expanded opportunities and choices. Consequently, this project looks skeptically at the assumption that the time-honored formal markers are automatically indicative of becoming an adult woman. Instead, I examine the subjective meanings of these formal makers from the perspective of young women themselves. Beginning research from women's standpoint allows us to hear their voices and puts their everyday experiences at the center of analysis (Smith, 1987). This strategy involves understanding the "presence and spoken experience of actual women speaking of and in the actualities of their everyday worlds" (Smith, 1987: 107). As this article will illustrate, our previous understandings of the life course are, in fact, out of sync with how young women actually experience it.

This article explores four central research questions. First, how do young women themselves perceive the formal transition markers typically assumed to constitute adulthood? Second, what is the relationship between formal markers and subjective understandings? Third, are there class differences in young women's subjective assessment of the formal markers? Finally, what do these subjective meanings suggest about young women's transition to adulthood today? In-depth interviews with 42 young women reveal that the subjective transition to adulthood is far more complex than previously assumed. While young women see becoming a parent and becoming financially independent as indicative of an adult orientation, completing schooling is instead tied to class-differentiated views of growing up. These interviewees subjectively linked beginning full-time work to career uncertainty, and emphasized self-development and independence from men despite the completion of the marker of marriage.

Together, these findings reveal a disjuncture between women's objective and subjective transition to adulthood. Simplifying the subjective meanings for the sake of clean analytical categories in our research may be problematic because it obscures the way that young women

¹I would like to thank Karen Lutfey for this phrase.

actually experience life transitions. In fact, young women's identities, especially those of differing class backgrounds, may be too complicated for the life course categories currently used to study the transition to adulthood. When we take seriously the role of identity in young women's lives, we learn that the experience of growing up in the shadow of the women's movement is an extremely nuanced and contradictory process.

Literature Review

Studies of the transition to adulthood among both men and women typically focus on quite visible "formal" markers of adulthood (Mortimer and author, 2000; Shanahan, 2000; Hogan and Astone, 1986). Adult status is generally designated not by a single event, but by involvement in a number of adult-like activities (Mortimer, 1992). The transition to adulthood has changed historically in substance, timing and sequencing (Mortimer and author, 2000; Mortimer, 1992; Shanahan, 2000)—it has become "a more extended, diversified, and increasingly individualized period" (Buchmann, 1989: 187). While the middle of the twentieth century was characterized by a concentrated set of adult markers, the movement into such roles has since been extended (Modell, 1989), and become more variable in sequencing (Shanahan, 2000). In this new historical context, individuals' identities and choices take on greater importance (Modell, 1989; Peters, Guit and Rooijen, 1992).

Historical changes in the economy, education, work, marriage, and parenthood have significantly impacted the transition to adulthood. Some scholars argue that this period of life should be considered a distinct phase called "emerging adulthood," characterized by identity exploration, freedom from adult roles and norms and experimentation in education, work, and love (Arnett, 2000). While a time of positive experimentation, this phase can also be quite stressful. Flexibility in the life course may reduce the likelihood that youth will develop long-term, stable expectations (Buchmann, 1989). Young people are more likely to be depressed than were their parents or grandparents (Seligman, 1988). Over one-quarter of some samples of 18 to 24 year olds reporting bouts of chronic depression, and nearly one-quarter report low levels of life satisfaction (Aquilino, 1999).

More young adults pursue postsecondary education today than in past (over 60 percent in the year following high school--Arnett, 2000), and, as a result, delay the entry into the full-time labor market (Modell, 1989; Peters et al., 1992). Despite high educational aspirations and rates of postsecondary attendance, many young adults have difficulty establishing a career path and identity (Mortimer et al., 2002). A rapidly changing global economy has resulted an insecure employment market, deteriorating opportunities (Hill and Yeung, 1999; Mortimer, 2003), a decline in life-long occupations, and recognition that career trajectories are often unstable (Buchmann, 1989). Young adults may be socialized to expect career uncertainty and to play a greater role in creating their own career paths (Moen and Orrange, 2002). After high school, and even after college, many young people "flounder" during the transition to work, moving from one job to another (Mortimer, 2003; Mortimer et al., 2002). As a result, the transition to financial and residential independence is more "fragile" and reversible than it was in the past (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1999).

Young people who do not attend college in today's service and information-based economy are often relegated to the secondary labor market, in jobs that are low paying, routine, and menial (Hill and Yeung, 1999; Borman, 1991; Borman and Hopkins, 1987). There is a widening gulf in opportunities and wages between those young adults with more education and skills and those with less, especially poor and minority young adults (Aquilino, 1999; Hill and Yeung, 1999; Oppenheimer and Lewin, 1999; Tanner and Yabiku, 1999). Some working class youth respond to the lack of opportunities by engaging in a "strategy" to find alternative paths for achievement (Mortimer, 2003). In contrast to their advantaged counterparts (who more often

focus on educational attainment), youth from lower class backgrounds are more likely to obtain higher paying, more rewarding, and also more demanding and stressful jobs while they are still in high school (Mortimer, 2003). They are also more likely to pursue vocational training that prepares them for jobs (Gaskell, 1992; Weis, 1990). Because college attendance tends to delay the entry into adult work and family roles, working class youth typically make the transition to adulthood more rapidly than middle class youth (Buchmann, 1989; Furstenberg et al., 2004). However, those who move into adult work and family roles earlier are more likely to have unstable career paths and relationships (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1999).

The movement into adult family roles like marriage has also changed historically in terms of both its timing and the extent to which it operates as subjective signifier of adulthood (Furstenberg et al., 2004; Modell, 1989). For example, during the post World War II period, as people married earlier than they had before, marriage itself became less indicative of the entry into adulthood, and was seen instead as only one step in the process of growing up (Modell, 1989). Women's median age at first marriage has risen from nearly 21 years old in 1970 to 25 years old in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Coupled with a high divorce rate, and perhaps due in part to economic insecurity (Furstenberg, 2000; Oppenheimer and Lewin, 1999; Shanahan, 2000), there is now a "widespread awareness of the fragility of marriage" (White, 1999: 63). More young people than in the past cohabit or live away from their parents' home prior to getting married (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1993). With marriage and parenthood now seen as "optional" aspects of adulthood, establishing a non-family, independent household has now become a normative marker (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1993, 1999). Although nearly 60 percent of young adults approve of cohabitation (White, 1999), these relationships are less stable than marriage (Van der Vliet, 1992). Today, marriage may be viewed as independent from becoming an adult: almost half of General Social Survey respondents agree that one can be an adult without marriage or parenthood (Furstenberg et al., 2004). However, little is known about the meanings that young women give to their own transition to marriage in the present era.

The transition to parenthood has also been delayed over time and is increasingly decoupled from marriage (Furstenberg et al., 1987). In 1960, 60 percent of women aged 20 to 24, and three-quarters of women aged 25 to 29 had become parents (White, 1999). Forty years later, the percent of women with children in these age groups had declined to 33 and 55 percent, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Nonmarital births now constitute one-third of all births (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002), and new norms have been created with respect to single parenting. White (1999: 59) reports that half of young adults think it is "all right to have a child without being married," and forty percent accept this statement when applied to themselves personally. Subjectively, the transition to parenthood can deeply impact women's identities (McMahon, 1995). McMahon (1995: 266) found that motherhood helped working class women establish themselves as "grown up," since they saw themselves as becoming an adult "through having a child." In contrast, middle class women perceived themselves as wanting to reach maturity and womanhood to be "ready" for motherhood (McMahon, 1995). For poor, African American, urban teenage mothers, parenthood often represents the acquisition of an adult status and is considered a positive step in development (Burton, Obeidallah & Allison, 1996). Similarly, women in poor neighborhoods often choose single parenthood because they place a high value on children, yet view marriage as a difficult goal to achieve (Edin and Kefalas, 2005).

Although this body of research on the transition to adulthood provides important insights into how young people think about adult roles like marriage and parenthood, these studies tend to focus on one sphere of life. How do young adults think about the multiple markers of adulthood? Arnett (1997, 2000) found that young adults often reject formal role transitions as subjective markers of adulthood, in favor of more intangible, psychological and individualistic

orientations. Over three-quarters agreed that “decid[ing] on own beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences” was necessary for adulthood, while over 90 percent agreed that adulthood included “accept[ing] responsibility for the consequences of your actions” (Arnett, 1997: 10). Of the role transitions typically studied, only financial and residential independence were viewed as necessary for adulthood by a majority of respondents (between 55 and 73 percent agreed—Arnett, 1997). Other researchers have found that both demographic markers and personal, individualistic criteria matter (Shanahan et al., 2005; Johnson et al., 2006). Shanahan et al. (2005) found that the completion of family transition markers, especially parenthood, was related to self-perceived adulthood. In Benson and Furstenberg’s (In Press) sample, parenthood was significant for women but not for men, while cohabiting and getting married were not associated with feeling like an adult. The combination of transitions also mattered: full-time employment was not enough in itself to lead to feeling like an adult—it had to be coupled with residential independence (Benson and Furstenberg, In Press). Johnson and her collaborators (In Press, 2006) found racial and class differences in whether young people felt like adults, suggesting that delaying adult feelings may be a luxury of more advantaged youth. Although these studies go a long way toward examining subjective perceptions, their survey approach does not tease out the complicated meanings that young people attribute to the multiple formal markers of adulthood.

Recently, Hartmann and Swartz (In Press) examined the process of becoming an adult through in-depth interviews with both men and women. They found that young adults define adulthood in terms of a constellation or accumulation of roles rather than the achievement of a single marker. Although interviewees discussed individualistic qualities and characteristics (such as maturity and responsibility), they directly linked them to social roles and the achievement of particular statuses. They also viewed becoming an adult as a dynamic, uneven, and quite lengthy process. But while Hartmann and Swartz (In Press) provide new insights about how young people define adulthood, they do not systematically analyze the subjects’ perceptions of each of the formal transition markers, the unique experiences of young women, or class differences in this life phase. This article attempts to fill these gaps in the literature.

It is vital to understand the experiences of young women because they come of age in a contradictory environment. On the one hand, the majority of women with infants now work outside of the home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002), leading them to focus simultaneously on work and family (Moen, 1992). Both adolescent boys and girls have similar achievement and employment aspirations (Mortimer, 2003; Stevens, Puchtell, Ryu and Mortimer, 1992; Dennehy and Mortimer, 1994), resulting in young women’s “double life concept” (Geissler and Kruger, 1992) or “have it all” approach to work and family (Sidel, 1990). This orientation may begin during adolescence, as girls, more so than boys, perceive their high school jobs favorably and attach importance to future careers (Mortimer, 2003). Girls also have higher educational expectations than boys (Mahaffy and Ward, 2002).

These changes in work and family are linked to changing gender roles more generally. During adolescence, girls “try on gender,” especially during transition periods, like the beginning of high school (Williams, 2002). However, they not only “try on” femininity, but also approach gender roles tenuously or with resistance (Williams, 2002). Similarly, both young men and women define their identities in ways that defy traditional gender roles, as they desire an opportunity both to care for others and be autonomous individuals (Gerson, 2002). Women may, in fact, experience benefits of multiple life possibilities and costs associated with traditional gender roles (Giele and Holst, 2004). Even in the arena of sexuality, traditional roles are deteriorating and women exhibit a sense of agency (Carpenter, 2002).

On the other hand, employment often fails to alter the traditional responsibilities associated with being a wife and mother (Moen, 1992; Hochschild, 1989). Because most workplaces and

work-family policies do not adequately accommodate family responsibilities, many couples make traditional gender choices when they have children (Hochschild, 2000; Singley and Hynes, 2005). As a result, women experience more conflict and disjuncture between work and family than do men (Moen and Orrange, 2002; Moen, 1992). While young men do not expect family roles to impact their career aspirations, women “are talking career but thinking job:” they have less specific career expectations and expect to interrupt work for child-rearing (Machung, 1989: 52–53), expect the timing of childbearing to influence their educational attainment (Mahaffy and Ward, 2002), have more career uncertainty and ambivalence (Orrange, 2003), and more often expect to “scale back” on their careers to adjust for family responsibilities (Gerson, 2002; Moen and Orrange, 2002). As Gerson (2002: 22) puts it, “even as [men and women] are developing similar ideals, they are preparing for different outcomes.” Although career uncertainty has become a norm for both young men and women in today’s economy, young men tend to view their careers in a linear fashion, while even career-oriented women (such as law and MBA students) view their future career paths as contingent on family plans (Gerson, 2002; Orrange, 2003; Moen and Orrange, 2002). Given this situation, although they do admire older women, young women have very few positive “life models” (people whose life paths they want to emulate—author, In Press).

The meanings that young women associate with the formal markers of adulthood provide an important addition to our understanding of the complex process of becoming an adult woman today. To this end, the present study explores young women’s subjective assessments of the five primary formal markers of adulthood: completing schooling, beginning full-time work, becoming financially independent, getting married, and becoming a parent. After outlining the methods, I will examine interviewees’ subjective perceptions of each of these formal markers.

Method

The women interviewed in this project were members of the Youth Development Study, an ongoing longitudinal study of adolescent development and the transition to adulthood. The Y.D.S. panel was randomly chosen from a list of enrolled ninth grade students in St. Paul, Minnesota. Respondents completed surveys annually, with the first year (ninth grade) in 1988 and the eighth year in 1995. Of the original 1,000 panel members who took part in the first year of data collection, the Youth Development Study retained 77.5% over an eight-year period (see Mortimer, 2003 for a complete description of the sample). When it began, the Youth Development Study sample was representative of students in the St. Paul public school district (Finch et al., 1991). Comparisons between the first and tenth waves reveal that the panel remaining is quite similar demographically and in terms of key indicators (Mortimer, 2003).²

The present interview sub-sample draws on information obtained through the eighth wave of data collection, when the 448 female respondents were mostly 21 and 22 years old. Following Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) suggestions for theoretical sampling, interviewees were chosen to represent trajectories of experience (particularly with regard to education, parenthood, and careers), as well as to obtain class and racial diversity. Three groups were targeted: those who had spent a significant amount of time in post-secondary education, those who became parents (typically teenage mothers), and those who had considerable investment in full-time work in the years following high school (See Table 1).³ I sought to obtain a sample that was diverse, as well as one with roughly equal numbers of women in each group.⁴

²There were some differences between the first and tenth wave in terms of racial background (the original sample was nearly 74 percent white, while wave 10 was 80 percent white), country of birth (the original sample had nearly 93 percent native born, compared to nearly 94 percent ten waves later), and gender (the original sample was nearly 48 percent male, while wave 10 was 43 percent male—Mortimer, 2003). At the same time, the sample remained quite similar over time in class background, school engagement and achievement, labor force involvement, and mental health (Mortimer, 2003).

In all, 138 women were invited to be interviewed; 42 consented by returning a postcard indicating their interest.⁵ Interviews took place between 1996 and 1997.⁶ These women, age 23–24 at the time of the interviews, were diverse; one-third were women of color, and they had a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds (See Table 2). The interview sample was quite comparable in class and racial background to the Youth Development Study sample overall.⁷

Interviews were conducted face to face, in a place chosen by the participant. Typically, people were interviewed in their homes, although some interviews were conducted in coffee shops or other locations. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. The interview guide covered a range of themes, including: respondents' feelings about different spheres of their lives (education, work, relationships, and children); their feelings about the differences between their current paths and the paths they expected to take when they were in high school; major turning points they experienced; which areas of their lives made them happy, disappointed, proud, and insecure; and their goals and plans for the future.

The interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to three hours, although most lasted one and one-half hours. The interviews were "structured conversations" (Taylor and Rupp 1991: 126), allowing space for participants to bring up issues they found to be important. After each interview, I wrote field notes, including the main themes, my reflections, and emerging research questions. Transcriptions were analyzed according to Glaser and Strauss' (1967) inductive principles for constructing grounded theory. A qualitative data analysis program (Q.S.R. N.U.D.I.S.T, 1996) facilitated the identification and organization of emergent themes. The first marker I will consider, completing education, complicates our understanding of the transition to adulthood because it is linked with class-differentiated views of growing up.

Subjective Meanings of the Formal Markers of Becoming an Adult

Completing Education

The women in this study demonstrated class differences in both the types of education they pursued and how the interviewees perceived the goals and outcomes of education. Those who finished their education at high school graduation or pursued community college or vocational

³In a survey that closely followed my interviews, many respondents in the larger Youth Development Study sample were well on their way toward the acquisition of adult roles. In 1998, when respondents were 24 to 25 years old, one-quarter of the Youth Development Study sample had received a Bachelor's degree (Mortimer, 2003). Among those who were employed, thirty-two percent of the panel were employed in their chosen career, thirty-nine percent were working in a job that provided them with career-relevant skills, while 28 percent said their current job was unrelated to their career or that they did not know whether it was related (Mortimer, 2003). In the same year, 25 percent of respondents were cohabiting, 26 percent were married, 38 percent had become parents, and 64 percent lived independently of their parents (Mortimer, 2003). There were gender differences in these transitions, with women considerably more likely to be married, cohabiting, or already parents (Mortimer, 2003).

⁴I oversampled from those groups who might be likely to have a lower response rate: women of color, women from working class backgrounds, and those who had become mothers. I should note that processes of selection into particular paths shape the transition to adulthood. For example, once one becomes a parent, one is less likely to complete a bachelor's degree.

⁵There were some demographic differences between those who consented to participate and those who did not, with the highest affirmative response rate from the most advantaged women. Thirty-five percent of the white women and 23.3 percent of the women of color whom I invited agreed to be interviewed. Similarly, 45.2 percent of upper-middle class women consented to be interviewed, as did 25.6 percent of middle class women, 16.2 percent of working class women, and 37.9 percent of women whose class backgrounds were initially unknown. Women in the "school" group were also more likely to respond favorably (38.6 percent, compared to 28.6 percent of the parent group and 24.4 percent of the "labor force" group).

⁶The women in this study are currently in their early 30s, and they are continuing to be surveyed by the Youth Development Study. My interviews captured their experiences when they were on the cusp of adulthood, a critical moment in the life course. Although the interviews were conducted several years ago, the findings are still extremely relevant to the process of coming of age today. Although some changes have occurred in the social and economic environment, young women today continue to face the contradictory issues discussed in this article.

⁷The sub-sample contained quite similar proportions of working and middle class respondents, a slightly larger proportion of upper-middle class respondents, and fewer unknown cases than the Youth Development Study sample as a whole. The interview sub-sample contained a greater proportion of minority respondents than existed in the sample overall (see author, 1999).

degrees were disproportionately from working class backgrounds, whereas middle class women disproportionately pursued four-year degrees. When asked about their experiences, the first group emphasized the ways that their schooling prepared them for their subsequent full-time work. They focused on gaining specific skills that would quickly move them into the work world and provide credentials that would help them make specific advancements in their jobs.

For example, one working class woman who attended a secretarial program at a business college said that her school “really prepared you for what it was going to be like once you started working full time.” She contrasted this approach with one that emphasizes identity exploration. She said: “I don’t want to go to school and be one of those people [who ...] takes 15 classes and still doesn’t know what they want to do.”⁸ Another interviewee, a mother from a working class background, had worked full time while pursuing her associate’s degree. She was the first person in her family to attend college of any kind, and viewed her associate’s degree as providing her and her son with important advancement potential. As she put it, “I was pregnant when I was 17, before I graduated [from high school]. ... I want my son to have a better opportunity than what I did. So I knew that I had to change my life... so I went into nursing.” Another working class woman emphasized the credential aspect of education in the following quote: “I like school. I like it a lot. But I also don’t have the money or the time to waste doing something that is not going to work out for me.” Similarly, another woman wanted to gain specific skills she could utilize in her retail work, so she signed up for an eighteen-month program geared explicitly toward learning retail skills. She said that after the program: “I was eager to get back out in the work force and start doing what I had learned at school.”

For this group, graduations were often seen as important and significant events, as they represented a successful completion of one phase of life. One working class woman, for example, dropped out of high school at age 16, but later received her G.E.D.. She described her proud and excited feelings about her graduation as follows:

Everybody was preparing for me to graduate. And it was a big deal to everybody in my whole house. ... It felt so good to know that because I made this accomplishment, you know, this was great ... it was wonderful. ... I felt ... like you feel on Christmas. You can’t sleep, you can’t eat, you can’t do anything, and you’re so anxious to know what you got, you know? But ... I think it was even better than Christmas. It was such a great feeling. It still feels good.

Thus, working class interviewees typically emphasized the importance of gaining credentials and skills from their education. They saw its completion in positive terms, leading them into the work world and representing a significant life achievement.

In contrast, identity exploration was the focus for most of those interviewees who were middle class and had attended four-year colleges. Reflecting normative middle class ideology, these women never made what one interviewee called “a conscious decision” to go to college—they just assumed that it was the appropriate path for them. As one put it, going to college “was just expected of me. It was never, like, I decided one day, ‘Wow, I think I’m going to go to college.’ It was just, you know, when I go. It was never a question of not going. ... That’s just the way it was, the way I was brought up.” Another woman echoed this theme: “It wasn’t, ‘Am I going to college?’ It was, ‘Where am I going to college and what school can I get into?’”

Once in college, these interviewees focused on exploring their interests, talents, and identities and delaying becoming an adult. College was a time for many to develop themselves socially and to explore their academic interests. For example, one middle class woman emphasized the

⁸Underlining represents emphasis in interviewees’ speech.

extent to which college was focused on identity exploration rather than career development when she said:

During undergrad you're ... expected to explore different fields.... I was one of those [people], taking a lot of classes just for fun. Like this is the only time in my life where I'll be able to take ballroom dancing ... and skating. ... I really didn't think of the practical component, because it was just something that you did after high school, not that it's something you're supposed to develop a career with.

Another interviewee directly described her decision to go to college as a way to avoid taking on adult responsibilities: "My mom pretty much gave me the ultimatum: 'Either you go to college and I'll help you [financially] ..., or you move out [and] you do it all on your own.'"

For many of these interviewees, graduating from college was a difficult and stressful experience. To describe their feelings about graduating, they used words like "panic," "fearful," "down," "lost," "nervous," and "frightened." For some, distress was caused by confronting the reality that they did not feel like adults. One woman told me that she "sabotaged" her graduation to avoid having to get "a real full-time job." Another woman said that she expected to feel "magically" different, but that she "didn't feel a whole lot more grown up." These feelings often resulted from continued career uncertainty, suggesting that they may have expected to have their career paths figured out by the time of college graduation. One woman reported "panic sessions." She said that graduating made her think: "'What am I going to do with the rest of my life?' Like it was a big gaping hole! ... Like I could just step in and never be heard from again!" Similarly, for another interviewee, graduation meant confronting her career goals, and she found this process quite difficult. As she put it, "when graduation came, I was very frightened, because I didn't know if I wanted to be a lawyer. I didn't know if I wanted to go to law school or grad[uate] school.... So graduation was kind of scary."

Thus, not only was pursuing postsecondary education a class-differentiated process among the women in my sample, but those from different class backgrounds perceived the goals and outcomes of education quite differently. Class differences can result in the choice of particular schooling pathways and orientations, while attending certain educational programs may help to reinforce different conceptions of the purposes and outcomes of education. These feelings are not addressed in prior research, which assumes that education serves uniform goals and purposes, and leads to feeling like an adult upon its completion.

Beginning Full-Time Work

Full-time work often represents an important marker of adulthood, as it can lead to financial and residential independence. At the time of the interviews, two-thirds (28) of the women in my sample were working full time, while the rest were working part time, in school and not working, or out of the labor force for other reasons (such as caring for their young children). When asked about their work, a quarter of the full-time workers discussed feeling established and satisfied with their current jobs, while the rest of those who worked full time discussed instead future work uncertainty.

Of the 42 interviewees, only 7 felt established and satisfied with their current jobs and fields, and saw them as relatively permanent. This group included both those who had gone to work immediately following high school and those who had entered their jobs after graduating from college. For example, one woman described her orientation as follows: "I'm at a gas station where I'm committed [to a] 401K, and that's where I'm going to be and that's it. ... I work at a gas station and people always [think], hell, that's usually more of a temporary job, something you do to get somewhere else. But for me, this is what I'm good at." Another woman, who worked in accounting, felt certain about both her job and employer:

I really like the company. It's a great company. They really are good to their employees, and I can't imagine, I have no reason to leave the company. ... I think this is like the perfect field for me. It's great, you know, it's a lot of opportunity, different areas, good salary opportunities. It's a great job I think.

In contrast, over half of the interviewees felt extremely uncertain about their career paths, although most of these women had already started full-time work. Career uncertainty was expressed both by interviewees employed in low-paying service jobs with little possibility for advancement and those who were on career tracks in the fields that they had studied in college. For example, one woman who had gone to college but had not graduated at the time of the interview told me that she felt more certain about getting her two tattoos than she felt about her career goals. She said: "at least those two times in my life, I knew exactly what I wanted. I knew what tattoo I wanted. I knew where I wanted [them]. Now I have no clue anymore. ... A tattoo is a lifetime commitment. That's the one thing that I know I'm stuck with."

Expecting their careers to change over the course of their lives was the norm. As one woman put it, "my goals are always, always, always, always changing. Every time I decide on something permanent, it changes." As another put it: "I just can't make a commitment. ... I haven't found something that I just want to cling on to. So, I don't know. I think I'll just drift for awhile in jobs." This orientation may reflect both the decline in life-long occupations and the expansion of women's career opportunities, which has created new career choices. Many of the interviewees felt that their options were wide open, and that they simply needed to choose among them. For example, one woman who had a full-time job in the field she studied in college attributed her career uncertainty to living in an era of "choices." As she put it:

I realize that, with my generation, we aren't doing one thing for the span of our lives. ... I still haven't figured out where I want to end up. ... I've considered pretty much the run of the gambit. I think I'm lucky to be in the United States in this era when I do have so many choices. ... And I wouldn't give that up for anything in the world, but that makes it harder to figure out what it is you want when you can do anything in my talent range. I guess I probably won't be an astronaut or a nuclear physicist."

This career uncertainty may be linked to their youthful age. For example, one woman said that after college graduation: "I'm ... trying to find my bearings." She went on to discuss multiple travel and career options and concluded: "it used to really bug me, but ... I'm only 24." This reference to what she saw as a young age was reflected in others' comments, as they reported feeling "young" and not yet "grown up." As another woman employed in a full-time, career-oriented job, stated: "I've been trying to figure out what I want to do when I grow up! If I'm not there already!" Yet another mentioned that all young people today seem to be "struggling to find a niche for themselves." This was a result of both internal questioning (as she put it, "men and women alike that are my age [are] ... struggling with 'well, what exactly is it that I want to be doing?') and external realities (as she phrased it, "'How do I get my foot in the door?"). While the interviewees felt that it was acceptable to delay long-term career decisions temporarily, they hoped to resolve them eventually. Thus although career uncertainty may impact all workers, there may be an age-graded effect of the economy on young adults' perception of the transition to full-time work (see also Mortimer et al., 2002).

Career uncertainty may also be gendered (Moen and Orrange, 2002; Orrange, 2003). Many of the women questioned their own abilities and linked their lack of confidence to their own career uncertainty. For example, concern about her ability to achieve her goals prompted one woman to avoid planning altogether: "I don't have definite plans. ... But maybe that's why I don't have plans. ... I don't have plans to get messed up." Another interviewee was concerned that she would never be able to figure out where her "passion lies" in terms of her career and would thus continue to have career ambivalence. Another woman (who was in law school at the time

of the interview) felt that her success resulted in part from luck and in part from deceiving others into thinking that she was capable. As a result, she was afraid of her “luck running out” and “being found out.” Her lack of confidence in her abilities is reflected in her approach to planning for the future, which she described in gendered terms:

Men are more confident ... in their outlook, in their ability to succeed. I mean, just speaking from me and my friends, I think that my women friends seem to be more cautious, like always have a plan B, because just in case, there's always that failure option, whereas the men I know are always, you know, I want this, and they just go right at it to get it. ... They seem more confident in their path, whereas, I think women expect more obstacles, so therefore they plan for it.

In addition to its gendered nature, career ambivalence may be tied to anticipated or actual difficulty combining work and family. As I have reported elsewhere (author, 1999), most of the women in this sample who were not yet mothers were optimistic about combining work and motherhood, although they were often vague about how they would work out conflicting demands. Those who were already mothers did, in fact, experience great difficulty balancing work and motherhood (author, 1999). Thus, career uncertainty was widespread in my sample, and appears to have both age-specific and gender-specific elements.

Financial Independence

About half of the 23–24 year old women I interviewed were financially dependent and one-third lived with their parents at the time of the interview. The middle and upper-middle class interviewees and those who had pursued several years of higher education were somewhat more likely to be still relying on their parents for financial assistance than were those from working class backgrounds and those who had become parents early on. For my interviewees, financial independence was seen as a complicated negotiation process, not a given, even after obtaining a full-time job, and many had encountered significant financial struggle. Although there were class and life experience differences in the timing of the movement into this adult role, both those who had and had not achieved financial independence considered it an important feature of becoming an adult. When I asked them to tell me about the major turning points of their lives, many described financial independence from their parents as an important theme.

The women who were financially independent emphasized the importance of being on their “own:” having their own apartment or house, car, and money. Achieving independence resulted in feeling self-sufficient, independent and competent. For example, one woman told me that she was proud of “living on my own, taking care of myself, [and] earning my own money.” Another said: “it’s a good feeling” to be able to take “responsibility for all my own finances.” Financial independence allowed these women to move into their own apartments or houses, resulting in a new relationship with their parents and creating a sense of feeling grown up. For example, one woman said that “moving out of my parents’ house was a different kind of freedom and independence--just to be able to take care of myself and not have to rely on them for anything, you know, emotionally, financially, or whatever.”

As is common during this life phase, this process was often wrought with struggle. For one young woman, this struggle included bankruptcy. Another interviewee moved into her own apartment at age 20 when she was working full time, yet acquired a great deal of credit card debt, resulting in “stress” and “anxiety attacks.” By the time of the interview, she felt that she had overcome her “disease” and achieved financial independence in a healthy way. She contrasted her own independence from others her age:

I am my own person. I don't need the support of anybody else, at least financially. That's a big, big step I still know people [who ...] live at home. They're 23 years old.

They're living at home. They're driving their parents' car.... I feel ... pretty proud of myself I'm 23, I work two jobs and go to school. I have my own place. I have my own car.

Those who were financially dependent on their parents felt discouraged about their situation and often agreed that such independence was tied to feeling like an adult. For example, one woman said that her parents "give me a whole lot of freedom at home," but that living with them results in not feeling "like an adult." This dependence led many of my interviewees to feel "disappointed" or "bad" about their situations. Although they felt emotionally "ready to move out" (in the words of one respondent), many lacked the necessary resources. Typically, it was the combination of both debt (from credit cards and school loans) and low wage jobs that delayed entry into this status. Although a number worked full time, they could not afford an independent residence. One single mother who lived with her parents and worked full time, but had only just begun to earn wages over the poverty line, told me that she did not want to "be struggling forever." Similarly, one college graduate who earned "a decent salary" working full time in her chosen field was in debt as a result of school loans. She was "not thrilled" about living with her parents and wanted her life to move a little "faster." She spoke about the difficulty of being in her twenties, and how she wished she could "bypass the twenties, and just get to thirty, because that's when all of your hard work starts paying off." This desire reflected frustration about the inability to achieve financial independence from her parents.

In sum, achieving financial independence was important, yet difficult, for these interviewees. In contrast to earlier eras, these women did not see marriage as a way to obtain financial independence, but instead expected to achieve it on their own (see also Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1993, 1999). Both those who had obtained financial independence, and those who had not, viewed this formal marker as pivotal to their subjective perception of growing up. Other studies have also found that financial independence is important for feeling like an adult (Arnett, 1997; Benson and Furstenberg, In Press; Shanahan et al., 2005).

Getting Married

Getting married is a somewhat contradictory transition for young women today. Despite high divorce rates and an awareness of its "fragility," most young people place a high value on marriage (Hill and Yeung, 1999; White 1999). While the marker of marriage has historically been linked to becoming an adult woman, many people today believe that one can be an adult without marriage (Furstenberg et al., 2004). Given this context, it is not surprising that young women reflected these contradictions in their subjective assessments of this transition.

Half of the interviewees were involved in committed relationships (10 of these women were married), while the remaining half were single.⁹ The married interviewees were disproportionately white,¹⁰ and were more likely than the non-married women to have children. A number of those who were married viewed this transition as an important turning point in their lives. However, getting married was not seen as a turning point by itself, but was instead connected to other adult transitions, especially moving into an independent residence, becoming financially independent, and becoming a parent. For example, a middle class, white

⁹Three women were engaged, 2 were cohabitating, 6 were in exclusive relationships, and 1 was divorced and involved in a new relationship. Although none directly labeled themselves as lesbians, two suggested this possibility. One woman was questioning her sexuality; the other (who had been in prison since she was a teenager) suggested that her intimate relationships had been with women, although she was looking forward to a relationship with a man.

¹⁰Nine of the ten married women were white.

woman said that in “the past seven months, I’ve just become an adult.” She elaborated as follows:

Since I got married, it seems like all these adult things are happening to me. I’m an aunt. I’ll be a godmother. I bought a house. It’s like I’m not at that middle stage anymore between teenage and adult years. I feel much more mature. And because of those turning points, they’ve made me mature. [...] Now I actually feel like an adult in this world. Where before when I was just 20 [or] 21, it was like I was stuck in between. Like I was almost in limbo And I almost felt like I didn’t know where I belonged in this world.

Similarly, when I asked another woman about turning points in her life, she mentioned getting married, but then linked it to financial responsibility. When her husband handed her “the checkbook, saying ‘here, you keep track of this,’” her reaction to this new responsibility was surprise (as she put it, “Oh, my goodness!”). One mother listed marriage as one of three turning points in her life: “[my child’s] birth, our marriage, and graduating school.” Thus, getting married was not singled out by itself as a turning point to these young women, but was instead seen as part of a constellation of adult-like roles (See also Hartmann and Swartz, *In Press*).

Even more striking among the women’s subjective perceptions was the extent to which they expressed a sense of independence from men. Regardless of marital status and racial or class background, nearly all of the women I interviewed emphasized the importance of establishing their own identities apart from their relationships with men as central to growing up. Embedded in their discussions of relationships was an emphasis on choice: their relationships with men were not necessary for the achievement of an adult identity (see also author, 1999). This orientation reflects Stacey’s (1991) finding that women have “semiconsciously incorporated” feminist ideologies into their everyday lives. These perceptions also suggest a cultural redefinition of marriage whereby marriage is not necessary for sex, cohabitation, or becoming a parent (Edin and Kafalas, 2005).

Among those who were already married, there was an emphasis on self-development both within, and despite, their relationships. For some women, this was discussed in terms of making time and space for themselves. One newly married woman told me that she and her husband were “figuring out how you want your relationship to be, so that you can be together but still really have your independence and still have your own time.” For others, this was described in terms of pursuing their educations and careers despite marriage. One married woman told me that she had some conflict with her husband about going to college and pursuing a career because he felt that “the man is supposed to support his family.” Despite his opinion, she planned to get a Master’s degree and continue to work. She described the situation as follows: “My husband said: ‘I don’t think so! But ... I want to do it, and I know I will.’”

Similarly, a few of these women had delayed marrying the fathers of their children at the time their children were born, but did so several years later, when they felt more “ready” for marriage (see also Edin and Kafalas, 2005). The emphasis on independence from men despite the presence of children was also apparent among women who were engaged or had been in long-term committed relationships. For example, one woman who had been in a relationship with a man for a couple of years but was unsure about marrying him, said: “I’ve planned one thing out. If I’m not married by the time I’m thirty, I’m going to start thinking about having a child by myself.” Another did not count on her relationship with her boyfriend to become permanent, but instead focused on the importance of her relationship with her child: “I just decided, you know, it’s going to be me and [my son].”

A number of the women maintained their independence through long-distance relationships, using words like “freedom,” “independence,” and “space” to describe the positive side of their

situation. For example, one engaged woman had been in a separate state from her fiancée for nearly three years, and they had not gone to college in the same city prior to that time. She said that she was “glad that he did go” out of state because it allowed her to develop during the period she called her “critical growing years.” She said that having this type of relationship allowed her to develop and strengthen important friendships, as well as to “be living on my own and supporting myself and ... knowing I can do it.” Thus, in contrast to feeling grown up as a result of being married or in a serious relationship, self-sufficiency was a central theme.

The interviewees who were not involved in relationships echoed the theme of independence from men, as they sometimes explicitly chose to delay marriage and/or serious relationships in favor of self-development. One woman, for example, said:

I’m independent. And I think to a certain extent men either don’t like that or they get intimidated by that perhaps. And what scares me, the more time goes by, the more I have these expectations of what I want in a man, what I want in a relationship, and as soon as I see something that’s not what I want, it’s like, “Psst, bye.”

Another interviewee described how the age at which she expected to get married continued to get pushed back the older she got:

When I’m, like, thirty years old, or late twenties or whatever, I might be able to deal with the marriage thing. ... I don’t have a clue as far as ... specifics, like what age I would [say for marriage]. I think progressively as I get older, I push back the age that I want to get married.

Several women explicitly recognized the role of high divorce rates and financial instability in shaping their marriage plans. For example, one woman said she was “waiting to get married” until she was “ready.” Although she had been dating her boyfriend since high school, the incidence of divorce in her family led her to delay marriage until she and her boyfriend were more secure financially and more “ready” emotionally. Others put off marriage for self-development and career development reasons—to complete their schooling, get their careers underway, or learn how, in the words of one woman, to “take care of me.” For a few women, delaying marriage was associated with a history of difficult relationships, including domestic violence and dealing with the “irresponsible” fathers of their children. As one single mother of two children put it, “I don’t blame men or anything like that, but I just don’t trust them, point blank. And I live alone. ... Men are not a priority.”

These interviewees felt that it was not necessary to get married to become an adult woman (see also Edin and Kafalas, 2005). Instead, they emphasized the importance of developing their own identities as a defining feature of growing up. The theme of independence is related to feminist ideologies about women’s self-reliance and self-development, and many of these interviewees themselves discussed the legacy of the women’s movement in these terms (author, 2003). These perceptions may also reflect the fragility of marriage, as interviewees talked about their reasons for delaying marriage, including their concerns about divorce. Ambivalence about marriage may also be linked to worries surrounding economic self-sufficiency, as young adults may prefer to postpone marriage until they feel more secure (Edin and Kafalas, 2005; Furstenberg et al., 2004).

Becoming a Parent

By age 23–24, one-third (14) of my interview sample had become mothers. Reflecting increasingly high national rates of single parenthood, only one interviewee was married prior to becoming a parent. None of these women were cohabiting, although a few were in romantic relationships. Becoming a parent was a class-differentiated transition, but not a race-differentiated one.¹¹

The majority of my interviewees who were mothers got pregnant accidentally, typically during high school. Although they viewed their unplanned pregnancies as the result of immature behavior, the process of becoming a parent helped them become responsible. They used words like “mature” and “grown up” to describe the impact of becoming a parent, and described taking financial responsibility for raising their children, either on their own or through the support of public assistance. The new mothers devoted their lives to parenting “24 [hours a day], 7 [days a week].” For example, one woman described how motherhood meant a change in her plans to go away to college, ending her “carefree” teenage years, and increased maturity. As she put it, “having my son was a major turning point in my life. I mean, it changed my entire life. It changed all the plans that I ever had had for myself. It really made me more mature, made me grow up a lot.” Another teen mom, who had been abusing drugs and alcohol and skipping school prior to her pregnancy, also experienced a transformation:

I was doing really bad in school. I was ditching [school].... before I got pregnant ... I was having a lot of problems with drugs, like, cocaine and marijuana and drinking a lot ... The day I found out [about the pregnancy] I said, “I’m not doing this anymore” And I quit, that was it. ... From that day forward, it’s like I grew up.

Quite powerfully, this woman told me that if she had not gotten pregnant: “I think I’d be dead Either that or dying.” She linked becoming a mother with not only becoming an adult, but changing her life from its extremely self-destructive path (see also Edin and Kafalas, 2005).

When discussing their decisions to raise the children on their own, the interviewees accepted sole responsibility and accountability for their pregnancies. Marriage or serious commitment to the baby’s father was not seen as a serious alternative. Except for two women, the interviewees never mentioned this option as a possibility they even considered. This finding is linked to the value the women placed on having children, their desire to avoid abortion (see Edin and Kafalas, 2005), and their partner’s ambivalence or outright rejection. For example, one mother said that her son: “was very much wanted by me. Which, not so much by his father ... He had his choice. I told him to go, then, if he wanted to. I was going to have a baby, and he could go away, and that would be the end of it for him.” Another single mother who was pregnant in her senior year of high school discussed her decision process about having her son:

I knew exactly what I was going to do. ... I knew I was going to keep him. . . . I had to talk to his father and at that time we were both very young. And the first thing he wanted to do was have an abortion. And I told him that would not be the right thing So I decided to have [the baby] and I didn’t know if he would be around or not, but I knew that was the right thing for me. And I thought, that’s fine if he doesn’t want to have anything to do with the child, then he doesn’t.

The interviewees who were not yet parents also viewed parenthood as a key marker of adulthood. These women did not feel “ready” to have children. Some used phrases like “too young” and “not grown up enough” to describe their reasons for postponing childbearing, and a number directly mentioned their age. For example, one woman wanted to delay having children until she was close to thirty years old. She said: “I feel that I need a more solid foundation for myself before I can think of providing for somebody else.” As another put it: “Everybody asks me if I have kids, I tell them I’m not old enough to have kids. And they’re looking at me, they’re like, ‘Yes, you are.’ No, I’m not old enough to have children. I’m only twenty-three. I can barely take care of me. How am I supposed to take care of an infant?” Some of these women contrasted having children with maintaining their freedom. One non-

¹¹While the interviewees who were parents were evenly split in their class backgrounds between working class and middle class or higher, nearly 79 percent of the non-parents were middle class or higher. There were not significant racial differences in parents compared to non-parents.

parent described her view of parenthood as follows: “Be selfish while you can, and then be ready to give to your children.”

For other women, delaying parenthood was important because they wanted to find the right partner or feel secure in their current relationship, get married, establish their careers, and/or have their finances in order. For example, one woman said: “I’d like to settle my own life first before I have to deal with somebody else.” For some, it was important to maintain a normative order of life course events, whereby childbearing comes after other developmental milestones. For example, one woman did not want to take on these responsibilities in what she called a “backward” way. In contrast to the paths of her friends, another interviewee said, “I’m going to do it right. I’m going to get married and then have children.” Establishing a career before motherhood was important for other women as well. One woman who was trying to get accepted to medical school at the time of the interview revealed a “close call” with an unplanned pregnancy when she was in college. This incident made her subsequently more careful about birth control: “I made this promise to myself that I wouldn’t put myself in a situation like that again ... if I couldn’t handle the consequences.” She told me that an unplanned pregnancy would have drastically altered her educational trajectory: she would have probably dropped out of college, and as a result would not have pursued medical school. This perspective corresponds to prior findings on young women’s expectations about the impact of childbearing on educational attainment (Mahaffy and Ward, 2002) and careers (Orrange, 2003).

Thus, becoming a parent was viewed by both mothers and non-mothers as representing an important turning point toward becoming adult (see also McMahon, 1995). The young mothers emphasized maturity and sole responsibility for their pregnancies. The women who were not parents sought to delay motherhood until they felt more established in their identities and roles.

Conclusions

Previous life course research has focused on the timing, sequencing, and effects of five key life events: completing education, entering the labor force, becoming financially independent, getting married, and becoming a parent. Although recent studies have considered aspects of the subjective transition to adulthood, they have not been able to fully capture how young people construct meaning in relation to these markers, nor have they focused on the gendered and class-based dimensions of growing up. These subjective meanings are especially important for young women who grow up after the women’s movement, as they are surrounded by contradictory choices and ideologies with regard to education, work, and family.

This study found that young women who come of age in the shadow of the women’s movement experience a disjuncture between the formal markers of adulthood and their subjective perceptions of those markers. While becoming a parent and becoming financially independent were universally seen by interviewees as achieving adulthood, completing schooling was tied to class-differentiated views of growing up. Interviewees subjectively linked beginning full-time work with future career uncertainty rather than feeling established and settled in one’s job or field. These young women viewed getting married as a turning point only in connection with other adult transitions, and this transition did not diminish their emphasis on self-development and independence from men.

Taken together, these findings suggest that our previous understandings of the transition to adulthood do not reflect the full complexity of how young women subjectively experience it or the extent to which class impacts these perceptions. Instead, this study implies a fluid relationship between objective and subjective adult role transitions. That is, I found that young women who had supposedly become “adults” in pivotal areas of their lives did not always view these markers as reflecting an adult status, while others described themselves in adult-like terms

despite the absence of key adult roles. In fact, young women's identities, especially those of differing class backgrounds, may be too complicated for the life course categories currently used to study the transition to adulthood. As a result, we may need to adjust these formal transition markers in order to deepen our understanding of identity during this life phase.

This study reveals the importance of considering the subjective understandings of formal transitions when looking at young women's experiences of their life course pathways. Formal markers which have been assumed to be formative are, in fact, only part of the picture of growing up. Self-definitions and meanings of these transitions reveal a great deal about the complicated process of becoming an adult in the contemporary era. When we understand this process from the perspectives of young women themselves, we learn that this life phase is not just one of positive exploration or gains (such as increased social status, independence from parental control, etc.). Instead, young women's concerns also reveal this life phase as a time of loss and ambivalence. As this analysis illustrates, the transition to adulthood may be fraught with such difficulties as fear of completing schooling, career or financial uncertainty, and the strain of single parenting. Growing up in the shadow of the women's movement at a time of rapid social change results in contradictory impulses and identities among young women.

Why is it that young women associate financial independence and parenthood with becoming an adult, whereas they see beginning full-time work and getting married as more complicated transitions, having nuanced and sometimes contradictory subjective meanings? These meanings may reflect current economic realities, work and marriage trends, and cultural ideologies. In terms of the arena of work, low wage jobs and career instability have become normative for young people as they move into the adult world. A college degree is increasingly necessary to obtain a livable income, but does not guarantee a good job or adequate wage. My study indicates that these economic tensions have made their way to the subjective level, as interviewees reflect present-day career uncertainty as they talk about their own lives and plans. Not only did most of my interviewees feel not established in their career paths by age 24, but even those who researchers might label as having an established work trajectory actually viewed their work lives as contingent and constantly changing. Although financial independence is elusive and reversible (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1993), it represented a more significant subjective turning point for these young women. In a context of career instability, young people may look to other kinds of markers, such as independence from their own parents and having a child, as evidence of "success" toward becoming an adult. In addition, career uncertainty is quite common for women, as they are more likely than men to see their future career pathways in ambivalent terms (Orrange, 2003). Despite widespread changes in women's work opportunities and patterns since the women's movement, uncertainty remains a dominant theme.¹²

Similarly, when we put women's everyday experiences at the center of analysis (Smith, 1987), we learn that paradoxical trends and ideologies regarding marriage and relationships with men may have also made their way to the subjective level. The women I interviewed reflected that getting married is a contradictory transition for young women today. On the one hand, these interviewees saw marriage as important. For example, many of the women who were married saw this transition as a turning point in their lives. On the other hand, this study also suggests that the fragility of marriage may also make marriage less central to becoming an adult woman. Greater flexibility and uncertainty in how people of all ages define themselves in terms of romantic relationships might have an impact on how young adults think about the marker of marriage. For these women, one can be an adult without getting married, and one can be married, but still have quite a bit of self-development necessary before fully feeling like

¹²In a future project, I will compare men's and women's perceptions of their career development. This comparison will help to untangle the age and gender dimensions of my findings.

an adult. Although the interviewees who were already married viewed marriage as a turning point in their lives, it was only a turning point in connection with other adult roles, such as financial independence or becoming a parent. Both those who were and were not in long-term romantic relationships emphasized the importance of self-development and independence from men. This theme dominated all areas of their lives--from their stress on becoming financially independent, to their desire to find a meaningful and satisfying career, to their focus on remaining independent from men, even in the face of becoming a teen mother (see also author, 1999). The emphasis on independence from men reflects dominant cultural ideologies among young women who grow up after the women's movement (see also author, 2003; Stacey, 1991).

Parenthood, on the other hand, was seen as a clear and tangible marker of adulthood both by those who had already made this transition and those who had not. Even when parenthood occurred during the teen years, it represented a permanent change, one that required these interviewees to grow up and become responsible. As marriage and parenthood have become increasingly decoupled, we see that parenthood, the more permanent of these transitions, takes on greater subjective significance and clarity. Marriage, on the other hand, as a more vulnerable and unstable institution, may be less tied to attaining adulthood and appears to be less central to young women's identities (see also Edin and Kafalas, 2005).

Class differences also play a significant role in how young people experience the transition to adulthood. Class is important in determining the timing of role transitions (such as when young women become parents or when they become financially independent) and their character (such as the types of jobs young women first move into or the type of education they pursue). There are also important class differences in how young women perceive the goals and outcomes of education. Working class women disproportionately completed their education at the high school, community college, or vocational levels. When asked to reflect on their educational experiences, these women emphasized the way that their schooling provided them with specific skills and credentials that prepared them for full-time work. In contrast, middle class women were more likely to attend four-year colleges or universities and emphasized identity exploration and delaying the movement into adult roles. While those who completed their education at an earlier level viewed the completion of education in positive terms, many of the college-educated interviewees experienced a "crisis" upon graduation.

How should we make sense of these multiple, and often contradictory, pictures of growing up today? This article has turned up a number of complex themes that call out for future research. First, studies with larger and more representative samples of young adults should systematically investigate the subjective transition to adulthood. It would be useful, for example, to examine the numerous ways that class differences impact the transition to adulthood. Future research would also benefit from comparisons between men and women, as well as inter-generational comparisons. It may be the case that the subjective meanings of adulthood differ by gender, as other researchers have found (e.g. Benson and Furstenberg, In Press; Moen and Orrange, 2002; Orrange, 2003). It is also important to examine how conceptions of adulthood have changed over time. For example, in what ways are these conceptions of growing up new as a result of changing historical circumstances and to what extent are they continuous with the past? These areas of future research could help disentangle the influence of economic and demographic change from the legacy of the women's movement on young people's lives. As researchers continue to examine these questions, we should think seriously about the extent to which the formal markers of adulthood previously used by researchers are still relevant today. As a result of dramatic changes in the young adult life course, these categories of understanding the transition to adulthood may no longer effectively represent young people's experience.

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Table 1
Transition Patterns of Youth Development Study Women and Interviewees

Group ¹³	% in YDS Sample	N Interviewed	Percent of Interviewees in Each Group
"In School"	28.6%	15	35.7%
Parents	30.6%	14	33.3%
"Labor Force"	40.8%	13	31%
Total	100%	42	100%

¹³ The "in school" group are those women who had attended a four-year college or university for at least eight months annually, in three of the four years following high school. The "parent" group had become mothers by the eighth year of the study. The "labor force" group were those who did not have an extensive school trajectory (i.e. they did not meet the first criterion), nor had they become mothers. These women were typically in the full-time labor force or moved back and forth between post-secondary school and work after high school.

Table 2

Number of Interviewees by Race and Class Background

Class Background ¹⁴	Racial Background					
	White	African American	Asian	Biracial	Hispanic	Total
Working Middle	7	2	1	2	1	13
Upper-Middle	13	3	2	2		20
Total	8		1			9
	28	5	4	4	1	42

¹⁴ Social class background was based on parents' income and education as reported in the parent surveys in the first year of the study (1988). Approximately 31 percent of the interview sample had working class backgrounds (this included those whose parents had less than a bachelor's degree and earned less than \$30,000 per year in 1988). The majority of the sample, nearly 48 percent, came from middle class backgrounds. This included four sub-groups: parents who had high educational attainment (at least a bachelor's degree) and low income (less than \$30,000 per year in 1988); low educational attainment (less than a bachelor's degree) but high income (at least \$50,000 per year in 1988); high education (at least a bachelor's degree) and middle income (between \$30,000 and \$50,000 per year in 1988); and low education (less than a bachelor's degree) and middle income. Twenty one percent were classified as upper-middle class in background because their parents had high educational attainment (at least a bachelor's degree) and earned a middle to high income (over \$50,000 per year in 1988).