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Falling Far from the Tree: Transitions to Adulthood and the Social History of Twentieth-Century America

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Abstract

Employing the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series of the University of Minnesota, we chronicle the changing timing and duration of transitions to adulthood in the twentieth century. Successive generations of young Americans reinvented the transition to adulthood to accommodate shifts in the economy and the American state. The patterned choices of young people delineate three eras of social history in the twentieth century: the era of reciprocity (1900–1950), the era of dependence (1950–70s), and the era of autonomy (1970s–2000). We also explain why African Americans differed from the general trend; they developed distinctive transitions to adulthood in response to persistent inequality.

Comments

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Falling Far from the Tree

Transitions to Adulthood and the Social History of Twentieth-Century America

Employing the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series of the University of Minnesota, we chronicle the changing timing and duration of transitions to adulthood in the twentieth century. Successive generations of young Americans reinvented the transition to adulthood to accommodate shifts in the economy and the American state. The patterned choices of young people delineate three eras of social history in the twentieth century: the era of reciprocity (1900–1950), the era of dependence (1950–70s), and the era of autonomy (1970s–2000). We also explain why African Americans differed from the general trend; they developed distinctive transitions to adulthood in response to persistent inequality.

This article proposes a three-part periodization of American private lives in the twentieth century. The transition to adulthood—when individuals undertake a cluster of choices about their places within families, workplaces, and institutions—provides the basis for our argument. We contend that the synchronized choices of Americans in this life stage delineate three distinct but connected twentieth-century eras, each era reflecting the responses of young people to changes in the economy and the American state.

Our definition of the transition to adulthood draws upon the work of John Modell, Frank Furstenberg, and Theodore Hershberg, as set forth in their essay “Social Change and Transitions to Adulthood in Historical Per-

spective" (1976), which illustrates the relationships among five choices made in transition to adulthood: marrying, leaving parents' homes, establishing new households, leaving school, and entering the workforce. Together these choices transport young people from their positions as dependents living in households headed by other people to economic independence and procreative households of their own.

We are aware of the limits of this definition. With the exception of ever having married, the status changes recorded by the census can be reversed; young people move both ways between the social positions that we take to reflect adulthood and childhood. In addition, an important minority of the population has always taken other paths, by remaining resident with their parents, spending their entire life spans outside the workforce, or electing never to marry. Yet the entry of most young people into conventional adulthood shapes the experiences of those who make other choices. For example, children in the United States living at home at age 11 have never been thought to have made alternative choices, but once most young people leave their parents' houses, staying home becomes a distinct behavior. The timing of this change in young people's lives carries ramifications even for those who depart from common paths. Furthermore, the great majority of twentieth-century Americans ultimately did undertake the five status changes that we measure, and by doing so they provided the bedrock of social organization. Mass departure from heterosexual procreative households and labor force participation would have required radical rearrangement of the economy, housing, and likely governance of the United States. It is worthwhile, therefore, to explore the ways in which this process has maintained itself—and kept most Americans on paths to a narrowly conceived adulthood—over the past century.

In broad strokes, twentieth-century transitions to adulthood can be sketched as follows. In the first 50 years of the century, young people prolonged the process of becoming adults. Many left school and joined the workforce as teenagers, but they delayed leaving their parents' houses and marrying. Their transitions to adulthood were characterized by the reciprocal reliance of young people on adult households and, in turn, of adulthood households on young people. The transition to adulthood shortened after the Second World War. Young people delayed the onset of transition by remaining in school longer than their predecessors, and once they began the transition to adulthood, they quickly departed from their parents' houses to establish their own residences with spouses. In this period, young people

made decisions about marrying and establishing their own households at especially young ages, either while they remained dependent upon parents or very shortly thereafter. Finally, beginning in the mid-1970s, young people once again lingered in transition to adulthood. They further delayed the end of school and established transitional households after they left their parents' houses but before they married. In this era, young people entered the workforce en masse in their early twenties, but many remained in school for another half-decade. They were the first twentieth-century generation to make decisions about marriage and establishing procreative households in positions of relative autonomy from their parents.

Our work is greatly indebted to previous research. In addition to developing the methods we employ, Modell et al. (*ibid.*) were among the first scholars to provide definitive evidence of the dramatic shortening of the transition to adulthood in the middle years of the twentieth century (see also Hogan 1981; Stevens 1990). Recent shifts, however, require revision of Modell et al.'s explanatory framework. In the decades since their research, the middle phase that they took as definitive of the century proved an aberration—the era of rapid transition to adulthood rose and then fell. Our article is the first to apply their approach to data that span the entire century.¹ Viewed from 1900 to 2000, the transition to adulthood must be understood and explained in three related but distinct eras rather than as one continuous trend.

More recently, scholars have incorporated late-twentieth-century shifts into their studies of the transition to adulthood. Modell's later work notes the rise and fall of early marriage, and of the social practices that characterized the rushed transition to adulthood (Modell 1989). Francis and Calvin Goldscheider's century-long study of leaving home finds that the decline in the age when young people left their parents' houses reversed in the last decades of the twentieth century (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1999). Their findings, especially when revised by Myron Gutmann, Sara Pullum-Piñón, and Thomas Pullum's "Three Eras of Young Adult Home Leaving in Twentieth-Century America" (2002), suggest a periodization of twentieth-century transitions to adulthood that closely accords with the one that we present.²

However, these studies concentrate on one or two emblematic transitional choices, such as marriage or leaving home, rather than the relations among the various decisions that comprise the transition to adulthood. Great advantage is gained by using the measures developed by Modell and his colleagues to consider the array of choices involved in the transition to adulthood

simultaneously. Analysis of the relationships among these choices, as opposed to separate consideration of each, reflects the process of transition to adulthood and comes closer to representing the experiences of young Americans. Conceiving of the transition to adulthood as a multidimensional life stage also illuminates its participation in broader historical shifts and energizes the connection between the transition to adulthood and the wider concerns and agendas of twentieth-century American historians. The changing relations among the five choices that comprise the transition to adulthood point to the influence of shifting opportunities on personal life and illuminate the ways in which inequality, especially on racial grounds, has shaped life course decisions.

Measuring the Transition to Adulthood: Spread, Congruence, and Integration

Becoming an adult involves a series of choices that are made in relation to one another as well as in relation to the choices of other people. The decision to enter the workforce, for example, interacts with other dimensions of the transition to adulthood: it can require departure from school and may enable a young person to leave his or her parents' household. Peers move together through these linked decisions; young people take note of each other's movement along multiple dimensions, and their decisions and paths impact one another. Three measures developed by Modell et al. (1976) capture these intertwining choices. *Spread* reflects the duration of the entire transition to adulthood within the life course of a generation of young people, *congruence* measures the extent to which different dimensions of the transition occurred simultaneously within a given generation, and *integration* refers to the likelihood that an individual who went through one status change would have gone through another.

Spread identifies the years necessary for the central 80 percent of the population to pass a given status change. It requires first that we identify the age group most likely to attain a given adult status. For example, in 1900, 95.5 percent of all 54-year-old males had married, so this age group sets the prevalence of marriage among men in 1900. Young men 21 years of age constituted the first group that was at least one-tenth as likely as 54-year-old men to have married, and at age 41, males first reached a marriage rate greater than 90 percent of that set by the benchmark older men. The spread for a

transition is the difference between the first and last years identified in this calculation; in the case of marriage for males in 1900, the spread was 20 years.

We report the spread of all five status changes together in the form of a combined spread. This measure denotes the time between the age at which 10 percent of the population undertook its first status change, usually leaving school or entering the workforce, and the age when 90 percent passed into the final adult status, which was usually marriage or establishing one's own household. In the century's first census, 10 percent of males had left school by the age of 11—and hence begun the transition to adulthood—but they delayed the final status change, when 90 percent of males had married, until the age of 41. Accordingly, in 1900 the combined spread of the male transition to adulthood was 30 years. This figure denotes the duration of the entire transition to adulthood for a given generation—it reflects the number of years during which most young people were in the midst of decisions that would shape their adult lives.

Congruence measures the overlap of two status changes during their spreads; it produces a number between zero, when there is no overlap between two measured status changes, and one, when the two changes overlap entirely. In the case of marriage and leaving one's parents' home for males in the 1900 census, the two status changes overlapped for 14 years, from the age of 21 to 34. In total, the two spreads lasted 42 years in 1900, so the congruence coefficient (two times the overlap divided by the sum of the spreads) for these status changes in that census year is 0.67.³ This figure indicates the degree to which people of the same age group were simultaneously in the midst of different aspects of the transition to adulthood. It thereby gauges whether young people followed age-based sequences of events—for example, first leaving home, then getting a job, then getting married—or whether they produced a more chaotic picture by jumping various hurdles simultaneously. Each aspect of the transition to adulthood is tested against all of the others; we report the mean of the individual figures as an average congruence.

The third measure, integration, gauges the extent to which an individual's position for one status change predicts his or her likelihood of having passed other hurdles in the transition to adulthood. Integration uses the lambda statistic from cross-tabulation analysis, which produces a number between zero, when one status fails entirely to predict another, and one, when one status wholly predicts another. In the case of marriage and leaving parents' homes, the lambda for males in 1900 was 0.28, indicating that knowing a

person's marriage status improved our ability to predict his household status by about one-quarter, and vice versa.⁴ Integration connotes similar processes to those captured in spread and congruence but describes individual, not group, experience: high levels of integration suggest that individuals had to move quickly, if not simultaneously, through different status changes; lower levels of integration denote a slower, more sequential approach to the transition to adulthood. We report integration figures in the form of a median of the individual pairings.

None of these measures perfectly replicates the experiences of individuals moving through the transition to adulthood. Ideal data would trace the decisions of individuals over time rather than reporting the distribution of status changes across the age range at a single moment. This shortcoming especially hampers analysis of women's workforce participation. For most of the century, women joined the workforce in greatest numbers prior to marriage; for the rest of their lives they moved in and out of employment in accordance with the demands of family life. Their workforce participation cannot be characterized as a status change en route to adulthood, so we have eliminated it from our calculations. Despite this weakness, the absence of a suitable longitudinal data set requires use of cross-sectional data to approximate the actual decisions of young Americans as they aged.⁵ To this end, combined spread, average congruence, and median integration prove revealing. They show a great deal of variation over the course of the twentieth century as young people consistently refused to come of age in the fashion of their predecessors.

Reinventing the Transition to Adulthood: Evidence of Three Eras

Our three-part periodization of the twentieth century begins in analysis of combined spreads. Both males and females began the century with prolonged transitions to adulthood; the combined spreads of the early decades of the century never again reappeared (figure 1). After midcentury, combined spreads fell to century-long lows. The drop from the beginning of the century to 1960 and 1970 reduced the number of years available for male decisions by 48 percent, and female spreads fell a stunning 64 percent. The young people who reached their twenties in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s came of age in a pressure cooker: their rapid transitions find little precedent or parallel

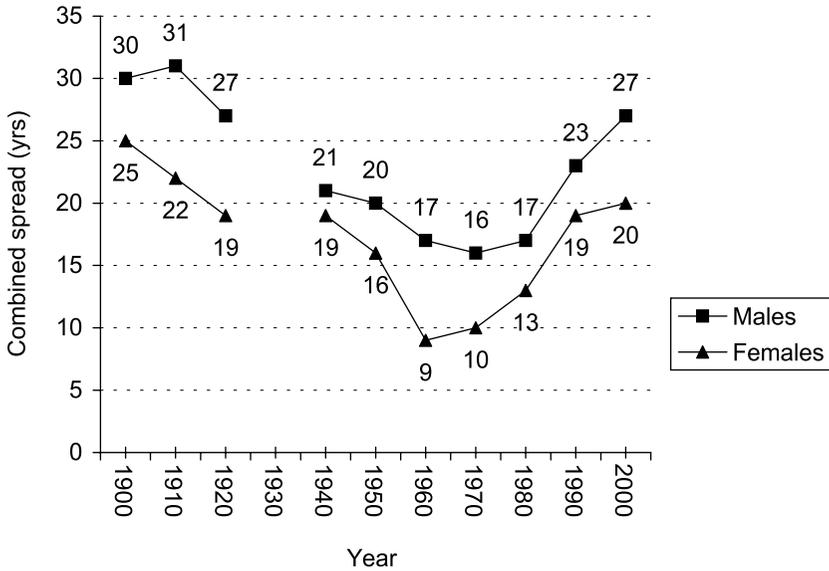


Figure 1 Combined spread for all males and females, 1900–2000

Source: Data for all figures are derived from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) of the United States (Ruggles and Sobek 2003). The data presented here use the 1 in 100 samples except in 1900 (1 in 760), 1910 (1 in 250), and 1920 (1 in 200). Data for the 1930 census are not available.

at other times in the century. By 1980, an increase in the number of years taken in the transition to adulthood was already apparent, and by 2000, young people delayed almost as long in transition to adulthood as they had at the outset of the century. The era of rapid transition to adulthood rose and then fell, delineating three distinct periods.

Despite this common pattern, males and females had different experiences of the transition to adulthood. Although they began their first status changes at similar ages, commonly leaving school or entering the workforce in their early to midteens, males and females completed the transition to adulthood at different paces. Males consistently delayed marrying and acquiring their own households for a number of years longer than their female peers. This discrepancy varied over time but dipped below four years only once, in 1940 (figure 1). In all other years, marriages and households comprised of older males and somewhat younger females facilitated the comparatively long transition to adulthood by young males.

Average congruence adds depth to this picture and furthers the distinction between male and female experiences. For males, the graph inverts the

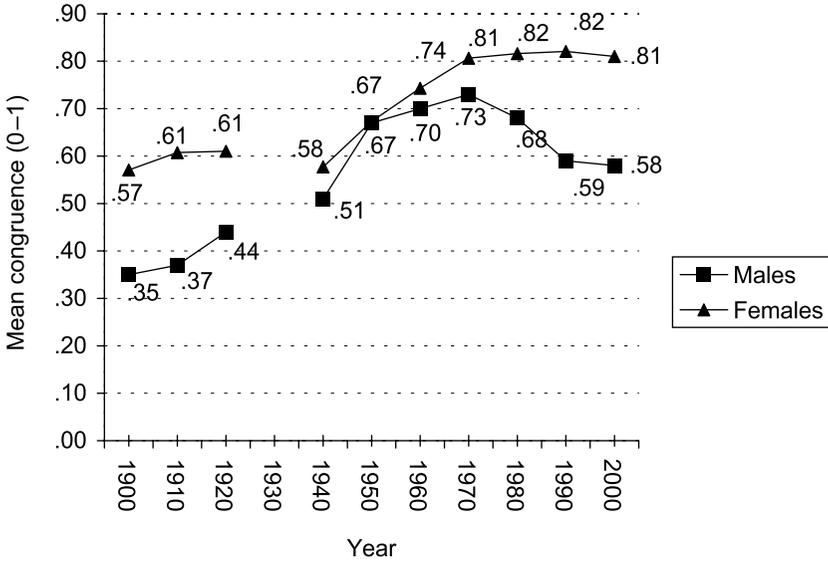


Figure 2 Average congruence for all males and females, 1900–2000
 Source: See figure 1.

trajectory of spreads; levels of congruence are lowest at the outset of the century, rising sharply to a peak of 0.73 in 1970 before falling again by the end of the century (figure 2). Although in 1990 and 2000 congruence remained higher than in the first decades of the century, it had fallen well below the number for any date after 1940. Thus, when males were most rushed in the transition to adulthood, they also made overlapping status changes; when they took more time to make the transition, they were more likely, as a group, to have largely finished one status change before they began another. Females, however, show a different trend. Average congruence was higher overall for females than for males, and as the century progressed, female levels of congruence increased. By the last decades of the century, females passed through the various status changes with great simultaneity while their male counterparts had returned to a significantly more sequential approach.

Congruence and spread provide a vision of the social experience of the transition to adulthood. Young people of different generations and genders would have seen different things had they considered the transitions of their peers. Males in the first decades of the century would have seen their peers taking a slow, ordered approach to the transition to adulthood. Friends and

acquaintances would have left school and generally found jobs before completing other status changes. At midcentury, the scene was both compressed and chaotic; a young man reflecting on his peers in this era would have seen them moving quickly through important decisions. Choices likely seemed to come all at once: just as some friends decided to leave school, others would have married and bought houses. By the end of the century, a more prolonged and sequential picture reemerged.

Surveys of female peer groups in transition to adulthood would have differed, especially with regard to congruence. Like males, females started with prolonged transitions to adulthood; the period of change shortened at midcentury but lengthened again at century's end. However, as the century progressed, females grew more likely to make decisions of different kinds within the same range of years. Despite prolonging the process at the end of the century, young women eschewed any particular order in the transition to adulthood.

Integration illustrates that individual experiences reflected group experiences. From the outset of the century to 1940, the correlations among female status changes rose slowly, while those for males changed very little (figure 3). In this period, passing one status change did not compel young people, especially males, to pass others. Median integration rose rapidly after midcentury. By 1960 and 1970, integration for males was almost five times higher than it had been in 1940, and for females the figure was almost one and a half times higher than 20 years prior. For women especially, passing one status increasingly meant passing others. Finally, the last censuses of the century saw steady decline in median integration. By the year 2000, young people once again might try one aspect of the transition to adulthood—by getting a job or moving away from home—without immediately undertaking all five. Like spreads and congruence, integration yields a three-stage periodization of transitions to adulthood.

Although the three measures suggest that first and final periods resemble one another, changes in school participation differentiate early- and late-twentieth-century transitions to adulthood. In 1900, 90 percent of 19-year-old males had left school, but it was not until they reached the age of 41 that similar numbers acquired their own households. Females passed through their transitions to adulthood in the same fashion. By the age of 20, 90 percent had left school, but they did not acquire their own households at similar levels until the age of 33. Between these two status changes, young people

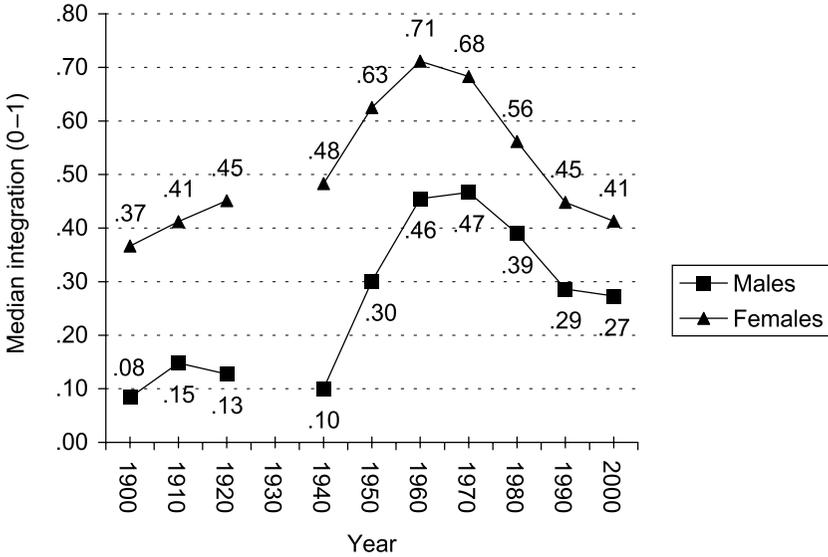


Figure 3 Median integration for all males and females, 1900–2000
 Source: See figure 1.

spent a good deal of time working in other people’s households, often without being counted part of the workforce. In contrast, young people in the final decades of the century remained in school until close to the end of their transitions to adulthood. For them, all five of the status changes began at older and more similar ages, in the late teens and early twenties, and entering the workforce became the first and quickest transition. In 2000, 23-year-old males and 22-year-old females already had reached 90 percent of their peak workforce participation, but they did not leave school in similar numbers until they reached the ages of 29 and 30, respectively. Young people now spent their transitional years working and studying. They combined these activities as a cohort, some entering the workforce while others studied, and as individuals, by working and studying at the same time.

In sum, spread, congruence, and integration provide reliable evidence of three eras of transition to adulthood. At the beginning of the century, young people spent an extended period in the midst of transition. As the century progressed, this prolonged life stage narrowed, creating a pressure-cooker transition from childhood to adulthood. Finally, as the century ended, young people once again spent a good deal of time becoming adults.

Social Historical Categories and the Transition to Adulthood

In the foregoing analysis, gender alone has been used to differentiate among different types of young people, but membership in other demographic groups also made a difference in the transition to adulthood. The measures used in this article inhibit consideration of some social categories such as class and immigration statuses. Because the census provides no indication of parental occupations or incomes for young people who have left their parents' homes, no continuous variable could be used to calculate the role of class in the transition to adulthood. Problems arise in the analysis of immigrants due to the dramatic decline of immigration between 1925 and 1965 and the use of marriage and workforce characteristics as bases for admission into the United States. However, the combined spreads of groups divided on two grounds—region and race—provide an indication of both the breadth and limits of the three historical eras outlined thus far.

Regional analysis indicates the pervasiveness of a three-stage periodization of the transition to adulthood. For much of the twentieth century different regions of the United States played host to different economic and demographic patterns (Heim 2000), and each setting shaped transitions to adulthood. For instance, at the outset of the century, young men in the West spent more than 40 years in transition to adulthood, whereas the figure never rose above 30 in the North, South, or Midwest.⁶ Similarly, female combined spreads were especially prolonged in the West, likely a result of the region's still erratic economy, which attracted unmarried and unfixed young people in disproportionate numbers. Despite such regional variations, the pattern of generational change visible in the total population characterized each individual region as well. At the outset of the century, young people in each region prolonged their transitions to adulthood; they began status changes many years before they would marry or create their own households. By midcentury, the length of the transition to adulthood in all four regions had dropped in unison, and spectacular falls in combined spread brought western young people into accord with the others. In 1960, the duration of the transition to adulthood ranged between 16 and 19 years for males in all four regions and between 9 and 12 years for females. Prolonged transitions reemerged with similar synchrony. By 2000, the four regions were remarkably alike: males spent 27 to 28 years in transition to adulthood in all four regions, and females spent 22 to 24 years. Whatever forces encouraged

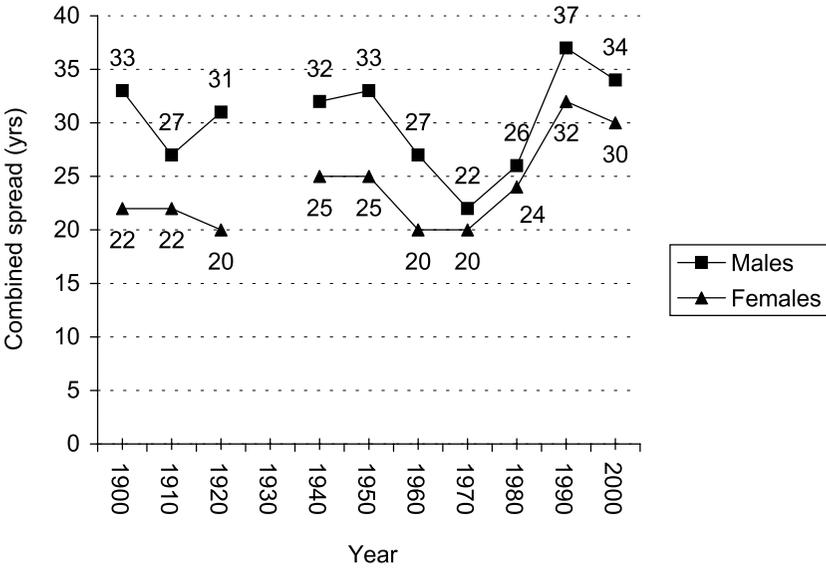


Figure 4 Combined spread for African American males and females, 1900–2000
 Source: See figure 1.

young peoples’ decisions, and whatever changes their choices wrought, they occurred simultaneously across the nation.

In contrast, African American experiences illustrate the limits of the three-era periodization. In response to the scarce opportunities available to them, African Americans consistently delayed the transition to adulthood; as midcentury approached, the combined spreads of African Americans remained prolonged, and the differences between their spreads and those of the rest of the population increased (figure 4).

Nonetheless, the combined spreads for African Americans were never lower than in the decades after the Second World War. For them, the mid-century drop occurred suddenly. Whereas spreads in the total population declined incrementally in the first half of the century and then slowly rose again, African Americans suddenly curtailed their transitions to adulthood at midcentury and then rapidly increased their durations as 2000 approached. In 1950, a decade prior to the drop, African American transitions were more prolonged than at any time in the first half of the century, and in the single decade between 1980 and 1990, spreads climbed 11 years for males and 8 years for females to unprecedented highs. These differences are crucial to under-

standing African Americans' experiences of the transition to adulthood and will be explored at the end of the article.

Twentieth-century transitions to adulthood were never uniform. At the outset of the century, the West played host to a distinctively prolonged transition, and differences in gender and race appear throughout the century. Nonetheless, across regions and within separate demographic groups, three distinct eras emerge. The explanation of this sweeping tendency and of the distinct pattern of African American transitions to adulthood requires an understanding of a broader historical setting.

Transitions to Adulthood in Historical Context

We use the context of young people's transitions to adulthood to explain why and how the observed shifts occurred. At the same time, we hope to suggest the wider importance of family history. Transitions to adulthood point toward an understanding of the twentieth century that emerges from the patterned choices of everyday Americans rather than from wars, political movements, or other historical events. The three eras outlined thus far now can be explicitly named and elaborated: the era of reciprocity reached from 1900 to approximately 1950, the era of dependence went from about 1950 to the mid-1970s, and the era of autonomy lasted from the mid-1970s to at least the end of the century. Each era reflects connections that place the transition to adulthood at the center of a social historical narrative of the century.

The Era of Reciprocity, 1900 to 1950

When the century began, young people made prolonged transitions to adulthood. Many remained "children," living with their parents and hence dependent in the eyes of census enumerators, until well into their twenties. And they were indeed reliant on the households they inhabited—most did not have the resources to establish their own households. As it had in the late nineteenth century, reliance also ran in the opposite direction (Chudacoff and Hareven 1978; Modell and Hareven 1978; Katz et al. 1982; Ruggles 1994). Most households could not have survived without the work of people in transition to adulthood: households depended on the wages of young workers and the rents of young boarders. The presence of multiple sources of income pro-

vided households with a measure of financial stability in a period when job security was low, credit scarce, and budgets tight for most American families. Yet, the era of reciprocity was already unraveling. Even as it defined most transitions to adulthood, the household organization that sustained reciprocity was giving way to families reliant on a single earner, with children who prolonged their time in school and shortened their transitions to adulthood. Reciprocity fit the shape of the labor force and the state at the beginning of the century, but by the end of the period shifts in both presaged the era to come.

Labor force dynamics in the first half of the century encouraged reciprocal currents of reliance between households and people in transition to adulthood. First, the limited participation of married women in the workforce elevated the value of youth labor. A good deal of income was provided by young female workers, who reached their peak labor force participation in their early twenties (Kessler-Harris 1982). At the same time, the wage structure within the male labor force placed young people in no position to start their own households. In 1940, the mean income of male workers between the ages of 25 and 29 was 68 percent of the wages of the highest earning older workers, a figure that was already likely higher than it had been earlier in the century. Male workers could expect their wages to rise steadily until the age of 60, after which earnings declined rapidly.⁷ Thus, by remaining in the households of older workers, younger men could build resources in two ways. First, young people may have saved some money for starting a household. Even in the absence of this direct accumulation, however, merely staying in the workforce added to their wealth because as they grew older their incomes increased. Delay of marriage and household headship meant that they could attain the income necessary to support the kind of households that they envisioned. These two labor-force dynamics—age-based wage inequality and the exclusion of married women from the workforce—persisted for the first half of the century and sustained the era of reciprocity.

Yet, important changes were underway: the exclusion of children from the workforce, the invention of retirement, and government support of single-family housing served to undermine the era of reciprocity. Late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century corporations dramatically expanded the scale and technology of business. As part of this process they systematized hiring and firing and reduced their dependence on the work of children and the elderly (Chandler 1977; Goldin 2000; Osterman 1980: 53–62;

Graebner 1980). Children closed out of the labor market were steered into schools. By 1920 the great majority of young people remained in school into their late teens, a shift that shortened the transition to adulthood by delaying its onset. At the same time, the introduction of old-age pensions, first through the incremental increase of military and state pensions and then with the passage of the Social Security Act of 1935, offered older Americans financial security and weakened their dependence on the wages of young workers (Katz 1996: 185–222). Finally, the federal government's commitment to consumption as a means of economic recovery spurred the creation in 1933 of the Federal Housing Administration and the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, which, respectively, underwrote and offered loans to homeowners (Jackson 1985). Just as important, the New Deal Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation and the Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation guaranteed private investments. By the 1940s, Americans were saving some 20 percent of their disposable income, as opposed to 3 percent in the 1920s (Cohen 2003: 71). While the full effects of the expanding state would await the end of the Second World War and the postwar boom in housing construction, already in 1940, credit, and therefore independent home ownership, had been made available to increasing numbers of young people. Between 1920 and 1940, the age at which 90 percent of males headed their own households dropped from 41 to 36.

None of these trends affected all Americans equally; in particular, African Americans stood out from the rest. Rather than following the downward slope of the aggregate population, African American transitions to adulthood remained prolonged throughout the era of reciprocity. Ongoing neglect of African American schooling, a “truncated” social welfare system that never offered equitable service to African Americans, and the unique insecurity of African American jobs delayed the process outlined above (Fass 1989; Grossman 1989; Katz 1996: 252–54; Brown 1999; Gordon et al. 1982). Between 1900 and 1950, young African Americans continued to leave school early in order to work and maintained the reciprocal currents of reliance between households and young laborers that characterized this era.

The Era of Dependence, 1950 to mid-1970s

By 1950, an extraordinary economic boom had joined the dynamics undermining reciprocity and had ushered in a new era of transitions to adulthood.

Churning postwar industry issued a call for labor that, with immigration restrictions still in place, could not be met by workers moving to the United States from abroad. The spike in demand aided America's lowest earners, and the gap between the wages of young and old male workers narrowed. In the same period, the Veteran Administration's loan insurance complemented the New Deal programs to facilitate mortgages and offered young people a unique opportunity to establish their own households. They seized it, and in so doing defined an era. At midcentury, transitional statuses all but disappeared. Young people made the most important decisions of youth—decisions about school, home, marriage, and work—while still living in dependence upon their parents.

During the era of dependence almost everyone was earning more than before. With more than a third of the workforce unionized for the first, and last, time in the century and the reserve of unemployed labor dwindling, workers made significant gains. Between 1947 and 1966, real hourly earnings increased 2.1 percent every year. By 1966, this meant that workers could expect real wages 50 percent higher than those of their peers 19 years earlier (Goldin 2000; Freeman 1980). Young males shared disproportionately in the rise in fortune. The mean earnings of men between the ages of 25 and 29 rose to 79 percent of the highest salaries by 1950.⁸ Although this figure declined in the next two censuses, the disproportionate rise in the incomes of young men in an era of increased prosperity encouraged a new approach to the transition to adulthood.

Young women did not share directly in this prosperity. Their wages remained relatively low and steady throughout the era of dependence. Accordingly, their best opportunity to share in the wealth of their young male counterparts was to marry. If they used their parents' generation as a measure of the economic standing necessary to form a household, young men and women suddenly found that they could marry and get a place of their own at far younger ages than had been the case earlier in the century (Easterlin 1968, 1980).

The newfound wealth of young couples quickened the transition to adulthood with the help of government policy. As previous scholars have suggested, the first significant government intervention in the transition to adulthood in this period was military service; service in World War II and Vietnam brought many young people out of their parents' homes before they otherwise might have found self-supporting civilian employment. Upon

return from service, however, GIs took advantage of the student loans and stipends accorded by the 1944 GI Bill of Rights to extend their educations (Hogan 1981; Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1999; Gutmann et al. 2002; Modell 1989). Ultimately, the GI Bill, along with the long-standing trend toward prolonged education, shortened the transition to adulthood by delaying its onset. In 1950, for the first time in the century, leaving school was not the first transition crossed by 10 percent of young people. Instead, the entry of 10 percent of young people into the workforce in their midteens began the transition to adulthood.

Government programs specifically promoting new households also compressed the transition to adulthood. In the immediate postwar era, the federal government aimed to make good on the widespread promise of homes as rewards for wartime sacrifices (Cohen 2003: 194–256). Most often, federal aid was provided indirectly. Private banks and savings and loan associations put Americans' buoyed savings of the 1940s to use as mortgages that were underwritten by the Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration. In a city such as Philadelphia, this influence was felt rapidly. A 1951 survey of 800 home purchases in that city found that 84 percent involved a mortgage insured by one of the two federal agencies (Philadelphia Board of Realtors 1951: 18–19). Increased earnings, abundant new housing, and guaranteed savings and loans made the golden era of American industry especially lustrous for young couples looking to establish their own households. The home ownership rates of American household heads in their late thirties soared from 32 to 65 percent between 1940 and 1960.⁹ Suddenly, the entire transition to adulthood was compressed between the relatively advanced age at which young people entered the workforce and the relatively young age at which they could afford their own houses.

Just as prosperity made the leap from dependence to adulthood possible for most Americans, the economic advances of African Americans allowed them to shorten their transitions to adulthood. African Americans had passed slowly into adulthood throughout the era of reciprocity, but in the postwar era they quickly reduced the number of years spent in transition. The sudden fall in the duration of African American transitions to adulthood followed partly from improvements to African American education and partly from a rise in prosperity. Generations of civil rights activism came to fruition in a series of postwar legal decisions, including the famous *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, which ushered in an era of reform of African Ameri-

can education (Anderson 1988; Patterson 2001; Kantor and Brenzel 1993). These reforms, though incomplete, saw the age at which 10 percent of African Americans left school rise to 16 by 1970, as opposed to 13 for males and 12 for females in 1940. At the same time, increased earnings lowered the age at which African Americans could establish their own households. Whereas in 1940 African Americans earned 43 percent of their white peers' income, this figure rose to 58 percent by 1960 and peaked at 73 percent in 1980 (Goldin 2000: 606). Increased prosperity meant that households headed by older African Americans found themselves less in need of the fruits of young labor, and young people found themselves more able to establish their own households.

Yet persistent inequality, both in the labor and housing markets, meant that African American transitions to adulthood remained prolonged in comparison to those of the rest of the population (Jackson 1985; Sugrue 1996; Hillier 2001). Despite their dramatic gains during the postwar period, by 1970, only 42 percent of African American families owned their homes, a figure that was 20 percentage points behind the aggregate population (Cohen 2003: 222). Ongoing disparities would come to matter a great deal in the final era of transitions to adulthood. Although the quick leap from childhood to adulthood faded as a definitive American experience and the transition to adulthood ceased to take place in a context of dependence on parents, inequality continued to ensure that different people became adults differently.

In the middle decades of the century, young households were not only the beneficiaries of economic growth; they also were its engine. Especially in the 1950s, early household formation and the ensuing baby boom created consumer demands that supported the labor of young workers. In previous boom times, immigrants had played a similar role—buoying demand even as they supplied labor. In the unusual midcentury period, young Americans assumed this dual position as they leapt from dependence to adulthood (Easterlin 1968).

The Era of Autonomy, mid-1970s . . .

In the period after the mid-1970s, the unusual confluence that had animated the previous quarter century came to an end. The structure of the labor force shifted once again to delay the transition to adulthood, and the cost of housing rose. Young people delayed in transition to adulthood, but unlike their early-century peers, they spent the period between childhood and adulthood in relative autonomy from their parents. This contrast was

especially strong for females, who found new opportunities in higher education and the workforce.

Young people's relative earnings dropped quickly in the era of autonomy. By 1980 male workers between the ages of 25 and 29 earned only 63 percent of the wages of the highest earning males, and by the end of the century they earned just over half the wages of the older group.¹⁰ This did not mean that young people were poorer, in absolute terms, in 2000 than they had been in 1940—instead, the real earnings of young males more than doubled in this period.¹¹ However, relative to older workers, and in comparison with what they could expect to earn as they aged, young men in the era of autonomy were poorer than they had been for more than 60 years. Once again they had good reason to prolong the transition to adulthood as they built financial resources (Easterlin 1980).

Rising real costs of housing encouraged this delay. Whereas in the era of dependence the mean value of housing in the United States totaled between three and four times the average annual income of males in their twenties, by 1990 the cost of housing had risen to six times young males' earnings.¹² Alongside the rising costs of housing, federal cutbacks of aid to young home purchasers made housing once again an elusive commodity. No new body replaced the Veterans Administration with loans specifically targeting young people; youthful purchasers were forced to generate their own credit. Even had they known whom and what they wanted to be, young people were now required to delay the transition to adulthood in search of housing.

The loss of economic opportunity produced a transition to adulthood that was characterized by autonomy. Rather than spending their youths in reciprocal reliance with their parents or leaping from childhood to adulthood in a state of dependence, young Americans now spent the transition to adulthood in school and at work pursuing their own interests and needs. With more married women working and the financial security of the elderly still ensured by the federal state, young people were no longer central to the economic well-being of their parents. However, young people lacked the resources, and often the impetus, to immediately begin their own procreative households. Instead, attaining personal independence from their parents without marrying became a centerpiece of transitions to adulthood. Portions of the transition to adulthood often were spent in nonfamily households, but a good number of young people spent this period living with their parents, either because they had never left home or because they returned home after a spell of living on their own. Such young people both depended on their parents'

households and contributed to them, but they should not be confused with young people living at home in earlier eras. Their workforce participation distinguished them from young people in the era of dependence, and their prolonged schooling as well as their independent interests and spending set them apart from their peers in the era of reciprocity (Mortimer et al. 1999; Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1993).

Women's workforce participation and remuneration changed dramatically in the era of autonomy, partly as a result of their extended schooling. As late as 1970, 90 percent of females left school by the age of 23, a figure that would not be reached by women in 2000 until the age of 35. Females' incomes continued to lag behind those of their male peers across the life span, but the earnings of young workers suggested the benefits of prolonged female education. Already in 1990, females 25–29 years of age earned a mean income 88 percent as high as males their age, a figure that had risen from 54 percent in 1960.¹³ As they earned more, women stayed in the workforce longer. They began to enter the workforce in their late teens, their workforce entry rates peaked by their early twenties, and they maintained high levels of workforce participation even after marriage. Remaining in school gave women reason to delay marriage, as did pursuit of long-term careers. Females' increased independence defined the last period of transition to adulthood.

The dramatic rise in the duration of African American transitions to adulthood in the last decades of the century far outpaced the changes within the aggregate population. This jump is largely attributable to declining African American prosperity. Although many African Americans remained in school for longer durations than their predecessors, economic improvement proved illusory. Some African Americans had reached higher economic strata, but commitment to African American schooling waned, and persistent racial bias in the housing and labor markets left African Americans increasingly concentrated in impoverished, isolated, and segregated urban ghettos (Goldin 2000: 606; James 1989; Kantor and Brenzel 1993; Orfield and Eaton 1996; Massey and Denton 1993; Oliver and Shapiro 1995). More than any of their peers, young African Americans faced a context in which the housing and jobs sufficient to start a household were simply unavailable (Hill and Yeung 1999). In response, they greatly delayed establishing their own households.

The three eras of transition to adulthood—characterized by reciprocity, dependence, and then autonomy—are connected to one another and distinct;

their members were diverse, but they responded to similar pressures. Each era of transition provided a mixed experience for young people. While the era of dependence, when young people leapt into adulthood, was made possible by opportunities in the housing market and the workforce, a prolonged transition to adulthood represents a greater degree of freedom to delay, weigh, and study before making a series of life-altering choices. Indeed, the dramatic shifts outlined here serve to undermine a normative understanding of the transition to adulthood and to point, instead, to its deeply historical dynamics. The decisions of youth in transition to adulthood reflect crucial social historical shifts that took place during the twentieth century. As generations of youth reinvented their transitions to adulthood, they also told us a great deal about how the world around them had changed.

Notes

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- 1 Data are derived from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) of the United States (Ruggles and Sobek 2003).
- 2 For a useful review of recent scholarship, see Shanahan 2000.
- 3 The value in the example case, 0.67, indicates that for two-thirds of their spreads the two status changes overlapped. The figure might, in an absolute sense, be considered high. However, in this paper “high” and “low” are viewed in largely comparative terms; this congruence figure is higher than most.
- 4 Lambda, a proportional reduction of error statistic, measures the extent to which knowledge of one variable improves the odds of predicting the other variable correctly. Because the variables used are all dichotomous (left school/did not leave school, etc.), these tests have no “ties” in prediction, a situation which often confuses the interpretation of measures of association. As with congruence, we evaluate levels of integration by comparing across censuses.
- 5 As noted above, our measures fail to capture “backward” movement for all of the status changes; in instances other than women’s workforce participation, this deficiency does not provide grounds for abandoning analysis. However, by smoothing the edges of a rough process, we slightly skew spread and congruence measures; the backward flows postpone the ages at which we report that 10 or 90 percent of individuals have passed status changes. The similarity of this effect at either end of the spread leaves its overall impact on our measures ambiguous.

- 6 These figures refer to the combined spread in each of the four regions. The regions North, South, Midwest, and West are derived from the 1990 census classifications: Region H33–34 (Ruggles and Sobek 2003).
- 7 Authors' calculations based on Ruggles and Sobek 2003. Unfortunately, income variables begin in the 1940 census, so these figures cannot be cited for earlier dates. However, economic historians generally agree that the earnings of young people in the prewar period were a good deal lower than those of older workers; see Denison 1985: tables 3–5.
- 8 Authors' calculations based on Ruggles and Sobek 2003.
- 9 Authors' calculations based on Ruggles and Sobek 2003.
- 10 Authors' calculations based on Ruggles and Sobek 2003. For extensive discussion of the economic differential between young men in the era of dependence and the era of autonomy, see Bernhardt et al. 2001.
- 11 Authors' calculations based on Ruggles and Sobek 2003. In the last generations of the century, young women's earnings also made crucial contributions to household economies. However, a comparison of young and old workers is less useful for females because of the generational changes in female workforce participation described above.
- 12 Authors' calculations based on Ruggles and Sobek 2003.
- 13 Authors' calculations based on Ruggles and Sobek 2003.

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