

Coming of Age in 21st Century America:
Public Attitudes towards
the Importance and Timing of Transitions to Adulthood

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Introduction

The transition to adulthood is universal in that it takes place in all human societies, but particularistic in that each society evolves its own system. The transition to adulthood is timeless in that it occurs thorough the history of human society and time-specific in that its nature and pace shifts and changes. The contemporary American system of transition to adulthood is distinct not only from that in other countries, even other advanced industrial societies, but quite different from the American system only a generation ago (Breen and Buchmann, 2002; Cook and Furstenberg, 2002; Settersten and Mayer, 1997). There have been major legal and demographic changes in how adulthood is defined and experienced. For example, legally the age of majority was decreased from 21 to 18 and the age at which persons can be tried as adults was lowered in most states. Demographically, changes include the rise in median age at first marriage for women from 20 in 1960 to 25 in 2000, the large increase in post-secondary education, and huge increases in pre-marital childbearing (Baker and Stevenson, 1994; Smith, 1999; 2003).

While the legal and demographic shifts in the transition to adulthood are well-documented and frequently studied, the values and social preferences about the transition to adulthood are less well known. Research does show that prescriptive and proscriptive age norms do exist about what transitions should occur, at what age, and in what order (Neugarten et al., 1965; Settersten and Mayer, 1997). For example, Settersten's work in Chicago (Settersten, 1997; Settersten and Haegstad, 1996) showed that a majority considered age as relevant for the following youth-to-adulthood transitions - marrying, full-time employment, becoming a parent, leaving home, and finishing school. But because the age-norming, transition-to-adulthood research is based on studies that are variable in methods, local in coverage, and typically have small samples, what is known about national norms, sub-group differences, and changes over time is limited (Settersten and Mayer, 1997).

To better understand where the public currently stands on the importance of and age norms for various transitions to adulthood the Network on the Transitions to Adulthood of the MacArthur Foundation designed a module to measure this.

Data

The data on transitions to adulthood was collected on the 2002 General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is an in-person, full-probability sample of adults living in households in the United States (Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2003). The transition to adulthood items were administered to a half sample with 1398 cases.

Analysis

As Table 1A shows, Americans are most likely to mention

finishing schooling as a transition that a young person needs to complete to become an adult. 72% consider this extremely important and 97% consider it at least somewhat important (the criteria for then being asked by what age the transition should "normally occur"). This is followed by obtaining full-time employment which is mentioned as extremely important by 61% and at least somewhat important by 95.5%. Next comes being able to support a family financially which 60% consider extremely important and 94% as at least somewhat important. Last among the top choices is being financially independent of ones parents which is considered extremely important by 47% and at least somewhat important by 97%. Other transitions are mentioned less frequently. Not living with ones parents is extremely important to 29% and at least somewhat important to 82%. It is followed by being married which is extremely important to 19% and at least somewhat important to 55%. The event least often mentioned as needed to become an adult is having a child which is considered as extremely important by 16% and at least somewhat important by 52%.

Of these seven roles, 37.9% considered all to be important markers of a youth becoming an adult (i.e. somewhat, quite, or extremely important), 19.9% named six of these changes, 28.4% five of them, 8.7% four, and only 5.1% considered three or fewer as important (mean mentions=5.8).

On average people believe that becoming self-supporting is the first transition that a young person should make (mean age = 20.9) (Table 1B). This is followed by no longer living with ones parents (21.1), having a full-time job (21.2), completing schooling (22.3), being able to support a family financially (24.5), getting married (25.7), and having a child (26.2). Thus, the average age at which people feel these various transitions to adulthood should occur ranges over 5.3 years. This difference in the timing of transitions is further demonstrated by looking at how many people think the transitions should happen at age 25 or older. As Table 1B indicates, only 14-16% think that financial independence, living on ones own, and having a full-time job should wait until a person is 25 or older. 22% think that finishing ones education should be delayed until at least 25. A majority favor an age of 25+ for being able to support a family (58%), getting married (68%), and having a child (78%).¹

Overall, there is a good deal of consensus across social groups on the importance of these seven transitions. Examining the differences on the seven transitions by the nine demographics shows statistically significant variations in only 14 of 63 comparisons (Table 2). Looking at these by transitions there are no statistically significant differences in the importance of completing schooling and only one, small demographic difference over the importance of financial independence and full-time employment. Two notable differences occur on the importance of

¹The age of transitions and their ordering are similar to those found in Settersten and Haegstad, 1996.

living on ones own and being able to support a family. College graduates are more likely to think that living on ones own is important (extremely+quite)(67%) than those with a high school degree or less education (54-55%). It is also seen as more important by Jews (71%) and those with no religion (62%) than by Protestants (59%) or Catholics (53%). Being able to support a family is seen as more important by older adults (90% 65+, 86% 50-64, 82% 39-49, 74% under 30) and by the married (85%) and widowed (87%) than by the never married (76%). There is least agreement on the importance having a child and getting married. Older adults are more likely than younger adults to see both these activities as important for becoming an adult. 29% of those under 30 rated marriage as important, but 50% of those 65+ did so. Similarly, the widowed and married see childbearing and marriage as more important than those who have never married. On childbearing Jews and Catholics are the most likely to consider it important (respectively 45% and 34%) while only 26-27% of Protestants and those with no religion think it is important. On marriage Catholics and Protestants rate it as most important (respectively 36% and 35%), compared to only 25% of Jews and those with no religion. Marriage is also considered more important by Hispanics (44%) than non-Hispanics (32%). Those with low incomes tend to be bimodal either saying that getting married is extremely important or not at all important, while those with high incomes are in the middle categories, not to important to quite important.

Age and the life-cycle related variable of marital status show the only well-established pattern of differences with older adults and the married and widowed holding more to the traditional point of view that being able to support a family, getting married and, having children are important hallmarks of becoming an adult. This probably largely reflects a change in values across cohorts, but with only a single point of observation the effects of aging, life cycle, and cohort can not be readily separated.

There is considerably more differences across sub-groups about the timing of these seven transitions. Statistically significant differences appear for over half of the breakdowns (34 of 63).

Only one difference occurs for gender and Hispanic ethnicity and neither is notable.

On martial status the currently married favor the highest ages for all dimensions except getting married, for which the never marrieds think one should wait the longest. There is also an interesting reversal on the general preference for a younger age of marrying than having children. The married, widowed, separated, and divorced all put the average age of marrying above the age of having a child (by 0.5-1.1 years), but the never married put having a child 0.5 years before getting married.

Age shows two distinct patterns. On gaining financial independence, living on ones own, and working full-time, young adults favor an earlier transition and older adults a delay. Those 50-64 favor a higher age than adults 65+. For the family-oriented variables of supporting a family, getting married, and having a child, the pattern reverses. Younger adults are for a later

transition and older adults and especially those over 65 are for a younger age.

On race Blacks consistently favor earlier transitions than Whites and (with one exception) Others.² Blacks also differ from Whites and Others in favoring an earlier age for having a child than for getting married.

Jews favor later transitions than the other religious groups do. They are generally followed by Catholics with Protestants or those with no religion backing the youngest transitions. Those with no religion differ from the others in putting the transition to parenthood before matrimony.

On income the wealthiest are for the highest transition age for all changes. The earlier ages of change occur among those with low to moderate incomes, but only for four events is the lowest age among those with the least income.

Education shows the most consistent differences of all. For all transitions those with graduate degrees favor the latest transition and those without a high school degree the earliest. The transition gaps are 1.5 years for living on ones own, 2.3 for financial independence, 2.8 for working full time, 2.9 for supporting a family, 3.0 for finishing school, 3.3 for getting married, and 3.5 years for having a child. This means that different educational groups have large and consistent differences about the timing of transition to adulthood. For example, 46% of those without a high school degree believe that one should finish schooling before age 20. This early end to education is backed by 32% of those with a high school degree, 19% with an associate degree, 11% of those with 4-year degrees, and 7% of those with graduate degrees.³

Thus, on the timing of transitions there are several major patterns. First, there are differences by cohort/life cycle and marital status in which the young and never married favor younger transitions on financial independence, living away from parents, and working full time, and older transitions on supporting a family, getting married, and having children. (There are no differences on finishing school for either age or marital status.) Second, SES differences occur on education and income. Substantially later transitions are consistently endorsed by the better educated and those with higher incomes. Third, there are some race and religious differences that do not seem entirely due to SES. Blacks, for example, endorse earlier ages for finishing school than Whites do controlling for level of education.⁴

²See similar results in Settersten and Haegestad, 1996.

³See Settersten and Haegestad, 1996 for a similar pattern.

⁴The cultural differences related to religion, ethnicity, and race need to be examined more closely, but sample size limits what can be established as their net effects.

Summary and Conclusion

Americans rank finishing school as the most important hallmark of becoming an adult. This is followed closely by obtaining full-time employment, being able to support a family, and being financially independent. Of lesser importance are not living with ones parents, getting married, and having a child. The transition that people believe should come first is being financially independent (by age 20.9 on average), followed by not living with one parents (21.2), being employed full time (21.2), finishing schooling (22.3), being able to support a family (24.5), getting married (25.7). and having a child (26.2). Thus, among these seven key standards of achieving adulthood the average transition period runs over a 5.3 year span, from being financially independent, living on ones own, and being employed full time by the traditional age of majority (21) to being a parent by age 26.

There is a large degree of consensus across social groups on the relative importance of the seven transitions. The only notable pattern of differences is that on supporting a family, having a child, and getting married older adults and the widowed and married rate these as more important than younger adults and the never married do. This probably reflects in large part a shift in values across generations away from traditional family values, but may also represent life-cycle effects.

There is considerably more variations across social groups on the age or timing of the seven transitions. First, the young and never married favor earlier transitions on financial independence, living away from parents, and working full time, and later transitions on supporting a family, getting married, and having children. (There are no differences on finishing school for either age or marital status.) This probably reflects a combination of inter-generational shifts in values and differences related to life cycle. Second, the better educated and those with higher incomes favor later transitions on all domains. It appears that the college-educated middle and upper classes and the not college-educated working and lower classes have notably different models on how people and general (and presumably their own children in particular) should transition to adulthood. The college-educated class favors finishing education at 23-24, getting married at about 27 and having children at 28-29.⁵ Those without any college education think these transitions should occur 3-3.5 years earlier. To the extent that extended education and delayed family formation leads to greater achievement and more material and psychological well-being, these difference in models of transition to adulthood could have notable impacts on social inequality and the perpetuation of same across generations. Third, apparently independent of the SES effects there are also cultural differences

⁵Creating what is sometimes called a period of extended adolescence (Baker, 1994; Byers, 1993).

related to race and religion. Blacks, for example, tend to back the early transition model more than Whites do net of SES. As with the case of the SES differences themselves, this would tend to lead to racial differences being continued into succeeding generations.

Table 1

Importance and Timing of Transitions to Adulthood

A. Importance

	Ex. Imp.	Quite Imp.	Some- what Imp.	Not too Imp.	Not at all Imp.
Complete Education	72.3	17.9	7.0	2.1	0.8
Employed Full-time	61.0	22.8	11.7	3.8	0.7
Supporting a Family	60.3	22.0	11.2	4.6	1.8
Financially Independent	47.4	33.5	16.0	2.1	1.0
Not Living with Parents	29.3	27.9	25.0	13.3	4.4
Married	19.1	14.1	21.6	24.0	21.1
Have a Child	15.8	13.2	23.3	25.3	22.4

N=1353-1379

Wording: People differ in their ideas about what it takes for a young person to become an adult these days. How important is it for them to be...

- a. Financially independent from their parents/guardians
- b. No longer living in their parents' household
- c. Completed their formal schooling
- d. To be employed full-time
- e. Be capable of supporting a family financially
- f. Have a child
- g. Get married

Extremely Important/Quite Important/Somewhat Important/Not too Important/Not at All Important

B. Timing

	Mean Age	% 25 or Older	
Financially Independent	20.9	13.9	(1317)
Not Living with Parents	21.1	15.2	(1114)
Employed Full-time	21.2	16.3	(1297)
Complete Education	22.3	22.3	(1306)
Supporting a Family	24.5	57.6	(1220)
Married	25.7	68.2	(714)
Have a Child	26.2	77.7	(675)

Wording: If Extremely/Quite/Somewhat Important, ask:

By what age should this normally occur?

Table 2

Importance Ratings of Transition by Socio-Demographics

(Probability levels)

Demographics	Transitions						
	Finan. Indep.	Living on Own	Finish School	Work Full	Support family	Have Child	Mar- ried
Gender	.022	.461	.136	.058	.408	.555	.884
Age	.610	.839	.530	.158	.000	.007	.000
Degree	.286	.001	.318	.027	.125	.491	.529
Race	.948	.296	.684	.892	.130	.753	.318
Hispanic	.686	.088	.157	.620	.360	.464	.020
Marital Status	.937	.431	.567	.061	.006	.000	.000
Income	.595	.649	.238	.343	.795	.061	.003
Religion	.809	.006	.934	.482	.106	.000	.001

Table 3

Mean Age of Transitions by Socio-Demographics

Demographics	Finan. Indep.	Living on Own	Finish School	Work Full	Support family	Have Child	Mar- ried
Gender							
Men	20.9	21.0	22.4	21.2	24.3	26.1	25.8
Women	20.9	21.2	22.2	21.3	24.8	26.3	25.6
Prob.	.695	.109	.436	.486	.024	.559	.734
Model	---	---	---	---	L	---	---
Age							
18-29	20.0	20.3	22.3	20.6	24.7	25.8	26.3
30-49	21.0	21.2	22.1	21.2	24.6	26.6	25.9
50-64	21.5	21.6	22.7	21.8	24.7	26.4	25.7
65+	20.9	21.4	22.0	21.5	24.0	25.6	24.3
Prob.	.000	.000	.398	.000	.119	.037	.001
Model	SLC	SLC	---	SLC	---	NCNL	L
Degree							
LTHS	19.9	20.5	20.9	20.1	23.2	25.3	24.4
HS	20.7	20.9	21.9	20.9	24.3	25.7	25.0
Jr. Col.	21.0	21.4	23.4	22.0	25.3	26.9	26.0
Bachelor	21.9	21.8	23.3	22.3	25.6	27.5	26.6
Graduate	22.2	22.0	23.9	22.9	26.1	28.8	27.7
Prob.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Model	L	L	L	L	L	L	L
Race							
White	21.1	21.2	22.5	21.4	24.7	26.5	25.7
Black	20.3	20.9	21.3	20.5	23.9	24.8	25.5
Other	20.2	20.9	21.7	21.2	24.3	26.3	25.8
Prob.	.001	.207	.003	.003	.029	.000	.891
Model	NC	---	NC	NC	NC	NC	---
Hispanic							
Not	20.9	21.1	22.3	21.3	24.5	26.2	25.6
Hispanic	20.3	21.0	22.1	21.0	24.7	26.0	26.5
Prob.	.031	.806	.603	.309	.729	.649	.081
Model	L	---	---	---	---	---	---

Table 3 (continued)

Demographics	Finan. Indep.	Living on Own	Finish School	Work Full	Support family	Have Child	Married
Marital Status							
Married	21.2	21.4	22.5	21.6	24.7	26.4	25.6
Widowed	20.0	20.6	21.9	21.0	23.8	24.9	23.8
Divorced	21.0	21.0	22.4	21.0	24.3	26.5	26.0
Separated	19.7	20.2	21.7	20.0	23.3	25.0	24.0
Never Married	20.3	20.7	21.9	20.8	24.7	26.1	26.6
Prob.	.000	.001	.504	.000	.060	.102	.002
Model	NC	NC	---	NC	---	---	NC
Income							
Lt 10K	19.9	20.2	21.3	20.9	24.0	24.4	25.2
10-15K	20.1	20.2	22.1	20.6	23.9	24.5	25.7
15-20K	20.1	20.3	22.8	20.4	23.6	25.2	23.9
20-25K	20.6	20.6	22.1	20.5	23.8	25.7	24.6
25-30K	19.6	20.4	21.9	20.4	23.8	25.5	25.9
30-35K	20.3	20.9	21.7	20.8	23.9	24.8	24.8
35-40K	20.9	21.2	21.7	20.9	24.1	25.9	25.8
40-50K	20.9	21.0	21.9	21.0	24.4	26.4	26.0
50-60K	21.1	21.4	23.0	21.0	24.7	26.9	25.6
60-75K	21.0	21.1	23.0	21.7	24.9	26.9	25.7
75-90K	21.1	21.6	22.6	21.8	25.4	27.5	26.7
90-110K	21.7	21.7	22.6	21.6	25.1	27.5	26.9
110K+	22.4	22.1	22.8	22.5	26.1	27.9	27.2
Refused	21.5	21.8	22.3	22.0	25.0	26.1	25.5
Prob.	.000	.000	.287	.000	.000	.000	.029
Model	L	L	---	L	L	L	L
Religion							
Prot.	20.8	21.1	22.2	21.1	24.1	25.8	25.2
Cath.	20.8	21.3	22.5	21.5	25.0	26.7	25.8
Jew.	21.9	22.1	22.7	24.1	26.6	29.4	27.5
None	21.1	20.7	22.1	20.7	24.8	26.1	27.5
Other	21.4	21.4	22.1	21.7	25.8	27.3	26.7
Prob.	.257	.042	.908	.000	.000	.001	.000
Model	---	NC	---	NC	NC	NC	NC

Models:

NC=not constant (nominal variable)

L=linear

SLC=significant linear component, best linear fit is statistically significant, but also statistically significant variation around this linear model

NCNL=not constant, not linear, best linear fit is not statistically significant, but significantly different from constant model

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