

Cambridge University Press

0521814804 - The Changing Adolescent Experience: Societal Trends and the Transition to Adulthood

Edited by Jeylan T. Mortimer and Reed W. Larson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

Macrostructural Trends and the Reshaping of Adolescence

Jeylan T. Mortimer and Reed W. Larson

The paths adolescents take from childhood into adulthood are shaped by broad demographic, institutional, and technological forces. In the next century, these societal forces may affect adolescent experience in ways that facilitate and enhance youth's preparation to become healthy adults or in ways that leave youth unprepared, even handicapped, for adulthood. Knowledgeable projections about how adolescent experience and preparation for adulthood are likely to be transformed in the future are vital for shaping agendas for research; for alerting educators, policy makers, and practitioners to new realities; and for formulating thoughtful responses to emerging dilemmas. This volume focuses on key societal phenomena that will influence the experience of adolescence in the future: demographic and economic trends, innovations in information technology, and alterations in key social institutions including those concerned with education, work, health care, and criminal justice.

Some ominous societal changes of the 21st century are addressed. Rapid population growth in some regions of the world induce crowding, environmental degradation, and resource scarcity that jeopardize investment in the next generation. In other regions where populations have stabilized or are shrinking, large aging cohorts compete with smaller and less powerful younger cohorts for resources. Across the world, technological and occupational changes have produced widening income gaps between "information workers" and low skill workers, with strong implications for the resources available to children in the succeeding generation.

Other quite promising societal changes are foreseen in these chapters. Cultural and economic globalization, information technology, new

Cambridge University Press

0521814804 - The Changing Adolescent Experience: Societal Trends and the Transition to Adulthood

Edited by Jeylan T. Mortimer and Reed W. Larson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

educational methods, and innovations in health-service delivery have the potential to enhance adolescents' lives in the future. They give young people access to diverse resources and present tremendous opportunities for youth to make choices among a wider variety of life options, thus enabling them to develop more fully their potentials.

This book examines adolescence in its worldwide context. Our comparative perspective highlights the ways in which the circumstances of adolescents in any single society are linked to trends that are common across societies. Although the social trends described in this volume affect all regions of the globe, special attention is directed to postindustrial societies, such as those in Europe, North America, and Japan. A companion volume, *The World's Youth*, focuses on the current state of adolescents in eight regions, including the developing world: the Arab states, Sub-Saharan Africa, Russia, India, Southeast Asia, East Asia, Latin America, and Europe and North America (Brown, Larson, & Saraswathi, 2002).

In this introductory chapter, we provide an overview of major societal changes that will influence adolescents in the future, and we consider some of the ways that they are likely to reshape adolescence in the decades ahead. We begin with a brief description of key macrostructural changes and then describe their impacts on adolescents' experiences.

MACROLEVEL CHANGES IN SOCIETY

Social scientists who study adolescence typically focus on the immediate contexts of their day-to-day experience, especially the family, school, and peer group, and, more recently, the workplace (Call & Mortimer, 2001). Neglected are the broader institutional forces and currents of societal change that affect the experiences adolescents have within these microsystems of development. It has been demonstrated, however, that societal changes can dramatically alter what happens within specific contexts (Elder, 1974). Modell (1989), for example, shows how dramatic changes in the dating patterns of U.S. adolescents in the early 20th century resulted from the increased availability of automobiles, as well as changing attitudes toward heterosexual relationships. In this section we introduce key macrostructural and institutional changes that are likely to impact strongly adolescents' lives in the future: patterns of demographic change; economic restructuring and globalization; institutional shifts, including school, work, and the links between them; criminal justice reforms; and trends in health-services delivery.

Cambridge University Press

0521814804 - The Changing Adolescent Experience: Societal Trends and the Transition to Adulthood

Edited by Jeylan T. Mortimer and Reed W. Larson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Macrostructural Trends and the Reshaping of Adolescence* 3

Demographic Change

To time travelers from the past, one of the most striking features of postindustrial societies – once they got beyond all our gizmos – would be the comparatively small number of children and youth and the large number of elderly. There is little doubt that this aging of the population will continue into the 21st century, changing society and bringing new issues to the fore. The nations of North America, Europe, and Japan have rapidly growing older populations that are dependent on economically active adults. In general, the economically active, adult population is shrinking relative to those who are economically dependent, including both younger and older generations. Therefore, investment in youth who will become the adults of the future deserves special attention.

An intergenerational contract, in which the older generation invests in the young, is the basis for social continuity in any society. Yet the exacerbation of competition between young and elderly in the distribution of resources is increasingly problematic in aging societies, especially those where the number of adults entering the productive labor force is shrinking. The following chapter by Fussell asks how this state of competition for scarce resources can be resolved. How can youth be enabled to move forward into adulthood, well equipped to deal with their economic and other adult roles, while the welfare of the elderly is not shortchanged? Her chapter suggests that postindustrial nations are at a crucial choice point; the future of young people – and ultimately society – hangs in the balance.

Fussell suggests that immigration from overpopulated to underpopulated societies may be a means to alleviate the labor shortages and resultant economic problems of aging nations. Indeed, that is a path being taken by the United States, where current immigration rates are high. But to date, receiving societies have been ambivalent about these new immigrants and their families, welcoming their labor but often posing restrictions on their continued residence and access to essential services (such as health care; see Ozer et al., this volume) and subjecting them to prejudice and discrimination. Immigrant adolescents may become exemplars of marginality: attached to the cultures and ways of life of their origin countries while at the same time attempting to be successful in their new environments, especially in school and work. Youth's increasing ethnic diversity may also exacerbate tensions between the dependent aging "majority" population and the younger "minority"

Cambridge University Press

0521814804 - The Changing Adolescent Experience: Societal Trends and the Transition to Adulthood

Edited by Jeylan T. Mortimer and Reed W. Larson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

population on which they will depend for their welfare, undermining the intergenerational contract.

At a more psychological level, changing demographic patterns create uncertainties for both majority and minority adolescents. Falling birth rates, delayed parenthood, divorce rates that have stabilized at high levels, and the proliferation of alternate lifestyles (e.g., cohabiting couples, single person households) can generate uncertainty for adolescents as they ponder their futures. For example, it is no longer realistic for an adolescent girl to expect to be supported as a homemaker by an employed husband to be and married for a lifetime. In the absence of clear guidelines, young men and women alike must navigate occupational choice and seek work-family balance in societies that are structured in many ways as if the “traditional” family still predominated (Johnson & Mortimer, 2000). Youth’s responses to these dilemmas, in their own work and family behavior, will shape both the character of adolescence and the demographic realities of the future.

Economic Changes

The globalization of the economy, accelerated by new communication technologies, poses another set of changing realities, challenges, and opportunities for adolescents as they prepare for their occupational futures. Diminishing market barriers, increasing crossnational flows of goods and services, and growing global competition put pressures on businesses worldwide to decrease costs and reduce worker protections. This changing and more competitive business climate, coupled with rapid changes in the nature of work, make it increasingly likely that the future job market – for which adolescents are trying to prepare – cannot be accurately foreseen. Local job markets in the West can disappear in a year or two, as entire industries are suddenly exported to developing countries. Economic change is especially likely to affect young people because they are transitioning into the labor force, have relatively short tenures of employment, and limited job security.

This process of transition into the workforce, however, depends on how the institutions of education and work are organized and connected to one another within a nation. The chapter by Kerckhoff points out that some postindustrial societies provide well-constructed links between school and work, such as the apprenticeship system in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. These give young people marketable educational credentials and provide clear institutional bridges

Cambridge University Press

0521814804 - The Changing Adolescent Experience: Societal Trends and the Transition to Adulthood

Edited by Jeylan T. Mortimer and Reed W. Larson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Macrostructural Trends and the Reshaping of Adolescence* 5

into the labor market. In other nations, like the United States and Canada, young school-leavers must find their way into the full-time labor force mostly on their own.

The situation in these North American countries creates a context for relatively turbulent school-to-work transitions. The absence of institutional connections between school and work, and the provision of general rather than vocationally specific educational credentials, leaves youth ill-prepared. After finishing school, many American young people flounder from job to job, experiencing bouts of unemployment and many job changes. Turbulent transitions into the workforce are particularly prevalent among young people who do not obtain a four-year college degree, and this is likely to be even more true in the future.

As income differences between the highly educated (college or higher) and high school graduates grow, ever-increasing proportions of youth seek higher education, hoping to take their places as highly favored “information workers” in the global economy. However, large numbers of youth are not successful in completing the B.A. degree. Kerckhoff’s proposals to strengthen the connections between school and work and to establish more occupationally relevant, educational credentials could ameliorate the economic strains of this period of life, especially for youth whose success in the educational system is limited.

While these recommendations are particularly pertinent to North American youth, whose bridges to work are the least structured among societies worldwide, they are increasingly germane in other nations as well. Links between school and work that have operated effectively in other postindustrial societies are under pressure in recent years as a result of global competition, technological change, and periodic economic recession. For example, traditional bridges between high schools and corporate employers are weakening in Japan, as economic recession has reduced the number of job openings. Many Japanese youth must find jobs on their own, like North American young people (Brinton, 2000). Similarly, German youth are responding to the tightening of labor markets by increasing the number of occupational qualifications they obtain, and by taking alternative and prolonged routes from education into the labor force (Mortimer & Krüger, 2000).

Accelerated technical and occupational change in the future may make it increasingly difficult for educational institutions to provide training that is fitted to a fluid and shifting labor market. For this reason, Kerckhoff and others have advocated closer communication between schools and employers. Fussell argues that the greatest need is not for

Cambridge University Press

0521814804 - The Changing Adolescent Experience: Societal Trends and the Transition to Adulthood

Edited by Jeylan T. Mortimer and Reed W. Larson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

more years of general postsecondary education but for better systems to match training to changing job opportunities.

Institutional Systems

Changes in service provision, in both governmental and nongovernmental sectors, represent another set of transformations affecting adolescent experience. Reviewing trends across nations of the world, Inglehart (1997) observes that postindustrial societies are experiencing a shift to “postmodern” values that include diminishing faith in the ability of large, hierarchical national bureaucracies to deliver social services. The demise of communist governments, the reduction of social welfare states in Northern Europe, and the diminution of welfare in the United States reflect a pessimism about the ability of big government to improve people’s lives. In its place, governments are experimenting with privatization, public-private partnerships, voucher systems, and other alternative means to provide services. At the same time, the number of nongovernmental organizations aimed at addressing social service needs has been rapidly expanding (Salamon, 1995).

Provision of juvenile justice is one area where pessimism about the potential of government to ameliorate problems has won out, at least for the present. In the face of juvenile crime, including violent crime, the United States as well as a number of European societies have abandoned a liberal rehabilitative philosophy and have replaced it with one aimed at punishment and the protection of society from the perceived threat of juvenile offenders. The chapter by Cullen and Wright documents how increasing numbers of youth in the United States have been placed in the criminal justice system while diminishing efforts have been made to alter the conditions, both personal and social, that led to juvenile offenses. They argue that the change in philosophy may partly be due to the high numbers of Black and Hispanic youth in the adjudicated populations; the voting public is more likely to view these minority offenders as predators to be locked up than wayward youth to put straight. This crossgenerational racism echoes warnings from Fussell’s chapter about schisms in the social contract between young and old.

The one ray of hope in this domain of government is that there have been a proliferation of experiments on alternative means of treating offenders and some, albeit uneven, use of research findings to shape policy. Many of the experiments in the United States have been based on the punitive philosophy, such as “scare straight” programs and boot camps,

Cambridge University Press

0521814804 - The Changing Adolescent Experience: Societal Trends and the Transition to Adulthood

Edited by Jeylan T. Mortimer and Reed W. Larson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Macrostructural Trends and the Reshaping of Adolescence* 7

and the results have not been promising. But Cullen and Wright point to an increasing body of research that begins to identify the positive effects of specific rehabilitative programs for certain categories of offenders, including violent offenders. Their synthesis of the evidence suggests the merit of rethinking punitive strategies; rehabilitative interventions have the potential to reduce recidivism and other negative outcomes. One can hope, both for society and for the next generation, that the path of the future for the provision of juvenile justice will be toward “smart government” based on empirical evaluation of the outcomes associated with alternative treatments.

The trends in health care for adolescents reflect changes in governmental and nongovernmental systems that have been more responsive to the needs of youth. Focusing on the United States, the chapter by Ozer et al. shows that federal expenditures for adolescent health care have been increasing over the last decade. There is increased institutional momentum to create systems – such as the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) – that deliver services to the young, including poor youth. They also point to increased use of the Internet and other information systems by health care providers to deliver information and supervise care that is fitted to the lifestyles of adolescents. For example, some health care providers are experimenting with the use of e-mail “ticklers” that prompt adolescents to get vaccinations or to make follow-up appointments for counseling on identified risk behaviors.

The future of health care for adolescents, however, is by no means secure. The efficacy of state-run medical systems of Europe and Canada is of continuing concern as rising costs of medical care collide with neoliberal fiscal conservatism. In the United States, the growing use of “managed care” is hardly a panacea. As Ozer et al. report, the patchwork system for financing medical care in the United States leaves many young people, especially minority youth in the age 15–25 age group, without health insurance. An optimist might predict that research knowledge will eventually lead to leaner but also smarter, more equal, and more customized delivery of educational, health, and criminal justice services to youth, but that outcome is by no means certain.

Again, the willingness of an aging majority population to devote resources to an increasingly minority young population looms as a threat to the health of future generations. Prospects of weakening the “social gradient in health” – the social class differences in health status that often emerge in late adolescence and early adulthood (Harley, 2001; Harley &

Cambridge University Press

0521814804 - The Changing Adolescent Experience: Societal Trends and the Transition to Adulthood

Edited by Jeylan T. Mortimer and Reed W. Larson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Mortimer, 2000; House et al., 1990) – are less likely under conditions of unequal access to health services.

Space did not permit us to include chapters on the many other institutional systems that provide services to youth, many of which are also experiencing fundamental change, crosspressures, and controversy. The institution of education may be considered a case in point. Across the world, educational institutions are under pressure as they attempt to cope with new knowledge about adolescent development, new conceptions of what this phase of life should be like, and constantly shifting global realities. For example, in an attempt to make secondary schools more responsive to the needs of adolescents, the Japanese government has cut back on school hours and has reduced the number of courses and tests required for graduation from high school; yet a private sector of supplementary *Juku* schools that make life stressful for many teens continues to flourish. Some important consequences of these trends are unintended and controversial, such as increasing socioeconomic disparities among youth in academic effort (Kariya and Rosenbaum, Forthcoming). In U.S. schools, issues of school choice, sex education, and drug education create battlegrounds on which debates between those promoting interventionist or noninterventionist philosophies, public versus private provision of services, and other controversies recur with adolescents' futures in the balance.

New Technology and Technology-Based Systems

Rapid technological change is yet another major factor that is certain to transform the lives of adolescents in the future. The increasingly rapid development and dissemination of new technologies, especially ICT (information and communication technologies) are restructuring the adolescent experience in pervasive and profound ways. Technological change underlies shifts in the occupational structure, educational demands, and the health care system, which we have discussed, as well as shifts in numerous other aspects of life that we have not discussed, from the kinds of entertainments adolescents' enjoy to their modes of relating to one another. In order to succeed in school and work, to have access to information of all kinds, and to participate broadly in the social and recreational adolescent subculture, adolescents must be computer literate and capable of regular retooling their technological knowledge as new technologies emerge.

Cambridge University Press

0521814804 - The Changing Adolescent Experience: Societal Trends and the Transition to Adulthood

Edited by Jeylan T. Mortimer and Reed W. Larson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Macrostructural Trends and the Reshaping of Adolescence* 9

Technological diffusion and its impact on adolescence are clearly global in character, with youth in remote corners of the world connected to one another and to information about how their more and less affluent peers elsewhere live. As the chapter by Anderson shows, young people throughout the world are increasingly online, despite a persistent digital divide in computer access crossnationally and socioeconomically. He also points out that the information available online is not well organized or evaluated, suggesting a critical need for adolescents to develop skills in navigating through this complex world. Extrapolating to the future, Anderson provides a glimpse of the potentials likely to arise as a result of ever-increasing speed and technological capacity, from digital implants that permit health and global positioning system (GPS) monitoring of youth, to cell-based computing devices, to improvements in instant translation that will allow adolescents to cross linguistic barriers and connect to ever-widening social worlds.

Technology's greatest impact, Boulding (1995) argues, consists of the human systems that develop around it. This is nowhere more true than with the Internet. Its physical capacities to store, retrieve, and exchange information are awe inspiring. But far more significant are the new communication patterns and life worlds that are evolving within it. Whereas Anderson examines the diffusion and increasing potentials of new technologies, Hellenga's chapter focuses on the evolution of the Internet as a new "social space" for adolescent life. She shows that the new worlds opened by – and being created by – youth alter adolescents' recreation and leisure time pursuits, peer relations, self-concepts, and, potentially, mental health. Increasingly, adolescents' communications with one another, even with close friends, are mediated by technology. With instant messaging, palm pilots, diverse portals to Internet chat rooms, multiple-player games, and other diversions, adolescents need never be alone. The buzz word is "connectivity," and it is clear that new generations of youth who have access to ICT will be connected to people and information as never before.

RESHAPING ADOLESCENCE

All of these macrostructural trends, in subtle and direct ways, are reshaping and reconstructing adolescence. As adult roles change in response to rapidly changing technologies, shifting occupational structures, and the increasingly global cultural and economic context, the requirements

Cambridge University Press

0521814804 - The Changing Adolescent Experience: Societal Trends and the Transition to Adulthood

Edited by Jeylan T. Mortimer and Reed W. Larson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

for effective preparation for adulthood change accordingly. At the same time, the system of supports available to youth – through governmental and nongovernmental systems, the Internet, families, and so forth – are also changing, altering the kinds of resources that they can draw on as they prepare to become adults.

The array of current and potential changes in adolescent experience are too numerous to do justice to here. They are observable throughout the modern world. In a separate volume, we examine the implications of change worldwide on key domains of adolescent functioning, including interpersonal skills, civic engagement, preparation for work, and well-being (Larson, Brown, & Mortimer, 2002). Here we focus on two general trends that affect all of these domains: the lengthening of the adolescent period and the increasing diversity among young people in the paths they take to adulthood.

Lengthening of the Adolescent Transition

The macroforces we have reviewed contribute to the delay of several transitions that typically mark the onset of adulthood. For many youth, the transition out of school occurs at older ages as they extend their years of education. Advances in technology require youth to attain more years of schooling to obtain the more desirable jobs. As Kerckhoff points out, appreciating economic returns make higher education increasingly attractive to adolescents as well as to their parents who are called on to provide continued support. Smaller family size and the growing affluence of the population have enabled the families of young people (at least those in the middle class) to invest in the development of their “human capital.” While youth must postpone the economic rewards that derive from full-time labor force participation, their prospects for future economic well-being are enhanced. As a result, across postindustrial societies, the proportions of youth obtaining college and postgraduate degrees have been increasing over many decades, with no end in sight.

In addition to prolonged education, other key markers of the transition to adulthood have been postponed, including acquisition of full-time work, marriage, and childbearing. Fussell attributes these delays to the increased instability of entry positions in the labor market, to the erosion of arranged marriage in East Asia, and, across cultures, to growing individualism. Whereas the timing of these life transitions were socially scripted by cultural norms in the recent past (Modell, 1989; Modell,