

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

RICHARD A. SETTERSTEN, JR.; FRANK F. FURSTENBERG, JR.; AND RUBÉN G. RUMBAUT (Eds.) *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, 591 p., index.

In the western world, the twentieth century was the time when we created progressively more refined conceptions of life stages. To this end, the century began with the psychologist G. Stanley Hall's "discovery" of adolescence as a new life stage sandwiched in between childhood and adulthood. One hundred years later, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, we see increasing attention to the stage of life that is popularly called "youth," or as termed in this impressive volume, "early adulthood."

The idea of adolescence as a unique period of life quickly caught on in the western world, as the editors explain in their introduction to this book, because it made sense of social and economic changes that were taking place to alter how young people spent their time. They argue that "similar forces are at work today to make early adulthood a distinct and socially recognized stage of life" (4). The idea of adolescence as "the period between childhood and adulthood no longer works well to describe what happens as young people come of age in postindustrial economies" (5). Social policies, however, largely continue to operate on the assumption that adulthood is attained between the ages of 18 and 21; they are thus outdated and in need of drastic revision. There is a demand, the editors argue, for social policies that pay attention to the unique needs of young adults between the ages of 18 and 34, so that their transition to adulthood may be facilitated.

I read this book through multiple lenses: as a social gerontologist I am interested in life course studies and especially work that investigates how early periods of life affect later periods; as a qualitative researcher I am interested in knowing about people's experiences and self-understandings; as a feminist sociologist I am interested in research that recognizes the ways in which women's lives differ from men's; and as a member of several non-racial minorities I am interested in research that attends to minority experiences. On most accounts I found what I was looking for, although the book most definitely addressed these concerns unevenly.

The book is a relatively seamless collection of 16 chapters authored by members and collaborators of the Research Network on Transitions to

Adulthood and Public Policy, a group of sociologists, demographers, economists, and psychologists funded by the MacArthur Foundation, under the direction of sociologist Frank Furstenberg. Each chapter offers evidence of changes that have taken place to make it difficult if not impossible for young adults to assume an autonomous existence as early as they did half a century ago. All but one chapter focus exclusively on discussing large sets of longitudinal or cross-sectional data, and all but two chapters use only American data.

The two chapters that compare the American situation with that of other countries with postindustrial economies are both co-authored by Canadian sociologist/demographer Anne Gauthier. In Gauthier's chapter with Elizabeth Fussell, the authors offer a comparative analysis of American women's transition to adulthood by examining differences in the general patterns of family formation. In turn, family formation is discussed in terms of the timing of: leaving the parental home; (heterosexual?) cohabitation; marriage; and childbearing. The authors argue that it is the combination of these events that constitutes the transition to adulthood. They go on to compare American data with data from Canada, Germany, Italy, and Sweden, to conclude that, even though there is a trend towards delaying marriage and childbearing, the vast majority of women in these countries have formed families (i.e., married and had children) by age 35. There is an interesting discussion here that relates differences to national economic and political considerations, but the analysis could go much further. How, for example, can we explain why 7.5% of Canadian women born between 1960-1964 had left home by age 35 but had never cohabited, married or had children, whereas the comparable figure for Italy is 3.2%? Are lesbians hidden in these figures? Why is there no recognition of the growing acceptability of lesbian families? I was disturbed by the implication that lesbian partnerships cannot be considered families. While there are no reliable statistics, there could have at least been an acknowledgement of this path to family formation – particularly in an era during which lesbian marriage (whether or not legally recognized) is increasingly popular.

The diverse paths women have taken through marriage and childbearing in the twentieth century are examined by Lawrence Wu and Jui-Chung Allen Li. The chapter is valuable for clearly showing the enormously diverse trajectories of women's lives as they negotiate marriage and childbearing. Their analysis, which differentiates between White, Black, and Hispanic women, shows that a substantial minority of women have always followed nontraditional pathways.

Diversity is also highlighted in other chapters, such as Ted Mouw's chapter focusing on the sequencing of leaving home, completing schooling, starting full-time work, marriage, and having children for men and women aged 35 and up. Mouw offers the provocative assertion that achieving each state is not necessarily a good indication of having achieved adulthood, but that "adulthood is better understood as the completion of the nonfamilial transitions of leaving home, finishing school, and finding work" (258).

Unfortunately (in my view), he does not develop this argument. D. Wayne Osgood and colleagues, meanwhile, identify and discuss the meaning of six distinct paths to adulthood. They compare their findings with those of Gary Sandefur and colleagues in their chapter on education.

Other chapters question the extent to which traditional demographic markers of adulthood remain useful. This is the explicit problem addressed by Michael Shanahan and colleagues, who examine the responses of young adults aged 25 and 26 to a survey asking about situations in which they feel like an adult. They note that previous research “suggests that contemporary American youth now rely on individualist criteria (i.e., indicators of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral maturity) to the exclusion of demographic transition markers,” but this research is based on convenience samples. In contrast, their chapter uses “a multivariate framework that simultaneously examines the relative importance of individualistic criteria and demographic transition markers” (249). They find strong support for the salience of demographic transition markers and limited support for individualistic criteria, but note that limitations of measurement and design may have obscured the importance of individualistic criteria. Indeed, no one was asked to define for her or himself what it means to be an adult. Had the researchers sought a qualitative understanding of perceptions, they might have reached different conclusions about important criteria.

The only chapter to use qualitative data is by John Mollenkopf and colleagues, who focus on comparing the paths to adulthood taken by groups of racially and ethnically diverse young people in New York City. They are particularly interested in examining the similarities and differences between those who are immigrants and those who are native-born. To this end, they conducted telephone interviews and in-person, open-ended interviews with people aged 18 to 32. They also conducted ethnographic studies of sites where American and immigrant young people interact. They compared those with parents from the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru with those whose parents are American-born Puerto Ricans, and they also compared the latter group with those whose parents were from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Chinese diaspora. They also compared those with parents from the Anglophone Caribbean to those with native African American parents, and they compared those whose parents came from Russia with American-born whites, including Catholics, Jews, and Protestants.

To my mind, Mollenkopf et al.’s study is by far the most impressive in terms of conception and design, and most interesting in terms of findings. Perhaps this is because of my bias as a qualitative researcher. Nevertheless, the data are richly contextualized. Sections of the chapter review issues such as how participants define success, and attitudes towards education. An intriguing comparison is made between those with immigrant Chinese parents and those with Puerto-Rican parents; both groups tend to have parents with little education, yet the two groups fare quite differently in terms of outcomes. The authors conclude with a nuanced discussion of the

role played by various factors such as area of residence, family strategies, and migration patterns.

Despite my enjoyment of Mollenkopf et al.'s chapter, the one I most appreciated was E. Michael Foster and Elizabeth Gifford's discussion of what happens to children in the foster care, juvenile justice, and special education systems. In our society it is too easy to classify children in these systems as "other" and then ignore them. It is not surprising, as the authors point out, that there is scant research about how these children fare as adults, but the little that is available shows that they generally do quite poorly. Foster and Gifford argue that, with proper attention and resources, outcomes for survivors of these systems could be much improved. This argument is supported by Richard Settersten in his concluding chapter on social policy. Here, Settersten draws together the research from the preceding chapters, to offer a life course perspective on the need for social policy that takes into account the contemporary realities for young people, and that works to facilitate rather than impede a satisfactory transition to mature adulthood.

Other topics covered in the book are attitudes and values (this was the only chapter to mention homosexuality), the role played by families of origin, and trends in time use. Overall, there is ample attention paid to racial group differences, although only one chapter (on education) recognizes the existence of Native American Indians and even there, this group is barely mentioned. Altogether, the book pays a lot of attention to statistics, which are often analyzed in new and creative ways to convincingly support the Network's contention that there are terrible costs to pay when we ignore how young people are transitioning to mature adulthood. Such statistics seem to be needed these days to convince policymakers and even the general public that something is amiss, yet I would have liked to have seen much more attention to qualitative research. This is a book that will satisfy demographers with an interest in American data. It will also be interesting to those who seek to know more about the significance of the transition to adulthood from a life course perspective. It is less satisfying for those who seek a qualitative understanding of young adulthood. Nevertheless, even for qualitative researchers it contains a wealth of background information that is both useful and thought-provoking.

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