

The Changing Adolescent Experience

*Societal Trends and the
Transition to Adulthood*

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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

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.

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"

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

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

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,

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 &

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 *Juko* 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.

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

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,

Furstenberg, & Hershberg, 1976), contemporary society is less prescriptive. In Japan, over 50% of young women remain unmarried at age 30, most working, living with their parents, and enjoying freedoms not available to them were they to marry (Orenstein, 2001). But we should also stress that for many youth the situation is not so free. American youth who do not obtain college credentials often find themselves in a “revolving door” of low paying and unstable jobs, which are usually insufficient to support a family (Kerckhoff, this volume).

It must be emphasized, that although the various transitions marking adulthood have tended to occur at older ages, the ordering of the transition markers have also become more variable (Buchmann, 1989; Shanahan 2000), leading to greater complexity and uncertainty in the experience of this time of life. Fewer young people are becoming adults in what might be considered a traditional, normatively prescribed sequence of events, that is, leaving home and finishing their educations, acquiring full-time jobs, marrying, and having children. Instead, these sequences have become more variable or “disorderly” (Rindfuss et al., 1987). The growth of cohabitation is accompanied by a more frequent decoupling of marriage and childbearing (Fussell, this volume). There are more frequent reversals in trajectories, such as leaving home and then returning or entering full-time work and then reenrolling in school.

For some, this is a period of liminality during which their connections to social institutions are weak, ambiguous, and shifting. They frequently change jobs, housing, familial arrangements, social milieus, and lifestyles. The prolongation and unpredictable character of the late adolescent period give rise to increasing uncertainty about the ending of this phase. As young people go to school and postpone entry to adult roles for longer periods, up to and sometimes beyond the third decade of life, their experiences may become inconsistent, their age status blurred. They may be considered to be adults in some respects and may bear some responsibilities of adulthood (for example, being a parent) while they are still “adolescent” in other respects (e.g., living at home and still economically dependent, at least partially, on their parents).

As a result of these trends, a new phase of “postadolescence,” “youth,” or what Arnett (2000) has called “emerging adulthood” has been identified. Arnett considers this early 20-something phase as, above all, a period of individual volition, when young people explore different lifestyles, change residence more frequently than people in any other age group, and experiment with intimate relationships, types of work, and worldviews. However, the long period of transition to adulthood,

with its numerous changes in life circumstances, may reflect constrained circumstances as much or more than individual choice. Indeed, the contemporary U.S. economy offers many contemporary young people who lack college degrees mainly nonstandard, “contingent” work that is temporary, part-time, or otherwise limited by contract (see Kerckhoff, this volume).

Thus, although some herald this new period as a time of unprecedented opportunity for identity development and human capital development prior to assuming full adult responsibilities, others worry that young people must make choices that will have lasting consequences for their life trajectories in work, family, and other spheres in the absence of adult guidance and institutional structuring (Kerckhoff, this volume; Hamilton, 1990). For many youth, this is a period of vulnerability, when low wages and lack of health care put them at risk. To make matters worse, it is an age period in which many risk behaviors peak (Arnett, 2000). This combination of experimentation, instability, and risk points to the second increasingly prominent feature in the reconstruction of adolescence.

Diversity in Adolescence and the Paths to Adulthood

We have already noted the increasing variability in the paths taken both within and out of adolescence and emerging adulthood. What remains to be emphasized is the ways in which differences in family wealth, and other inequities affecting access to resources, influence the paths young people take. Shaped within the competitive ethos of postindustrial capitalism, the new adolescence is a period of high stakes in which access to resources is critical in shaping both options and constraints. Multiple bases of inequality – related to gender, ethnicity, immigrant status, family socioeconomic status, and other factors – engender tremendous diversity in the capacity of youth to make choices and choose life paths.

Family income is a foremost factor in differentiating the paths taken through this transitional period. Family wealth affects adolescents’ access to information technology and thus their development of ICT skills that are increasingly crucial to education, communication, and employment. As Youniss and Ruth (this volume) argue, “Denial of access, whether by design or neglect, is tantamount to relegating some youth to secondary status in the competitive job market.” Family wealth also affects access to higher education – particularly in the United States – which affects the types of jobs young people eventually get. As

Kerckhoff points out, those without a college degree are more likely to find themselves in a low-paying and unstable labor pool, with limited options. Like the “upstairs borders,” vagrants, and “maids” of the 19th century, they may find themselves stuck in situations that society may view as subadult. Based on recent societal trends, it is plausible to assume that the experience of transition to adulthood will become increasingly *differentiated* with growing economic inequality (Kerckhoff, this volume) and diminishing rates of social class mobility across generations.

Youth who are disadvantaged in one way are likely to be disadvantaged in others. In many cases lower family income is more frequent among ethnic minorities, including new immigrants, and the disadvantages of low income are magnified by other types of discrimination. We have already noted that the majority populations of many countries are ambivalent in their support of initiatives to enhance the lives of immigrant and minority youth. Cullen and Wright show that contact with the criminal justice system is a highly prevalent experience in adolescence and the transition to adulthood and, in the United States, it disproportionately affects minority youth, especially African American youth. As a result, difficulties of obtaining jobs following incarceration are compounded by minority status and discrimination.

This multiplication of disadvantage is also evident in the domain of health. Ozer et al. note the prevalence of comorbidities: disabling conditions, both mental and physical, often occur together. Adolescents who have learning disabilities and or mental and physical health problems that impair their abilities to climb the educational ladder will be disadvantaged. The growing difficulties in paths to adulthood as disadvantage and stressors accumulate pose daunting challenges to educators and youth service providers to enhance youth resilience under conditions of adversity.

Finally, if migration between societies quickens – as is likely – in response to worldwide differentials in population density, economic well-being, and standards of living (Fussell, this volume), increasingly diverse experiences of adolescence will coexist within single societies, as new cultural groups, with widely divergent economic and other resources, come in contact with one another and attempt to accommodate to the opportunities and constraints they face in their new homes. The growing diversity of societies, linked to expanding social inequality as well as to immigration, challenge youth to develop higher levels of empathy, tolerance, and interpersonal skills.

In sum, the dawn of the 21st century may be considered both the best of times and the worst of times for youth, a time of ominous trends as well as new opportunities. The great expansion of adult life patterns and options among which adolescents can choose presents an array of rich but often bewildering opportunities. Those who live in the more affluent, postindustrial societies and those who are positioned in the more advantaged social classes, ethnic groups, and other social locations within them can take advantage of expanding educational options, new technologies, and distance learning that will heighten both their human and their social capital as they enter the labor force and other adult roles. They will have a lengthened period for maturation and exploration that will increase the likelihood that they will make well-informed vocational choices and enter stable and satisfying intimate, and familial, relationships. They will become well equipped to contribute to the civic life of their communities.

But these same changes also create new “have nots.” Other adolescents have less entrée to the rich options for personal development in this transitional period. They have fewer resources and less access to the manifold opportunities that would allow them to fully develop in this longer, more diversified, and often more competitive adolescence. Some youth leave school before obtaining the educational credentials needed to obtain jobs that allow economic sufficiency and health benefits, have little access to computers and other technological innovations, experience stigmatizing criminal justice attention, or bear children early and incur numerous psychological, social, and economic risks in doing so. Unless steps can be taken to level access to opportunities, many youth will become increasingly disadvantaged.

CONCLUSION: YOUTH'S AND ADULTS' ROLES IN SHAPING THE FUTURE

What is clear is that, across social strata, rapid social and institutional changes place a premium on youth's initiative, creativity, and ability to navigate a multidimensional labyrinth of choices and demands. For both rich and poor, the future puts greater responsibility onto their plates, requiring them to be volitional and agentic as they manage diverse components of fiscal, human, and social capital. Of foremost importance, they must be proficient in gathering information and putting it to use.

The concluding social policy chapter by Youniss and Ruth stresses the active role adolescents play in shaping both their individual futures and the future of society. They draw on dramatic historic examples of young

people's important contributions to political change. The myriad choices of ordinary adolescents, little concerned with political struggles and having little awareness or exposure to social movement activism, also affect their societies' futures. Fussell shows that through their fertility decisions young people determine the future age structure of society, with its numerous ramifications. Adolescents are not passive recipients of macrosocietal change, they are actors within it. In some cases they create it. Adolescence is above all a period in which youth are required to be agents, to find their own paths, and, within the set of constraints and opportunities available to them, to mold themselves in ways that enable them to obtain the adulthoods they desire.

This new volitional adolescence, as Youniss and Ruth point out, shifts the role of parents and others who want to assist youth to that of providing support and guidance – in helping them to marshal resources to find their way in the labyrinth. The role of parents for the new adolescence is that of managers, who find information, make contacts, help structure choices, and provide guidance that helps youth avoid pitfalls and work their way through the myriad of choices (Furstenberg et al., 1999). This important contribution of parents creates another separation of “haves and have nots.” Those youth who receive this type of navigational support from parents are likely to be highly advantaged over those who for whatever reason do not (i.e., parents are estranged, dead, too busy, or lack the knowledge or capability). A clear resource needed by young people in the 21st century is for help lines, advisors, career counselors, and enduring relationships with caring adults who can help them through the maze of information and options.

As several of the chapters in this volume attest, the macrolevel forces shaping adolescents' access to pathways of opportunity can be modified, arrested, or deflected by social interventions, including the actions of government and the leaders of key social institutions. Neither a Marxian economic determinism nor a Malthusian population determinism are tenable. As Fussell suggests, governments can affect the redistribution of wealth through welfare, taxation, and other policies, so as to ameliorate the economic distress of minority and immigrant populations, as well as other economically depressed segments of the population. Similarly, Kerckhoff notes that educational policy can either equalize or exacerbate the differences in knowledge, skills, and credentials that enable youth to succeed in the economic sphere.

An important social policy implication of these chapters is that increasing attention should be given to the needs of young people in their 20s. The lengthening of adolescence and the development of the liminal

period of emerging adulthood intensify the need for support at this time of life. Whereas vocational psychologists have traditionally focused on the second decade of life as the critical period for the formation of vocational identity and career choice, serious occupational engagement and decision making are increasingly being postponed well into the third decade of life. This is also an age period when Americans are most likely to have no health insurance, a deficiency that must be addressed.

Youniss and Ruth point to the need to shift the focus of education to the learning of “re-programmable skills.” It is becoming less important for secondary and higher education to provide a curriculum of fixed knowledge. Given rapid social, occupational, and technological change, successful young people (and adults) must be taught how to learn and continually relearn as they adapt to changing institutional structures. They must be provided the general knowledge and skills that will enable them to exercise agency as they attempt to achieve their goals in the context of ever-changing social realities. What is critical is that young people enjoy learning, know how to find information, and are able to think creatively in new situations.

As Youniss and Ruth point out, the positive and negative scenarios set forth by the authors of the chapters in this volume highlight the responsibility of adults to move adolescent futures in the more salutary directions. It is our hope that this volume will extend the boundaries of thinking about adolescence and adolescent futures, sensitize adolescent researchers to macrostructural variability and its impacts on adolescent experience, and increase awareness of growing inequalities. Young people have tremendous potential to shape productive futures for themselves and contribute to society if we give them the knowledge, opportunities, and support they need, and then stand out of their way.

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