Theorizing Alternative Pathways Through Adulthood: Unequal Social Arrangements in the Lives of Young Disadvantaged Men

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Abstract

This chapter introduces the innovative field-based studies on disadvantaged men that are featured in this volume. Together, these studies of disadvantaged men from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and both urban and nonurban settings complement and extend recent discussions of emerging adulthood, which typically conceptualizes the transition to adulthood as a normative and linear process. The authors offer that the research presented here provides a more accurate rendering of the transition to adulthood for young disadvantaged men. For disadvantaged young men, the transition to adulthood is often complex and nonlinear, and features a diversity of pathways that are often overlooked in contemporary research on transitions to adulthood. The chapter ends with a call for research and theory that better reflects the precarious nature of pathways to adulthood for disadvantaged men in urban and nonurban settings. Researchers are encouraged to draw on findings from field-based studies to inform policies and practices directed at minimizing the marginalization of disadvantaged men from mainstream society. © 2014 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
For young people from the upper-middle class, whose parents can afford to bankroll them while they experiment with careers, relationships and identities, the period between adolescence and adulthood may in fact be an odyssey... But poor inner-city and rural youth, as well as young people who live in the so-called red states, are far less likely than their advantaged, suburban and blue-state counterparts to delay the transition into conventional work and family roles, both because they choose not to and because they simply can’t afford to.

Steinberg (2007, para. 1–2)

The fates of young men have diverged dramatically since the 1970s, in large part due to changes in global and local economies (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2011). For men with resources, the transition into adulthood is synonymous with experimentation with autonomy and self-exploration, risks and excesses (Kimmel, 2008; Twenge, 2006), and often greater educational opportunities and more freedom in personal and professional choices than previous decades (Arnett & Tanner, 2005; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005; Settersten & Ray, 2010). Due to the extreme inequalities in contemporary U.S. society, however, young men without resources often lose ground over this developmental period. They are challenged to complete a high school education, which has increased worth in a global economy. They face disproportionately higher odds of incarceration. They confront critical challenges from law enforcement and courts, peers in street life, skeptical family members, and expectant partners with children in need of resources. Young men in low-income neighborhoods are uniquely vulnerable during the transition to adulthood, and we remain challenged to understand and to alter the marginalization of these men.

In this volume, we present innovative research focused on the contexts, processes, and meanings in life pathways for disadvantaged young men as they move from adolescence into adulthood. In many ways, this collection of studies was inspired by an earlier collection of research on the experiences of young urban girls of color (Leadbetter & Way, 1996). The papers in this volume highlight how traditional gender expectations, including rigid understandings of manhood and masculinity, shape the experiences of young disadvantaged men as they transition into adulthood. Adolescent boys of color who come of age in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, for example, are often called upon to manage adult relationships and responsibilities at early ages. Whether they are pressured to be a so-called real man on the street or a “man of the house” at home, this process of adultification can feel overwhelming and, at times, can lead young men to retreat from the responsibilities and obligations typically associated with manhood as they enter their late-teens and early twenties. For some, meeting the gendered expectations embedded in understandings of what it means to be a good provider or a good father can give new meaning to their lives, which can
shore men up as they transition to adulthood. The economic uncertainty that characterizes their lives, however, can present a challenge to these efforts, leaving some men feeling as if they have fallen short of their efforts to be good men, husbands, or fathers. Utilizing extensive field-based data on hard-to-reach populations of young adult men, our goals are to encourage conceptualization and theory development for the transition to adulthood for disadvantaged young men from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and to shape hypotheses on how youth strategize for stability despite dramatic changes in their lives over time.

**Inequality and the Model of Emerging Adulthood**

The chapters in this volume emerged from a panel presentation at the Society for Research on Adolescence in March 2010. We realized from the outset that our research collectively reflected a very different side of the emerging adulthood debate that had begun to play a prominent role in understanding the lives of young adults (Arnett, 2004). While we share some common focus with the emerging adulthood framework, we want to expand the dialogue across disciplines, across methods, and most significantly across social and historical contexts. The stage model of emerging adulthood is embedded with certain assumptions about young adults’ linear and almost inevitable forward motion, their progress toward successful adult outcomes and role fulfillment. Our work problematizes the measurement of social class as a variable and offers insight into the consequences of exclusion in an era of rising and unprecedented inequality. These chapters contribute to an understanding of the complex social location of young, economically disadvantaged men of color that is often lacking in intersectional approaches (Dill & Zambrana, 2009).

Arnett and colleagues argue that emerging adulthood is a developmentally distinct stage of life, a new period that is defined by age and is universal across social contexts. However, the contours of this proposed stage shift dramatically for the groups of young men who we address in these four chapters. We find that they do not move through the challenges of young adulthood in sync with their peers who attend college, who choose internships to build social capital, or who plan for the right time to get married or to have children. These young men negotiate these challenges throughout the course of their lives—some still struggling to settle down at age of 40 or 50 and others coping with adultification and exposure to adult responsibilities at very young ages (Burton, 2007).

Creation of one’s own identity does remain a central task for young men in our studies. Erikson, and Arnett after him, argues that this reflects a specific stage in life. However, we link the efforts of young “men of the house,” of men who confront the threat of violence and targeted police surveillance in their home communities, and of young migrant laborers who are confused as to how to be fathers to their children, not to age-specific
tasks but to unequal social arrangements with context-defining institutions, such as the incarceration industry, limited local economies, struggling families, and attenuated education systems. As with other youth in a globalized world, these men must craft a working biography of their own selves; they must individualize their experiences in the midst of growing inequality and dwindling resources to remake themselves again and again (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

**Unequal Social Arrangements Through Mass Incarceration**

Perhaps the most consequential new social arrangement to emerge over the last 40 years is the rise of mass incarceration. In *Punishment and Inequality in America*, sociologist and demographer Bruce Western writes that the “penal system is now an important part of an American system of social stratification” (Western, 2006, p. 12). His analysis reveals that the negative consequences of this new system reshape the life course of entire demographic groups, especially poor Black and Hispanic men with little schooling. Today, prison and its associated apparatus (e.g., zero-tolerance policies in schools, the intersection of the criminal justice and health care systems, and the embrace of targeted enforcement programs like “stop-and-frisk” in New York City) is a “major institutional presence” in the lives of disadvantaged young men like those described in the chapters from Richardson and Jones. In contrast to adolescent boys who come of age in more stable, middle-class settings, the young men featured in these two chapters and those who care for them must learn to manage a three-pronged threat to their well-being: the threat of lethal violence, which remains at chronic levels in some settings even in the wake of the Great Crime Decline; routine exposure to targeted police surveillance; and the pull of formal and informal ties to the criminal justice system.

As Richardson explains, the parents and caretakers of Black adolescent boys coming of age in tough urban neighborhoods confront a dilemma: keep children close to home or keep them safe? How parents resolve such dilemmas is often contingent on social capital, which varies across and within neighborhoods. For those parents who are most precariously positioned in the neighborhood, institutional exile—effectively giving up a young man to the juvenile justice system—comes to make sense as a parenting strategy. While this strategy may help to keep young people alive in the short term, it also leads to the accumulation of negative social capital. This is just one of the ways that the shift toward mass incarceration encourages a set of situated practices that exacerbate inequality and are likely to have serious consequences for young people's successful transitions to adulthood.

Young men left behind in distressed urban neighborhoods must contend with a contradictory set of challenges that is shaped by their social circumstances: they remain routine targets for lethal violence and police surveillance. Young, Black men like the ones described in the chapters from...
Richardson and Jones are often seen as threats (Anderson, 2011; Jones & Jackson, 2011), and little attention is given to how routine interactions with the police might influence their social development. The degree to which the life space of poor, urban young Black men has been altered in the mass incarceration era is aptly illustrated in Jones’s ethnographic account of how young men become socialized into the stop-and-frisk and other types of routine encounters with the police that were described as “the regular routine” by one of her respondents. Her study reveals how routine encounters with the police are best understood as a set of patterned social interactions that structure the daily lives of young men in high-surveillance neighborhoods. Jones’s chapter encourages us to consider the consequences of this sort of socialization for healthy adolescent development. Together, these two chapters suggest that instead of an emerging adulthood, poor, urban young men of color, especially those with ties to the criminal justice system, are more likely to experience an arrested adulthood as threats of lethal violence and frequent encounters with law enforcement interrupt the forward progress that is often associated with positive adolescent development and successful transitions to adulthood.

Unequal Social Arrangements in Postfamilial Families

The “postfamilial” family marks unknown territory for many young adults. It is unclear who parents should “be” to their adult sons, and how they should support them in a protracted transition to adulthood. They may provide a sense of belonging and embeddedness that is distinct from childhood and adolescence, and offer supports as adult children navigate uncertain pathways to school and work (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). The model of emerging adulthood reflects the process of concerted cultivation in Annette Lareau’s (2003) research on unequal childhood and divergent parenting practices across race and class. Families may face many years of exploration and uncertainty, but they invest intensive amounts of concentrated resources in their children to ensure success. In long years of support for college, or a down payment on a first home or apartment, adult sons are recipients of these resources. In this way, some families live up to the ideal of becoming launching pads for successful young adults.

For many young disadvantaged men, however, families present complicated relationships that shift and transform in early adult years. Young men develop long-term relationships with parents, siblings, and extended kin that do not fade out with a launch into adulthood. Obligations in families with limited resources continue and may increase in a transition to adulthood. Similar to Lareau’s (2003) notion of natural growth, parents may play a less central role in their sons’ growth. Obligations flow both ways: families share extensive but diffused resources, and sons are contributors just as frequently as their parents or other family members.
When families need their adult sons’ time and money to survive on a daily basis, the transition to adulthood is transformed. In his study of two urban communities in Maryland, Roy explores how young men managed households for their mothers for many years, caring for children and delegating household tasks and space. They also contributed money through illegal activities that put them at great risk for incarceration, injury, and trauma. For some, these adult-like responsibilities ended abruptly during adolescence, with the entry of stepfathers and mothers’ boyfriends into their households. Pushed out of the role of “man of the house,” young men in economically disadvantaged families struggled to regain authority and esteem. Some isolated themselves from family members and friends, in an effort to figure out how to become self-sufficient with few opportunities for school and work. This ethnographic finding illustrates a crisis of connection in early adulthood that Way (2011) identifies for many of the same adolescents in poor urban communities.

Young men are considered adults within their kin networks, and their attempts to find work, finish school, or start a family can lead to self-sufficiency which is a gift and a threat to family members. Settersten’s research examines how young men struggle to adapt with off-time transitions. He and his colleagues argue that for many disadvantaged men, early fatherhood can facilitate other markers of adulthood, such as employment. For the Latino fathers in Oregon in his study, these unexpected turning points in family life were full of risk but also gave men new opportunities to reframe their past experiences—and new motivation to find an adequate context for raising children and becoming adults, even with low-wage work and limited educational options.

Unequal Social Arrangements as Process of Disconnection

These four chapters problematize many of the assumptions that support a model of emerging adulthood for young men who experience varying degrees of disconnection and disadvantage. For example, as a young disadvantaged man enters the status of being “disconnected,” his lack of participation in school and work is often framed as a personal problem, the solution to which is a matter of personal change. Becoming a successful adult is framed as a matter of appropriate choices. With the acquisition of the appropriate skills for a good job, he can “connect.” By avoiding risky behavior, he can remain “connected.” Social policy and interventions are focused, as a result, on linking disconnected, disadvantaged young men with job training, job placement, and spots in community colleges, vocational training, and even colleges and universities.

These chapters demonstrate, however, that lack of participation in school and work is a result of long-term processes of disconnection that were set in motion before personal decisions are often made. The young men in these studies have adapted to being at risk in their homes and
communities, and to being a risk to those in those same locations, at times through no direct action of their own. Through adultification, they learned to support their families as many adults would. For these young men, becoming an adult is less a matter of choice—of a school, a job, or a relationship—but a matter of survival, of getting by with few options (Silva, 2013). In some ways, we might question whether a “transition” to adulthood actually takes place, when young men take on serious adult-like risks and responsibilities as boys or adolescents.

As we stress, there are few secure pathways for young disadvantaged men. Instead, new institutions have developed as holding zones, such as mass incarceration, permanently marginalized sections of the job market, or even programs that allow nonresidential unwed fathers limited involvement with their children. If we examine these institutions and their relations with young men closely, our focus turns from promotion of individual change toward changing institutions in ways that will support successful transitions to adulthood for a broader swath of youth (Bynner, 2005). Which systems serve to exclude young disadvantaged men from successful markers of adulthood, and which systems might support inclusion and investment as alternatives?

A Call for Theorizing Transitions Among Diverse Groups of Young Men

Finally, this volume should be read as a call to encourage new ways to conceptualize transitions to adulthood for young, disadvantaged men. In each of these chapters, we demonstrate the limitations of the emerging adulthood model to provide concepts that fit with the life experiences of the men in this volume. When we typically conceptualize transitions, we assume some to be failed transitions and others to be successful, such as finding a good job or earning a college degree. The transition to adulthood from a developmental perspective is normative and linear. What our research suggests, in contrast, is that transition to adulthood is complex and nonlinear, featuring a diversity of pathways, moving in fits and starts, forward and backward. Even young men are unable to shed past experiences and labels—such as ex-offender or dropout—and their success as an adult is held in doubt. Instead, they years of transition are periods of active negotiation, as these men attempt to restore order to the complexity in their lives (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005). They learn to live with uncertainty and to build stable identities marked by economic and social marginality. They transform roles as fathers, workers, friends, and sons and adapt to very real challenges in their day-to-day routines, all while perhaps making little progress toward normative goals. These “successful” outcomes appear to be out of sync with the complicated risks that many young adult men face in their households, their neighborhoods, and in their larger communities.
For young disadvantaged men, the negotiation of school, work, family life, parenthood, and other markers of adulthood may start earlier and stretch out over a long period of time, perhaps even longer than for young adults who do not experience adultification or disconnection. Although a transition is protracted, it still remains unequal: some young adults will settle into “success” and others will fall even further behind, beginning a pileup of many years of cumulative disadvantage (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006). Persistent inequality has produced divergent experiences that are not adequately captured by the concept of emerging adulthood. A variety of new social arrangements have taken a toll on young, disadvantaged men. Our conceptual model of making a successful transition to adulthood should account for the experiences of this group of young men.

References


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