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FAMILY BACKGROUND AND CONTEMPORARY CHANGES IN YOUNG ADULTS' SCHOOL-WORK
TRANSITIONS AND FAMILY FORMATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

The oft-discussed lengthening of the transition into adulthood is unlikely uniform across diverse segments of the population. This study followed youth in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 and 1997 cohorts ($n = 12,686$ and $8,984$, respectively) from 16 to 32 years old to investigate this trend in the United States, examining cross-cohort changes in transitions with a focus on differences by family background. Logistic regressions revealed that young adults in the most recent cohort were less likely to have completed schooling, fully entered the labor force, married, or become parents by their 30s than those in the older cohort. The cross-cohort drop in young adults completing schooling was more pronounced among youth from more disadvantaged family backgrounds, the drop in entering the labor force and having children was more pronounced among those from more advantaged backgrounds, and the drop in marriage did not differ by family background.

Keywords: education; family formation; life course; socioeconomic inequality; transition into adulthood; work

1. Introduction

A hallmark of the late teens through the 20s is the acquisition of social roles that signify the balance of independence, interdependence, responsibility, and productivity widely considered to define adulthood in Western societies. In particular, completing education and taking on full-time work—cornerstones of socioeconomic attainment and hallmarks of personal independence—are social signals that someone has left adolescence to become a “real” adult (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011). Yet, this process of becoming an adult is influenced by the changing macro-level structures and evolving cultural norms that individual youth must navigate in their daily lives. Consequently, the nature of school and work transitions during this period as well as other life course trajectories—such as family formation—can vary considerably within a society, such as the U.S. (Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005; Schulenberg, Sameroff, & Cicchetti, 2004; Settersten & Ray, 2010).

This study, therefore, drew on life course theory to examine changes in school and work transitions among young people growing up in diverse family backgrounds in the U.S. at the end of the twentieth century and start of the twenty-first. Specifically, we compared two cohorts of youth in terms of the family background disparities in how long they took to complete schooling and commit to the labor market and then shifted the focus to family formation transitions—marrying, becoming a parent—closely tied to such socioeconomic attainment. This examination used event history analyses of nationally representative data from two studies of U.S. adolescents followed into their 30s two decades apart: the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79) and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97). The results speak to the ways in which a critical period of the life course can fuel diverging destinies between different groups of youth over time.

2. Background and Conceptual Framework

2.1. The transition into adulthood

The late teens to the mid-20s have long been viewed as a preparatory stage in developed nations, when young people transform themselves into the adults who will ultimately carry the major economic, political, and social responsibilities of society. This transformation is most concretely marked by major role sequences, primarily socioeconomic ones like exiting the educational system and entering the workforce but also family role sequences like partnering and becoming a parent (Bonnie, Stroud, & Breiner, 2014; Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011). This period is of great interest to life course researchers. After all, the role of transitions (i.e., discrete changes in state or setting with the potential to redirect long-term trajectories) in macro-micro linkages is at the heart of life course theory, which emphasizes how such transitions, their connection to past experiences, and their influence on future experiences are embedded in sociohistorical context (Elder, 1998). According to the theory, context can be thought of in terms of macro-level structures and systems that evolve over historical time, the more proximate settings of everyday life, and the interplay between them. Thus, the transition into adulthood is conceptualized as an individual experience shaped by broader social forces (Crosnoe & Johnson, 2010; Shanahan, 2000). Indeed, as argued by Buchmann (1989: 1), this transition is a “strategic point at which to investigate shifts in the social structuring and individual organization of the life course.”

For the last several decades, the sociohistorical context of the transition into adulthood has been characterized by two related macro-level forces. First, during the massive economic restructuring of the last several decades, the decline of the manufacturing sector and the growth of the information/service sector have reshaped the labor market into an hourglass with little middle ground between the security afforded by professional careers and the insecurity of low-

wage unskilled work. Because higher education is one effective way to push through the bottleneck in this hourglass, the long-term economic returns to educational attainment have reached historic highs (Carnevale & Cheah, 2013; Danziger & Ratner, 2010; Fischer & Hout, 2006; Goldin & Katz, 2008). As a result, young people are incentivized to invest more in accruing advanced academic credentials, thereby spending more time in the educational system and delaying full-time entry into the labor market. Second, the long-standing cultural view of the late teens through early 20s as a time for family formation has been reactive to these effects of economic restructuring on human capital development (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011; Cherlin, 2009). Given the increased emphasis in Western societies on securing economic independence before starting a family, extending the time that young people invest in their education—which pushes back or disrupts labor force participation—will inevitably postpone their real or perceived economic independence and, therefore, their tendency to see themselves as ready to partner or parent. These practical considerations have, in turn, shaped cultural norms about when young people “should” form families. Ages once considered appropriate starting points are often deemed too young now, and the transition into adulthood is increasingly seen as a precursor to family formation rather than a setting for it (Arnett, 2004; Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, & Tellegen, 2004; Settersten & Ray, 2010; Taylor et al., 2012).

Thus, the longer period of human capital development and older age norms, both resulting from economic restructuring and other social changes, have converged to lengthen the period of role acquisition between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2004; Bynner, 2005; Danziger & Ratner, 2010; Heinz, 2009; Roisman et al., 2004). The main argument of this study is that this general lengthening of the transition into adulthood within the contemporary sociohistorical context of the U.S. is likely to vary according to the more proximate contexts of

individual young people's daily lives, including and especially the family contexts in which they have been raised (Buchmann, 1989; Furstenberg, 2010; Hogan & Astone, 1986).

2.2. Family background diversity

The different resources that families provide can shape whether this particular transition period in this particular sociohistorical context is a launch pad into a successful adulthood or a time of stagnation that forecloses future opportunities. Family background advantages of interest here are having college-educated parents and being raised by both parents.

The first advantage taps into the intergenerational transmission of human capital. On average, college-educated parents have higher educational and occupational expectations for their children and more knowledge, status, and monetary resources to translate these expectations into reality. Despite having more progressive attitudes about family formation, they also tend to model more traditional family formation behaviors for their children. The second advantage taps into the organization of the home and the ability of parents to enact their parenting values. When partnered in a coordinated effort to maximize the life chances of their children, parents are better equipped to marshal resources, monitor behavior, and maintain family investments in children, providing a more stable and secure foundation for the transition into adulthood. Above and beyond the financial and human capital that might go along with such a family structure, this foundation allows children to better meet the challenges of school, resist peer influences, and strategically work towards their goals (Cherlin, 2009; Crosnoe & Johnson, 2010; Furstenberg, 2010; Goldin & Katz, 2008). If such family advantages influence how young people transition into adulthood and those transitions affect future life trajectories, then the late teens through the 20s represents a point of increased divergence between youth from diverse family backgrounds.

To explore this divergence, we focus first on the amount of time young people take to exit the educational system and fully enter the labor market. These two transitions are obviously linked—schooling is a foundation of work trajectories, and the educational system is a foundation of the workforce. As just described, the contemporary sociohistorical context has fundamentally changed young people’s school-work transitions by incentivizing an extended period of skill development, but these incentives are not uniformly aligned with economic reality across families (Heinz, 2009; Schoon, 2014). They are pulling a more diverse array of people into higher education than ever before. Yet, pursuing more education is so costly and necessitates such careful planning that it requires a stable pool of resources and support that many of these “new” students will not have. They might not be equipped to meet the demands of higher education initially or over time, and they may need to fund their educational pursuits by working simultaneously or going back and forth between the two. Although often necessary, doing so can stretch out the duration of educational attainment and push back full-time labor force participation as young people struggle to make headway in both contexts (Bernhardt, Morris, Handcock, & Scott, 2001; Buchmann & Kriese, 2011; Fischer & Hout, 2006; Schoon, 2014). Consequently, transitions out of school and into work may now be taking longer in general, but youth with more family advantages might be better equipped to make these transitions in a timelier manner while youth without those advantages take even longer.

Also reactive to the effects of economic restructuring on human capital development is family formation, which tends to happen latter now than it did in the past (Cherlin, 2009). Because of the aforementioned widespread perceptions that starting a family now requires economic security, shifts in the length of school and work transitions needed to achieve that security have altered cultural norms and values about family formation and, over time, actual

family formation behaviors (Arnett, 2004; Roisman et al., 2004; Settersten & Ray, 2010; Taylor et al., 2012). This link between socioeconomic attainment and family formation, however, is complicated by the fact that the view of economic security as a necessary condition for starting a family seems to be much stronger for formal unions than for parenthood, leading to a decoupling of marriage and fertility. Even though the economic burden of parenthood is significant, becoming a parent remains a non-negotiable life achievement for most young people. They might plan to postpone parenthood until they feel economically secure, but only up to a point—eventually, they will make that transition regardless. Marriage, on the other hand, has come to be seen as more of a luxury item, one that can be taken or left depending on economic circumstances. As a result, economic considerations factor into marital decisions and behaviors more than fertility ones. Youth who grew up with more family advantages might be more likely to see the economic standards of marriage and parenthood as realistically attainable and, therefore, delay both while sequencing them in the traditional way. Conversely, youth who did not have these advantages growing up might feel uncertainty about the future that makes them postpone marrying without making them more reluctant to become parents (Cherlin, 2009; Smock & Greenland, 2010; Wu, 2008). Consequently, transitions into marriage and parenthood may now be taking longer in general, but youth with more family advantages might be delaying both while youth without such advantages might delay the former more than the latter.

2.3. Hypothesizing about family background diversity in young adult transitions

Conceptualizing the late teens through 20s as a period of life course transitions within a contemporary sociohistorical context that is differentially experienced by youth with and without key family resources leads to testable hypotheses. Specifically, the general delays across contemporary cohorts in the transition out of school and the transitions into work and marriage

will be most pronounced for youth whose parents are not college-educated and/or are no longer together, and the general delay across contemporary cohorts in parenthood will more pronounced among youth with college-educated and/or still partnered parents.

3. Methods

3.1 Data and sample

To empirically test those hypotheses, we drew on nationally representative data from two cohorts of young people in the U.S. Beginning in the late 1970s, a sample of 12,686 14-22 year olds ($M = 17.9$ years old) were followed annually as part of the NLSY79, with surveys becoming biennial in 1994. The Bureau of Labor Statistics gathered data on labor market activity, education, and family processes as young people passed through adolescence and into adulthood. In 1997, a new cohort of 8,984 12-18 year olds ($M = 14.4$ years old) was recruited and followed annually. The NLSY97 was set up to be a direct comparison to the NLSY79, with the same survey design and many variables measured in the same manner. Both surveys included oversamples of Black and Latino/a respondents and corresponding weights that we applied to all analyses so that our results would be representative of the U.S. population at each point in time.

Because this study conducted a cross-cohort comparison of the transition into adulthood occurring from the late teens into the early 30s, analytic samples included all respondents at baseline but were limited to survey waves when respondents were between ages 16 and 32. The upper cut-point was 32 years old because it was the oldest age of NLSY97 respondents in 2011, which we selected as the last NLSY97 survey wave included in our analytical sample (and the second-to-last survey wave of data available) to create maximum overlap with the latest NLSY79 survey wave conducted in 2012. For analyses, we reshaped the individual-level dataset

into person-year structure, which resulted in a final sample of 180,663 observations from 12,686 NLSY79 respondents and 132,976 observations from 8,984 NLSY97 respondents.

3.2 Measures

Dependent variables in this study were markers of transitions into adulthood through socioeconomic attainment and family formation. Using separate person-year datasets for each outcome, dummy variables tracked individuals until the event happened. For the transition out of education, measures of school enrollment status at each wave were used to create trajectories of non-enrollment in either high school or college. When respondents were not enrolled for two years in a row, they were coded as *completing schooling*. For the transition into the labor force, NLSY created weekly measures of employment status and hours worked per week, which were combined into counts of weeks of full-time employment during each year. When respondents were employed full-time for 16 or more weeks per year (i.e., four or more months in a year to exceed the usual three-month span of summer jobs), they were coded as *entering the labor force*. We defined full-time employment as working 35 or more hours per week, but findings were very similar when employment was defined as 40 or more hours per week (results available upon request). The last two transitions (marriage and parenthood) were constructed based on dates in months and years when respondents were *first married* and had their *first child*.

The focal independent variable was a binary indicator of membership in the NLSY97 cohort (vs. the NLSY79 cohort). Family background was measured two ways at the initial survey wave. First, participants reported their mothers' and fathers' highest levels of education, which were coded into a binary indicator of whether at least one *parent was college-educated*. Second, participants described their living arrangements during middle adolescence; *family structure* was coded as two-parent if respondents lived with both biological parents at age 14.

Finally, all analyses included the following sociodemographic covariates: continuous measures of *age* and *age-squared*, a dichotomous variable for *gender* (1 = female, 0 = male), and a series of dummy variables for *race/ethnicity* (Latino/a, Black, and White). See Table 1 for descriptive statistics of study variables for the NLSY79 and NLSY97.

[Table 1 about here]

3.3 Plan of analyses

Overall, this study aimed to investigate whether the delayed transition into adulthood differed by young people's family backgrounds. The initial phase of analyses, therefore, established whether that transition was indeed delayed for young adults coming of age today. We used logistic regression to estimate discrete-time event history models, which are especially well-suited for tracking discrete outcomes over time with longitudinal data (see Castilla, 2007). Four models predicted each dependent variable with the cohort marker (NLSY97 vs. NLSY79), family background variables, and covariates. Within our event history approach, results in this initial phase represented the estimated association of each independent variable with the likelihood of each transition within the defined time frame of 16 to 32 years old.

To assess our hypotheses about family background diversity in young adult transitions, we added interaction terms for the cohort marker with the parent education and family structure variables as a means of gauging whether cohort differences varied by family background. Additional analyses explored cross-cohort variation in the timing of transitions by adding interaction terms for cohort with age and age-squared. All analyses were conducted in Stata with NLSY weights to make estimates nationally representative. Using the *mi estimate* suite of commands, multivariate analyses included predicted values for missing data on parent education

and family structure based on available data with limited missing cases (cohort, gender, race/ethnicity), which were pooled across five imputed datasets to estimate each outcome.

4. Results

4.1 Changes in the transition into adulthood

Table 1 describes the sample, including the mean age when respondents transitioned into each adult role. Compared to the NLSY79 cohort, young adults in the NLSY97 cohort were about one year younger when they completed their schooling ($M = 20.9$ for NLSY79, $M = 19.9$ for NLSY97) and more than one and a half years younger when their first child was born ($M = 24.9$ for NLSY79, $M = 23.2$ for NLSY97). On average, the more recent NLSY97 cohort was also slightly older when they entered the labor force ($M = 19.4$ for NLSY79, $M = 20.1$ for NLSY97) and when they married ($M = 23.9$ for NLSY79, $M = 24.1$ for NLSY97). Although significant t-tests confirmed that these cohort distinctions were statistically different, the average difference in the age at each transition was within one year of age between the NLSY79 and NLSY97 cohorts. Descriptive statistics also revealed a significant increase in young adults with college-educated parents (20% of the NLSY79 cohort vs. 29% of the NLSY97 cohort) and a significant decrease in young adults from two-parent families (74% of the NLSY79 cohort vs. 71% of the NLSY97 cohort).

Figure 1 shows Kaplan-Meier survival estimates for each young adult transition marker, with separate estimates by cohort. Treating the transition as the “failure,” these descriptive graphs plot the proportion of each cohort that had not yet transitioned into the outcome of interest by age; the proportion experiencing the transition by each age was thus equal to one minus the survival estimate. Survival plots for school completion and labor force entry in the upper two quadrants of Figure 1 show that most young adults completed those transitions by

their early 30s, with the majority occurring between the late teens and early 20s. Comparing cohorts, NLSY97 young adults had more abrupt exits out of schooling and more gradual entries into the labor force. In other words, apparent cohort differences were not in the *occurrence* of transitions—most young adults, regardless of cohort, fully made both transitions by age 32—but in the *pace* of those two transitions as youth moved into their 20s.

[Figure 1 about here]

In the lower left quadrant of Figure 1, the survival plot for marriage shows that this transition occurred earlier and at a faster pace for the NLSY79 cohort, resulting in a growing gap in the incidence of marriage between cohorts (almost 75% of the NLSY79 cohort vs. only 50% of the NLSY97 cohort). Childbearing (lower right quadrant in Figure 1), on the other hand, began slightly earlier for the NLSY97 cohort. That small difference in incidence of first birth was limited to adolescent childbearing, with the NLSY79 cohort catching up by the mid-20s to similar frequencies of about one in six young adults transitioning into parenthood by age 32. These descriptive results offer some support for a delayed transition into adulthood, with the clearest cohort differences for marriage.

Moving to the multivariate results for overall cohort differences, Table 2 displays coefficients and standard errors from discrete-time event history models for each transition marker. Net of sociodemographic characteristics and family background, in a given year, young people in the NLSY97 cohort were significantly less likely to complete all four transitions by 32 years old. These results establish a delay in each transition marking adult roles and responsibilities, and they offer a foundation from which to test our hypotheses. Additionally, the significant results for linear and quadratic age terms across all outcomes suggested that the trajectory of each transition followed the shape of a downward parabola, with the likelihood of

each transition in a given year increasing as respondents got older and then slowing down, peaking, and eventually declining. There were also main effects of family background on the transition into adulthood. Young adults with at least one college-educated parent were significantly less likely to transition into each adulthood status in a given year. Living in a two-parent family was also negatively associated with the likelihood of school completion and first childbearing, but positively associated with the likelihood of labor force entry and first marriage.

[Table 2 about here]

4.2 *Family background variation in the changing transition into adulthood*

The main aim of this study was to investigate whether the general cohort differences established in the first phase of analyses varied by young people's family backgrounds. We entered cohort x background factor interaction terms into the discrete-time logistic regressions, which revealed significant evidence of moderation for three out of the four transition outcomes. There were significant interaction terms for cohort with parent education and with family structure across school completion, labor force entry, and having a first child, but we only discuss results for parent education because family structure results followed similar patterns.

Figure 2 displays the annual estimated likelihood of school completion for different combinations of cohort and parent education with all other variables held to their sample means. Among young adults in both cohorts, the predicted probability of school completion was higher for those whose parents were not college-educated; that gap was especially pronounced in the NLSY79 cohort. These results for school completion supported our hypothesis that the cross-cohort delay in transitioning out of school was driven by young people whose parents were neither college-educated nor still partnered with one another. Results for employment and marriage, however, did not support that hypothesis. As shown in Figure 3, the cross-cohort drop

in the predicted probability of entering the labor force was greatest among young adults whose parents had graduated from college. For the NLSY79 cohort, parent education was positively associated with consistent full-time employment, but it was negatively associated with labor force entry in the NLSY97 cohort.

[Figure 2 about here]

[Figure 3 about here]

As for family formation, the cross-cohort difference of delayed marriage in the more recent cohort did not vary by either parent education or family structure, which went against our hypothesis. Results for first childbirth, however, did support our hypotheses. In Figure 4, the annual estimated likelihood of a first birth in both cohorts was significantly higher among young adults with less educated parents, but the gap in the probability of childbearing by parent education was more pronounced in the more recent NLSY97 cohort. In other words, the overall delay in parenthood was driven by young adults from advantaged backgrounds (i.e., parents who were college-educated and still together), whereas there was virtually no cross-cohort change in the likelihood of a first birth for disadvantaged youth.

[Figure 4 about here]

Additional analyses tested for cohort differences in the timing of transitions into adulthood, as opposed to the overall likelihood that has been presented thus far. Significant interactions for cohort with the linear and quadratic age terms revealed variation in the timing of school completion (see Figure 5) and marriage. Although the annual estimated likelihood of school completion was similar at either end of the age distribution, the biggest disparity between cohorts occurred when respondents were in their mid-20s. Age and cohort trends in marriage also followed this pattern of significantly lower likelihoods in the NLSY97 cohort, with a

pronounced gap in the mid-20s. Unlike the divergence and re-convergence of schooling, the recent cohort's likelihood of marriage was lower at every age. Sensitivity analyses available upon request included all other transition measures in each model (e.g., employment, marriage, and childbearing were included in models predicting school completion). All adult roles were significantly associated with one another, but the focal results were robust.

[Figure 5 about here]

In sum, we found general trends of a delayed transition into adulthood. The more recent cohort of contemporary young adults were significantly less likely to have transitioned out of school and into work, marriage, and parenthood by the beginning of their 30s, and more young adults completed socioeconomic transitions than family formation transitions by that age. Our main hypotheses about family background variation in cross-cohort differences were more complicated, with results for school and parenthood in line with our hypotheses, results for work that were the opposite of our hypothesis, and null findings for variation in marriage.

5. Conclusion

Young adults in the contemporary U.S. context are commonly perceived as “real” adults once they have successfully gained independence and become productive members of society. Transitioning out of school and into full-time employment are two important markers of economic productivity that are also linked to markers such as marriage and parenthood that signal responsibility and independence in one's family life. Those transitions reflect the intersection of macro-level economic structures and cultural norms with individuals' life courses (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011; Settersten & Ray, 2010). In this study, we took an event history approach to compare the transition into adulthood among two cohorts of contemporary young people across diverse family backgrounds. Our findings build on past research about the

elongation of this period (e.g., Arnett, 2004; Buchmann, 1989; Settersten & Ray, 2010) by investigating delays in four components of the transition into adulthood as they relate to past inequality in family background and unequal future prospects.

We applied a discrete-time event history approach to logistic regression models using nationally representative data from the NLSY 1979 and 1997 cohorts. The findings speak to a general picture of the transition into adulthood in the contemporary U.S. as well as in specific segments of the population. Overall, results supported the general trend that contemporary young adults finish school, fully commit to the labor force, get married, and become parents significantly later than their counterparts did 20 years ago. Fewer of today's young adults have achieved the roles that deem them "real" adults by the beginning of their 30s, but this increasingly elongated process (Bonnie et al., 2014; Bynner, 2005; Settersten & Ray, 2010) likely benefits young adults coming of age in a global economy that prioritizes higher education as a means of mobility and security. One limitation of this study is that we found strong and robust cross-cohort differences but were not able to definitively attribute those differences to the macro-level social and economic factors we know were at work. Although outside the scope of this study, future research should explore structural change by linking data, such as the NLSY surveys and Geocode data, to other sources of data (e.g., the Business Census and the General Social Survey) and utilizing multi-level modeling techniques to capture individual- and institution-level effects.

Notably, youth's family backgrounds accounted for some of those cross-cohort differences in markers of the transition into adulthood. We hypothesized that delays in school completion, full-time employment, and marriage would be more pronounced among youth whose parents were neither college-educated nor still together, whereas delays in parenthood

would be driven by youth with college-educated and still partnered parents. Results yielded mixed evidence, with support for the schooling and parenthood hypotheses but none for employment and marriage. Delays in employment transitions were actually driven by more advantaged youth, and there was a lack of significant variation in the transition into marriage.

Because the contemporary U.S. economic context is characterized by the increasing importance of higher education and extended skill development (Danziger & Ratner, 2010; Goldin & Katz, 2008; Heinz, 2009), we expected that adult economic roles would be more difficult for youth from disadvantaged family backgrounds to attain. Instead of variation in education and employment transitions operating in the same way, however, results revealed a trend of delayed transitions out of schooling among youth without college-educated or partnered parents and delayed full-time commitment to the labor force among young adults from more advantaged family backgrounds. Our measurement of school completion and employment were both rather blunt, representing the age at which young adults finished their schooling (through graduation or leaving) and fully committed to full-time employment but not degrees earned, field of study, type of job, or earnings. Given past research on socioeconomically disadvantaged youth's progression through higher education (Goldrick-Rab, 2006), that delay in school completion was more likely the result of taking more time to obtain a degree with breaks in enrollment as opposed to the pursuit of advanced degrees. Youth from more advantaged family backgrounds, on the other hand, may have been delaying fully entering the labor force in favor of engaging in professionalization opportunities such as internships with little or no pay but that broadened their professional networks and gave them the work experience now required for entry-level jobs. Clearly, we need to go further in parsing out family background differences in

socioeconomic attainment during the transition into adulthood, but these findings provide a good foundation for further exploration of this issue.

Knowing the sources and outcomes of those differences is especially important for current and future generations as today's young adults take longer to achieve adult economic roles yet delay family formation to a much smaller extent. Although we found significant variation in the timing of transitioning to a first marriage (such that the cohort differences were biggest in the mid-20s), we found no evidence of differences in marriage by family background. Although marriage remains an important aspect of the transition into adulthood, contemporary young adults' unions are increasingly characterized by cohabitation as both a normative progression of a romantic relationship and a pre-cursor to marriage, with clear differences in the meaning, frequency, and longevity of cohabiting unions among young adults across diverse family backgrounds (Smock, 2000). Thus, the role of family background in union formation during the transition into adulthood may have been masked by this study's inclusion of only marriage. Given our findings that marriage was the least common transition by age 32 and one of the few transitions with significant differences in timing, variation by family background might have only emerged later on during the 30s or even 40s.

On the other hand, the delayed transition into parenthood, the other component of family formation, was indeed more pronounced among youth with college-educated and still partnered parents. The lack of movement in childbearing patterns among young adults from more disadvantaged backgrounds has implications for their own socioeconomic prospects and those of their children (Cherlin, 2009; McLanahan, 2004) because this group of young people delayed school completion—and, following the overall trend, marriage—but not parenthood. Because the focus of this study was on socioeconomic aspects of the transition into adulthood, the results

beg the question: if these young people are “not quite adults” (Settersten & Ray, 2010) in terms of economic independence, how do they get by financially? Whereas their peers from more advantaged family backgrounds may rely on their parents for housing and financial support (Swartz, Kim, Uno, Mortimer, & O’Brien, 2011), young adults who do not have the luxury of parents to fall back on may be particularly at risk of falling into debt or having difficulty paying for their education, especially if they themselves have children to support.

This study presented first a broad overview of changes in the transition into adulthood in the U.S. and then considered whether those changes were specific to young people from different family backgrounds. Although this study considered diversity in the transition into adulthood within the U.S. and past studies have shown the U.S. case does at least partly generalize to many other developed nations (Schoon, 2014), we need to examine that generalization and its limits more closely while considering the transition into adulthood as a whole. We also need to look outside of Western countries. Recent work on the transition into adulthood in Europe has employed sophisticated methods such as sequence analysis to investigate the connection between adult roles and to test for destandardization of the transition (for an overview see Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011). Other research has extended that idea of cataloging similarities and differences to a variety of political regimes and levels of economic development, including emerging economic powerhouses such as Brazil, Mexico, and South Korea (Fussell, Park, & Costa Ribeiro, 2010). More formally testing these similarities and expanding the pool of comparison countries—including countries with different structural forces at work—is a must to really understand how the transition into adulthood is changing and why that matters.

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Table 1. Weighted descriptive statistics of study variables, by cohort

	NLSY79		NLSY97 ¹	
	%	Mean (SD)	%	Mean (SD)
Age at Transition to Adulthood Statuses				
School completion		20.88 (2.15)		19.91 (2.51)
Entry into labor force		19.40 (2.32)		20.10 (2.63)
First marriage		23.90 (3.62)		24.14 (3.43)
First child		24.85 (3.98)		23.22 (3.96)
Sociodemographic Covariates				
Age		25.18 (4.38)		23.16 (4.39)
Gender is female	49.13		48.68	
Race/ethnicity				
Latino/a	6.35		13.56	
Black	13.95		16.24	
White	79.71		70.20	
Family Background				
College-educated parent(s)	20.49		28.97	
Two-parent family at age 14	74.12		70.88	
<i>N</i>	12,686		8,984	
Person-years	180,663		132,976	

¹ All NLSY97 measures significantly different from NLSY79 at $p < .05$ level of significance.

Table 2. Coefficients of discrete-time event history models of transitions into adulthood

	β (Standard Error)			
	School Completion	Labor Force Entry	First Marriage	First Child
NLSY97 Cohort (Ref: NLSY79 Cohort)	-0.247*** (0.023)	-1.942*** (0.032)	-0.769*** (0.024)	-0.091*** (0.024)
Sociodemographic Characteristics				
Age	2.349*** (0.055)	2.151*** (0.060)	1.168*** (0.037)	0.559*** (0.031)
Age-squared	-0.050*** (0.001)	-0.052*** (0.001)	-0.023*** (0.001)	-0.010*** (0.001)
Gender is female	-0.016 (0.024)	-0.418*** (0.030)	0.375*** (0.024)	0.393*** (0.024)
Race/ethnicity (ref: White)				
Latino/a	0.200*** (0.035)	-0.228*** (0.035)	-0.133*** (0.032)	0.307*** (0.031)
Black	0.016 (0.029)	-0.586*** (0.036)	-0.758*** (0.031)	0.306*** (0.029)
Family Background				
College-educated parent(s)	-0.826*** (0.028)	-0.135*** (0.034)	-0.252*** (0.029)	-0.531*** (0.031)
Two-parent family at age 14	-0.288*** (0.030)	0.069* (0.035)	0.087** (0.030)	-0.155*** (0.027)
Constant	-27.148*** (0.566)	-21.368*** (0.606)	-16.905*** (0.433)	-10.199*** (0.360)
<i>N</i>	21,434	21,262	19,935	20,097
Person-years	77,216	76,718	205,539	194,783

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, † $p < 0.1$

Figure 1. Kaplan-Meier survival estimates for each transition, by cohort

Figure 2. Annual estimated likelihood of school completion, by cohort and parent education

Figure 3. Annual estimated likelihood of labor force entry, by cohort and parent education

Figure 4. Annual estimated likelihood of first birth, by cohort and parent education

Figure 5. Annual estimated likelihood of school completion, by cohort and age

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