

Chapter 2

Societal, Educational, and Occupational Changes

One of the primary shifts in western society impacting the nature of the post-secondary years is the delay of marriage. Several family factors have been shown to be associated with the delay of marriage. For example, family structure during childhood is associated with the timing of an adult's entry into marriage. In a study by Jiang and Wojtkiewicz (1994) responses from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) were utilized to examine multigenerational family dynamics. The multiethnic sample, ages 22–45, were from 13,017 households. A logistic regression model was used to predict marital outcomes at specific ages as a function of family unit, socioeconomic status, personality traits, and overall marriage attitudes. Results indicated that Caucasian children, in comparison to adolescents, who lived in either single mother households or had a family with a step-parent, had a decreased chance of marriage by age 22 or age 28. Furthermore, children in families that transitioned, such as a transition accompanying parental remarriage, were also found to have a decreased chance of marriage by the age of 28. However, participants born to a single mother, as opposed to experiencing their mother becoming single as children, had an increased chance of being married by age 22. These results suggested that family transition during childhood had a greater impact on future marriage age than transitions during adolescence or being born into an already transitioned family. Hence, adults who experienced family change such as divorce or parental loss during childhood may be more likely to be apprehensive and fearful about their personal marital success. This may make them more likely to delay marriage or abstain from marriage completely in comparison to adults who did not experience family change during childhood.

Beyond individual differences in age of marriage, a broader and more impactful shift in the age and frequency of marriage can be found as a function of modern changes in culture. These shifts, driven by multiple interacting sociological components, have particularly impacted the age and frequency of marriage for women. Recent statistics suggest that the average age for a woman's first marriage has risen 4 years over the last three decades (Goldstein and Kenney 2001). Furthermore, a recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics

(2012) found that the percentage of women involved in their first marriage had decreased from 44 % in 1982 to 36 % in 2010.

Although the overall age of marriage has increased over the past few decades in mainstream western individuals, it is important to note variations in this shift based on ethnicity and religion. For example, foreign-born women have a higher probability of first marriage by the age of 25 than women born in the United States (Copen et al. 2012). Similarly, men who grow up in religious environments have a higher probability of first marriage by the age of 35 than men who grow up with no religious background or affiliation.

Even with considering these ethnic variations, studies show that the average age of marriage among other cultures is also on the rise. For example, trends and patterns in later marriages are also apparent in Asia over the past 50 years (Jones 2010). Some of the oldest-marrying populations live in Asia including some populations where the percentage of women remaining single into their 40s exceeds 10 % of the population.

Studies examining the correlates associated with this delay in marriage cross-culturally suggest several possibilities. Similar to patterns in western individuals, women in Asia who marry later are usually more educated. However, in a nuanced finding in Asian populations, uneducated men are found to be less likely to marry at all. Hence, the patterns in marital delay or lack of marriage completely can be attributed to a shifting economy and to changes in higher educational attainment (Jones 2005).

It is important to note that although Asia is home to some of the oldest-marrying populations in the world, there still are trends of teenage marriages in several Asian countries such as in Bangladesh, parts of India, Afghanistan, and Nepal.

Looking beyond Asia, Barakat (1993) assesses the customs and traditions of Arabic marriages and the progression of the age of marriage for men and women. For example, in the Arabic world in the 1960s, the average age of marriage for women was between 17 and 21 while men ranged from the ages of 21 and 30. In the 1970s about 40 % of women living in Kuwait, Libya, and the United Arab Emirates were married at ages between 15 and 19. This percentage dropped to around 35 % by the 1990s and by an additional 10 % the following decade (Rashad et al. 2005). As a result, a 20 % increase in Arabic marriages later in young adulthood, between the ages of 20 and 29, is expected to occur by the year 2025.

Considering the complexity of these changes, multiple factors can be attributed to the decline in marriage rates and the average age increase of marriages in many parts of the globe. Driven in part by changes in women's financial independence as well as in shifts in the attainment of advanced education, marriage is no longer seen by women as an essential component of financial stability (Lee and Payne 2010). Furthermore, many careers require advanced education and training which ultimately ends up delaying marriage decisions for both men and women. Previous studies have shown fluctuations in the age of marriage among men as a function of career priorities (Oppenheimer et al. 1997). Similarly, a study by Lieb and Thistle (2006) suggested an equivalent trend with women, based on their findings that

women reported valuing careers and occupations more than marriage. These studies are further suggesting that women are finding financial stability through work rather than marriage and are becoming more independent than ever before.

Beyond career and occupation, an additional variable impacting the delay of marriage is the increase in cohabitation which is becoming more prevalent (Lee and Payne 2010). The percentage of women cohabitating has increased from 3 % in 1982 to 11 % in 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics 2012). As a result of the greater acceptability of cohabitation, couples often see no need in committing via marriage.

Hence, recent societal shifts contributing to the steady delay in marriage over the past several decades have redefined the developmental-social aspects of the post-secondary school years. Whereas in the past, young adults would marry soon after post-secondary school, ushering in a definitive beginning of adulthood; they have more recently begun delaying marriage, blurring the once solid lines of transition between adolescence and adulthood. This new demarcation shift is resulting in the need to rethink the transition to adulthood and consider the new developmental stage of emerging adulthood.

In addition to marriage postponement, educational and occupational factors are further contributing to the delay of adulthood. Unlike past generations, modern adolescents are no longer expected to progress immediately to the financial stability of adulthood and be obliged to provide for themselves and their family shortly after graduating high school. Rather, in more recent times adolescents focus more on advancing their education and strive towards more long-term occupational goals. This shift in educational objectives is driven by the changing nature of an evolving work place. In comparison to previous generations, unskilled factory work is no longer the standard career path for young adults (Conley and McGaughy 2012).

Throughout the 20th century, vocational education geared towards agricultural and industrial work, was the most prevalent form of higher education (Conley and McGaughy 2012). This trend in training was in line with the patterns of the economic means of the time. In contrast, the modern economy is considerably different from that of the previous century. The current changing economy calls for new categories of occupations, shifting from industrial and agricultural jobs to technological and service careers (Conley and McGaughy 2012).

Due to this lack of short-term financial pressure and the prevalence of occupations requiring a higher skill set, adolescents are taking time after post-secondary school to expand their education to attain a promising career with sustainable independent income. Preparations for these careers begin as early as high school with classes placing individuals on specific tracks to further educational qualifications. Adolescents then continue on these tracks beyond high school gaining the education necessary for a more complex work environment (Conley 2007).

More specifically, professions that provide services to others, such as teaching, counseling, business, and law are gaining popularity. These new career paths are accompanied by a shift in educational requirements as well. Such occupations cannot be attained with only a high school education; therefore, some form of higher

education is needed. For example, in the United States, a law career requires attendance at a 4-year bachelor's program followed by 3 years of law school (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). Similarly, an elementary, middle, or high school teacher must earn at least a bachelor's degree. For teaching in a preschool, a student must complete at least a two-year associate's degree.

Generally, a high school education from kindergarten until grade 12 is attained by the age of 18. Some individuals may attend vocational school following high school, attend a 2-year program at community college, or enroll in a technical school in order to obtain an associate's degree. Alternatively, a program for a bachelor's degree takes approximately four years. Those who pursue a master's degree will need to attend school for at least an additional 2 years beyond the 4-year bachelor's degree program. In these instances an individual may not be ready for the workforce until the age of 24 or 25. If one wishes to attain a doctoral degree, they must add another three to four years of professional schooling and education resulting in a potential total of 10 or more additional years of education beyond that of high school. Consequently, the attainment of some sort of advanced degree, which has become a necessity for most career paths leads to an elongated transitional process and a delay in the transition into adulthood.

The growing prevalence of this elongated educational process is supported by recent trends in higher education. The National Center for Education Statistics (2012) reveals patterns of increasing enrollment in post-high school education. Current research shows that of the entire population in 2011, 88 % of people 25 years of age or older had completed high school. Of that 88 %, 30 % had completed a bachelor's degree or higher. These percentages have increased since 2001 when 84 % graduated high school and 26 % of these high-school graduates completed a bachelor's degree or higher. Furthermore, there has been an 11 % increase in enrollment at degree-granting institutions between 1990 and 2000 with a subsequent 37 % increase in enrollment between 2000 and 2010. Between 1985 and 2010, post baccalaureate education enrollment rose a significant 78 %. Further supporting this trend is the recent statistics suggesting an increase in students over the age of 25 attending college between the years 2000 and 2010. Hence, examining the aggregate of these trends suggests a clear shift in educational attainment which is impacting the transition from adolescence to adulthood. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2012), this pattern of increasing enrollment is expected to continue.

However, it is important to note that, although the literature has pointed to specific trends in higher education attainment, nuanced variations in this process have been reported based on a range of ethnic and cultural factors. For example, in a study focused on Asian American students by Dundes et al. (2009), the authors reported that many parents of Asian students prioritize university prestige over their children's satisfaction with their academic preference. This basis for decision making and way of thinking continues to impact future life decisions as well. After college parents decide what career they want their child to pursue based on the financial stability and independence of the career irrespective of the offspring's satisfaction with the chosen career. An attempt by the child to overrule parents and

defer from a university or career chosen by the parent can pose a threat to family relationships. As a result children often choose to overlook their own desires to prevent being seen as a failure by their family.

Other variations in higher education attainment have been found as a function of family circumstance. Studies show that children and adolescents who experienced disruptions in the traditional family such as divorce, single parenthood, or step parenting are more likely to leave home early and seek financial independence in comparison to children or adolescents reared in traditional homes (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1998). They are also more likely to form nontraditional families themselves such as single parenthood or cohabitation. The combination of these factors leads to a lower likelihood of obtaining some form of higher education.

An additional family factor impacting educational trajectory is financial resources and family size. Individuals with greater family financial resources and with fewer siblings in a family are more likely to attend higher education than those with lesser financial resources or larger sibships (Ermisch and Francesconi 2001).

An additional and related recent trend seen in college-aged students is further elongating the transition into adulthood. Many young adults seeking higher education return home to live after graduating from collegiate programs prior to finding a stable job or independent living arrangements. Once living at home, these individuals maintain this living arrangement for extended periods of time waiting until they are more financially established to afford independent living. This is in stark contrast to those who do not attend college and leave home early to form a family and secure a job right out of high school (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1998; Ramachandran 2005).

As Ramachandran (2005) describes, this trend of returning home is becoming “the latest challenge in parenting.” Parents are finding themselves forced to balance between supporting their adult children and the desire for their children to have the ability of self-support. The percentage of these “boomerang” children, as they are known, ages 18–34 has increased 70 % since the 1970s. This trend is often credited to the current economy, the rising demands for a degree, and the increasing cost of living. Additionally, college leaves many young adults with considerable debt making for an even harder and slower transition into adulthood (Wilcox and Snow 1992).

Interestingly, the educational and economic shifts reviewed are interconnected with the social shifts examined earlier, further complicating the transition into adulthood. Shifts in the increased length of education and significance of having a career may alter marriage patterns as well. For example, individuals who invest time in prolonged education tend to alter their ideas about marriage as well. Barnett et al. (2003) describes this circumstance as the career-marriage conflict, or the CMC. After completing an educational program, college seniors will begin to plan their life’s direction in terms of a demanding career, financial stability, and a more permanent romantic relationship, all coinciding with each other.

In a finding that further highlights the interconnection of family and career variables, the authors reported that college students who grew up with working

mothers had less anxiety or CMC about how to balance both a busy career and a healthy marriage. In comparison, those whose mothers did not work during their childhood were more likely to experience increased levels of anxiety and uneasiness about how to handle the conflict between marriage and career. This effect, found to be similar amongst both male and females, increased their risk of marriage and childbearing delay.

In sum, these shifts in educational and occupational circumstances over the past few decades are continuing to impact and prolong the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Significant increases in enrollment in not only baccalaureate programs but post baccalaureate programs highlight the changing nature of modern careers and occupations. These educational and economic shifts are particularly noticeable in western societies but have been noted to some degrees in other societies augmenting the evolution from adolescence to adulthood globally.

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