

Chapter 2

Boomerang Children in the U.S.: History, Geography, and Household Characteristics

Abstract In this chapter I review the relevant literature pertaining generally to the coresidence of young adults in their parental households; I then discuss in some detail the theoretical foundations for my analyses. Before presenting my review of the general literature I first discuss some general issues pertaining to the coresidence of adult children. This chapter details the prior literature on the topic of previously launched adults, which, as stated, has frequently only described adult-parent coresidence situations where the child is possibly caring for an aging parent. The literature also predominantly focused on the parents rather than the children in these living arrangements. This chapter outlines the historical background of marriage and family structure in America and introduces readers to the theoretical foundations used in this book—namely, the life course perspective and perspectives relating to family development and household structure.

Keywords Family • Children • Parents • Life course • Household • Coresidence

In this chapter I review the relevant literature pertaining generally to the coresidence of young adults in their parental households; I then discuss in some detail the theoretical foundations for my analyses. Before presenting my review of the general literature I first discuss some general issues pertaining to the coresidence of adult children.

2.1 General Considerations About the Coresidence of Adult Children

Many studies about the coresidence of adult children, especially those dealing with the levels of parental happiness, do not differentiate between children who have returned home and children who never left (Mitchell 1998). Research shows that having an adult child return home can have a wide range of impacts on family well-being as a whole. Numerous television sources and books have portrayed adult children returning home in a somewhat negative light (Mitchell 1998). The media

tends to depict these adult children as being a generation that is “uniquely slow in establishing independence from parents” (White 1994: 82). This may be due in part to the fact that there is a widespread idea that leaving the parental home is one of the first major transitions in adulthood, and if this transition is delayed or disrupted, there may be some negative consequences for both the parents and the child (Billari and Liefbroer 2007).

In light of the recent economic recession, as well as factors such as high unemployment rates and costs of living, living away from home may be more difficult for adult children these days. Additionally, parents may not only have greater acceptance toward their children moving back home, but may also anticipate “patterns of prolonged dependence” from their adult children (Mitchell and Gee 1996: 443). The return of an adult child to the family home may also have negative implications for parents’ marital satisfaction, or their satisfaction in general. Parents with poor health, blended families, lower socioeconomic status and higher numbers of children already living in the parental home could well have lower levels of satisfaction (Mitchell and Gee 1996).

Coresidence is almost always more beneficial for the child than for the parent and research shows some contradictions in the general findings regarding parents’ feelings on living with their adult child. For example, Mitchell and Gee (1996) found that parents had negative reactions to their adult children returning home when the children left and returned multiple times and when children left the home the first time for work or school. The return of an adult child often created a financial and psychological burden for the parents. The once “empty nest” was now a “crowded nest,” and some parents felt that the return of their child represented failure of themselves as parents (Schnaiberg and Goldenberg 1989; Aquilino 1990). The parents who reported unhappiness frequently noted that there was interpersonal conflict or turmoil between themselves and the child. Parents noted that a major factor affecting their happiness was the child’s main activity at the time of coresidence; children who were working or attending school were thought to be less stressful to parents than those who were unemployed (Mitchell and Gee 1996). Parents also reported having problems with lack of privacy and independence, and the child’s messiness or unwillingness to help with chores or other household tasks. Parents suggested that they sometimes felt their child was taking advantage of them in terms of financial support, which confirmed prior research that argued that adult children reaped more benefits from living at home than did parents when children were living back at home (Mitchell 1998). Previous studies also suggested that sons increased household demands while daughters may have been more likely to help around the house, and that sons provided less enjoyable interaction and companionship than daughters (Mitchell 1998).

Despite the findings, these data also described a high percentage of parents who were generally happy and experienced satisfaction despite the fact that their adult children were returning home. Parents received satisfaction as a result of the direct parent–child relationships (Aquilino and Supple 1991). In these cases, if the child

helped with housework and other tasks and if the child and parents enjoyed positive interpersonal interactions, then the likelihood of parental happiness was much greater (Mitchell 1998). Mitchell also noted that parents reported a better assessment of living arrangements if the child and the parent engaged in fewer hostile arguments, if the child provided instrumental support, and if there were fewer disagreements with the “boomerang child” about getting along with other family members. Parents who experienced satisfaction with an adult child returning home also noted the enjoyment of companionship or friendship and having the family together. Even if there were some negative effects of an adult child returning home, these could frequently be lessened if the child had taken on some aspect of a traditional adult role, such as engaging in full time employment. A poignant quote from one study regarding adult children living at home stated that “it is not whether an adult child lives at home, but which adult child lives at home” that will be the most salient in determining parental happiness with adult child coresidence (White 1994:94).

Additionally, research using data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) to analyze parent and child coresidence, focused on the perspective and experience of the parent rather than the child. Speare and Avery (1992) analyzed instances of elderly persons living with older children and looked specifically at parents’ transitions to and from coresidence with their children, rather than the transition of the children to and from coresidence with their parents. They found that driving forces that compelled parents to live with their adult children tended to focus on the needs of elderly people based on their health and disability status. If for example, an elderly person needed help with daily activities, he or she would be more likely to move in with and remain living with adult children.

Likewise, Aquilino (1990) analyzed and estimated the likelihood of parent and adult child coresidence by concentrating on characteristics relating to family structure and other parental characteristics. Aquilino found that parental dependency was not the major factor that explained coresidency at any point in the life course, and this finding is similar to the findings from previous research. Parental and family structure characteristics did have effects on whether or not an adult child would move home; parents’ marital dissolution and subsequent remarriage were negatively related to adult child coresidence, while parents with extended households (including the presence of relatives or nonrelatives in the household) significantly increased the likelihood of having adult children as coresidents (Aquilino 1990). While the literature focusing on the experiences of the parents is interesting and informative, it leaves a large gap in the body of knowledge regarding previously launched adults. Additionally, a majority of these studies are somewhat outdated, published in the 1980s and early 1990s, and while these studies can inform future research, I believe that more research is needed to fully assess the phenomenon of previously launched adults. I turn next to the general literature on marriage and family structure.

2.2 Historical Background of Marriage and Family Structure in America

While the phenomenon of adult children living at home is not new to the American family, the fact that adult children are doing so during a time in which we are so highly independent and individualistic as a society is something that warrants further consideration. Census data have showed that intergenerational coresidence was maintained throughout the industrial revolution, and during this period of time, young adults almost always lived with their parents or with parental surrogates. Intergenerational coresidence began to decline after World War II and many other aspects of family life changed a great deal during the industrial revolution. For example, infant mortality declined, fertility declined, household size declined, the divorce rate increased, and millions of people moved away from farming and began to work in the factories (Rosenfeld 2007). These changes, as well as others, are largely still in effect to the present day. Other changes that occurred after World War II and have had a lasting impact on Americans include the rise of divorce and heterosexual cohabitation, the invention of the birth control pill, the sexual revolution, the civil rights movement, the rise of feminism and women's rights, and the gay rights movement. Rosenfeld (2007) noted that the ordinary and traditional life course transition used to consist of first living with one's parents and then living with one's spouse. Historically, one was almost always part of a family, either headed by the parents or in a marital family with children. In fact, singlehood was so abnormal, that bachelors could not legally live on their own without special permission in several American colonies. This was due in large part to the fear of the absence of social control that is to some degree always present in the family. Rosenfeld argued that in order to understand the dynamics of intergenerational relationships, it was important to understand how family structures of the past impacted the mate selection of young adults, historically speaking.

Cherlin (2009) has described the history of marriage and how marriage in the United States was so much vastly different than marriage in any of the other Westernized nations. In the United States, we have largely taken for granted that love and marriage go hand in hand. Cherlin, however, noted that this has actually not always been the case. Prior to the twentieth century, love was not a precondition for marriage and was actually considered to be risky business for marriage. In the nineteenth century, people engaged in more utilitarian type marriages, and in order to protect their livelihood they strove to marry someone who would be able to work on the family farm or take care of the family. If someone married for love, and the person turned out to not be a good provider, then the family could be left in the wake of a serious destruction.

The idea of utilitarian marriage seemed to lose its appeal in the late 1800s and early 1900s. During this time was a shift toward a more companionate type of marriage, one that was based more on intimacy and the loving feelings of two people for one another. As we know, marrying for love and love only is not an event that really happens; parents and communities have always influenced the mate choices

of young adults and these choices are constrained by various structural factors. Factors such as social, legal, and demographic forces often create a narrow pool of people from which to choose a potential mate. Social and demographic constraints exist via residential segregation, intergenerational coresidence, closed labor markets, and early age at first marriage (Rosenfeld 2007). Residential segregation ensures homogamy, or marrying or mating with individuals with similar characteristics, and this is due to the fact that residential segregation almost always is based on racial characteristics. Racial residential segregation greatly reduces interracial social exposure, thus leading to a lower likelihood of meeting and marrying. Clearly, young adults who live at home face increased inputs from their parents about their potential mates; this could potentially lead to more traditional unions.

In the mid 1900s we saw a specific type of family form arise, that of the husband headed and male breadwinner ideal. Though many people recall this time fondly, such a familial configuration was not actually the norm for American family life. During the 1800s women greatly helped out and worked to support the family, whether it was by working on the family farm or doing other tasks to help contribute to the family livelihood. During the 1950s there was some tension between the idea of companionate marriage and the male breadwinner ideal; however divorce rates were extremely low and marriage rates were quite high. The male breadwinner ideal somewhat lost favor after the 1950s, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s with all the social and cultural changes that were occurring in the United States. These included events such as the Civil Rights Movement and the sex and gender revolutions. Additionally, this was a time when women were entering the paid labor force en masse, and their increased labor force participation also greatly changed the way we viewed marriage and family situations.

The 1980s brought the rise of individualized and expressive marriage, that is, marriage in which people thought and felt that they should be personally fulfilled in every aspect of life, including the marriage. If a marriage was somehow unfulfilling, the partners should have the right to end it. This led to the 1990s where we saw a steady high rate of divorce, and we really have not turned around from this even over 20 years later. These ideas of marriage that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century are what in effect lead to what Cherlin has termed “the Marriage Go Round.” It seems to be the case that Americans hold two very different ideals when it comes to marriage. These ideals are that most Americans, when asked, say that they believe a marriage should last forever, and also that their marriage would last forever. However and quite contrarily, the same people who expressed these assertions about marriage lasting forever also claim that they agreed with the idea that those who were unhappy in a marriage should get a divorce. America seems to be the only country that has these two conflicting ideals occurring at once in the same person. In other countries, there may be the idea that marriage is quite important and that marriage will last forever, but it is not in tandem with the idea that an unhappy person should get divorced. Likewise, in those countries that agree with the assertion that unhappy people should get divorced, they are not in agreement that marriage is so important and that everyone should aspire to get married and be married forever.

Changing notions of marriage seem to go hand and hand with alternative and changing families and family structures as well as changes in individual ideals. Rosenfeld has argued that “from the individual perspective, the family always seems to be changing” (2007: 42). As far as family structures are concerned, we have seen an increase in every type of nontraditional union. The numbers of interracial, same sex and heterosexual cohabiting couples have been growing since 1960 (Rosenfeld 2007). The reality of the contemporary family is that the “traditional” nuclear family is but one of many variations of family structure and household structure. In addition to single parent families, interracial, same sex, and heterosexual cohabiting couples, more people are choosing to remain single. Historically, failure to marry was linked to perceptions about personal or social deficiencies. Similar to the stigmas relating to “boomerang children,” these stigmas about singlehood are fast disappearing. Many young people no longer view marriage as necessarily better than remaining single and the number of single people reporting that they are “very happy” has increased steadily in the last three decades. As the current generation of never married people age, it is likely that many will remain unmarried and forego childbearing. Those who do forego childbearing are likely to still be faced with a pro-child social message. Those who choose not to do so, especially women, continue to be denigrated or regarded as selfish or incomplete. While some single parents naturally include divorced parents, there is also an escalating subset of highly educated women who choose motherhood but not marriage.

It is important to note that the role of critical historical eras and events are very important for our being able to understand the trends associated with home leaving and returning. Historical events, such as the Industrial Revolution, World War II and the Great Depression, as well as longer term changes in the attractiveness of living with parents, family structure, the growth of second rate jobs, and other factors, have lead to a high increase in the likelihood of returning home (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1999). Between 1880 and 1940, the percentage of single young adults who lived with their parents increased (Rosenfeld 2007). This was likely due in part to the increasing life expectancy of older Americans. As life expectancy increased, more and more unmarried young adults lived with their parents simply because there were more parents available with whom to live. Additionally, living with parents was normative, and there were few other practical options. Conversely, researchers have argued that during the Depression there were likely unstable finances and home situations that may have resulted in a lower likelihood of adult children moving home with their parents.

In the mid-twentieth century, the long-established norm of intergenerational co-residence began to change, even as parents were living longer and longer. Despite the fact that more adult children had living parents, the percentage of adult children living with their parents began to decline. World War II had a profound impact on young men’s transitions to adulthood, and young men who reached the age of 18 between 1938 and 1944 left home for the first time to join the military service, compared with barely one in six who joined the military among those who reached the age of 18 between 1930 and 1937 (the Depression era) (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1999). Non-family related leaving was temporarily interrupted by the

marriage component of the baby boom, but thereafter other non-family routes out of the home began to increase. Non-family reasons for leaving included attending college away from home, and leaving home solely to be independent. Those persons who came of age between 1968 and 1972 had the highest surges or non-family leaving, as well as those who came of age later in the 1970s. This trend faded somewhat in the 1980s, likely due to increases in housing costs, and this is important because it seems as though the trend of home leaving and returning has continued throughout the years until the present.

Since 1960, the independent life stage has become increasingly routine for young adults in the United States (Rosenfeld 2007). The independent life stage overturned old norms (namely, the norm of adult children living with parents), and now both parents and children expect to achieve some measure of independence. Contemporarily, a major contributor to the increase in rates of returning home may be the changes related to the nest leaving process itself (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1999). Research has shown that returning home was more likely among those who left at a young age or those who left home for reasons other than marriage. Reasons other than marriage include leaving home simply to be independent, getting a degree, or taking a job. The decline in age at leaving home is important to examine as well because young adults usually leave the family home during late adolescence or young adulthood. As a result, they have likely not had experience in adult economic or social roles and thus may be more likely to return to the family home.

Mitchell (2009) has noted that two trends of particular importance have surfaced to create the “boomerang age.” These are the greater instability and reversibility of partnership formation, and the increased likelihood that once young adults leave the family home, they are not precluded from returning. There are indeed changing notions of marriage and family and many young people are likely to question or even rebel against traditional behavior. Nevertheless, the U.S. has become increasingly multicultural and some families may even display patterns of behavior consistent with their cultural traditions. For example, some traditional ethnic groups are still morally opposed to cohabitation and delayed home leaving has become increasingly common and is more likely among traditional ethnic groups due to cultural traditions (Landale and Oropesa 2007; Mitchell 2009). In addition to the more traditional leanings of particular ethnic groups, other groups may find that changing economic opportunities make living at home a preferred lifestyle.

Billari and Liefbroer (2007) have poignantly discussed the potential influences and impacts of age norms on leaving home. As leaving the parental home is arguably one of the most important and first major transitions during young adulthood, social norms dictate that the time of leaving home should be influenced by how individuals, particularly young adults, feel about these norms. There are a variety of determinants that impact the age at which young adults leave the family home; Billari and Liefbroer discussed three of them. The first determinant is related to the involvement in parallel events that would coincide with a young adult moving out of the home; these include getting a job, going to college, or getting married. Often involvement with one of the aforementioned events results in a decision to leave

home. The second determinant deals with the opportunities and constraints that might have led to or impeded the decision to leave the parental home. These opportunities and constraints have been previously mentioned, and include housing market and economic conditions. The third determinant is related to the impact of cultural factors, attitudes, and values. The importance of social norms for decision-making during young adulthood has been stressed within the life course approach, which will be discussed in much more detail later in this book.

Some researchers have argued that age norms can only be considered norms if they are backed up by sanctions. However, it was unlikely that sanctions were attached to age norm transgressions, and even if there were sanctions attached it would be hard to tell what these sanctions were. Sanctions were unlikely followed through with regard to age norms because it appeared that age norms were generally followed regardless of whether or not there were sanctions associated with age norm transgressions. Additionally, the exact timing of age norms seemed to be unclear; should the age norm occur at a precise age or within a range of certain ages? Studies (Veevers et al. 1996; Settersten 1998) have shown that a vast majority of young adults perceived an age deadline for certain transitions, namely leaving home. Age deadlines for leaving home were substantially shared by respondents, who themselves also agreed that there were no specific consequences attached to violations of these age norms.

Sociological and demographic literature on age norms suggests that “age norms may influence the occurrence and timing of important life course decisions but are not very helpful in explaining how norms relate to other factors that may influence home leaving” (Billari and Liefbroer 2007: 183). To account for the fact that age norms might not be helpful in explaining impacts of life course decisions, Billari and Liefbroer (2007) sought to maximize their explanation by incorporating Fishbein and Ajzen’s (1975) theory of reasoned behavior. Essentially, the theory of reasoned behavior states that various factors tend to influence people’s intentions and their behavior. These factors include attitudes or beliefs, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. These factors are determined by beliefs about whether or not others approved or disapproved of a particular behavior, in this case, the age at which someone left the family home. However, the social networks to which individuals belong also have an impact on societal norms. Billari and Liefbroer (2007) showed that perceived opinions of parents were associated with the actual timing of leaving the parental home and societal norms and friends’ norms concerning the timing of leaving home were not. I turn next in this chapter to the theoretical foundations of my research.

2.3 Theoretical Foundations

A major conceptual approach I used to inform the research I undertook is the life course perspective. The life course perspective analyzes the relationship between norms, expectations, and the timing and sequencing of various events in and the life

stages among individuals (Mitchell 1998). It directs our attention to the powerful connection between individual lives and the historical and socioeconomic contexts in which these lives unfold (Mitchell 2006). The basic idea is that social norms exist about the appropriate timing of major events in life (Billari and Liefbroer 2007). The life course is the course of aging, but also involves many facets and implications (Clausen 1972). Common events include going to school, getting a job, starting a family, and perhaps most importantly, gaining economic independence from parents. Theoretically, age is the determining factor that specifies appropriate times for the stages and transitions. Returning home when one is supposed to be moving onto a new transition throws traditional age transitions off schedule (Settersten and Hagestad 1996; Smith 2004).

It is important to note that different variations in social contexts, including family structure, background, and different demographic variables (such as race, gender, religion, occupation, and social class) can have profound ramifications on an individual's particular pattern in the life course. People compare themselves with their peers to draw conclusions about whether or not they are "on time" with respect to important life transitions (Billari and Liefbroer 2007). However, Elder (1985) has argued that the contexts in which adults are returning to the home of their parents (economic climates, delayed transitions of marriage and family) are helping to redefine the life transition and make returning home more normative.

A major question posed by life course theory that is relevant for this research is "how do collective experiences of birth cohort members generate structural change?" (Hess 1988: 16). In particular, if the collective experience of a particular cohort of young adults is that of moving back in with parents, this could perhaps produce a structural change in the family and how we view this institution. Elder and his colleagues have put forth an elaborated life course framework related to the individual and to family development (1998). This perspective argues that families were changed by the behavior and developmental courses of the members; subsequently it was important to pay attention to the transitions of the individuals that comprised a particular family. Additionally, important also was the notion that changing lives altered developmental trajectories (Elder 1998).

As previously mentioned, these trajectories or pathways include education, work, and family, and are followed by individuals and groups in society. Elder has argued that various historical forces "shape the social trajectories of family, education, and work, and they in turn influence behavior and particular lines of development" (1998: 2). Likewise, Mitchell (2006) has argued that an individual's own life path is embedded in and transformed by conditions and events occurring during the historical period and geographical location in which the person lives. Geopolitical events, economic cycles, and social and cultural ideologies can often shape people's perceptions and choices and alter the course of human development. I believe that the historical forces at work that need to be entertained in my research are the economic crises that have shaped the last ten or so years, most especially in the years between 2005 and 2010. Various contributing factors include the bursting of the housing bubble, sub-prime and predatory lending, and increased debt; indeed all may be active parts of history that would be historical factors that changed history

in a negative way. We can see that all of these various interrelated parts are combined in a way that led to economic downturn; this in turn has led to decreased job opportunities for young adults, high student loan debt, and lack of viable prospects for the future.

An interesting part of the life course perspective emphasizes how human lives are interdependent and connected on various levels. Elder (1998) has described a situation of “linked lives” whereby societal and individual experience are linked through the family and its network of shared relationships. Consequently, macro-level events affect individual behaviors and this micro/macro link significantly affects familial relationships in a variety of ways. Mitchell (2006) has also noted that the idea of linked lives may be seen in the way that generational relations were interconnected with experiences and transitions from earlier life. Stages and transitions in the life course were interlocked across generations and existed within the context of different relationships and historical events.

While it may be argued that regardless of historical forces and economic atmospheres, individuals have agency to shape and control their own lives, ultimately the structures that are in place have a great impact on the choices and opportunities actually available to individuals in a given place and time. People and families are subject to the constraints imposed upon them as they live in particular socio-historical locations. Being subject to various historical times and the consequences of these times could well lead to shared experiences of moving back home that could potentially have lasting impacts on the lives of these various young adults. Early life course decisions, opportunities, and conditions can affect later life outcomes for individuals (Mitchell 2006). The past has the ability to shape the present and the future, much like a domino effect, and this can occur on a cohort/generational level and also on an individual level. The timing and circumstances under which various early life events occur can potentially set up a “chain reaction” of experiences for individuals and their families and events experienced earlier in life may continue to influence an individual’s life path in the future throughout the life course (Mitchell 2006).

Unfortunately owing to a lack of longitudinal data, it will not be possible for me in this project to determine such lasting effects. I need data from a longitudinal study that could follow cohorts throughout their lives to see exactly what X variables are related to moving back home. However, I am unable to perform such a study at this point in time. Despite this drawback, I will be able to examine other theoretically relevant variables relating to the life course, such as how many times the child has left and subsequently returned to the home, and how these returns affect both their and their parents’ happiness.

Despite a shared experience, there is room for differences within cohorts. For example, some members of a particular cohort may experience the life course and its trajectories in a “traditional” manner. This would include moving out of the family home, getting an education, getting a job, getting married, and having a family. However, not everyone in a cohort may have a shared experience and experience the events in the same temporal order. I believe that this is why it is important to

study such a group, and try to see what factors may lead to or detract from a particular life course of events and the temporal order in which these events occur.

From a demographic standpoint, the life course perspective is extremely important. When traditional life course trajectories are followed, individuals will likely marry and reproduce in the “normal” fashion. We now know that some groups are delaying marriage and childbearing until later years, and this may also be the case if parts of the life course are interrupted. For example, moving back home with a parent is likely to inhibit a young adult from procreating. Depending on the length of time an individual spends living back at home; the events of marrying and childbearing may well be delayed even more than previously assumed. Lastly, I think Mitchell made a poignant observation that with the life course approach there is “recognition of innovation and human agency in the life course. New behaviors, when routinized, can be created or alter pre-existing trends” (2006: 25). There is some speculation that behaviors such as home returning and cohabitation with parents have become and will continue to become increasingly popular, most likely due in part to the loss of social stigma that once existed when these types of behaviors were not widely practiced. It is my hope that this is the case, and that this phenomenon of adult children moving back in with their parents continues to lose social stigma, as it is in some cases an utmost necessity for young adults to move back in with their parents.

The family development framework is another theoretical perspective of relevance for my analysis. Aldous (1978) has argued that family development has focused on the characteristics of families over the period of their existence and also on the content and timing of past events in individual histories and how these events affect present interaction patterns among the family members. Historically, families expected a certain sequencing of family related events. For example, young people typically expected to complete schooling, marry before having children, and then later become grandparents. Patterns were so predictable that scholars found the depictions of family life and the life course of the family to be relatively accurate (Mitchell 2006). This is not always the case anymore. With recent changes, the timing and sequencing of events are too varied to warrant this linear model of family development. Indeed families may be involved in multiple stages simultaneously, may reverse stages, and might not fit into a model whatsoever.

Additionally, Aquilino has noted that “in the launching stage of the family life cycle, the developmental tasks of young adulthood involved relinquishing economic and emotional dependencies on parents” (1991: 14). Aldous (1978) has also contended that during this period parents have tended to shift their focus from parenting to reestablishing the marital relationship. However, as we well know, these requisite events during the launching cycle are often likely disrupted with the return of an adult child to the home. The ability to examine the feelings of parents regarding their adult children moving home, as well as the content and timing of individual events are of particular interest for this project, and with the available data I will be able to analyze this portion of the theory more closely.

Demographic theories of marriage and family are important to analyze the context of previously launched adults. Waite (2006: 87) has noted that “the family is

one of the foundational social institutions in all societies, although the definition of the family varies from place to place and from time to time.” Often, people use the term family when they really mean household, namely, all those sharing a dwelling. Household members may or may not be related by blood, marriage, or adoption. Conversely, “family” can refer to a number of different social entities and a variety of living arrangements. There are a variety of dimensions by which people view families. These include procreation, sexual relations, socialization, residence, economic cooperation, and emotional ties (Mitchell 2006).

Waite has also argued that the contemporary family in the United States looks different than it did in the past. Considerable diversity exists across and within families. Popular previous definitions of the family tended to emphasize that it was the basic institution of society, and that it was a social and economic unit consisting of “two adults of the opposite sex who shared economic resources, sexual intimacy, labor, accommodations, reproduction, and childrearing” (Mitchell 2006: 21). Fewer people today are living in traditionally defined families, with more living in non-family households. Most scholars recognize that previous definitions of the family were often idealized, ideologically based, and not always relevant to the realities of modern family life. This is attributable to transitions such as earlier nest leaving by young adults (as well as returning to the nest), delayed marriage, non-marriage, and marital disruption. Waite has noted that children have depended almost entirely on their families for financial, emotional, and instrumental support, but sometimes they failed to take into account the age at which this support was supposed to end, and what ramifications could be seen if children continued to receive this support from their parents well into adulthood. Waite has also argued that with current debates about the characteristics of marriage and the family, it was necessary to continue with further research that could help contribute to understanding these changing notions and ideas.

Social capital is also important to consider when analyzing the life course. The ability to adapt to life course change can certainly vary according to the resources or support available to families or individuals. These resources can be either economic or cultural, and they are exceedingly important to consider when using a life course perspective. Originally developed by French theorist Pierre Bordieu in the 1970s, social capital is defined as “social connections among individuals” such that it “inheres in the structure of relations” (Bordieu 1986). Access to social capital can generate normative structures and resources, such as social support (Mitchell 2006). Social capital and social support can be seen in various groups that emphasize family centered norms, values, and obligations. Social capital can also be found within families and can stem from the quality of intergenerational relationships (Mitchell 2006). Young adults with weak family ties may not have the option to return home during difficult economic times, regardless of other types of capital (Mitchell 2000). This is an important and interesting way to look at capital with respect to previously launched adults, because it would likely be the case that when the issue of capital

comes to mind, it is most likely economic capital. That being said, those who come from families with low economic capital may have different likelihoods of moving back in with parents, and this may also be dependent on the social capital of the family as well. Young adults approach their lives with a given set of personal characteristics that are intertwined with individual and family resources, and then combined with various other constraints. Moving back home with parents may seem like a purely individual decision, but it should actually be viewed through the lens of a much wider social context (Mitchell 2006).

As I have previously stated, young adults are social beings who have the potential to navigate and create their own lives and even in some cases instigate social change. However, the possibilities for those who lack social and economic capital (financial power, education, social networks) are much more limited. As a result, the life course and the events that occur within each individual's life course are neither entirely free creations nor entirely pre-determined, but a complex mix of the various components of macro and micro level circumstances that are occurring at a particular time and location.

There are a variety of factors that could contribute to or detract from the likelihood that a young adult would move back in with their parents. I intend to examine several factors related to various demographic, life course, and family related issues in order to better understand the relationships between these variables and the launching status of young adults.

2.4 Conclusion

It seems evident from the literature on previously launched adults that further analyses such as those to be undertaken in this book have merit and will contribute to the literature in a variety of areas. The extensive literature reported and reviewed on the topic of previously launched adults has served as a background for this research. To conclude, it seems that studies looking specifically at previously launched adults and the characteristics of these children themselves are sparse, and those that do exist typically date back many decades, with few contemporary counterparts. Therefore this book will also serve as an opportunity for reexamining the phenomenon and its relevance and applicability in more modern times. These analyses, hopefully, will also contribute to current literature in an important way: the launching status of adult children will differentiate between those who move out of the family home and then return and those who never move out of the family home.

This current chapter was a review of literature in several areas relevant to the research questions of this book. Before turning to the analyses intended to examine the research questions, I will discuss in the next chapter the data and methods that will be used in the analyses.

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