Pathways to Adulthood for Disconnected Young Men in Low-Income Communities

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

Kevin Roy, Nikki Jones

Abstract

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

Steinberg (2007, para. 1–2)

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

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

**Inequality and the Model of Emerging Adulthood**

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

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

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

Unequal Social Arrangements Through Mass Incarceration

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

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

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

Unequal Social Arrangements in Postfamilial Families

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

For many young disadvantaged men, however, families present complicated relationships that shift and transform in early adult years. Young men develop long-term relationships with parents, siblings, and extended kin that do not fade out with a launch into adulthood. Obligations in families with limited resources continue and may increase in a transition to adulthood. Similar to Lareau’s (2003) notion of natural growth, parents may play a less central role in their sons’ growth. Obligations flow both ways: families share extensive but diffused resources, and sons are contributors just as frequently as their parents or other family members.