Adulthood as a life course phase and transition: The life course is one key way of conceptualising adulthood. The life course is typically understood as a series of stages or phases organised according to the chronological sequence of age (Riley 1988). These stages have often been treated as a set of inevitable sequences: after childhood follows youth, then adulthood which precedes old age (Lowenthal, Thurnher and Chiriboga, 1977; Elder, 1978). The sociological notion of the life course, as compared with its conceptualisation in other disciplines, refers to a linear progression of time but not to a single life pathway. Rather, according to the Rapoorts (Rapoport and Rapoport 1975), and Glen Elder (1978), the life course comprises a number of career lines relating to work, parenthood, friendship, sexuality and so on. Like tram lines, career lines may cross over at different points in time and they may proceed in parallel. As agentic beings, we drive our own careers along the tramlines but we do so within a web of relationships with other people and in the context of wider historical, ideological and structural forces. These career lines are punctuated by transitions and their respective rites of passage (van Gennep, 1960) - moments in time at which we enter and exit from these different career trajectories.

Adulthood as the central phase of the life course represents, in normative terms, the climax of socialisation influences provided during childhood and youth. The achievement of adulthood confers both responsibility for self and for others. Its conceptual relation to the upper end of adulthood - old age - is however less clear-cut since adulthood appears both to overlap with old age while, through the concept of dependency, also to be differentiated from it.

Over time, adulthood as a life course phase has been subject to differentiation. Middle age has become a key life course phase within adulthood brought about by increased longevity and the growth of older people relative to young people in most western societies, while fine grained distinctions are made within old and middle age themselves. Thus middle age begins at an older age since young people’s transition to adulthood is typically completed later and later. It also lasts longer as older people stay fitter longer.
On the other hand, some age boundaries have been significantly resistant to change such as age of retirement (Gilles, 1996) which, in the UK, until recently was 60 for women and 65 for men. Indeed the growth of longevity is leading to widespread ‘ageism’ in most Western societies, suggesting that age as a social marker is not obsolete. The middle-aged who are employed in particular sectors, e.g. the IT sector and in the UK national politics, are at particular risk of ageism since these sectors pride themselves on their ‘young’ image. Ageism also exists with respect to the young and the elderly. It is also gendered, for example whole industries are devoted to keeping the ageing process at bay for women.

At the same time, the boundaries between youth and adulthood at the earlier end of the life course have become more fuzzy. The transition to adulthood has occurred later in the life course for many young people. As the baby boomers born in Northern Europe and the US after the Second World War grew up, so social and material conditions improved across the social class spectrum. Wider access to upper secondary and higher education, the Pill, the Women's Movement all contributed to the prolongation of youth for this and succeeding birth cohorts. From the 1960s, age at marriage and age at birth of first child increased gradually for most social classes in western societies, leading to an extended phase of ‘adult independence’ before ‘adulthood proper’ and the responsibilities of parenthood arrived (Settersten and Lovegreen, 1998; Buchman, 1989).

It also seems that from the 1970s, the transition to adulthood has become ‘stretched out’ in terms of the scheduling of its different constituent parts - the completion of education, entry to and establishment in the labour market, becoming a couple and the transition to parenthood, especially compared with the transitions of the preceding generation born around the Second World War. There is also evidence that many of today's young people will not achieve all these transitions; some will not become parents, some will enter same sex partnerships and some will live alone. Young people currently spend longer in education and training, with some groups spending longer than others because of the uneven expansion of further and higher education across society. In short, youth has become elastic so that conceptual distinctions are increasingly made between ‘young people’ and ‘young adults’, reflected in turn in a weakening of the very concept of adulthood.

Just as the transition to adulthood varies across different cultures and historical periods, so it is negotiated differently according to gender, ethnicity and social class. It also has a range of meanings. Financial independence from the family of origin has historically been the most important defining criteria for adulthood across social classes and sexes (Elder, 1978). However, during the era of the ‘housewife-breadwinner couple’ (approximately from 1900 to 1970), women and men achieved adult status differently as men were expected to become breadwinners and women to take responsibility for children and the household (Bernard, 1975). Thus the markers of adulthood have been strongly gender specific.
Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

Adulthood is central concept in the field of work-family studies. However, during the 1980s and 1990s much of the research in this field was devoted to a particular phase of the adult life course namely the period when parents with young children are likely to be employed. In the mid to late 1980s, the first studies of adults with elder care responsibilities began to appear, thereby extending the focus on adulthood to later life course phases. Moreover, with the emergence of the concept of the ‘beanpole family’ (long and thin in form as older generations live longer and affinal ties are weakened by divorce in the middle and younger generations (Bengston, 2001), interest is beginning to focus on those with responsibilities for both younger and older generations - namely the pivot or sandwiched generation. By contrast, few studies with a work-family perspective have looked at adulthood earlier in the adult life course especially pre-parenthood; for an exception see the cross-national study of young people's views of their future work-family lives (Brannen et al., 2001).

State of the Body of Knowledge

Changing Conceptualisations of Adulthood: It is difficult to discuss adulthood according to one set of concepts just as it is difficult to distinguish adulthood according to one set of markers. We may understand adulthood from many different perspectives, only some of which are discussed and problematised here.

First, there is the structural perspective, in particular the changing context of legal and educational institutions which shape the framework and resources for adulthood. Over the past 30 years, the age of majority has fallen in most Western European countries and in the US, conferring the legal status of adult on younger age groups. However, the fuzziness of the concept is reflected in a good deal of ambiguity in the age at which adulthood is said to begin in different domains, e.g. driving licences are granted at the age of 16 in the US while voting rights accrue at 18 and the consumption of alcohol at 21. During the same time period the number of years spent in higher education has increased, thus prolonging the phase of financial dependence upon the family of origin (and in some countries upon the welfare state), for both young men and young women. So whilst entry to 'legal adulthood' is conferred via citizenship rights, a young person may not be an adult financially. How far the achievement of financial independence, so important in earlier periods, is a key marker of adulthood in contemporary society constitutes therefore a matter for debate (Nilsen, das Dores and Brannen, 2001). Moreover, the postponement of financial independence is also due to the flux of economic cycles and the rapid pace of economic and technological change which require people at many phases of the life course to negotiate changes in jobs, employment status, and increasingly to re-train and re-skill. Periods of economic and labour market change can lead to employment insecurity; adults may typically rely on welfare benefits and support from families, making otherwise legally adult persons financially dependent. The changing
financial status of adults thus brings into question the concepts associated with adulthood namely individual autonomy and independence.

Second, adulthood may be viewed through the lens of gender, and the gendered division of labour with respect to the household, parenthood and the labour market. What was earlier problematised through role theory (Bernard 1975; Frieze et al, 1978; Giele, 1980), is today more often discussed in terms of different ways of ‘doing’ gender (Dryden, 1999; Fenstermaker and West, 2002). There have been considerable changes in family life and the labour market over the past three decades. Such changing gender roles, or varieties in ways of doing gender, lead to greater diversity in adult careers: dual earner families, single earner mothers bringing up children alone, lone mothers who are unemployed, double income no kids families, gay and lesbian couples with and without children.

Third, adulthood may be viewed through the lens of social constructivism (Berger and Luckmann, 1967) and the concept of identity. Identity in post modernist conceptualisations refers to identities in the plural which individuals make for themselves, not only in respect of gender but also in respect of sexuality. Identities may be fluid, reflexive, innovative (Kellner, 1992). In these theories, identity is no longer explicitly problematised in terms of the life course, nor is it explicitly located in relation to an age or any particular phase of life, such as adulthood. Yet in this new conceptualisation, identity presupposes an autonomous self who engages in the production and reproduction of self through lifestyle.

As the shift in focus to ‘identity as lifestyle’ occurs, so consumption is seen as the more important gateway to the expression of individuality, independence and autonomy. It also marks a shift in the formative influences upon identity, giving consumption and self-image primacy. To paraphrase Bauman (1998), there is shift from the old idea of ethics as important for personality and identity, to one where aesthetics become a more important concern. Moreover, structural factors such as labour market uncertainty may compel young adults to prioritise consumption identities over worker identities (Bauman, 1998) and hence may shape the ways in which they negotiate the work-family interface. However, the structural context which shapes such lifestyle choices may not be reflected in individuals’ perceptions of their lives. Rather adults may construe their lifestyles decisions as ‘choices’ while the structural context remains part of their taken for granted worlds (Jones and Wallace, 1992; Nilsen and Brannen, 2002).

This recent notion of identity as fluid and contingent is also seen as a form of liberation at personal and interpersonal levels. The accompanying concept of identity politics and life politics (Giddens, 1991) is thus linked to discussions of diversity and with ideas of freedom of expression in different domains, notably sexuality and alternative forms of partnership. Identity politics is thus the expression of ‘voice’ according to which individuals adopt and speak on behalf of particular life styles. In some cases, this becomes the basis for establishing community and social belonging among those who adopt and identify with such lifestyles. Whereas, in Giddens' terms, the focus in modernity was on emancipatory politics, postmodern
society accentuates life politics, turning attention away from collective forms of identification and self understanding, to individualised practices which give more freedom to the individual to map out their own routes to selfhood in globalised and socially disembedded contexts (Giddens, 1991).

Furthermore, the concept of adulthood as identity resonates with grander theoretical formulations, notably with the theory of individualisation (Giddens, 1991 & 1994; Beck, 1992; Buchmann, 1989). The so-called standard life course, with its phases and stages fixed according to age criteria and shaped by institutional forces such as strong welfare states and particular educational systems, is said to be replaced by 'choice biographies' which entail a disembedding of individual lives from the structural fabric of social institutions and age-specific norms (Beck, 1992 & 1994; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1996). Although this theory has its merits in terms of indicating trends across western societies, from an empirical point of view it may be criticised as too simplistic in ignoring particular cultural contexts, types of welfare regime, subcultures and divisions of gender and social class (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002). In short, it places importance on individual choice without taking into proper consideration opportunity structures (Jones and Wallace, 1992; Sennett, 1998; Nilsen and Brannen, 2002). Its neglect of structural forces leads to an easy accommodation with the political rhetoric of the New Right and the discourse of the market, where individuals are viewed as customers and consumers, rather than citizens. The individualisation thesis also overemphasises the rational; the picture of individuals which emerges is one of social actors who constantly reflect upon their very thought and action. Such a blueprint ignores Weberian conceptualisations of the routinisation of action, and is embedded in the assumptions of modernity which it seeks to transcend (Campbell, 1996).

Underpinning much of the debate about changing forms of adulthood is the concept of autonomy and individual rights which lie at the heart of Western liberalism. However ideas of autonomy and freedom are heavily intertwined. Personal freedom to make choices in whatever area of life nevertheless invokes responsibility for the choices one makes. When it becomes difficult to bridge the gap between adulthood as entitlement to individual rights and adulthood as being responsible for others, then it may be time to reconceptualise adulthood for individuals are always embedded in social relationships.

**Implications for Practice and Research**

In the work-family policy field, the interest in adulthood has shifted in recent years from a focus upon working adults who have family responsibilities, in particular for children and elderly relatives, towards a focus upon a much broader range of commitments which is reflected in the arrival of concepts such as 'work-life' and 'work-personal' life. These concepts beg a number of questions however. Whether personal commitments have a similar status or legitimacy as do care commitments is questionable since care of family members involves a sense of obligation. In some cases such obligations may be negotiable but not in others, notably with respect to children. At a policy level, it may seem reasonable to expect employers
and/or the state to take account of demands on employees' working time in relation to family obligations, especially in situations of significant 'need' as when children are young and close relatives are ill. However it is more questionable whether similar entitlements ought to be available to those who choose to take time off when their commitments are less pressing and when they lack any element of obligation to others. Such calculations bring to the fore the ethics of care and the importance of understanding interdependence (Tronto, 1998) as well as issues framed in terms of the welfare of those who cannot fend for themselves in the market place. It may be possible to navigate such dilemmas by adopting a 'whole life' perspective in which every citizen is allocated an entitlement to a maximum period of absence from the workforce spread over the course of their lives, for whatever reasons and taken whenever and in whatever way he or she wishes. Such ideas need to address how such periods of leave play out between men and women and the extent to which they may create gender inequity especially if there is to be no compensation for lost pension contributions.

A number of themes relating to adulthood suggest themselves for further research in the work-family field. For example, further investigation is needed to explore the tensions arising from young people's financial dependence on their families over longer periods and the growth in consumerism among young people. Second, attention needs to be devoted to the fact that family relationships across the generations are becoming more rather than less important, despite the rhetoric of individualisation and autonomy, as welfare states are restructured, affinal ties are less stable and people live longer (Bawin-Legros, 2002). The gendered responsibilities of caring, not only for children but for other dependents such as the very elderly, and transfers of other resources within families need continuing investigation.

References


Other Recommended Readings on this Topic:


Locations in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Studies

The Editorial Board of the Teaching Resources section of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network has prepared a Matrix as a way to locate important work-family topics in the broad area of work-family studies. ([More about the Matrix ...]).

Note: The domain areas most closely related to the entry’s topic are presented in full color. Other domains, represented in gray, are provided for context.
<table>
<thead>
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About the Matrix

Sloan Work and Family Research Network
Resources for Teaching: Mapping the Work-Family Area of Studies

Introduction

It was appropriate that the members of the Founding Editorial Board of the Resources for Teaching began their work in 2000, for their project represented one of the turning points in the area of work and family studies. This group accepted the challenge of developing resources that could support the efforts of teaching faculty from different disciplines and professional schools to better integrate the work-family body of knowledge into their curricula. The Virtual Think Tank began its work with a vision, a spirit of determination, and sense of civic responsibility to the community of work-family scholars.

A fundamental challenge emerged early in the process. It became clear that before we could design resources that would support the teaching of those topics, we would first need to inventory topics and issues relevant to the work-family area of studies (and begin to distinguish the work-family aspect of these topics from "non work-family" aspects).

The members of the Virtual Think Tank were well aware that surveying the area of work and family studies would be a daunting undertaking. However, we really had no other choice. And so, we began to grapple with the mapping process.

Purpose

1. To develop a preliminary map of the body of knowledge relevant to the work-family area of study that reflects current, "across-the-disciplines" understanding of work-family phenomena.

2. To create a flexible framework (or map) that clarifies the conceptual relationships among the different information domains that comprise the work-family knowledge base.

It is important to understand that this mapping exercise was undertaken as a way to identify and organize the wide range of work-family topics. This project was not intended as a meta-analysis for determining the empirical relationships between specific variables. Therefore, our map of the workfamily area of study does not include any symbols that might suggest the relationships between specific factors or clusters of factors.
Process

The Virtual Think Tank used a 3-step process to create the map of the work-family area of studies.

1. **Key Informants:** The members of the Virtual Think Tank included academics from several different disciplines and professions who have taught and written about work-family studies for years. During the first stage of the mapping process, the Virtual Think Tank functioned as a panel of key informants.

   Initially, the Panel engaged in a few brainstorming sessions to identify work-family topics that could be addressed in academic courses. The inductive brainstorming sessions initially resulted in the identification of nearly 50 topics.

   Once the preliminary list of topics had been generated, members of the Virtual Think Tank pursued a deductive approach to the identification of work-family issues. Over the course of several conversations, the Virtual Think Tank created a conceptual map that focused on information domains (see Table 1 below).

   The last stage of the mapping process undertaken by the Virtual Think Tank consisted of comparing and adjusting the results of the inductive and deductive processes. The preliminary, reconciled list was used as the first index for the Online Work and Family Encyclopedia.

2. **Literature review:** Members of the project team conducted literature searches to identify writings in which authors attempted to map the work-family area of study or specific domains of this area. The highlights of the literature review will be posted on February 1, 2002 when the First Edition of the Work-Family Encyclopedia will be published.

3. **Peer review:** On October 1, 2001, the Preliminary Mapping of the work-family area of study was posted on the website of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network. The members of the Virtual Think Tank invite work-family leaders to submit suggestions and comments about the Mapping and the List of Work-Family Topics. The Virtual Think Tank will consider the suggestions and, as indicated, will make adjustments in both of these products. Please send your comments to Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes at pittcats@bc.edu

Assumptions

Prior to identifying the different information domains relevant to the work-family area of study, members of the Virtual Think Tank adopted two premises:
1. Our use of the word “family” refers to both traditional and nontraditional families. Therefore, we consider the term "work-family" to be relevant to individuals who might reside by themselves. Many work-family leaders have noted the problematic dimensions of the term "work-family" (see Barnett, 1999). In particular, concern has been expressed that the word “family” continues to connote the married couple family with dependent children, despite the widespread recognition that family structures and relationships continue to be very diverse and often change over time. As a group, we understand the word “family” to refer to relationships characterized by deep caring and commitment that exist over time. We do not limit family relationships to those established by marriage, birth, blood, or shared residency.

2. It is important to examine and measure work-family issues and experiences at many different levels, including: individual, dyadic (e.g., couple relationships, parent-child relationships, caregiver-caretaker relationships), family and other small groups, organizational, community, and societal. Much of the work-family discourse glosses over the fact that the work-family experiences of one person or stakeholder group may, in fact, be different from (and potentially in conflict with) those of another.

Outcomes

We will publish a Working Paper, “Mapping the Work-Family Area of Study,” on the Sloan Work and Family Research Network in 2002. In this publication, we will acknowledge the comments and suggestions for improvement sent to us.

Limitations

It is important to understand that the members of the Virtual Think Tank viewed their efforts to map the work-family area of study as a "work in progress." We anticipate that we will periodically review and revise the map as this area of study evolves.

The members of the panel are also cognizant that other scholars may have different conceptualizations of the work-family area of study. We welcome your comments and look forward to public dialogue about this important topic.

Listing of the Information Domains Included in the Map

The members of the Virtual Think Tank wanted to focus their map of work-family issues around the experiences of five principal stakeholder groups:
1. individuals,  
2. families,  
3. workplaces,  
4. communities, and  
5. society-at-large.

Each of these stakeholder groups is represented by a row in the Table 1, Information Domain Matrix (below).

**Work-Family Experiences:** The discussions of the members of the Virtual Think Tank began with an identification of some of the salient needs & priorities/problems & concerns of the five principal stakeholder groups. These domains are represented by the cells in Column B of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individuals' work-family needs & priorities  
- Individuals' work-family problems & concerns  
- Families' work-family need & priorities  
- Families' work-family problems & concerns  
- Needs & priorities of workplaces related to work-family issues  
- Workplace problems & concerns related to work-family issues  
- Needs & priorities of communities related to work-family issues  
- Communities' problems & concerns related to work-family issues  
- Needs and priorities of society related to work-family issues  
- Societal problems & concerns related to work-family issues

**Antecedents:** Next, the Virtual Think Tank identified the primary roots causes and factors that might have either precipitated or affected the work-family experiences of the principal stakeholder groups. These domains are highlighted in Column A of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individual Antecedents  
- Family Antecedents  
- Workplace Antecedents  
- Community Antecedents  
- Societal Antecedents

**Covariates:** The third set of information domains include factors that moderate the relationships between the antecedents and the work-family experiences of different stakeholder groups (see
Column C in Table 1).

- Individual Covariates
- Family Covariates
- Workplace Covariates
- Community Covariates
- Societal Covariates

Decisions and Responses: The responses of the stakeholder groups to different work-family experiences are highlighted in Column D.

- Individual Decision and Responses
- Family Decisions and Responses
- Workplace Decisions and Responses
- Community Decisions and Responses
- Public Sector Decisions and Responses

Outcomes & Impacts: The fifth set of information domains refer to the outcomes and impacts of different work-family issues and experiences on the principal stakeholder groups (see Column E).

- Outcomes & Impacts on Individuals
- Outcomes & Impacts on Families
- Outcomes & Impacts on Workplaces
- Outcomes & Impacts on Communities
- Outcomes & Impacts on Society

Theoretical Foundations: The Virtual Think Tank established a sixth information domain to designate the multi-disciplinary theoretical underpinnings to the work-family area of study (noted as Information Domain F).
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**Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains**