

Title: "Transitions to adulthood: New initiatives for public policy"

Presenter: Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., Ph.D., Zellerbach Family Professor of Sociology and Research Associate in the Population Studies Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

Summary: Nivedita Ranade

At the fourth and final guest lecture of the 2007 CHHD Spring Colloquium series, Dr. Frank Furstenberg talked about the MacArthur Network and their extensive work in the field of transition to early adulthood.

In order to provide a background to his talk, Dr. Furstenberg provided the audience with a historical overview of how the timing of adulthood and the transitions associated with it have remained dynamic since the 19th century. For example, prior to industrialization the transfer of responsibility primarily occurred within agricultural communities. However, with increased focus on schooling and changes in the job economy during the 19th century, the transition to adulthood became more regulated, age-graded and less variable. With the advent of the 20th century there began a rapid process of entering adulthood; the average age at marriage was much earlier (at least 6 years earlier than the current average), and the transition was more normatively prescribed. This period was also characterized by the lower-income young adults making earlier transitions into adulthood. In contrast, there has been a major change in the nature of the transition to adulthood since the second half of the 20th century. It has become more protracted, less homogenous, and less differentiated by gender. It also has almost split into two components: economic transition and family transition. In short, there has been a prolongation of youth which in turn exerts stress on associated systems such as the family, schools, and youth-serving institutions (e.g. the criminal justice system, mental health agencies, or welfare agencies).

Dr. Furstenberg further stressed that this transition can be especially difficult for vulnerable, working-class, non-college-bound youth. This is due to the greater demand to manage on their own: income inequalities, economic disadvantage, minority status, and in general, being outside the mainstream society. They face human capital problems such as having limited skills, developmental deficits which in turn affect the transition to school and work. They also encounter stigmatization and isolation due to limited social support from mainstream institutions. The family may also not prove to be a beneficial source of support because in some cases their families may be dysfunctional or non-existent.

Furthermore, some parents may not completely appreciate the new timetable these youth follow with respect to transitioning into early adulthood, and as a result may be less resourceful with respect to knowledge and material necessities.

Dr. Furstenberg further remarked that the social service system fails miserably in adapting to this contemporary nature of the transition to adulthood due to their antiquated notions of childhood, and their strict rules regarding eligibility requirements and service discontinuation. In addition, there are gaps between the adolescent and adult services; for instance, the staff are unprepared and untrained to deal with young adults, and there is a failure to adapt to the changing needs of youth and to provide the necessary services accordingly.

Hence, the MacArthur Network is geared toward identifying these gaps through research, with the aim of ultimately bringing about much needed institutional innovations and public policies. These can be achieved by shifting age and eligibility standards in the social service systems, enhancing the capacities of family and community colleges and targeting resources to service systems.

Suggested Readings

Osgood, D. W., Foster, E. M., Flanagan, C., & Ruth, G. R. (Eds.). (2005). *On Your Own without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations*. From the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Mental Health and Development. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Settersten, Jr., R. A., Furstenberg, F. F., & Rumbaut, R. G. (Eds.). (2005). *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Furstenberg, F. F., & Foley, K. *Destinies of the disadvantaged: The life course of teenage mothers and their children*. Forthcoming. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.