Emerging Adulthood: A New Stage in the Life Course

Implications for Policy Development

Discussion Paper

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Implications for Policy Development

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Abstract

Defining youth is always a challenge, particularly when using age criteria (Furstenberg, 2000; Galland, 2001; Gauthier, 2000). Who, in fact, are youths? Teenagers? Adults? Life stages are defined as much by psychological and biological processes as by the social standards that mark ages, such as symbolic rites, life events, laws, standards, and social roles (Elder et al., 2005). The definition of youth has always been somewhat ambiguous, as the boundaries from childhood to adolescence or from adolescence to adulthood depend on a multitude of such factors. These standards change according to macro-social contexts (socioeconomic conditions, rules of law or policy), meso-social contexts (group or community values), and micro-social contexts (family and personal values).

The purpose of this study is to propose a reflection on the definition of youth and of its relevance in policy development. Our analysis will focus on young adulthood, the period that straddles adolescence and adulthood and that researchers refer to as a new life stage. New expressions, such as adolescence, (Anatrella, 1988), post-adolescence (Galland, 2001) or emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004), are also used in reference to this category of youth aged between 17 and 25. Côté (2006) even hypothesizes that there is another phase, coined "youthhood", which characterizes the second half of the twenties.

Early adulthood is an especially important life transition characterized by a quest for autonomy and an exploration of identity (Gaudet, 2005; 2001). This group also represents a particularly interesting target group for the policy milieu, as they experience a number of specific realities: changes in their academic and occupational trajectories, as well as family and housing status. These changes are examined from an intergenerational perspective, with a particular focus on differences in values. The symbolic age of majority (age 18) is but one of numerous benchmarks along the path to adulthood. New data on the current generation of young people show they are evolving in a normative culture that differs radically from previous generations. Finally, the study also explores issues related to identity formation and relationships with institutions as well as implications of this new life stage for policy development and data development strategies.

Sommaire

Définir la jeunesse demeure un défi, particulièrement si on la fonde sur des critères d'âge (Furstenberg, 2000; Galland 2001; Gauthier, 2000). En effet, qui sont les jeunes? Les adolescents? Les adultes? Les stades de la vie se définissent autant par de processus psychiques et biologiques que par des normes sociales qui marquent les âges tels que les rites symboliques, les événements de vie, les lois, les normes et les rôles sociaux (Elder et al., 2005). La définition de la jeunesse a toujours été empreinte d'un certain flou, car les limites pour passer de l'enfance à l'adolescence ou de l'adolescence à l'âge adulte dépendent de la multitude de ces facteurs. Ces normes changent en fonction des contextes macrosociaux (la conjoncture socioéconomique, les règles de droit ou les politiques), mesosociaux (les valeurs de différents groupes ou communautés), et microsociaux (les valeurs des familles et des individus).

Dans cette étude, nous proposons une réflexion sur la définition de la jeunesse et de sa pertinence pour le développement des politiques. L'objet de notre analyse portera sur les jeunes adultes. L'entrée dans l'âge adulte

représente une transition de vie particulièrement importante pour comprendre ce que signifie être un jeune. Elle nous conduira à définir la jeunesse en tenant compte de la période située aux frontières de l'adolescence et de l'âge adulte et que les chercheurs désignent comme étant une nouvelle phase de la vie. Une nouvelle nomenclature, telle que l'adulescence, (Anatrella, 1988), la postadolescence (Galland, 2001) ou l'emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004) est d'ailleurs employée pour désigner les jeunes à l'aube de leur vingtaine. Côté (2006) émet même l'hypothèse qu'il y aurait une autre phase, qu'il qualifiait de youthood, qui suivrait la seconde moitié de la vingtaine.

L'entrée dans l'âge adulte représente une transition de vie particulièrement importante caractérisée par une quête d'autonomie et d'exploration identitaire (Gaudet, 2005; 2001). D'autre part, les jeunes adultes représentent un groupe cible intéressant pour le milieu des politiques avec des réalités bien précises : leurs nouvelles trajectoires scolaires et professionnelles ainsi que familiales et résidentielles. Ces changements seront analysés dans une perspective de différenciation intergénérationnelle, en mettant l'accent entre autres sur les différences de valeurs. L'âge symbolique de la majorité (18 ans) n'est qu'un des jalons parmi tant d'autres qui ouvrent la voie à l'âge adulte. Les connaissances récentes sur la nouvelle génération des jeunes indiquent qu'ils évoluent dans un univers normatif complètement différent de celui des générations précédentes. Enfin, cette étude explore également les questions d'exploration identitaire ainsi que le rapport des jeunes face aux institutions, pour conclure avec une discussion au sujet des implications de cette étape de la vie sur le développement des politiques et des stratégies de développement de données.

1.   Introduction

The first step in developing a public social policy or program is to define the project's target population. In theory, two types of social policy may be developed: 1) policy that targets populations based on their life-course situation; or 2) policy that targets populations based on the specific problems they experience. In practice, when a policy is developed, a target population is often defined according to both the life stage and the specific problems of that population. However, this two-pronged approach involves certain difficulties and risks.

"Youth" policy is one example of how hard it is to define a population as a group at once based on age and on its specific problems, such as delinquency, membership in street gangs, hyper-sexualization of young girls, etc. The risk of this two-part definition lies in generalizing the realities of marginal groups to an entire population. Youth is defined foremost as a life stage, and this period should not be characterized based on the problems of young people, which would only reflect the distorted reality that media push regarding youth. However, it should be remembered that youths face unique psychosocial and economic difficulties that must be factored in when developing programs and policy. In this report, we propose a reflection on the definition of youth and of its relevance in policy development. Our analysis will concern young adults. We will base that analysis on a review of literature and of empirical studies on youth, identity and life courses.

2.   The Boundaries of Youth

Defining youth is always a challenge, particularly when using age criteria (Furstenberg, 2000; Galland, 2001; Gauthier, 2000). Who, in fact, are youths? Teenagers? Adults? Life stages are defined as much by psychological and biological processes as by the social standards that mark ages, such as symbolic rites, life events, laws, standards and social roles (Elder *et al.*, 2005). The definition of youth has always been somewhat ambiguous, as the boundaries from childhood to adolescence or from adolescence to adulthood depend on a multitude of such factors. These standards change according to macro-social contexts (socioeconomic conditions, rules of law or policy), meso-social contexts (group or community values) and micro-social contexts (family and personal values).

We will attempt to explain youth by giving special attention to this time of life characterized by a quest for autonomy and an exploration of identity between adolescence and adulthood (Gaudet, 2005; 2001). Early adulthood is an especially important life transition in understanding what it means to be a youth. It will lead us to define youth by considering the period that straddles adolescence and adulthood and that researchers refer to as a new life stage. A new expression, such as *adulescence*, (Anatrella, 1988), *postadolescence* (Galland, 2001) or *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2004), is also used in reference to youths at the dawn of their twenties. Côté (2006) even hypothesizes that there is another phase, coined *youthhood*[1], which follows the second half of the twenties. We will focus on these youths since, firstly, their reality challenges the definitions of adolescence and youth found in such disciplines as psychology, sociology or anthropology. Secondly, they represent a particularly interesting target group for the policy milieu, as they straddle adolescence and adulthood based on the law of majority (age 18). In fact, this population group challenges policy that is too strictly applied based on age and that fails to factor in the needs of youths who are not quite adults even though they have turned 18.

2.1 Norms and Age Categories

As mentioned, formal and informal norms define age categories. From a sociological perspective, we will examine the legal, social and policy norms involved in defining youth, but more particularly the transition to adulthood in Canada. We call this series of norms "social institutions", i.e., standards that a society implicitly or explicitly accepts.

The first social organizations that structure the time of childhood until adulthood are, of course, educational institutions. We can differentiate life stages based on educational institutions: day care for early childhood, elementary school for childhood and preadolescence and high school for adolescence. Youths who begin high school start a new stage of life. The high school benchmark that occurs at about age 13 signals the beginning of teenagehood, or the "teens". Age 12 is recognized

as the end of childhood. This social standard is even recognized in the *Criminal Code of Canada*, whose jurisdiction excludes children ages 12 and under who commit omissions or offences. However, childhood does not extend from ages 6 to 12. Preadolescence is a new stage of life that represents the transition from childhood to adolescence. According to developmental theories, preteens are children in the second cycle of primary school (ages 8 to 12). This age group also has a culture apart from that of childhood, with their desire for independence, their greater curiosity regarding the adult world, and greater interest in consumer culture. The sexualization of young girls also begins at this time. This age group is also known as the "tweens", a target group for advertisers who have developed a consumer market for them.

When youths reach the age of 17, educational institutions no longer standardize their life courses. In fact, high school usually ends at this age. It is a time when the life courses of youths diversify with the many options available to them: vocational training, the start of post-secondary education, or the beginning of their work life. For some youths who leave school without their diploma, educational institutions will stop being transition benchmarks. The *Labour Code* and the provincial education act will be the benchmarks of their life courses.

2.1.1 Legislation

Legislation is another set of norms that are juxtaposed to educational institutions in influencing the boundaries of youth. Laws are formalized social standards that are effective indicators of society's expectations with regard to conduct. They dictate social expectations for individuals based on life stages and protect individuals who cannot make informed decisions concerning their welfare. In Canada, every province is responsible for setting the age of majority in various fields of jurisdiction. Nationwide, the *Criminal Code* and the *Canada Elections Act*, 2000, chap. 9 are probably the two statutes that standardize the age of majority at 18 for the entire country. Thus, in the eyes of the law, the pivotal age of 18 is a decisive time in an individual's life, whether in respect of the

individual's ability to enter into a contract under provincial statutes or his status as an adult under the *Criminal Code* anywhere in Canada. However, this age of majority does not give access to every right, depending on the province. For example, every province except Alberta, Manitoba, and Quebec requires that an individual be 19 years of age to purchase alcohol (Canada Border Services Agency, 1998).

The First Step Toward Criminal Liability: Age 12

The beginning of adolescence is marked by the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* (2002). As of age 12, youths are deemed "liable" for their actions, that is, the State holds them accountable for their criminal actions. However, this law serves as a transitional institution, since its application is much more flexible and less severe than the *Criminal Code.* Thus, Canada's legislative system formalizes the stage of early adolescence through this law.

The First Step Toward the Age of Consent: Age 14

Although the laws that set the age of majority appear to make a categorical separation between adolescence and adulthood, other laws allow for a more gradual transition. Another transitional age is that of 14. Under the *Criminal Code* (1985, paragraph 161), age 14 is the requisite age for consent to sexual activity (Pilon, 2001). In recent years, there has been discussion in Canada about increasing the age of consent to 16 in order to protect, among others, young people from sexual predators on the Internet. Age 14 is also critical under the *Civil Code of Quebec*; as of that age, teens may consult a health care professional and receive several treatments without parental consent. This confidentiality of medical care is particularly important in the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases among young people.

The Second Step Toward the Age of Majority: Age 16

There is no federal law in Canada setting a minimum age for entering the labour market (Human Resources and Social Development Canada, 2005). Rather, various provincial labour statutes and laws on school attendance stipulate when a young person may enter the labour market. First and foremost, it is the provincial laws on school attendance that govern youth labour. Generally, teens are required to stay in school at least until age 16 or, in some provinces, until age 18. This does not mean that teenagers cannot work, simply that employers must hire them to work after school hours, because school attendance policy ensures that education has priority over paid work. For some provinces, there is no age for employability, but a number of age categories are stipulated based on the types of jobs, with the categories being set to protect the health and safety of youths. For example, the minimum age for working in a mine is generally set at 18 in all provinces. Provinces where no minimum working age is set generally establish restrictions on working conditions when youths are younger than 14 or 16. For example, in Quebec, young workers aged under 14 must obtain consent from their parent, work during the day and the work schedule must not conflict with school hours. In Ontario, workers must be at least 14 and restrictions are imposed on certain types of work (construction, mining, maintenance, etc.). In Alberta and British Columbia, the minimum working age recently dropped from 14 to 12 and Alberta imposes a restriction of two hours of work per day on school days (Schultz and Taylor, 2006).

Thus, the Canadian legal system sets gradual benchmarks for the beginning of adulthood. Teenagers gradually acquire rights and responsibilities from age 12 until age 19 in some provinces. However, it can still be said that in most provinces, age 18 is the legal age when adult life begins.

2.1.2 Policy

Although policy is less structuring than laws in categorizing the stages of life, it has concrete, implicit influences. First, policy often aims to spur social change. For example, its purpose is to provide equal opportunity, increase worker productivity, improve quality of life, etc. For youth, policy on education, employment assistance

measures, housing access or the social safety net are examples of policy which affects the timetable for the transition to adulthood.

For example, policy that supports a knowledge-based society – particularly policy that favours post-secondary education – meets the needs of the knowledge economy and imposes new timetables for life. A society in which young people are encouraged to earn master's degrees will necessarily affect the age at which individuals join the full-time labour market. Knowing that this transition often represents the springboard for participation in other areas of life, such as family and housing, extending the time spent on education affects the entire life course of young people. Conversely, policy that encourages youth to enrol in vocational training will result in them joining the labour market sooner.

The lack of policy to counterbalance structural effects such as the shortage of jobs, shortage of affordable housing or poverty also influences life transitions, and therefore changes the standards that define adulthood. One example is access to housing in major Canadian cities, notably Toronto and Vancouver. If there is no policy on access to affordable housing, young people will have to delay leaving their parents' home and starting a family. Early adulthood will thereby be extended according to the structuring effects of the economy and the labour market. As such, both policy and lack of policy affect the temporality of youth in various socioeconomic contexts.

2.1.3 Social and Symbolic Norms

Legislation and policy are examples of explicit social norms that influence the stages of life. Other social norms also influence the roles associated with certain life stages, but these are much less formal. They correspond to social expectations or to what can be described as "normal" in a society and equally allow us to identify marginal behaviours.

Life stages such as childhood, adolescence and adulthood are largely defined by the social roles that individuals are asked to play in a given society. Our social roles are developed based on social expectations and affect the development of our individuality and our relationships to others. Our roles as citizens, parents, workers, and so on, are therefore influenced by a society's policies, institutions, and values. How these roles are configured, i.e., the combination of social roles associated with certain times of life, determines the life stage (Macmillan and Copher, 2005). For example, adolescence in our society is associated with being a high school student, working part-time on weekends, being unable to vote (since Canadians must be 18 to vote), and volunteering with school or community activities. Becoming a parent before age 18 is no longer a commonly accepted role at this time of the life cycle, although it was a century ago when women's adult lives began at a younger age. Thus, as social roles vary based on social and historic contexts, policy can quickly become unsuited to the changing realities of populations.

These symbolic social norms structure life courses. The period following the Second World War in industrialized societies – the baby boom generation – is one of the most standardized historic times in 20th-century history (Fussel and Gauthier, 2006). Post-war social norms in western countries required, for example, timetables for early adulthood based on a sequence (school/marriage/parenthood) and for the age associated with each transition. Several contemporary researchers agree that around the early 1970s, a change occurred in the standardization of the ages associated with roles and the sequence of those roles. In fact, the change resulted from the breakdown of institutions like marriage, the pluralism of cultural values, and the postponement of certain transitions like parenthood. We examine these changes in greater detail in the next section.

The two life stages that have changed the most in the past 30 years are the transition from childhood to adulthood and the period of old age and extreme old age. Both these times of life involve a great deal of interdependence in which individual autonomy is yet to be defined. In the case of youth, this life stage has been extended to such a degree that it can now be broken down into two phases: adolescence and

early adulthood. Some authors maintain that this extension of youth is likely due to the deferral of adult roles, but also the precociousness of adolescence. For example, we know that physiologically, puberty is occurring at a younger age and that certain adult problems, like depression and mental health problems, are also happening earlier in life. In short, it appears that social, environmental and biological pressures are shortening childhood and resulting in an ever-longer waiting period before early adulthood.

2.1.4 Scientific Norms

While scientific expertise has grown dramatically in the past 50 years, it has contributed especially to constructing the social reality (Bell, 1970). The views of experts contribute to creating new social categories; one example being the concept of *emerging adulthood.* Scientific disciplines and techniques also helped define the stages of life. This phenomenon is contemporary in the area of youth, as childhood and adolescence are modern concepts. Before the 19th century, the role of children in families was mainly one of production; when families became conjugalized, that is, when the family unit became based on the couple, children began to take on symbolic value. Childhood became particularly institutionalized around child labour laws in the mid 19th century. In Canada, the various laws concerning children working in factories were enacted between 1890 and 1917 (HRSDC, 2006). It was only in the early 20th century that intellectuals became interested in human development and in identifying life stages such as childhood and adolescence.

In fact, the views of psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists concerning youth have helped to define this life stage. The development of scientific techniques, like statistics, also have a significant impact on how we conceptualize social reality. For example, the age categories created for national statistical surveys clearly illustrate social construction based on scientific perspectives. For example, the 2001 Census defines the following age groups: 0-14 (child), 15-24 (adolescent) and 25-64 (adult).[2] Thus, in the Census, as in most surveys of

the Canadian population, age 15 is considered the beginning of the working life, and thus the end of childhood. This categorization, which is used by many, contradicts in particular all the knowledge of psychologists who establish the start of adolescence at puberty (around age 12) and sociologists who establish the start of adolescence based on biological changes but also changes in status and social roles. For the latter, age 15 does not represent the benchmark of a change in role or institutional change.

The Perspective of Psychology

Psychology is likely the discipline that has most influenced research on the transition from childhood to adulthood in the 20th century (Dubas, Miller and Petersen, 2003). While anthropology had already identified rituals in the transition from child roles to adult roles, the discipline mainly examined social role transitions: from girl to procreative woman or from boy to tribe member. Psychology helped to define a period of life, i.e., a stage of development. Hall (1904) was the first to suggest the stage of adolescence. His observation of human development was greatly influenced by German romanticism, which described this period as a time of turmoil and troubled identity. Although several studies in psychology have refuted the pathological view of adolescence, this dubious image continues to cloud the collective imagination.

Adolescence is now acknowledged as a specific period of human development, thanks to the key influence of Piaget's and Erickson's developmental psychology in the 1950s. It is a period that can be identified through physiological changes, behavioural changes (e.g., more conflicts with parents), and relational changes, that is, a period of socialization that opens onto a social circle outside the family. This developmental psychology approach focussed mainly on the internal factors that characterize the passage to adolescence and then adulthood. Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach is the other psychology movement that has likely been most influential in our understanding of adolescence. It shows how human development is influenced as much by internal

factors (ones that are strictly psychological) as by external factors, such as family, school and society in general. Developmental psychology has contributed to the analysis of risk factors for certain youth populations. It has also favoured an approach to youth in which the identification of pathologies is dominant.

The Perspective of Sociology

The other discipline studying the transition from childhood to adulthood is sociology, which looks at social facts and the characteristics of groups of individuals. That is why it has been less interested, traditionally, in adolescence as a period of life, instead studying youth as a social group. For example, sociological analyses on youth were frequent in the 1970s, since young people as a social group were becoming key social stakeholders due to social, political, and demographic conditions surrounding the events of May 1968. From this perspective, one area of sociology took an interest in this group as an initiator of social change in politics and culture.

A second sociological perspective on youth was that of social role analysis inspired by Parsonian sociology. In the 1960s, Parsons analyzed society as a system in which adults have specific social roles and in which the family as a social subsystem is a melting pot for the transmission of roles, standards and values. Thus, children's upbringing helps them learn their role as parent, spouse, worker, etc. Parsons developed his theory in the American post-war period when the roles of women, men and children were highly standardized, notably through the mass media, which were beginning to convey the prevailing social standards. Although this theoretical perspective has several biases, it was a key influence on youth analysis, since this social group was also analyzed based on the implicit and explicit social standards and roles that defined them in given societies.

As in psychology with the human development approach, one branch of sociology became focused on the life courses of young people, that is, their transition to certain social roles in contemporary societies. Highly inspired by the anthropological tradition that studied transition rites, several youth sociologists have examined transitions to adulthood based on social role transitions. In the 1980s and 1990s, this type of analysis dominated youth sociology, since transitions in the social roles of workers, spouses, parents, and tenants have undergone major transformations in terms of length, repetition, postponement, and trajectory changes. These changes shall be explored in the next section.

2.1.5 Conclusion: The Need for a Life-Course Approach?

Psychology and sociology have studied this transition from childhood to adulthood in very different, yet complementary, ways. Many psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists now use a life-course approach to understand this very significant transition to adulthood. Such a multidisciplinary approach allows for addressing this life stage as both a period of psychosocial development and a transition of social roles influenced by structuring contexts, or socioeconomic determinants.

The life-course approach allows us to understand the dynamic and temporal aspects of individual and social realities. In fact, examining youth only in terms of social group ignores individuals' temporal reality. Yet we know that identity, social roles, and human and social capital are the result of an individual's history and the context in which that individual evolved. This perspective is particularly relevant to understand within the framework of preventative policy because it has contributed to the development of life-course analyses that are of interest to the social intervention and policy milieus. In fact, identifying a developmental period means situating it in time and studying it based on other life stages, such as childhood and adulthood. This perspective allows us to not only identify the risks associated with each life stage, but also allows us to prevent them.

3. Emerging Adulthood: A New Stage in the Life Course

According to Arnett (2004), early adulthood is characterized by a lack of institutional benchmarks. As stated previously, the end of high school (generally at age 17 in Canada) represents an institutional transition between two life stages: adolescence and early adulthood which corresponds to the transition to either education at the university and/or college level or to the labour market. Instead of stating that there are no institutional benchmarks, we should perhaps speak of a multiplicity of benchmarks that create a time of life − from an institutional and social perspective −that is imprecise. Developmentally, we could also say that it is an imprecise period, since the young people aged approximately 17 to 24 identified by Arnett define themselves as neither teens nor adults. Defining this life stage is not only of theoretic interest, but raises several implications for policy since, as we have shown, policy or lack of policy in areas that directly concern youth (e.g., education or the social safety net) affects the timetables of life.

This reflection on the definition of early or emerging adulthood will be structured in three parts. First, we will analyze the particularity of the family, occupational/academic and housing trajectories of young adults and the importance of understanding these changes when developing policy. Second, we will try to understand how this period of life as experienced by the current generation compares with how it was experienced by previous generations. Third, we will explore the aspect that most distinguishes today's youth: the symbolic process of their quest for identity through experiences and lifestyles.

3.1 An Ambiguous Transition in the Life Course

In traditional societies, the beginning of adulthood was generally marked by a rite of initiation or a life event − often marriage − that symbolically and concretely signalled adulthood, announcing the start of a new lifestyle, but especially new social roles (Lapassade, 1997). These rites and norms were standardized because of the strong normative consistency in traditional societies and the resulting social control. To be part of a community, individuals had to meet these social expectations. In pluralistic contemporary societies where there is little consistency in social standards, social control has declined. Thus, individuals who are less subject to social control have a wider range of choices of life and lifestyle. This phenomenon, detraditionalization, stems from the diminishing consistency of social standards and leads to the individualization of lifestyles.

In this context, youth has become a very complex life stage: it is not only becoming longer, but is diversifying and becoming less and less one-dimensional and univocal, as youths have ever more life choices to make[3] (Irwin, 1995; Shanahan, 2000). However, there is inequality regarding the range of possibilities for young people (Bynner, 2005; Bynner and Parsons, 2002; Bynner, 2001). Certain cultural groups have a more consistent and controlling normative system than others. For example, young Canadians of Asian origin leave the parental home fairly late, generally when they get married. This behaviour contrasts with the behaviour of other cultural groups, in particular for those of Canadian-British origin, who leave earlier to become independent or study elsewhere. The latter are also more likely to return to the parental home after leaving once (Gee and Whilster, 2003). This example illustrates how individuals' normative reality affects their choice of possibilities. On the other hand, the socioeconomic context may have the same effect and compromise the possibility of making choices. In fact, young people's life courses reflect contemporary social transformations, i.e., the events and social roles that traditionally identify life stages are being transformed.

Norms that traditionally define the beginning of adulthood remain, but are less consistent due to diversification. New norms and new experiences are added to these traditional standards. Such intrinsic changes to the life courses of youths are augmented by the pluralism of values and customs of the cultural groups that live side by side in countries with considerable immigration, such as Canada, and that enhance the diversification of life courses in early adulthood. The cultural process of

detraditionalization leads to the destandardization of life courses, so to speak. This hypothesis is often cited to explain the delay now observed in early adulthood or the desynchronization of events that traditionally marked the beginning of adulthood (Bidart, 2006). This explanation is highly debated and the only way to invalidate it is to study the life trajectories of Canadians. A recent analysis of transitions in the Canadian population shows that family trajectories are those that have changed the most in the past 50 years (Ravanera, Rajulton and Burch, 2004).[4]

In the 1990s, much of the scientific literature on youth examined the risks presented by the new configuration of roles associated with the early twenties (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1993; Bernier *et al.*, 1999). The life transition of early adulthood has changed considerably since the 1970s and policy has not necessarily kept pace with these new realities (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998; Giddens, 1991). To understand these risks, we will present the changes that have occurred in the life trajectories of young people. Trajectories are defined as the temporal continuity of social roles.

Three trajectories can be distinguished:

- the academic / occupational trajectory;
- the family trajectory;
- the housing trajectory.

3.3.1 Academic and Occupational Trajectories of Youths, or "Yo-Yo" Transitions

The academic and occupational trajectory is probably the one that has received the most attention from youth researchers in recent years. This interest can be explained by two factors. The first is socio-historic: in the 1980s and early 1990s, young adults had a hard time joining the labour market. Popularly referred to as Generation X, the youths of the 1980s experienced the globalization of markets and general restructuring of staff (downsizing)[5], but also the saturation of the labour market, as baby boomers had not yet begun to take early retirements. The second factor in the analysis

of academic and occupational trajectories is their importance in early adulthood life courses. Employment integration is often the door to autonomy and independence both in terms of identity construction and finances. In this section, we will see how longer educations, determinants in the family environment, the exploration of identity and trajectory changes between training and work now characterize the paths of emerging adults.

Longer educations are probably the biggest change in the life courses of young people. Most western youths have integrated this new labour market requirement, by lengthening their transition to adulthood − the developmental period that Arnett refers to as "emerging adulthood". This longer education also highlights the socioeconomic disparity between youths with post-secondary degrees and those without. In European countries, young university graduates are more likely to have a first well-paid, full-time job, are more likely to have a better salary, and are more likely to advance quickly in their profession (Muller, 2005). A post-secondary degree has therefore become an important facilitator of the transition to the full-time labour market. It is access to post-secondary education which has the most impact on the entire youth trajectory, particularly with respect to social inequalities (see box below). A longer education is most influenced by the parents' social and cultural capital and, to a lesser degree, the environment of origin (Lehmann, 2004; Frenette, 2007, Sandefur *et al.,* 2005). Thus, the parents' education, like their children's education, is the most important indicator of social mobility.

Data from the 2001 Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID) indicate that 46% of Canadian youths from families with incomes higher than $100,000 attended university versus 20% of youths from poor families (incomes of less than $25,000) (Statistics Canada, 2005a). The study found that 17% of youths whose parents had only a high-school diploma or who had not finished high school attended university. This percentage is 28% for youths whose parents went to college and about 50% for youths whose parents have a university degree. The factor most correlated with the level of education for Canadian youths is their parents' level of education and not their income. Thus, the parents' social and cultural capital influences young people's academic aspirations more than their financial capital (Lehmann, 2004). Research shows that the results of reading and math tests, the parents' educations, parental expectations and the quality of high schools have a greater effect on university attendance than parental income (Frenette, 2007; Sandefur *et al.*, 2005). Access to education is therefore an indicator of social mobility over the generations.[6]

While one population group is spending more time on education and increasing their chances of upward mobility, another group is dropping out of high school. Among high-school drop-outs, several studies have identified difficulties with such basic skills as mathematics, literacy, and relational and communicational skills.[7] Since these skills are closely tied to parental support, it is clear that children who are neglected or who live in homes where socialization is not learned are particularly at risk of being excluded from the labour market (Cieslik and Simpson, 2006). Moreover, most young people who drop out of school before earning their high school diploma make many trajectory changes (changes of course, coming and going between work and education), repeatedly returning to school.[8]

In short, longitudinal analyses reveal a major disparity in the academic and occupational trajectories of youths. They also show how temporality affects transitions. In fact, heading back to school appears to become harder as young people get older and have children: 8% began post-secondary education at age 22, 5% at age 23, and only 3% at age 24 (Statistics Canada, 2006a). From a policy development perspective, this information illustrates how important it is to act quickly on training trajectories.

The academic and occupational trajectories of youths are also characterized by a period of exploration in their twenties. This period of occupational exploration may be very beneficial, as it allows youths to define their occupational interests and identity.[9] For some, it will be an opportunity to go back to school, change direction or experience low-paying menial jobs. For others, this period of exploration may represent the first step toward casualization. In fact, this period does not have the same effect on trajectories; being beneficial for the more educated. However, it appears to slow down integration trajectories for less educated youths (Hoogstra, Schneider and Chang, 2001). A gender-differentiated study supports this and also shows that, for young women, overly long periods of experimentation might disqualify them and slow their occupational trajectory (Alon, Donahoe and Tienda, 2001). The speed of integration for young women has a greater effect on their long-term trajectory if they are unable to stabilize their employment situation before their first pregnancy.

A Period of Exploration… Toward Insecurity

A US study based on a longitudinal survey of adolescent transitions (Michigan Study of Adolescent Life Transitions) estimated that 14% of youths are "slow starters", that is, young people who prolong their transition to adulthood (Osgood, Ruth, Eccles, Jacobs, and Barber, 2006). These youths are characterized in particular by the few hours they spend on paid work, their employment in low-paying service jobs, and their low level of education. For these youths, the exploratory period lessens their chance of improving their long-term situation. These data echo qualitative research on early adulthood life courses which show how certain youths are at risk of disqualification as well as social and economic exclusion in a context of life course individualization (Bajoit *et al.*, 2000; Buchmann, 1989; Dubet, 1993c, 1987; Guillaume, 1998).

3.1.2 Family and Housing Transitions: The Boomerang Generations

Family Transitions

Although in Canada it is the employment transition that fundamentally structures early adulthood, it is Canadians' family timetables which have undergone the most dramatic changes in the past 50 years (Ravanera, Rajulton and Burch, 2004). Chiefly, women's behaviour has produced this change in society. When women joined the labour market en masse, there was a change in the fertility rate and in gender-based social relations with respect to care (Beaujot, 2000). First, more women then previously pursue a post-secondary education, thereby delaying the birth of their first child. In 2003, almost half of all women (48%) who had given birth to a child were over age 30. Twenty years ago, 75% of women had their first child before age 30. Canadian women who gave birth to a child in 2003 were 29.6 years of age, on average, versus 26.9 years of age in 1983 (Statistics Canada, 2005). Because of their greater involvement in the labour market, they are having fewer and fewer children. The birth rate was 1.53 in 2003 compared with 1.65 in 1981 (Statistics Canada, 2006a).

Choosing to postpone motherhood often meets labour market expectations. According to a longitudinal analysis based on SLID data, women who delay the birth of their first child earn at least 6% more than those who become mothers at a younger age (Drolet, 2002). These changes in young women's life courses lead to multiple redefinitions of gender-based social relations: the desire for equity in the occupational sphere also applies in the private sphere, where women still carry most of the burden for care and household work (Marshall, 2006).

This deferment of family transitions is also due to a period of exploration in love when young people cohabit with their spouse without necessarily making a long-term commitment. For many youths, love relationships in their twenties, even when they involve commitments, are perceived as experiences (Bernier, 1996; Bernier, *et al.,* 1992). In other words, cohabitation does not necessarily

involve a long-term commitment. Among youths in non-marital unions, the couple's relationship is less important than work, whereas we observe the opposite to be true with married couples (Lapierre-Adamcyk *et al.,* 1999). The quality of conjugal relationships is influenced, among other factors, by the family context in which the young people grew up.

Housing Transitions

In terms of housing transitions, youths are leaving the family home later than before. From 1996 to 2001, the proportion of youths aged between 20 and 29 living in the family home went from 39% to 42% (Beaupré and LeBourdais, 2001). Men are more likely to be single and to extend their stay in the parental home. Immigrants and people who attend a place of worship, more likely to live in a traditional normative environment, tend to stay in the family home longest. Girls and youths living in blended families are most likely to leave early (Beaupré *et al.,* 2006b).

Accordingly, the behaviour of youths in their twenties in 2001 resembles that of their grandparents who lived through the economic crisis and left the family home on average at the same age. The baby-boomer cohort, on the other hand, left the family home early. However, one unusual phenomenon specific to young adults in the 2000s is their tendency to return to the fold. By comparing the baby-boom cohort (1947-1956) with the Generation-X cohort (1967-76), Beaupré *et al.* estimate that 14% of baby boomers were "boomerangers" versus 22% of GenXers. Economic problems (25%) and the end of the school year (19%) are the reasons cited most often by GenXers when they return home (Beaupré *et al.,* 2006a).

Many studies on early adulthood trajectories show just how much youth life courses have diversified and how the roles that traditionally defined early adulthood (parenthood, work, conjugal relationships) have been deferred. In short, youths in their twenties take on fewer conjugal, family and occupation commitments. Long-term

commitments such as parenthood seem instead to be postponed until their thirties. In their twenties, most young people now focus on exploring academic and occupational trajectories as well as family trajectories.

3.2   The Intergenerational Perspective

Assistance received from the family is one of the elements that most influences the life course into adulthood. The family is one of youths' most important resources. Those who can count on a family with a flow of assistance and support therefore have greater chances of succeeding. To understand the impact of this resource, we must first understand the values that characterize the various generations based on stage of life. The following section presents an analysis of the life courses into adulthood based on the values and culture of two different generations.[10] This analysis will lead to a study of changes in the flow of intergenerational assistance.

3.2.1 Intergenerational Differences in Values

Since the 1970s, several researchers have tried to identify changes in the transition to adulthood. As discussed earlier, the traditional boundaries of early adulthood have undergone major changes in terms of sequence and duration. Yet one element frequently cited in identifying the new younger generation, but to which little attention has been given, is the change in values between the adult generations. This phenomenon has significant implications in terms of policy:

- the institutions of the welfare state have evolved very little although they were developed based on the values of a specific generation;

- Today's young adults have parents who experienced the clash of values in the 1960s, a factor which influences the type of relationships they may have with their parents.

Three characteristics, with respect to values, distinguish early adulthood for these two generations:

- the importance of independence;

- social control;

- agency, i.e., the process through which individuals negotiate their choices.[11]

First, unlike the experience of young adults in the 2000s, the commencement of adulthood for baby boomers in the early 1970s was practically irreversible. Since at that time, they were more likely to have many siblings, their departure from the family home lightened, the financial and housing burden for their parents who placed great importance on their adult child's financial and normative independence. Adulthood was defined by independence in every regard.

The fragmentation of social control is the second element that sets youth in the 1960s apart from youth in the 2000s, in most Western countries. In fact, in the 1960s, adults were more subject to the control of social institutions like the nuclear family, the Church, the community, not to mention gender-based social relations dominated by men. Less geographic mobility and the limited means of communications made it more likely for individuals from the same community to meet, know each other and to exercise control over one another. Conversely, today's youth are more likely to live in a residential suburb with few public meeting places; they are more mobile and develop deterritorialized relationship networks with new methods of communication. Thus, social control is much more diffuse for the contemporary generation of youth than it was for their parents.

This decline in social control leads us to a third element of intergenerational differentiation, namely, more freedom of choice, which is important social progress.[12] As such, individuals have developed a discourse on the importance of negotiating life choices and lifestyles. During the 1990s, much

research on young adults focussed on the process called agency, since this phenomenon sets them apart from the previous generation (Beck, 1992, 1997, 1998; Beck-Gernsheim, 1993, 1998; Giddens, 1991, 1992, 2000).

These three characteristics (access to independence and role reversibility; social control; and agency) are the aspects that most differentiate young adults in the 2000s from young adults in the 1960s (Gaudet, 2002, 2006). A statistical survey of young Americans shows there is very little difference in values between the generations that reached adulthood in the 1980s and 1990s compared with the difference in values between the 1980s-1990s cohorts and the 1960s cohort (Smith, 2006). This shows a great cultural change between the baby boomer generation and the generation of the 2000s. We note, among these value changes, the emphasis placed on the independence of the youths who were becoming adults in the late 1960s. This value remains present in the views of youths of today; however, it does not translate into genuine independence, as it did for their parents' generation. According to many qualitative and quantitative studies, young adults today in fact are experiencing more a situation of semi-autonomy or greater interdependence (Cicchelli, 2000, 2001; Gaudet, 2001; Setterstein, 2006). In fact, they take a symbolic distance from their parents, but often still depend on family assistance. Moreover, family support has a significant impact on the rest of a young adult's life course. The common association between early adulthood and independence should therefore be revisited. This association may have been truer in the 1960s than it is today.

3.2.2 Formal and Informal Intergenerational Assistance

Several studies highlight the effect of family support for youth as they transition to early adulthood (financial or housing assistance or time) (Schoeni and Ross, 2006; Osgood *et al.*). Yet that support depends necessarily on the parents' financial, temporal and emotional capacities, as well as the quality of the relationship they have with their children.

A generational perspective of the flow of assistance helps us to understand how early adulthood is a unique time when individuals 1) hold a new social position with respect to previous generations; and 2) establish a new type of relationship with family members. These two changes have impacts on the flow of resources within families. Depending on a family's social standards, it is generally agreed that the parents are the givers with respect to subsequent generations (Godbout and Charbonneau, 1996). Thus, material or moral assistance generally flows from the older generations to the younger. The predominance of the giver's role is inverted later in life, when the older generations require more and more care and support from the younger generations (Cheal, 1987).[13] The transition to adulthood is unique, as it means a shift from the receiving child to the giving adult (Charbonneau and Gaudet, 1999). Since the passage to adulthood is longer and more ambiguous than previously, the transition from the receiving role to the giving role is also fairly ambiguous. That is why some believe young adults "should" be independent and leave behind their receiving role in order to fully assume the role of producer and giver suited to their age.

This anthropological interpretation of the flow of giving within the family influences many prejudices regarding the responsibility of youths and their positioning with respect to other generations. Of a family's four generations today, young people in their twenties have had a transition to adulthood that is far different. Expectations in their regard are thus very diverse. For some parents, sensitive to the difficulties their children face, their role of support for their child (young adult) remains active. Other parents think their children must learn to get along on their own. They ignore the reality of this new life stage and expect their child to become financially independent as they did at the same age. We might say that the parent-young adult relationship is acknowledged little and is not understood by practitioners and parents, who may not be aware of the needs of young adults. Research shows, for example, that many young people would like to spend more time with their parents. In contrast, the most recent statistics on how Canadians spend their

time indicate that adults and their teenagers are spending less and less time as a family (Turcotte, 2007).

Families and social institutions must adjust their expectations with respect to young adults, and adjust their assessment of the assistance they need. Because many adults still associate the early twenties with a period of independence, rather than of semi-autonomy and symbolic distance-taking from parents, some young people do not receive the assistance they require, whereas that assistance is a deciding factor in whether early adulthood will be easy or difficult. The possibility of returning to the family home when a relationship breaks up or when financial problems arise makes all the difference in a young person's life course, including the potential for accumulating assets and resources. Statistics on young "boomerangers", i.e., young adults who return to live in their parents' home, indicate that young women from a blended family are less likely to return home, an indication that youths whose parents are divorced may not have the same opportunities for housing assistance.

Clearly, this flow of intergenerational assistance is particularly chaotic for youths who, at one time or another in their childhood or youth, were under State protection due to negligence or maltreatment or were under the supervision of the juvenile judicial system. These youths make an abrupt transition from the status of a youth receiving assistance to independent adult. This passage is made even more brutal by the fact that few programs have been created to ensure the gradual transition from dependence on the State system to emotional and financial autonomy. Moreover, these youths are often still in contact with members of their family, but there are no provisions to facilitate the relationship when they become adults. This relationship was severely disrupted by State intervention and little effort is made to encourage these ties, which can reduce the difficulties related to early adulthood trajectories for these very disadvantaged youths (Foster and Gifford, 2006).

3.2.3 Conclusion: Interdependent Generations

Two aspects should be remembered in the intergenerational analysis of the passage to adulthood. First, the notion that youths today are growing up in a value system and with norms that are much less consistent than those of previous generations. Does this mean it is necessary to defend a more consistent societal ideal? Should we be nostalgic for a homogenous community? Not necessarily, but at the very least it is important to acknowledge this normative disparity in order to understand the identity problems that young people experience in response to a lack of consistency in the value system. Second, we must also retain the notion that the flow of intergenerational assistance is the factor that most facilitates early adulthood. That depends on several factors, in particular: 1) families' material capacity for support; 2) the misconception of early adulthood as a time of coming to autonomy; and 3) the qualitative aspect of the parent-young adult relationship.

3.3 The Socialization Process for Emerging Adults: The Quest for Identity

Several definitions of adulthood are based on the changes that have occurred in the life courses of young adults. However, our understanding of youth and early adulthood cannot be limited simply to life trajectories, as they do not reflect the complexity of the symbolic process at stake in this life stage (Erikson, 1996c, 1968). By symbolic process, we mean the entire socialization process that consists of developing one's identity and one's relationships to others, to social standards and to institutions (Dubar, 2000a, 2000b). This quest for identity is not without difficulties, as will be discussed below.

3.3.1 Exploration of Identity and Culture

Since the publication of Arnett's work (2004) on the specificity of early adulthood in human development, it is now virtually impossible to ignore this new life stage (approximately ages 17 to 25). Arnett defines this life stage as the age of identity exploration, instability, concern for the self, the age when young people no longer feel like teenagers without necessarily feeling like adults, an

age of possibility. Arnett distinguishes "emerging adulthood" from adolescence and from "young adulthood", which begins at age 30. It is a period when youths, by exploring, can develop their identity and cultural capital (Côté, 2002). It is also a period of life with a unique socialization process, since there are tensions between the desire for individualization of the agent's power and the desire and need for integration that is, the need to integrate certain social standards (Gaudet, 2005).

Life Choices and Individualization: Relationship to Money

It has been seen that one of the differences between the younger generation today and their parents' generation is this multitude of options in everyday life. This power of agency does not mean there are no structural constraints, simply that it involves more "power" or a semblance of power with regard to certain life choices. To illustrate the importance of this exploratory and identity-forming period, it is appropriate to briefly analyze young people's relationship to money.

Emerging adulthood is characterized notably by a very particular relationship to money, one dominated by the concern for self (Gaudet, 2006; Arnett, 2007). These consumer attitudes probably best illustrate how young adults experience a psychosocial period between the knowledge of the adult world and childhood beliefs (Fine, 2004). Young people's relationship to money effectively appears to resemble a form of magic thinking when we examine their indebtedness ratio for credit cards. Most youths see consumer culture as the perfect area for developing and experiencing their identity. Advertising exploits this consumer view, in which an individual may purchase a lifestyle, a look, and a certain image to be defended and conveyed. It is not surprising that consumer culture and advertising target this population group, which has strong purchasing power because they are often free of major financial commitments (rent, mortgage, children, etc.) while still wishing to experiment and individualize.

These possibilities for life choices and lifestyles in emerging adulthood are not without their drawbacks. Indeed, this power of choice is a heavy burden to many youths. The quest for an identity is often very destabilizing and may become a source of worry and psychosocial difficulties. Youths who are not fortunate enough to have parents, to be guided by a significant adult or an institution often feel lost in a system of normative plurality. In fact, Giddens (1991) explains accurately the degree to which the self-esteem that individuals develop during childhood becomes of key importance when they face periods of identity transition such as early adulthood.

Individualization and Relationship to Institutions: Civic Participation

Another sphere of identity-related exploration is that of the relationship to institutions. Youths today vote less and are less involved in political parties and official organizations, yet their practices in terms of social awareness are no less diminished. In fact, their involvement is also individualized. For example, more young people volunteer or become politically involved in a spontaneous, sporadic way (Gaudet and Charbonneau, 2002). In fact, if we compare membership in political groups with membership in community groups, we observe that fewer youth get involved to defend a group's ideas, whereas more defend causes; in particular, they are very active in environmental protection even thought not many are Green Party members.

Their relationship to institutions is completely different from that of their parents, a generation which was mostly militant and played an active role in criticizing certain institutions and in creating those still found in the welfare states of western countries. Thus, youths develop a position that is based much more on ethics and personal responsibility in one's daily practices. In particular, they are increasingly present in international NGOs and environmental protection and alterglobalization organizations (Ion and Rayon, 1998; Best and Kelner, 2003). Many youths also support responsible consumer lifestyles such as buying fair-trade products (Quéniart and Jauzion, 2007).

As such, the fact that youths are noticeably absent from formal institutions should not brand them as

"apolitical" or deaf to social causes (Queniart and Jacques, 2001). However, that absence indicates that this group has little access to institutions that resemble them or to places of power where they can defend their interests. Consequently, they are virtually absent from places of institutional power because many are dealing with very concrete financial concerns and with difficulties related to their many concurrent transitions. It is not surprising that young people do not participate in formal institutions, as this life stage is defined, among other factors, by a lack of institutions. As Arnett explains, emerging adulthood is characterized precisely by a lack of allegiance to the social institutions that standardize the timetables of life.

3.4   Conclusion

The realities of young adults versus those of other age groups lead us to review the traditional norms that define early adulthood. Thus, the symbolic age of majority (age 18) is but one of numerous benchmarks along the path to adulthood. Recent data on the new generation of young people indicate that they are evolving in a normative culture that differs radically from that of previous generations. This normative breakdown results in specific difficulties in terms of orientation and the weakening of certain life courses that may be too long or disqualifying with respect to present-day social and occupational standards. The period of youth that Arnett identifies as emerging adulthood occurs approximately between ages 17 and 25. The characteristics of this life stage include: 1) an exploration phase; 2) a life-course structure that differs from that of previous generations; 3) a situation of semi-autonomy from parental support; and 4) an absence of institutions. This requires that organizations, policy and programs adjust to better meet the needs of this population.

4.   The Implications of a New Life Stage for Policy Development

The transition to adulthood is becoming longer and more diverse and, as indicated in the literature on youth, policy and social institutions must adapt to this new stage of development. This stage was based socially on structural changes (new economic realities and labour market requirements for academic qualifications) and in response to social expectations. The impacts of this re-definition of the period of youth have repercussions on various aspects of policy development.

4.1   Adapting Population Analyses

As already mentioned at the beginning of this report, policy is often developed as a response to social problems (populations at risk of exclusion, such as Aboriginals, single-parent families, etc.) or to situations involving population groups targeted based on their situation in their life course or related social roles (childhood, active population, retirees, old age, etc.). It is therefore important to adapt the age categories used at the research stage, since this step precedes any development of public social policy. This means that the data on which such policy is based could be more relevant if organized by considering the 17-25 age group, rather than the 15-24 age group, as conventional statistical categories suggest. In this way, social policy affecting all age groups (employment insurance, income security, training, etc.) would have to be re-examined to be able to apply it to the emerging adult group.

4.2   Making Youth Policy More Flexible

The life courses of young adults have changed radically compared with those of their parents. The legal and social standards that set the beginning of adulthood at age 18 therefore do not perfectly reflect the complexity and the slow transition that characterizes early adulthood today. As already shown, the period of psychosocial development that occurs approximately between 17 and 25 and that corresponds to a quest for identity and a period of exploration (emerging adulthood) is virtually ignored by the political and social institutions that govern such life areas as training, work, social and family organization, and even criminal law.

Youth researchers unanimously agree that there are social risks to this failure to adjust policy and social organizations to this new life-course phase. For

some youths under youth protection legislation in various provinces, age 18 will be an important threshold marking the end of their access to certain resources. For young offenders, age 18 is an irrevocable benchmark in the application of law. Given the particularity of this new life phase, it seems relevant to review the application of certain policies in order to determine whether they are suitable for individuals beginning their adult lives. It would also be relevant to reconsider age 18 as a benchmark, to examine whether some policies might be more likely to apply to the 17-25 age group. Might it be relevant to examine the need to relax certain policies that apply to this age group? In this respect, Quebec is exploring programs to support youths over age 18 who were wards of the State as children and adolescents.

As we explained, youth life courses have diversified, but are also filled with trajectory changes and detours, both in the private sphere of their love and family lives and in their academic and work lives. As such, policy, institutions and organizations must adapt to these facts by showing greater flexibility. For national policy, academic trajectory changes are probably the most urgent to understand. In fact, education is the factor that most influences long-term life courses, particularly in terms of occupation. Thus, a young person who has difficulty with the school-to-work transition will delay other life commitments in the social and economic spheres.

It is important that we ask just how open educational institutions are to such trajectory changes. How do they adapt to young people who are at risk of dropping out in each province? How are youth reintegrated in programs after they drop out? How can teaching be adapted to adults? How can continuing education be promoted? And how can continuing education be included in conventional educational curriculum? A recent OECD report (1999) states the importance of adapting educational systems to the new exploratory paths of youth. In fact, countries tend to favour an idealized and fairly linear educational model that stands in the way of youth taking trajectory changes.

Consequently, a certain elasticity in the programs and rules of educational institutions is important.

4.3 Adopting a Global Approach to Interventions with Emerging Adults

The life-course approach allows us to understand this period of youth as a unique time greatly influenced by the events of childhood and adolescence. The data presented in this report show the influence of their environment of origin as well as the effect of temporality on the life courses of emerging adults. We now know that youths who have difficulty with basic skills like mathematics, literacy and social skills are more likely to become parents at a younger age, have weak ties to the labour market or extend their transition to adulthood. Thus, the characteristics of the individual's environment of origin directly affect that person's academic and occupational trajectories, which are the doorway to all other trajectories (academic and housing). We also know that the speed at which individuals accrue social roles influences the rest of their life course. Youths who overly extend their transition period will struggle more to join the labour market.

The reality of emerging adulthood must be understood within a temporal context in order to avoid a categorization that disregards the conditions that led them to experience various types of transitions. This perspective also allows us to prevent certain situations of poverty and social exclusion that might occur when moving to adulthood or later. It would therefore be interesting to enquire into policy's role in various transitions (family, housing, academic and occupational). What are the barriers to these transitions? Who has the most difficulty overcoming these obstacles?

The period of semi-autonomy that characterizes young adulthood especially weakens those without a support network. It is therefore essential to prevent the risks associated with this period for youths who are isolated from their family due to geographic distance, family problems, or poor mental or physical health. Where policy is concerned, we should ask which policies and institutions are in place to support the period of semi-autonomy that

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approximately spans from ages 17 to 25. In this regard, would social housing or housing assistance policies provide global support for the transition to socioeconomic independence? For example, a policy of social housing in mixed settings might allow youths in the exploration and semi-autonomy period to live in safe neighbourhoods with a range of resources.

4.4   Greater Emphasis on Institutions

In our view, this life stage is characterized most by a lack of institutions. While the academic system governs and organizes childhood and adolescence by giving parents and their children information, resources and structure, no organization supports emerging adults and their parents. Where can young adults turn for resources and information if they are not or no longer pursuing post-secondary education? What types of support can help and guide parents in all their choices? There is currently an institutional vacuum for these emerging adults, who frequently are supported neither by a stable employer nor by an educational institution. Colleges are certainly the institutions that may be most effective in reaching youths and their parents in order to offer orientation services, resources and information (Settersten, 2005).

4.5   Conclusion

The re-definition of youth as we have seen it throughout this report leads us to raise many research questions and to mention new avenues for reflection when developing policy for youth. First, it requires a redefinition of age categories for the statistical analyses on which policy is based. Then, it requires a re-examination of the "flexibility" of policy that generally sets age 18 as the boundary between the social realities of adolescence and adulthood. We explained that the period that occurs roughly from ages 17 to 25 differs from adulthood in that it is a semi-autonomous stage. In addition, this period requires that we consider youth from a dynamic perspective, i.e., that we apply a life-course approach to policy development. Finally, emerging adulthood requires reflection on the role of institutions and their function regarding orientation, socioeconomic support and social integration.

5.   Notes

[1] J. Côté (2006) explains that the quest for identity and the lifestyle of young people represent a "cultural lifestyle" which can be applied to age groups other than the 17-25-year-old age group. Thus *youthhood* could also be experienced by thirty-year-olds.

[2] <http://www.statcan.ca/english/concepts/definitions/age.htm>

[3] Some refute the thesis of individualization, arguing that the latter is the order of social representations. In a consumer culture agents believe they have much greater authority over their choices whereas in reality there is no more choice than previously (Elchardus and Smits, 2006).

[4] Since the early 1940s, the average age at which men join the labour market has not changed significantly. However, it has changed a great deal for women since the 1970s. With respect to the timetable for family events, there have been changes for men and women since the 1970s. There has been an homogenization of the average ages for leaving home, the first union, the first marriage, and birth of the first child for cohorts born between 1916-1920 and 1946-1950. For the subsequent cohorts, the age at which an individual reaches the life events that characterize the beginning of adulthood and their sequence have become destandardized because of the changes in women's timetables. In Canada, we cannot say that life courses have remained standard. This phenomenon is due, among other factors, to women joining the labour market. These results show that the Canadian trend parallels that observed in the United States and in Germany (Ravanera, Rajulton and Burch, 2004).

[5] The "downsizing" phenomenon is characterized by a change in businesses' management styles in the early 1990s, whereby industries decreased their permanent staff in order to reduce their production costs. Work was then given to contract employees or to sub-contracting companies, often with foreign companies. This phenomenon became more pronounced with the globalization of markets and the arrival of information technologies.

[6] In Canada from 1993 to 2001, the difference in youths' university attendance and parents' education has remained similar. This suggests that social reproduction is very strong and that the children of parents who are less educated remain less favoured. As such, there has been little social progress in this regard. It can even be said that social inequalities have risen over time, since the rate of indebtedness for post-secondary education rose 76% from 1990 to 2000 (Statistics Canada, 2005a).

[7] Young Australians interviewed about their experience said they view their detours negatively, without necessarily seeing them as failures. They attribute these detours to a lack of guidance from their parents or in school (Riele, 2004). Other research conducted in two cycles (1998 and 2000) on mental health among American young adults shows that alcohol abuse is strongly correlated with interruptions in academic and occupational trajectories. These interruptions are mostly viewed negatively. Young adults who are neither employed nor attending school believe that their lives have not progressed since they left school. They have a very negative view of this stagnation in their status (Aseltine, 2005). This study shows that in fact, youths do not necessarily "choose" a life strewn with interruptions. Rather, they experience psychosocial difficulties in their academic and occupational trajectories.

[8] The Youth in Transition Survey (YITS), a longitudinal survey conducted between 1999 and 2003 on Canadian youths aged between 18 and 20, provides fairly accurate information on the diversification of youth trajectories. For example, in 2001 the drop-out rate was 14% among young men and 8% among young women at age 22 (Statistics Canada, 2004). We know that 17% of youths in high school dropped out between 1999 and 2001 compared with 45% between 2001 and 2003. However, this does not mean that these youths have permanently ended their academic trajectory, since most of them go back to school in their early twenties. The same survey found that 27% of high-school drop-outs had managed to earn their high school diploma in 2003 (Statistics Canada, 2006a). While young men were known to go back to school, it appears that the same is true for young women. From 1999 to 2003, the percentage of young women who dropped out and then returned to school more than tripled, whereas the situation for men is relatively the same (Statistics Canada, 2006b).

[9] Young people's relationship to employment depends on the meaning they attribute to their occupational experience. Although most youths start working as teens, they often consider that they joined the labour market when they are hired for their first well-paid job. This job is generally in their field of study or experience and one in which the young person can see himself in the medium to long term. For most young people, access to a well-paid job is not only a prerequisite for commitments in other areas of their personal life, but also a source of personal well-being (Heinz, 1999; Heinz, 2002). Young people want to feel "fulfilled" in the labour market and they tend to overlook socioeconomic constraints and/or their own inexperience, which influence the type of job they can hold. North-American studies effectively show that youths often have unrealistic expectations regarding the labour market (Rindfus, Cooksey

and Sutterlin 1999; Thiessen and Blasius, 2002). Very few youths obtain the job to which they were aspiring.

[10] One mistake that stakeholders or practitioners frequently make is to compare today's youth to the baby-boomer generation (Hamel, 1999). This comparison is understandable, since baby boomers are the generation that represented the strength of youth and social change. They were also the subject, for the first time in social sciences, of numerous studies. Our understanding of youth is therefore substantially coloured by that generation and by an idealized image of baby boomers.

[11] In the course of qualitative research concerning the definition of adulthood, we interviewed young people regarding the boundaries of early adulthood. We especially asked them to compare their life course with that of their parents, who became adults in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. We conducted the same interview with their parents. (Gaudet, 2002, 2006).

[12] Within the scope of the same research (Gaudet, 2002 and 2006), the parents of youths consider detraditionalization to be social progress, in that their children started to acquire control over their life much earlier than they did. Although they believe this also delays some responsibilities like parenthood, they consider that it is healthier for their children to live in a society where social control is diffuse and diversified. Young adults in the current generation are aware of this sociohistoric difference and consider themselves lucky to be able to individualize their values and life choices.

[13] This relationship of intergenerational assistance is particularly distorted for young immigrants, who receive little assistance from their parents; their own parents are often having a hard time joining the labour market. In such cases, assistance will flow in the opposite direction, from the younger generation to the older. This inversion of assistance is also found among some Canadians born in Canada. In our qualitative study, for example, many young people agreed to live with their parents at their parents' request, with the parents then receiving rent in exchange (Gaudet, 2002).

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