

The Independence of Young Adults, in Historical Perspective

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Americans have always had an image of ourselves as ruggedly independent. Our legends and heroes include a great number of loners, of single-minded inventors, of young people striking out on their own, of Western cowboys with no family ties. While we have always celebrated individuality, the reality of family life was usually quite different from the legend. For most of American history young people were tightly tied to their families. It used to be case, for instance, that unmarried young Americans usually lived with their parents. For some Americans in past eras, getting married was the only way they could move out of their parents' home.

In the 17 and 18th centuries, in some of the American colonies, it was illegal for unmarried people to live on their own (Morgan [1944] 1966). The reason colonial leaders did not tolerate people living on their own was that they wanted everyone to be part of a family so that each citizen would have at least one other coresident citizen looking after them. Colonial leaders called this system of mutual supervision "family government." Family government ensured that rules and norms were followed, that drunkenness and revelry were held in check, that young adults were raised according to local standards, and that young peoples' marriages were made according to custom and community approval.

From colonial times until about 1940, unmarried young adults usually lived with their parents, or with relatives, or sometimes with other families. In the 17th and 18th centuries many families sent their children away to be servants or apprentices. Beginning around World War II, this historical pattern of family government began to change. Young adults began to live on their own, and to postpone marriage. A new life stage for young adults began emerging after 1960, the Independent Life Stage (Rosenfeld 2007). The Independent Life Stage usually includes travel away from home to college, living apart from parents, moving to the city, traveling abroad, and exposure to a variety of cultures.

Figure One shows the percentage of unmarried young adults who lived with their parents. The data in the figure come from the decennial US census, the American Community Survey of 2005, and the Current Population Surveys of January 2008-November, 2009. From 1880 to 1940, the percentage of young unmarried women who lived with their parents was always higher than 65%. Young men were traditionally

allowed more independence, so the percentage of young men who lived with their parents was slightly lower. In the post-1960 world, this gender disparity has been reversed. Now it is the young women who are more likely to live apart from their parents. Feminism, birth control, the delay of marriage, and women's labor force participation are just a few of the dramatic changes that have transformed young women's lives.

In some ways Figure One understates the historical change to the family system that has taken place in the last 70 years. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, many of the young adults who did not live with their parents could not have done so because their parents were already deceased. As life expectancy increased, and as parents lived longer, the opportunity to live with one's parents has increased. Yet the percentage of unmarried young adults who live with their parents declined to an all-time low in 2000.

Between 2000 and 2009, the percentage of unmarried young women living with parents has crept up a little bit, from a low of 36.2% in 2000, to 38.6% in 2005, to a range of 40-42% during the 2008-09. You will sometimes see stories in the popular press about the "boomerang effect," of young people increasingly returning to the parental nest (Buss 2005; Ellin 2002; Lewin 2003), but in fact the percentage of young adults who live with their parents remains near an all-time low. The popular press loves stories about young adults moving back in with their parents. In reality, young adults in their 20s seem to prefer to live on their own.

Independence of Young Adults During Economic Recession

During the deep economic recession we experienced in the US starting in the fall of 2008, millions of people lost their jobs and almost a million homes were seized by banks because of foreclosure. In this kind of economic environment, young people fresh out of school have had a difficult time finding jobs. You might expect that the recession would cause young people in great numbers to move back in with their parents, but the data from 2008 and 2009 do not show much of this. The cloud of points at the end of Figure One shows monthly data on the percentage of young adults who lived with their parents for each month from January, 2008 to November, 2009 (the most recent public data we have). These little data clouds reflect some seasonal variation and some random noise, but they do not show much of an upward spike in the percentage of young adults living with their parents during the Great Recession of 2008-2009. At most, the recession seems to have increased by a percentage point or two the proportion of unmarried young adults who live with their parents. Even in tough times, it seems that most American young adults prefer to live independently.

Independence and Parenting

Evidence suggests that middle class and upper-middle class parents in the US have been moving toward more child-centered parenting in the past 50 or 60 years. Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care* has been through 8 editions and more than 50 million copies since its introduction in 1946 (and Spock's book continues to be updated and to sell even after Spock's own death, see Spock and Needlman 2004). I remember my mother had a copy of Spock's book on the shelf and consulted it often.

Before Dr. Spock, parents were usually advised to be strict, direct, and unyielding with children. The old authoritarian parenting style was well suited to prepare children to be obedient, to grow up and to work in factories or to work on the family farm. In the

post World War II era, middle class American parents have realized that they need to prepare their children to make it on their own someplace beyond the boundaries of immediate parental influence. Therefore, children had better be taught how to think for themselves, and how to be tolerant of others who may be different from themselves. Comparisons of the classic 1924 study by the Lynds of Muncie, Indiana, and later follow-up studies of Muncie showed a dramatic drop in authoritarian parenting over the course of the 20th century, and a rise in parenting styles that taught children to be tolerant and to think for themselves (Alwin 1988; Lynd and Lynd 1929; Rosenfeld 2007).

Independence and Loneliness, and Depression

The independence of young adults from their families has some important potential benefits. For instance, young adults are better able to choose mates without undue interference from their families. This has resulted in a rise of interracial and same-sex couples in the last few decades. The greater freedom of young people to select their own mates may be experienced as a benefit of modernity by young people; their parents may have mixed emotions about this kind of freedom.

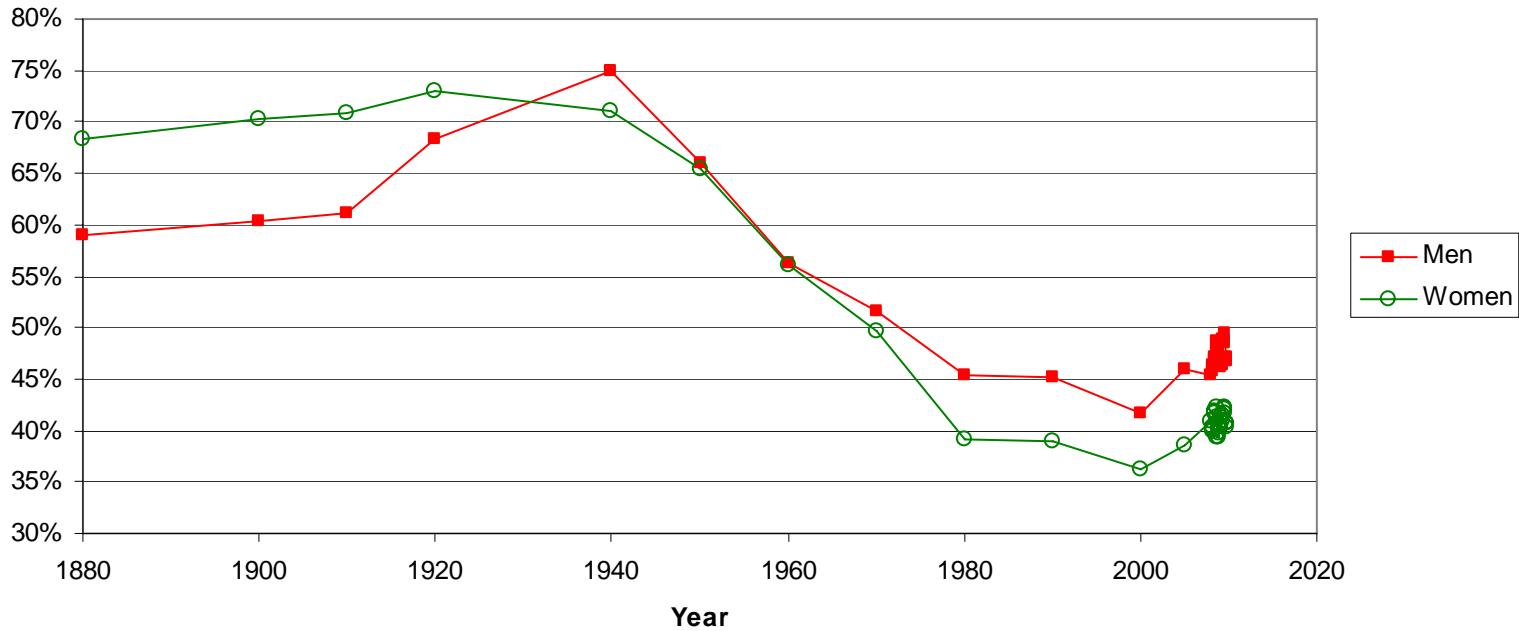
In addition to some beneficiaries, there are also certain to be some casualties of the new Independent Life Stage. Not all young people are well suited to independence, and even young people who have plenty of independent spirit can get in to trouble. Without family close by, i.e. without family government, small problems can grow into more serious problems. Some therapists and scholars believe that our independence from our families of origin makes us more vulnerable to anxiety and depression (Olds and Schwartz 2009).

Social scientists have been complaining about the loss of community for as long as social science has existed. In the modern era, they may have a point. The long term trends suggest that Americans are less involved in political and social life, and that Americans seem to have fewer friends (Putnam 2000). Modern life can be lonely and disorienting, especially for young people who are only beginning to figure out where they are headed. Even when the young adults have a strong idea of where they are headed, the path to full adulthood can be full of twists and turns. Parents will inevitably worry about their young adult children, even as their young adult children exercise the very independence that the parents taught them to have.

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Percent of Young Unmarried Americans who Live with Their Parents



Source: US Census microdata via IPUMS, 1880-2000; American Community Survey 2005; Current Population Survey data for each month Jan 2008-November 2009, via NBER. All Individuals are US born, age 20-29, never married. Percentages are weighted by household weights. "Living with Parents" means living with either or both parents.