

CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES: WOMEN AND YOUTH

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Studies discussed:

Lives of their own: The individualization of adult women's lives
(Study no. 2)

Charles Jones and Lorne Tepperman

One-adult and two-earner households and families: Trends, determinants and consequences

(Study no. 4)

Thomas K. Burch and Kevin McQuillan

La formation de ménages chez les jeunes

(Study no. 5)

Richard Morin, Damaris Rose and Jaël Mongeau

Early adulthood behaviour and later life course paths

(Study no. 6)

T.R. Balakrishnan and Carl F. Grindstaff

The four studies in this group deal with two categories of people experiencing rapid social change: women — particularly young women — and, to a lesser extent, young people generally. Narrowly considered, two of these studies deal with the changing composition of Canadian households, with the growing number of lone-mother households figuring importantly in this picture. The remaining two studies focus explicitly on the changing situation of women. Taken together, these four studies help to illuminate some of the more important changes now taking place in the life experiences of two large components of the Canadian population and provide the basis for some anticipation of the course of future developments.

The study by Burch and McQuillan on the changing composition of Canadian households is an informative two-part report; while both parts are well executed, they are only indirectly related to each other.¹ The first part, which describes the incidence of living alone, is based on an analysis of Canadian census data for

the period 1921 to 1986. The study reports that the proportion of the population living alone has tripled since 1921, though most of the increase took place since World War II. While the increase in living alone is found in most adult age-sex categories, it is most pronounced among older women. Thus, the probability of living alone is rather similar for men and women until about the age of 60, after which the proportion of women living alone increases sharply, as a function of their longer life expectancy.

Among the *unmarried* aged about 30 to 50 years, men more often live alone because divorced women generally are awarded custody of children and so live with them. After age 50, the probabilities that unmarried men and women will live alone are almost identical. An attempt to use the available census data to predict the living arrangements of Ontarians identifies rather different predictive factors for men and women and for different age groups. For example, among those aged over 65, higher education tends to increase the probability of being married, but it also increases the probability of living alone if unmarried. Generally, the authors find that age, marital status and the interaction between them are the major factors predicting whether an individual will live alone, while income and education are further directly associated with the likelihood of living alone. It is noteworthy, however, that data from an index of satisfaction with living arrangements show that most people prefer to live with a spouse or equivalent. Accordingly, the authors suggest that these just-cited influences may be countered by the preference of many for intimate co-residential relationships.

On the other hand, however, the authors note that other influences predict increasing proportions of those living alone. The second part of this study looks at family change and family income, in the context of the fact that growing proportions of lone-parent, childless, and two-earner families have greatly increased the diversity of Canadian family types. Changes in the family structure and the work activity of family members have been important determinants of changes in income distribution that have increased income inequality among Canadian families. The greatest widening of the gap between prosperous and poor families occurred during the "boom" years of the 1970s. Ironically, increased employment of women has tended to increase the income of husband-wife families, but not of lone-mother families. In these latter families, such mothers were either already working or were unable to because of childcare responsibilities. Thus the income disparities between two- and one-parent families have widened.

In summary, this is a well-executed study which adds to our understanding of the numbers and characteristics of lone-household residents and of the

consequences of the increased employment of women for economic equality in Canada. The obvious limitation of this study is that it is based only on Ontario data; it gives no indication whether the relationships and trends which it identifies hold true for the rest of Canada, but of course it was not designed to do so. We note, however, that many of the relationships found seem so "inevitable" that they likely do hold true in much of the rest of the country. Within these limits, the study achieves what it sets out to do. One weakness of the study may be noted, however. The effort to forecast trends in the proportions of those living alone may be seen as distinctly questionable because of notable future uncertainties, including possible trends in non-marital cohabitation, delay or avoidance of marriage, changes in divorce rates, and trends in homosexual unions.

The report fails to draw explicit policy implications. Nevertheless, a study which focusses on current and likely future changes in the demand for various types of housing and which details some of the characteristics of consumers, has implicit policy implications. Similarly, findings which signal changes in income distribution among different family types may be of concern to policy makers as well.

The second study of household composition, by Morin *et al.*, underscores some of the findings of the Burch and McQuillan study, but adds important new information as well. The objectives of this study were to discover for Canada and for the provinces, trends in the number and types of households formed by young people in relation to sociodemographic and socioeconomic variables and certain characteristics of the housing stock. This study also seeks to identify factors which influence the housing choices of young householders, particularly the importance of the desire for privacy and the need for space in contrast to the importance of physical housing and environmental features. The study is based on household data from Statistics Canada for 1974-75, 1979-80 and 1985-86, and from three housing satisfaction surveys conducted in Montreal during the past 10 years. For the purposes of this study, "young people" were defined as those aged 15 through 34 years.

Some important findings from this study can be summarized as follows. The growth rate of households headed by young people is higher than that of those where the head is 35 years of age and over. Moreover, during the 1960s and 1970s, the rate of increase in young households exceeded the rate of increase in the number of young people, because of three trends during those years: postponement of marriage, young people leaving home before marriage and increasing rates of separation and divorce. These developments were apparent

at a time when favourable economic conditions, together with increasingly diversified and accessible housing, permitted large numbers of young people to gain independence of residence. These trends were not equally apparent across the country, however, being strongest in western Canada and least apparent in the Maritime provinces.

During the years from 1974 to 1980, the proportion of married households declined — particularly where there were children — while the proportions of young people living alone — especially women — and of lone-mother households, increased. Interprovincial differences reflect economic considerations and residential availability; thus these trends were weakest in the Maritime provinces in contrast to the rest of the country.

The period from 1980 to 1986 witnessed a reduction in the proportion of young householders. However, this was due to a decline in the proportion of young parent couples and did not reflect a decline in the tendency of young people to live alone. The proportion of lone-mother households increased notably during this period, particularly in Quebec. The authors believe that since 1980, less affluent economic conditions have helped to slow the rate of formation of young households, but they suggest that non-economic factors also operate to inhibit formation of lone-parent and single households.

Indications of housing satisfaction among young people are available only from the Montreal surveys. These data suggest that young people tend to have the same housing aspirations as their elders, particularly in respect to home ownership, but that they tend to be less well satisfied than those older regarding their current housing arrangements.

Some of the issues arising out of this research are similar to those ensuing from the Burch and McQuillan study: how relevant is the existing mix of housing to the needs of the most rapidly growing consumer groups — those who live alone, and lone mothers? Further issues are raised by aspects of the research too detailed to be considered in this brief summary, including the optimal locations for housing designed to meet the particular needs of these consumer groups. The strengths of this study are that it provides explicit information on the changing patterns of household formation among young people over a quarter-century period, thus giving indications both of the major trends during this period and of the effects induced, for example, by economic changes and housing supply. The information on interprovincial differences further contributes to an understanding of such influences.

The major limitations of this research derive from the fact that it is based on secondary analysis of census and Montreal survey data. Particularly with respect

to the information on satisfaction with housing, it is unfortunate that the available data are limited to Montreal samples. The study generally achieves its objectives quite well. Note that there may be debate over some of the interpretations provided by the authors, such as, for example, the relative influences of economic versus sociocultural change in the rates of formation of young households and the shaping of their housing needs, and the extent to which housing demand is driven by housing supply, or vice versa.

The last two studies considered in this group focus more narrowly on the changing circumstances in the lives of women in Canada today. The more general of the two is by Jones and Tepperman. This broad study focusses on childbearing and family structure as they relate to the labour force participation rates of women. Data from a variety of sources are used to demonstrate that women's lives are becoming "individualized," that they are becoming increasingly dissimilar to the patterning of the lives of other women. Individualization is seen as reflected in three ways: in the growth of variety, that is, the broadening range of options that women now have in comparison with even a few decades ago; in increasing fluidity, seen in higher probabilities that women may move between states, such as between full and partial employment; and finally, in increased idiosyncrasy, since women's life courses are becoming increasingly unpredictable from past determinants of women's lives. Their analysis of the situation of women today leads the authors to propose a number of broad hypotheses. The most important is that with the predicted individualization of the lives of women, Canada's supply of female paid labour will increase enormously because the influence of "participation suppressors" — such as prolonged childbearing — will decline, and the influence of "participation stimulants" — such as delayed marriage and higher education — will increase.

Canadian, American and European data are used in seeking evidence of the hypothesized relationships, and to discover the effect of life-cycle patterning of women aged 25 to 64 on years spent in paid work movements in and out of the labour force and on average hours worked per week. The data show that women in Canada and in Western Europe are leading more varied work lives and are more likely to be in the work force than previously. Their work activity is becoming more evenly distributed between full-time and part-time employment and housework, and they have more varied kinds of jobs than in the past. Women change their labour force status and the kind of work they are engaged in more often, and more easily, than ever before. Such fluidity increases with educational attainment and decreases with marriage, and, since educational attainment and marital postponement are increasing, fluidity of employment will likely increase as well.

Future trends were projected using a discrete Markov model. This model estimates that by 2024 an average woman in the labour force will spend 32 out of 40 possible years in the labour force, versus the figure of 16 out of 40 for the year 1944. The model estimates for 1984 are reported to be "already quite close" to the estimates for 2024. These projected changes will dramatically increase the supply of labour, so much so that assuming growth of the female population, educational upgrading, disappearance of the suppressor effects of marital status and of age, the paid work which women aged 25 to 64 years of age supply would more than double by the year 2025. The authors conclude from their study that the work lives of Canadian women are becoming increasingly individualized, but it is not known whether other aspects of their lives are becoming individualized at the same rate.

In view of problems that young mothers are now experiencing as a result of their work involvement, this study highlights the importance of devising programmes and facilities which would help to reduce the stresses of role conflict — between mother, homemaker, wife and employee roles — that women experience. A strength of the study is the variety of data used to test the hypotheses. The relationships found suggest that the predicted trends are characteristic of the changing lives of women across much of the Western world. At the same time, the conclusions based on the variety of data may give concern because the analyses and limitations of each dataset are so different.

The authors make no explicit policy recommendations, but they do suggest that future policy must address the challenges of working mothers and of flexibility in life course assumptions at work and in education for both sexes, but particularly for women. The most obvious implication of this study is that there is room for policy measures to influence the supply of female labour through trying to change the suppressors or stimulants affecting supply.

The last paper in this group, by Balakrishnan and Grindstaff, seeks to discover how the decisions and actions of women during their early 20s affect their later work and fertility careers. Data from three sources are analyzed: the Canadian Fertility Survey of 1984, the Family History Survey of 1984 and the Public Use Sample Tapes of the 1981 Census of Canada. Regression analyses of the data from the three sources of field findings show that marital status, age at first birth, education and labour force activity are all related to the number of children that women bear. Early marriage and early childbearing are associated with larger family sizes, as well as with lower levels of educational attainment and reduced attachment to the labour market through time. The authors do note, however, that the younger a woman's age at marriage and at first birth, the

greater the probability of marital disruption. Higher educational attainment is associated with postponement of marriage and childbearing and with greater permanent attachment to the labour market.

Speculating cautiously on future patterns, the authors suggest that women will continue to marry and to bear children at later ages, that their education levels will continue to rise and that marital dissolution rates will likely remain high. As a result, they expect completed fertility rates to continue to decline.² There is the possibility that substantial numbers of women may be only delaying later births until they have achieved their educational goals or found a permanent position in the labour market.³ Under those circumstances, the incidence of higher parity births may depend on government policies relating to pay equity and funding of childcare, which would reduce the opportunity costs of childbearing.

The strength of this study is its very clear discussion of how early adulthood decisions appear to influence fertility and employment decisions in a systematic fashion. A weakness may be the insufficient presentation of competing theoretical models of female life-cycle behaviour. It must be noted, however, that the data analyzed raise questions of whether policy initiatives such as pay equity and adequate daycare services may encourage or enable women to make up for fertility lost through postponement of childbearing.

Endnotes

1. There is one factor likely to be missing from those listed that contributed to the growth rate of young households being higher than that of the young population. It is that an increasing proportion of young people felt able economically (and were encouraged societally?) to create early unions. The counterpart of this factor is mentioned later in the text as an explanation for the slow-down of the creation of young unions in later and more difficult economic times. It is logical that it be mentioned in economically advantageous times.
2. Balakrishnan and Grindstaff expect completed fertility rates to continue their decline. Yet they repeatedly describe Canadian society as a pro-natalist society. One may abstract from the unusual terminology: it is public population policies that may be described as pro-natalist, but not family attitudes. What is more profoundly misleading is the essence of the statements. After they have met all their other life aims (Masarati for him, Porsche for her, annual trip to Hawaii), Canadian couples might begin to consider the question of having a child. To describe the situation as pro-natalist when, statistically, "Canadians already started dying out" in 1970

(Krótki, 1989), and the Quebecois are doing so at an even faster rate (Termote, 1988), is to coin a rather misleading phrase.

3. The second author is known for his eternal optimism on fertility. At one stage of his prolific research production, he coined the phrase about women in their 30s "catching up," which in fact they never succeed in doing (Grindstaff, 1984). Some of the catching up is exercised by women in higher socioeconomic groups with considerable professional achievements, but is demographically of little importance in spite of its high visibility (Gee and Kimball, 1987:82-83).