

MORATORIUM AND WORK IN ADOLESCENCE

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Introduction

Before starting my first season of football, my mother and I went to a nearby sporting goods store to pick up some “essential” equipment. As we purchased forearm, elbow, rib, and neck pads, I wondered how all that gear would fit on my scrawny teenage frame. My first practice proved my doubts to be well founded; I could barely move. The very pads designed to protect me had actually become a barrier impeding my giftedness. This paper argues for the obsolescence of the traditional form of psychosocial moratorium into an inhibiting “padding” for youth. This obsolescence, however, also calls the church to redeem the concept of moratorium as a practice.¹ Beginning with a historical perspective, this writing will trace the shifting contexts in which the traditional moratorium has emerged and eventually obsolesced. Following the contextual focus, a perspective that holistically engages the particularity of young people will be constructed by utilizing recent findings in career development theory and cognitive neuroscience. These two perspectives converge in foregrounding Erik Erikson’s own emphasis on exploration and pointing to a re-imagined moratorium as a time of “practicing” adulthood—not delaying the responsibilities of adulthood.

Defining Moratorium

In his work on the life course, Erik Erikson proposed that youth require a “psychosocial moratorium”—“a period of delay granted to somebody who is not ready to meet an obligation or forced on somebody who should give himself time.”² Social and economic insulation allows “a delay of adult commitments, and yet it is not only a delay.”³ A moratorium also empowers “the young adult through free role experimentation” to “find a niche in some section of society.”⁴ This period offers protection to developing youth but also presents the opportunity for significant exploration of the roles of one’s particular place and time. In order to narrow the scope of this paper to a manageable size, I have chosen to focus on the developmental value of a psychosocial moratorium for youth seeking a “niche” in the world of work.

Working Youth: An Historical Perspective

With over ninety-five percent of contemporary U.S. teens attending high schools, it is difficult to imagine that, for most of human history, an adolescent moratorium from work was

¹This paper will limit its focus to high school youth, which also reveals the cultural limits of this work. As is shown later in this paper, youth from non-industrialized civilizations have no such moratorium.

²Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968), 157.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid, 156.

unfeasible.⁵ Far from the ravenous consumers caricatured in the media today, youth have customarily been essential contributors to the economic welfare of their communities. As Thomas Hine notes, “The labor of teenagers—and of preteenagers as well—has played a very large role in the development of North America.”⁶ Into the nineteenth century, children as young as six were expected to contribute significantly to work around the home, and many people in their teens were bound out as servants and apprentices. Even industrialization’s severing of home and work did not deter this social practice, as most young people fulfilled substantial labor roles in emerging industries. Far from a universal phenomenon, an occupational moratorium, in the form of extended schooling, was an option only for the relatively few young people, whose upper-middle-class families “were able to forgo the income from their children’s labor.”⁷ In light of the traditional necessity of youths’ contribution, how has the world of work come to the point of excluding them as a developmental requirement?

The first clue to answering this question is found in the earliest supporters of child labor laws and compulsory public education. Although also the goal of social reformers concerned for the well-being of young people, “the creation of a public education system was one of the chief planks of [the labor unions’] platform.”⁸ With industrialization’s creation of a labor surplus, unions regarded the exclusion of young people as a means of maintaining high wages.⁹ These labor unions made a serious push for reform, but in spite of these efforts, the majority of families could not afford to sacrifice the economic contributions of their young.

The public high school did not become a viable alternative for the majority of young people until the 1930s. The origin of this socially-sanctioned delay from work can be traced to the economic downturn during the Depression and the governmental response fashioned in the “New Deal.” In an effort to decongest the over-saturated labor market and ensure “that heads of families had preference for the jobs that existed,” the New Deal, of which labor unions were vital constituents, “actively discriminated against young people in the workplace.”¹⁰ This turn of events triggered widespread acceptance of an occupational moratorium in the form of the public high school—a fact that is reflected in high school enrollment stats from those years. From 1910-1930, as the employment of ten to fifteen year olds dropped seventy-five percent, high school graduates increased by six hundred percent.¹¹

This brief history discloses the truth that an occupational moratorium is not necessarily a benign fact of nature. The events of the early 1900s clearly show that “society wasn’t ready to deal with [youth]. High school was the institution it had provided for whiling away the time, and

⁵Ronald L. Koteskey, “Adolescence as a Cultural Invention,” in *Handbook of Youth Ministry*, ed. Donald Ratcliff and James A. Davies (Birmingham, AL: R.E.P. Books, 1991), 66.

⁶Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 57.

⁷Ibid, 110.

⁸Ibid, 142.

⁹Koteskey, 48. Hine, 143.

¹⁰Hine, 204-205.

¹¹John W. Santrock, *Adolescence*, 11th ed, (New Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill Publishing, 2007), 7.

more young people took advantage of it.”¹² From its inception, an adolescent moratorium from work has borne the potential of degenerating into a “stasis mode” that inhibits the gifts of youth for the preservation of a particular social order. The danger, woven in during moratorium’s historical construction, is still a potential for today. This recognition is the first step in critically reinterpreting the social practice of an occupational moratorium.

The Evolution of the School-to-Work Transition

The labor decisions of the 1930s and the forces of industrialization converged to create a dominant version of the school-to-work transition for American youth. This dominant view assumed “a clear, discrete event, a movement from full-time schooling to full-time work.”¹³ During the decades following the New Deal, the statistics drawn from the number of high school students in part-time employment clearly reflect this experience. Surveys conducted in 1940 revealed that only “1 of 25 tenth-grade males attended high school and simultaneously worked part-time.”¹⁴ Studies comparing contemporary “time-budgets” throughout the world also demonstrate that post-industrial youth spend significantly less time in household and wage labor than non-industrial young people. Developments in technology and increases in family wealth “give societies the opportunity to redirect the daily attention of youth from repetitive labor to activities that offer new possibilities for learning and psychosocial development.”¹⁵ This collusion of governmental policies and social forces established a distinct school-to-work transition as the “traditional” expectation for young people, but does a distinct transition still correspond to the experience of today’s youth?

The dominant version of the school-to-work transition has become a highly questionable assumption for numerous reasons. First, the view that youth should be solely committed to the role of student does not correspond to the societal attitudes and practices of the United States. Time budgets show that U.S. students only dedicate about thirty minutes a day to homework, whereas students in European and East Asian countries spend anywhere from 1.2-3 hours per day completing homework.¹⁶ The fact that, “Japan and other industrializing nations of East Asia have made deliberate investments in education,” while the U.S. allots significantly less of its gross domestic product for primary and secondary schools, also reflects dismissive attitudes toward academics.¹⁷

In addition, the belief that young people wait to step into occupational roles until the completion of schooling is nearing the delusional. Currently, seventy-five percent of high school

¹²Hine, 215.

¹³Jeremy Staff and Jeylan T. Mortimer, “Social Class Backgrounds and the School-to-Work Transition,” *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 119 (2008): 56.

¹⁴Sanrock, 391.

¹⁵Reed W. Larson and Suman Verma, “How Children and Adolescents Spend Time Across the World: Work, Play, and Developmental Opportunities,” *Psychological Bulletin* 125 (1999): 701.

¹⁶Larson and Verma, 712.

¹⁷Ibid, 713.

students work part-time.¹⁸ U.S. high school students are “distinctive among postindustrial youth in the amount of time they devote to paid labor.”¹⁹ In fact, many “work 10 or even 20 hours or more per week, than [high school students] in Europe and East Asia.”²⁰ These statistics present a very different version of the school-to-work transition than that enacted in decades past. Rather than a discrete step out of school into work, this transition involves significant overlap, characterized by “long-term involvements in both work and school.”²¹ The “ubiquity of shared high school student and worker roles” casts doubt on the definition of “moratorium-as-delay” but also raises serious concerns about working youth.²² Primarily, what is the developmental value of work, and most pertinently for this paper, what might this suggest about the place of a psychosocial moratorium in this rapidly changing world?

Adolescent Work: Risk or Asset?

Over the last two decades, researchers have gradually developed two important qualifications in answering this question. The first involves a shift from work-as-such to work intensity.²³ Focusing on work-as-such, initial studies tended to offer a mixed answer to the question of developmental value. Numerous studies found correlations between working and risk behaviors such as substance use, academic disengagement, decreased extracurricular involvement, and lowered health maintenance.²⁴ Teenage workers also reported numerous assets relating to increased practical knowledge in matters like keeping a job, budgeting time and money, and assessing goals.²⁵ More recent studies have shifted from emphasizing correlations with work-as-such to correlations with work intensity.²⁶ While still finding a linear relationship between intensity and risk, these studies have discovered an exception in nonworking youth, who show higher correlations with risk behaviors and extracurricular disengagement than those working a moderate amount.²⁷ Longitudinal studies have also shown that a strategy of “steady work” for youth of high and low socioeconomic statuses (SES) is more highly correlated with

¹⁸Sanrock, 391. One longitudinal study even found that only six percent of the students surveyed could be classified as “nonworkers.” Staff and Mortimer, 59.

¹⁹Larson and Verma, 708.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Staff and Mortimer, 56.

²²Staff and Mortimer, 59.

²³Ibid, 56.

²⁴Sanrock. 392.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Staff and Mortimer. Jerald Bachman, Deborah J. Safron, Susan Rogala Sy, and John E. Schulenberg, “Wishing to Work,” *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 27 (2003): 301-315. Deborah J. Safron, John E. Schulenberg, and Jerald G. Bachman, “Part-Time Work and Hurried Adolescence,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 42 (2001): 425-429.

²⁷Bachman et al., “Wishing to Work,” 311. Safron et al., “Part-Time Work and Hurried Adolescence,” 438, 441.

educational and career attainment than strategies involving high intensity or even no work.²⁸ This strategy seems to cultivate skill in balancing school and work, which is becoming essential with the increasingly extending demands of higher education.²⁹

Research has also begun to reveal increasing complexity regarding risk causation and antecedent contextual factors. Theorists now recognize that work intensity and its impact are actually conditioned by antecedent factors such as academic disengagement³⁰ and socioeconomic status.³¹ One longitudinal study of low SES youth has shown that part-time work is correlated with positive antecedents and outcomes.³² Another study found that “For young, economically disadvantaged males, paid work actually increased their chances of high school completion.”³³ Rather than a sign of maladjustment, moderate work can be seen as an outcome of and trajectory toward healthy development.

By showing the benefit of a “steady work strategy,” particularly for low SES youth, these studies challenge the notion that a delay from work is developmentally normative. This raises the need to redefine moratorium, but questions must now move into the heart of Erikson’s concern for a psychosocial moratorium, identity. This approach is best made via career development theory.

Theories of Career Development

Since the early 20th century, career development theories have attempted to illuminate the processes involved in the formation of occupational identity.³⁴ Early theories framed career development as a process of matching person to work environment.³⁵ These theories proposed

²⁸Staff and Mortimer, 55-69. Tama Leventhal, Julia A. Graber, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, “Adolescent Transitions to Young Adulthood: Antecedents, Correlates and Consequences of Adolescent Employment,” *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 11 (2001): 297-323.

²⁹Staff and Mortimer, 65.

³⁰Bachman et al., 301-315.

³¹Some have noted that “long work hours may not be harmful and may even be beneficial to the longer-term attainment of youth who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, because of their special reasons for working in adolescence. Whereas youth from higher socioeconomic backgrounds may want to work long hours to support leisure activities or other discretionary purchases or because they have little interest in school.” Staff and Mortimer, 58.

³²Leventhal et al., 297-323.

³³Staff and Mortimer, 58.

³⁴Maduakolam Ireh, “Career Development Theories and Their Implications for High School Career Guidance and Counseling,” *High School Journal* 83 (2000): HTML.

³⁵“Trait and Factor Theory” is the earliest example of this approach with “trait” referring to personal characteristics measured through testing and “factor” referring to “characteristics required for successful job performance.” Ireh, HTML. Although utilizing more complex concepts, Ginzberg, Super, and Holland still seem to maintain the axiom that career development is fundamentally person-environment matching.

that persons, based on their fixed traits, personality type, or self-concept, choose a stable career field that most nearly corresponds.³⁶ Even theorists such as Eli Ginzberg and Donald Super, who utilized a developmental perspective, operated under the assumption that personhood and work environment are relatively static and discrete entities.³⁷ Their theories present the teenage years as a time of exploration, during which young people come to recognize who they are and in the process begin to narrow in on a career choice.³⁸ For example, Ginzberg proposed a “tentative stage”, which involves the evaluation of personal interests, capacities, and values, and a “realistic stage,” in which “the individual extensively explores available careers, then focuses on a particular career, and finally selects a specific job within the career.”³⁹ With the foundational assumptions of a static reality and objective career knowledge, these theories have encountered significant challenges in the emergence of postmodernity.⁴⁰

In response to postmodern shifts, emerging career theories have utilized a “constructivist” paradigm.⁴¹ This paradigm “emphasizes how an individual proactively makes meaningful sense of his or her selfhood, which is ever evolving, and inherent to his or her social and psychological worlds.”⁴² The definition encapsulates the two dominant themes of constructivism—context and personal agency. Rather than a neutral backdrop from which it is possible to abstract human activity, constructivism emphasizes that “human behavior is best understood in context.”⁴³ This emphasis on “embeddedness” assumes a “flexible and varied” self as opposed to the “unitary and stable” autonomous self of early theory.⁴⁴ Recent models stress this dynamic quality by making

³⁶Santrock, 396-397.

³⁷Blustein and Noumair note that the versions of “self” and “identity” on which early theories were built, “seem to describe relatively stable aspects of one’s psychological experiences, which are devoid of connection to one’s culture and are independent of others.” David L. Blustein and Debra A. Noumair, “Self and Identity in Career Development,” *Journal of Counseling & Development* 74 (1996): 434. Charles Chen locates Donald Super within the modern positivistic ideology, which regards vocational behavior as “generally identified by a scientific and logical match between a person’s traits and the demands of the work environment. Charles Chen, “Integrating Perspectives in Career Development Theory and Practice,” *The Career Development Quarterly* 51 (2003): 204.

³⁸Super’s self-concept theory holds that “vocational development is a process of developing and implementing self-concept.” Ireh, HTML.

³⁹Santrock, 396-397.

⁴⁰Mary McMahan and Mark Watson, “An analytical framework for career research in the post-modern era,” *International Journal for Educational & Vocational Guidance* (2007): 169.

⁴¹Ibid, 170.

⁴²Peter McIlveen and Wendy Patton, “Narrative Career Counseling,” *Australian Psychologist* 42 (2007): 226. The centrality of context and individual particularity are highlighted by Chen, 205 and McMahan and Watson, 171.

⁴³McMahan and Watson, 172. It has been further noted that “One of the most important recent advances in consideration of the self and identity has to do with the increasingly apparent observation that any attempt at understanding intrapsychic experience necessitates a corollary need to discern the context of a given individual.” Blustein and Noumair, 434.

⁴⁴Blustein and Noumair, 436.

change inherent to the career development process.⁴⁵ Drawing on the contextual emphasis, this paradigm also highlights the importance of personal agency by using the concept of story.⁴⁶ Personal agency functions in a process of “meaning-making” that interprets the significance of one’s contextual influences for career development.⁴⁷ Instead of the static matching of universal “traits” or “types” characterizing early theory, the constructivist themes reframe career development as a dynamic, particular “story” that guides future activity by interpreting the relative importance of various contextual factors.⁴⁸

Constructivism’s tenets of “embeddedness” and “career-as-story” disclose the dynamic character of contemporary career development. Rather than the attainment of a stable self-concept during adolescence securing persons against dramatic occupational changes, as assumed in early career theory, current experience shows that “such a stable sense of self or identity is very likely compromised by the need to engage in career exploration and decision making throughout one’s adult life.”⁴⁹ This means constructivist career theory illuminates the significance of practices associated with psychosocial moratorium (i.e. exploration and tentative commitment), but it also challenges early career theory’s assumption that these practices are restricted to a discrete stage of life. If anything, young people are practicing skills vital for future career renegotiations, not trying to make “commitments ‘for life’” in the world of work.⁵⁰ This begins to suggest psychosocial moratorium be reinterpreted as more of a practicing of adulthood than a delay from adulthood, but what do recent findings of a “teen brain” mean for this thesis?

The “Teen Brain”

Cutting-edge neurological research has challenged traditional assumptions about the brain by revealing its ongoing plasticity, particularly during adolescence.⁵¹ In light of this finding, many researchers have pointed to a teenage “disjunction” between the early maturing

⁴⁵The “Systems theory framework” is a prime example. McIlveen and Patton, 227. The STF is described as “a holistic metatheoretical framework that accommodates both the content influences and the process influences on an individual’s career development...These influences are illustrative of the dynamic nature of career development and the interaction that occurs within and between systems.” Mary McMahon and Mark Watson, “Systemic Influences on Career Development,” *The Career Development Quarterly* 56 (2008): 281-282.

⁴⁶McIlveen and Patton note the connection between context, particularity, and story by stating, “As distinct from objectively measured personality traits, stories express the uniqueness of an individual; a story of one who is contextualized in time, place, and role. McIlveen and Patton, 227.

⁴⁷Chen, 205.

⁴⁸McIlveen and Patton, 227.

⁴⁹Blustein and Noumair, 437.

⁵⁰Erikson, 155.

⁵¹Jack O. Balswick, Pamela Ebstyn King, and Kevin S. Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 172.

limbic system, the seat of emotion, and the late maturing frontal lobe, which mediates “executive functioning” such as “attention, response, inhibition, regulation of emotion, organization and long-range planning.”⁵² Consequently, this recognition of a distinctive “teen brain”—hard-wired for poorly-calculated risks—has encouraged the proposal of various societal strategies for limiting “adolescents ‘opportunities for immature judgment to have harmful consequences.’”⁵³ While currently the dominant view, several theorists have questioned causal assumptions of brain equals behavior on the basis of the reality that “an individual’s genes and environmental history—and even his or her own behavior—mold the brain over time.”⁵⁴ Rather than being absent, the formal thinking processes “may be slower in young people than in those who are older.”⁵⁵ This means, “The primary difference between a teenager’s brain and an older person’s brain then is not a difference in capacity but in the selection of capacities.”⁵⁶ Instead of being qualitatively different from adulthood, youth functions as a “becoming of adulthood” that actively shapes the developing brain through behavior and experiences.⁵⁷

This debate validates the importance of a psychosocial moratorium but in a unique form. Based on the continuing growth of the prefrontal cortex, youth have distinctive developmental needs. Young people are in the process of accruing new competencies for rationality, which requires developmental scaffolding, but theorists also recognize that the brain is not insulated from its environment. As the dissenting camp points out, brain development is involved in a complex interplay with behavioral and environmental factors. Rather than simply waiting for adulthood to find them, young people are better conceived as practicing adulthood.

From Gatekeepers to Guarantors

The contention that teens are not merely waiting for adulthood but actually practicing it, particularly in regards to work, foregrounds the importance of a theology of vocation. Misguidedly operating under modern, secularized assumptions, youth ministry has typically reduced “vocation” to one’s investment in a particular career or job, thus delaying questions of vocation until a future adulthood.⁵⁸ This is both theologically and developmentally inappropriate. Vocation is a calling gifted by the Holy Spirit’s presence in the waters of baptism.

⁵²Jay N. Giedd, “The Teen Brain: Primed to Learn, Primed to Take Risks,” The Dana Foundation, 4. Handout in *Persons along the Life Course*, November 2, 2009.

⁵³Santrock, 80.

⁵⁴Robert Epstein, “The Myth of the Teenage Brain,” *Scientific American Mind*, April/May 2007, 58.

⁵⁵Howard Sercombe and Tomas Paus, “The ‘Teen Brain’ Research,” *Youth and Policy* 103 (2009): 33. One study of 10 year olds found that those who scored highly on a “resistance-to-peer-influence scale” “engaged ‘executive’ processes automatically when challenged with relatively complex and socially relevant stimuli.” Sercombe and Paus, 34.

⁵⁶*Ibid*, 35.

⁵⁷*Ibid*.

⁵⁸Joyce Ann Mercer, “Call Forwarding: Putting Vocation in the Present Tense with Youth” (paper presented at the annual Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, Princeton, NJ), 31-32.

This gift is “what we’re called to do, and it far surpasses the notion of an immediate job or career—vocation is a life direction.”⁵⁹ As creatures made in the Image of God, vocation is woven into our very being, and it is also the overarching journey we take as followers of the fulfillment of that image, Jesus Christ. The already/not-yet character of Christian vocation means that theologically, ministry with youth cannot ignore questions of why we are and what our purpose is, but also developmentally, the church must address matters of vocation with youth. As noted throughout this paper, teens are already undergoing significant formation in the labor market. In doing so, many are receiving a vocation of “consumer” from the capitalist marketplace.⁶⁰ Faithful ministry must present an alternative vision of the vocation of youth, but in doing this, must also embrace an alternative vocation for the church.

Under the pressures of competition within the American religious marketplace, the church has often confused its vocation with the vocation of professional corporations. This has led the church to mistake self-preservation for its way of being in the world, but in the call to practice exploration with youth, there lies the potential for the church to re-narrate its vocation as the pilgrim people of God. This is not a call to maintain the status quo of its institutions but an invitation to journey into the mystery of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. To exile youth to their own “developmentally appropriate” programming in order to ensure efficiency and minimize risk is to forget the call to be a pilgrim people, whose life is a gift of the gracious Creator. Perhaps when the church begins to cultivate this vocation, the exploration and “risk-taking” of youth will no longer be seen as a threat, but a gift inviting the church to participate in the mystery of salvation.

Conclusion

Reading this article from the perspective of a theology of vocation invites the church to a new posture in relation to young people. Primarily, this posture entails a shift from “gatekeeper” to “guarantor.” Traditional understandings of moratorium-as-delay have contributed to a segmented ecclesiology that restricts the young to an insulated holding area until adulthood is reached. This structuring positions adults as gatekeepers, whose sole responsibility on behalf of youth, is to ensure that teenagers are “protected” from significant roles until they are adults. Developmental scaffolding becomes almost incomprehensible in this model of ministry. Youth are required to remain in a world increasingly distanced from adult responsibilities, and when the time comes—whenever that might be—they are expected to hit the ground running. This practicing of moratorium is developmentally inappropriate, and it excludes the possibility of one of the most vital ingredients in Erikson’s work on identity, the “adult guarantor.”⁶¹ Guarantors are representatives of adulthood but not in a manner resembling a gatekeeper. The guarantor is an “affirming companion” who “responds to the adolescent’s plea to be recognized as more than he [sic] seems to be, with unique potentials needed by the world.”⁶² These people are ongoing supportive partners as young people explore adult roles. If the church is to respond appropriately

⁵⁹Quoted in Josh Sweeden, “The Particularity of Christian Vocation,” *Didache: Faithful Teaching* 6, no. 1 (2006), <http://didache.nts.edu/> (accessed November 27, 2009), 1.

⁶⁰Mercer, 37.

⁶¹James Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 227.

⁶²Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 77.

to the findings of this paper, it must surrender the role of gatekeeper with its responsibility of ensuring that “dangerous, risk-taking teenagers” are protected from the adult world and vice-versa and assume the role of guarantor with the responsibility of supporting young people as they share their giftedness in the Body of Christ.

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