Vol. 6, no. 2 (Summer 2007)

<u>*Futurist Book Group Discussion*</u>

The Boomerang Age: Transitions to Adulthood in Families

by Barbara A. Mitchell

Transaction Publishers, 2006

ISBN 0-202-30838-3

Synopsis of the December 2006 Futurist Book Group meeting, summarized by Carolyn Shettle and Lisa Roney

Barbara Mitchell's primary theme in ***The Boomerang Age*** is that "Today's young people often experience less permanency and more movement in and out of a variety of family-related roles, statuses and living arrangements." She supports this theme with an array of statistics and facts related not just to the unprecedented frequency of young adults' returning to the "parental nest" after initially leaving it, but with additional statistics about other transitions faced by young people and their families. What the book did not do is provide anecdotal information or case studies that would make these trends more real to the reader. Because of this, the group generally found the book to be dry. The group also criticized the book's highly academic language, e.g., "life course perspective" and "linked lives," and its large number of editorial errors.

The group agreed that one of the strengths of the book is its contrast of the idealized 1950s version of the family not only with today's family, but also with the family historically. For example, she points out that in the 1930s, there were a large number of single parent families – but, at that time, the cause was more likely to be death than divorce. Likewise, pre-industrial families rarely consisted of three generations living together, because of life expectancy and economic limitations. Furthermore, before the 20th century, large numbers of young adults lived away from their parents; about one third of men and women in their twenties and thirties in the late 19th century American urban communities boarded with other families. Yet another way that families differed from the 1950s idealized image was that until the mid-18th century the difference between marriage and cohabitation was fluid in many countries.

Some other observations and statistics in the book that the group found of interest were:

o   Social scientists have always expressed concern over the demise of the family.

o   Compared to earlier decades, young adults in the US, Canada, and many European countries increasingly leave home at earlier ages and tend to leave to form non-family households.

o   Young adults are less likely than earlier generations to leave home to form legal, heterosexual marital unions.

o   40% of young people who leave home at 18 or younger return home at least once.

o   Sons return home more often than daughters.

Mitchell sees a number of factors affecting young peoples' greater movement into and out of roles, including contraceptive practices that permit the "separation of sex and reproduction." The group would have liked to have seen her spend more time addressing the likely future effect of changes, such as globalization, population aging, immigration, and technological advances on the family. Similarly, she could have better developed the likely future effects of changes in the family, such as home-returning, increases in cohabitation, and delayed marriage and child bearing, on other social institutions such as government, religion, and the media.

Mitchell says that the trend towards increased individualization in which young adults increasingly leave home to live in non-traditional family settings and returning to the parental home will become increasingly common and is likely to continue into the future. However, she tempers this by pointing out the difficulty of making correct predictions about the future and notes how wrong the 1950s vision was of what family life today would be like.

POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM *(send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):*

o   *The author refers to movement in and out of family-related roles, statuses, and living arrangements. How will this, in conjunction with the seeming demise of a "career for life," impact one's sense of identity?*

o   *How will increasing social alienation, at least among some people, impact the family – both directly and through a possible resurgence of religion and spirituality?*

o   *What will be the relative preponderance of marriage, cohabitation, and non-family households in 2020 in your country or region? What will be the future of "boomeranging" (home-returning) – or waiting longer to "leave the nest" – and does this portend a resurgence of the extended family?*

o   *Will any of the trends identified by the author impact the preference for male children that exists in some countries?*

o   *How will the IT-enabled syndrome of being constantly "plugged in" impact family life, particularly in stimulation- and diversion-oriented cultures? What will be the long-term impact of "chronological challenge" (not having "enough hours in the day")?*

o   *It has been envisioned that people will continue working past the traditional retirement age. In the US, this is already happening due to pension plan defaults and the need to maintain healthcare coverage. At the same time, average longevity is increasing. For some people who continue working later in life, their jobs provide a social network, whereas for others, they are a source of stress. Taken together, how will these factors impact the family as we know it?*

o   *A longer view of human history shows that the post World War II U.S nuclear family stereotype of married Dad, Mom, Dick, Jane, Sally and Spot is an aberration that was used to support an industrial suburban corporate economy and a welfare state with rising incomes. In the 21st century with its more heterogeneous, dynamic populations,*

living arrangements, and livelihoods, why does the term 'American family' continue to be used instead of 'American families'?

o *The author indicates that pre-industrial families were rarely multi-generational. To what extent is this true of farming families in the US, Europe, Asia, or Africa in the pre-industrial age? How did the era of "company towns" impact family structure, and what changes can be expected in the post-industrial era?*

o *In contrast with single generation families, "skip generation" families of grandparents and grandchildren normally result from events such as death or abandonment that remove the parents and transfer the parental role to grandparents or to older siblings. Will skip generation families become more or less prevalent in your part of the world, and if so, in which socioeconomic brackets?*

Also see first portion of Jay Herson's summary of World Future 2007, this issue.