

Research Briefing N° 85

Diversity in the transition to adulthood

While the transition to adulthood has generally been prolonged, not all young people are able to afford further study and delayed entry into paid work. This research examines the diversity in transitions (the different pathways/life choices young people can/may take) in a comparative perspective.

Key words: transition to adulthood; longitudinal studies; wellbeing

Key findings



This research is of particular relevance to educators, policy makers, researchers, and young people themselves.

Adopting a life course perspective, we compared similarities and differences of how young people navigate the transition to independent adulthood, the role of early predictors in their lives and associated adult health outcomes. In particular we assessed transition outcomes in the mid-20s for two comparable age cohorts born in the late 1950s and the late 1960s/early 1970s, across three countries (Britain, Finland and the United States), enabling within and across country comparisons. In each country we could identify at least four distinct transition patterns by age 25/27:

- highly educated young people with no children, often single or cohabiting, in full-time employment, living independently from their parents;
- work oriented young people without children, who have medium level qualifications, mostly working full time, and living independently from their parents;
- traditional families: young people with medium to low level qualifications who had made the step into parenthood, independent living and full-time employment;
- slow starters included those with medium to low levels of education, who were single with no children, employed and living with their parents;
- in addition, in Britain we identified a group of fragile families, characterised by low educational attainment, early parenthood, low levels of employment and living in rented accommodation;
- in all countries those who successfully negotiated multiple transitions by their mid-20s (e.g. traditional families) reported higher levels of life satisfaction than those who focused on fewer role transitions (e.g. slow starters) - except for the fragile families who reported the lowest levels of life satisfaction.

The findings challenge widely held assumptions regarding identical transition pathways and that delayed transitions are generally a positive experience.

What we did

Becoming an adult is conceived as a status passage involving several role and status changes. In each country, we focus on the 'big 5' transition events for young people: the completion of education, entry into paid employment, partnership and parenthood, as well as independent living arrangements. Using Latent Class Analysis (LCA) (a statistical method that can be used to test assumptions about the structure of relationships among observed variables) we examined patterns in transition outcomes and role combinations of cohort members in their mid-20s. This provided important insights into similarities and differences in transition experiences of young people growing up in different cultural contexts and in different historical periods. Given the different institutional contexts the findings suggest the existence of distinct patterns in the transition to adulthood across different countries.

Cross-study comparisons in general and international comparisons in particular, are essential for theory advancement. Such studies assist in making generalisations based on data as

well as in disentangling how country-level culture and expectations create certain opportunities and limitations during the transition to adulthood.

How we did it

The research was conducted within the international Collaborative on Contexts Affecting Pathways from Childhood to Adulthood (CAPCA), coordinated by the University of Michigan with a grant from the National Science Foundation (BCS 0818478) and the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC: RES-594-28-0001).

Drawing on data collected for well-established national and community-based studies: from Britain (the 1958 National Child Development Study [NCDS] and the 1970 British Birth Cohort Study [BCS70]), the United States (Monitoring the Future [MTF]), and Finland (the 1959 Jyväskylä Study of Personality and Social Development [JVLS] and the 1966 Northern Finland Birth Cohort [NFBC]), we assessed patterns of social role combinations of young people in their mid-20s, their childhood antecedents and associated adult health outcomes.

Further information

Findings were published in a special issue of ['Longitudinal and Life Course Studies' Vol 3 N°2 \(2012\)](#) concerning comparative studies of the transition to adulthood.

See also:

Maggs, J. L., Jager, J., Patrick, M. E., & Schulenberg, J. (2012). Social role patterning in early adulthood in the USA: Adolescent predictors and concurrent wellbeing across four distinct configurations. *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*, 3, 190-210

Räikkönen, E., Kokko, K., & Pulkkinen, L. (2012). Patterns of adult transitions, their antecedents and correlates among Finns born in 1959. *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*, 3, 211-227

Salmela-Aro, K., Ek, E., & Chen, M. (2012). Mapping pathways to adulthood in Finland. *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*, 3, 228-242

Schoon, I., Kneale, D., Jager, J., & Chen, M. (2012). Becoming adults in Britain: What is a successful transition? Changing transition experiences and associated levels of wellbeing. *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*, 3, 173-189

Schulenberg, J.E., & Schoon, I. (2012). The Transition to Adulthood across Time and Space: Overview of Special Section. *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*, 3, 164-172.

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