

# Transitions to adulthood: an intergenerational lens

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## **Introduction**

There is a long sociological tradition of research on the transition to adulthood. For example, changes to the British labour market in the 1970s and the relegation of many young people to the 'secondary labour market' generated considerable interest in the transition from school to work (Brannen 1975). The current economic downturn across Europe bringing high youth unemployment has resulted in renewed interest in this transition phase. However, there is rather little historic or contemporary research that examines the plight of young people in relation to their wider family relationships and little that examines how the transition to adulthood is shaped historically both by the family supports available and the wider economic and political contexts of the periods in which young people make their transitions.

This chapter will seek to address the research on these issues. First, it will set the transition to adulthood in a contextualist life course perspective. Second, it will give an overview of topics discussed in studies of the transition to adulthood in youth research. Third, it will approach the transition to adulthood from an intergenerational perspective, that is, the ways in which this life course phase of young people is embedded in intergenerational family relations whose meaning and importance change over historical time, vary by gender and social class and may be transformed by experiences such as migration. The chapter will cover a wide spectrum of studies (written in English) and outline the variety of research questions that have been examined in research with different types of methodological, theoretical and empirical orientations, and the types of knowledge gained from these respectively.

## **A contextualist life course perspective**

The history of the life course perspective has its origins in the biographical approach developed by W.I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki in their classic study *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1958 [1918-20]). What sets a life course approach apart from other perspectives in sociology is the insistence on the link between human agency, time, and structural features of a society. C. Wright Mills was one of the early sociologists who demonstrated how the biography-history dynamic is an important approach in the discipline (Mills 1980 [1959]). However, as Elder et al (2006) observe, until the 1970s, mainstream sociology 'rarely dug deep into the complexities of life, and too often, in the words of Robert Nisbet (1969), existed in the "timeless realm of the abstract" (p. 5).

A number of books and articles have addressed the theoretical foundations of life course research and a wide variety of conceptualisations have been developed. Heinz et al (2009) sum up the approach thus: 'As a proper methodological basis for the analysis of social processes, it [the life course approach] denotes an interrelationship between individuals and society that evolves as a time-dependent, dynamic linkage between social structure, institutions, and individual action from birth to death' (p. 15). Kohli (2009), discussing different ways of addressing age and the life course observes that: 'What we have before us is not just a temporal variation of other social givens, or a temporal process, but a *social fact* generated by its own system of rules. In this manner the life course can be conceptualised as a social institution – not in the sense of a social grouping (an aggregate of individuals), but of

a pattern of rules ordering a key dimension of life' (p. 64). Elder et al (2006) see the life course perspective as a *theoretical orientation*.<sup>i</sup> Drawing on this definition '[they] view the life course as consisting of age-graded patterns that are embedded in social institutions and history. This view is grounded in a contextualist perspective and emphasizes the implications of social pathways in historical time and place for human development and ageing.' (p. 4).

What characterises a contextualist life course approach is its sensitivity to historical and spatial contexts. Studies from this perspective do not seek to formulate 'laws' about how transitions happen that transcend time and place. Life course transitions, included the transition from youth to adulthood, are studied with reference to the historical period and contextual features of particular societies and groups that relate to social class, intergenerational relations, gender and ethnicity in which individuals are situated.

### ***Transitions to adulthood***

Significant transitions in the life course include the transition between the life course phases of childhood, youth and adulthood. Traditionally the transition from youth to adulthood is thought of as a sequence of events that includes: completing education; entry into the labour market and so gaining financial independence from the family of origin; setting up a separate household; establishing a long term relationship with a partner; becoming a parent (Elder 1985). Hareven (1978) states that particular age groups are problematized and become an issue depending on wider social and economic changes. Hall's book 'Adolescence' (1904) is the first instance of discussing the concept of youth as distinct from other phases (Jordan (1978). Adulthood marks the 'mature individual' (Hareven 1978) and is associated with autonomy and independence from the family of origin. Markers of adulthood change over time with the life course only becoming clearly structured as a sequence of phases in the West in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hareven 1978; Kohli 2009). These markers vary across cultures; the different stages in the process towards adulthood may be accompanied by rites of passage and cultural markers that change over time. For example, Jackson's and Marsden's classic study *Education and the Working Class* (1962) captures the different ways in which working class young people who were exposed to the British class system through winning places in Grammar schools were incorporated into middle class institutions and culture .

Over the past 20 years research has demonstrated that the transition to adulthood is not a linear sequence, especially as structural changes demand a longer time in education in preparation for gainful employment (Jones and Wallace 1992; Nilsen et al 2002, Benson and Furstenberg 2007; Settersten 2004; 2009, Kohli 2009). Some argue that youth as a life course stage is rendered increasingly obsolete since it is being extended indefinitely into both younger and older age groups (Buchman 1989). Still others focus on a destandardisation of the life course as a whole (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Settersten and Mayer 1997; Settersten 2004; Hartmann and Swartz 2007). Transition patterns between youth and adulthood vary considerably according to social origin and gender (Jones and Wallace 1992; Irwin 1995; Hartmann and Swartz 2007; Lareu and Weininger 2008) and notably also between countries (Nilsen et al 2002, Billari and Liefbroer 2010).

In the research field denoted as 'youth research' two main perspectives on this transition have been identified: the cultural perspective mainly drawing on ethnographic research to

explore a variety of local expressions of youth culture in a short time frame, and the transitions perspective focusing on quantitative data to examine education to work transitions in structural contexts over longer time spans (Furlong et al 2011). The two approaches have sometimes been seen as opposites. Against the backdrop of this theoretical divide, MacDonald (2011) discusses what has changed and what has remained the same over a 30 year period in UK research on youth transitions. He suggests that in order for youth research to gain more relevance, particularly with reference to youth unemployment, the theoretical divide needs to be bridged. In an earlier study by MacDonald et al (2001) examples are drawn from a longitudinal qualitative study to demonstrate how the two traditions can be integrated in designs using biographical interviews. Furlong et al (2011) discuss the same divide and suggest an approach to bridge the gap between the two: a social generation perspective. This takes both cultural and structural dimensions into consideration while also emphasising historical context and change. Roberts (2009), addressing the same research area, makes the case for approaching youth transitions through an opportunity structure theory that takes into account changing structural circumstances that affect individual transitions in different historical periods. Nilsen and Brannen (2014) discuss these perspectives in view of youth transitions as embedded in intergenerational relationships and suggest that an integrated contextualist life course approach discussed above is helpful for researching such questions.

Quantitative research that adopts a life course approach to the transition to adulthood has its origins in different disciplines. These include demography (Liefbroer and Toulemon 2010), psychology (Settersten 2009) and different perspectives in sociology (Settersten 2004; Biggart et al 2005; Benson and Furstenberg 2007; Hartmann and Swartz 2007; Lareau and Weininger 2008). These studies show how the timing of events associated with the transition to adulthood varies and is becoming more complex and protracted. Analysis by Billari and Liefbroer (2010) of the European Social Survey Data (ESS-3) supports this proposition, also suggesting that the transition to adulthood happens later in the life course for younger cohorts. Comparing data on women across European countries, they find significant differences between cohorts and countries on the timing of some transitions. Acknowledging that gender differences are likely to be significant, they focus only on women because of the complexities of their data and methods of analyses. The timing at which young women move out of the parental home did not vary much between countries. However, the time between moving out and starting a family was in all contexts found to be protracted: more young women lived on their own without partner or children, for a longer period of time than earlier. They did not identify a common pattern in the timing of transitions across Europe. The survey was carried out before the economic downturn.

Qualitative research, including biographical and mixed methods life course studies in sociology have also provided important insights into this topic (Jones and Wallace 1992, Jones 1995, Irwin 1995, Nilsen et al 2002). Jones and Wallace studying youth transitions in the UK in the early 1990s showed how moving out of the parental home was a process rather than an event; it involved moving back and forth over many years before establishing a permanent separate household. British qualitative research in the same period identified a phase in the life course between 'youth' and 'adulthood' called 'young adulthood'. This is associated with a prolonged period in education where young people neither live with their parents nor have started a family of their own. The phase spans the teenage years to the

thirties but is less defined by age than by life style. Living a so-called 'independent life style' depends on access to an adequate income and appropriate housing, signifying the importance of intergenerational relationships which are likely to be related to social class (Jones 1995, 2009).

The term autonomy is associated with independence and refers to subjective feelings of being able to make decisions about one's own life. However, both terms carry connotations that are associated with societies in which individual values and norms are more prominent than those with familial value systems. In a comparative study of young people in Norway and Portugal, Nilsen et al (2002) found that notions of independence were more prominent in the way Norwegian young people talked about their lives than was the case in the Portuguese data. The class differences found in both countries indicated that middle class young people in Norway living the independent life style, were highly dependent on study loans and grants from the state, making their lives seemingly independent, at least from the family of origin. Support from a universalistic welfare state was the 'silent discourse' in the interviews, never mentioned as important by young people but something 'taken-for-granted'. In Portugal young middle class students tended to live with their parents and underscored the importance of their families.

Thus in all these studies family is an important point of reference, directly or indirectly. The essence of the transition to adulthood involves moving out of the childhood home and setting up a separate household. The family and the resources provided by different generations within families are therefore important in this phase of life.

### ***Intergenerational transmission and the transition to adulthood***

Intergenerational transmission takes place within families and networks of kin. Family is understood as 'a network of individuals related by kinship and including two or more generations' (Bertaux and Thompson 1993, p 43) and is a site where different types of intra and inter-generational transmission processes occur; not only with reference to material resources but also values, hopes, ambitions and aspirations are transmitted between family members (Bertaux and Thompson 1997). The demographic shift involving declining birth rates and increasing individual life spans has resulted in a change to the structure of intergenerational families from a pyramidal shape to a 'bean pole' (Bengtson 2001, Brannen 2003). With fewer members in each generation but longer life time spans, this has important implications for types and qualities of intergenerational relationships (ibid). Those born early in the twentieth century had fewer older relatives alive over their own life course than do those born in the later part of the century suggesting that intergenerational relationships beyond the nuclear family are potentially becoming more important in contemporary society. In the current period, high rates of divorce means that many young people are situated in bean pole family structures that are dominated by women. One conclusion from this current state of affairs is that individuals, and young people in particular, may need to turn to other sources of help beyond their families of origin or wider kinship networks, in particular public services and benefits. On the other hand, with the retrenchment of public services and high youth unemployment rates in many European countries, family relations are becoming more rather than less important as sources of material support (Mortimer 2014).

Most intergenerational life course research designs look across the lives of whole generations and hence the focus on the transition to adulthood is but one of many (see Brannen et al's study of four generations 2004). A further limitation is that much of the research in this field has concentrated on transfers of material resources. Indeed many of the studies have been funded by policy-making bodies out of a growing concern for the 'ageing of Europe' and the costs of a demographic imbalance between generations in terms of care and work force participation (Bawin-Legros and Stassen 2002).

One of the more salient debates in this area has been the so called "*generational equity*" debate (Kohli 1999; Kohli and Künemunde 2003; Albertini et al 2006). Originating in the US in the mid 1980s discussions centred on how the public transfers of funds are unevenly distributed between generations because of the increased costs of pensions and health care to the ageing population. In current public and political discourse the plight of the young is increasingly contrasted with the benefits that many of the baby boomer generation have enjoyed creating inequalities that are said to lead to major intergenerational tensions and conflicts (Chauvel 2006; Wyn and Woodman 2006; Willets 2010; Howker and Malik 2010). It is argued that older generations because of increased longevity are overly advantaged in public funding. However, as Guillemard (1996) points out, the debate confuses the concepts of cohorts and generations and, as other recent research has demonstrated, public transfers in the form of pensions to older cohorts form the basis for extensive transfer of funds downwards - from the older to the younger generations in families (Kohli and Künemunde 2003; Albertini and Kohli 2013). Attias-Donfut and Arber (2002) discuss the issue of generational conflict and contrast it with the concept of 'generational contract' which points to the solidarities and reciprocities that also exist between generations. Bengtson and Oyama (2012) argue that solidarity and conflict form a 'unit of contraries' and maintain that few signs of intergenerational conflict currently exist in western societies but that they may develop under policy regimes that do not take intergenerational relationships seriously.

However, as Silverstein et al (2002) have noted, intergenerational support patterns ebb and flow over time, and multigenerational families represent "latent kin networks" of support that are typically turned to at times of crisis, acting as a "Family National Guard" (Hagestad 1996, 2006). For example, analysis of US data by Schwartz et al (2011) found that parental financial support for young people in the transition phase varied according to need. Children who had difficulties in work or other areas of life were more likely to be recipients of parental support. Parents thus act as 'scaffolding and safety nets' for young people in this phase. However intergenerational studies can produce dissonant findings in that younger generations may be less likely than their parents to report such support out of a desire to demonstrate their independence (Brannen et al 2004).

### ***Intergenerational relationships across Europe***

With the growth of unemployment among young people across Europe, attention needs to be drawn to the conditions and situations of their parents. The importance of intergenerational relations is highlighted by a recent research initiative from life course researchers from the UK, the USA and Germany to study the impact of the economic downturn after 2009. Questions to be studied include: 'How might deterioration in their parents' economic circumstances affect young people's orientations to their futures and capacity to undertake a successful transition from school to work? Might ever more youth

be mired in persistent poverty?' (Mortimer 2014, p. 98). Findings from studies in this initiative suggest the significance of context in considering the impact of the downturn on young people and that social class affects parents' ability to lend support to young people. Intergenerational relationships are found to be essential during historical periods of economic hardship in the three countries. Moreover, higher earning parents were able to provide for their children throughout the transition period regardless of the welfare provisions in their countries (Mortimer 2014, p. 100).

Cross-national quantitative life course research has been facilitated by large international surveys that have provided great advances in the understanding of structural impact on individual and familial trajectories and into patterns of intergenerational transfers across country contexts (Kohli 1999), albeit these studies rarely include more than two generations. Such data are useful for analysing *outcomes* at different stages in trajectories (Settersten and Mayer 1997; Blossfeld 2009). Biographical interviews provide insight into the *processes* behind outcomes (Bertaux 1981). However, biographical studies of intergenerational transmissions in the transition to adulthood are rarely cross-national and like quantitative studies do not include more than two generations (Bertaux and Thompson 1997). Biggart et al's (2005) FATE study is an exception since it is qualitative with nine partner countries. However, it only focussed on two generations. Although it did not employ a life course approach this project sought to study how families have adapted to changing dependency during the phase of young people's transition from education to work. Findings from this study suggest that young people remain semi-dependent on parents for a longer period of time, and that the youth transition phase is prolonged.

Intergenerational transfers also take place in contexts which act upon and reinforce institutional regimes of care across generations. In the southern European states, family care is accorded greater significance than in northern Europe (Haber Kern and Szydlik, 2010), including during the transition to adulthood (Nilsen et al 2002, 2012; das Dores Guerreiro et al 2009). This is also the case in many Eastern European countries, e.g Bulgaria (Ghodsee and Bernardi 2012; Kovacheva 2010). Specific configurations of intergenerational giving and receiving are thus the outcome of a number of interacting factors notably welfare states and other institutional and cultural features, family structures, and also the combinations of needs and resources across the life course as well as individual characteristics of the parties involved (Brannen 2006). Inter vivos transfers are frequently associated with 'need', particularly at key life course events. Marriage, for example, is an important predictor of money transfers, as is childbirth (Thomson 2008) and divorce (Leopold and Schneider, 2010).

### ***The context of migration***

The context of migration draws attention to how economic and social disadvantage in an older family generation can be broken in the next generation. As a recent three generation biographical study of Irish migrants who came to Britain in the mid 20th century and who were from poor backgrounds shows, their sons successfully launched themselves into adulthood and became upwardly occupationally mobile, while the current generation of Polish migrants (also included in the study) were highly aspirational for their (young) children. The reverse process was also found, for example of white British sons of highly skilled manual workers becoming downwardly mobile in the changing context of the British labour market (Brannen 2015 in press). In understanding such intergenerational mobility and

its consequences for young people account was taken in this study of the different types of resources (for example, a strong work ethic) that the migrant generation brought with them as well as the opportunity structures available to them and their children in the new country.

Most studies on intergenerational transmission in migrant and minority families are often quantitative and many have focussed on difference in practices and attitudes between migrant/minority and native/majority communities (Attias-Donfut and Wolff 2008; Finney 2011). For example, a Dutch study on whether young people of migrant origin live longer in the parental home than native young people, found no significant differences along ethnic lines. Regardless of ethnicity parental attitudes to family ties and the families' socio-demographic situations were more important in determining co-residency (de Valk and Billari 2007). However, the latter authors also observe that the lack of data from more than one generation in the household represents an empirical limitation.

A few studies have adopted a cross-national focus. The importance of national context in relation to African migrants in Europe was examined and compared and showed that intergenerational norms and values were transmitted in all countries, although in hybridised form (Attias-Donfut et al 2012). UK studies have investigated Asian families and intergenerational practices. Gill and Davies (2006) found that values in close knit ethnic communities were as important for young people's choice of education as were those within the family. The dividing lines between community members and the extended family are often blurred in intergenerational relations.

### ***Intergenerational relations in the transition to adulthood and social class***

In studies of the reproduction of social inequalities and processes of social mobility, the family, and thus intergenerational relationships and patterns of transmission, are found to have a decisive impact. However, in structural approaches to the field, particularly in quantitative studies, the role of the family is often treated as a 'black box' (Bertaux and Thompson 1997; Crompton 2006; Irwin 2009). This is also true in studies of the transmission of disadvantage. Quantitative studies in this field have often been criticised for the ways in which they use the concept of 'family culture' as an explanation for intergenerational patterns. For example, 'cultures of worklessness' are said to pass down the generations without any empirical evidence provided to underpin such claims (Shildrick et al 2012).

In family sociology on the other hand, interpersonal interaction processes are frequently the focus of attention without drawing on the structural settings in which the processes are situated (Irwin 2009). Family background correlates strongly with educational attainment and subsequent occupational career. Thus there is agreement in social mobility research in general that middle class families are more likely to provide an environment that transmits forms of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1984) or cultural values (Goldthorpe 1996) that are transferable into material and other advantages. The processes by which this transmission occurs are however rarely explored which may be due to the conceptual apparatus that is typically applied in quantitative studies, and that 'the mechanisms by which advantage and disadvantage are transmitted in family and interactional contexts remain something of a black box in quantitative analyses' (Irwin 2009, p 1125).

Recent exceptions include Devine's (2004) comparative qualitative study of how middle class

parents in the UK and the USA help their children in their choice of education and careers, highlighting how national contexts and familial resources generate different strategies. In a UK qualitative study Irwin and Elley (2013) discuss parental involvement in and expectations concerning young people's educational transitions; they identified diversities within as well as between social classes. Jones et al's (2006) UK study of parents' support in the transition to adulthood focuses on parental standards and norms in supporting young people during the transition phase, particularly with regard to partnership behaviour before full financial independence is achieved.

The transmissions of educational and occupational aspirations can occur through routes other than parents, as Thompson (1997) notes. Important role models and inspirational figures can include grandparents, uncles, aunts, and older siblings. Straightforward imitation from one generation to the next is easy to trace statistically but more complex processes are better captured by life story interviews in order to help understand the underlying influences and dynamics (ibid).

### ***Conclusion***

In this chapter we have discussed transitions to adulthood from a contextualist life course perspective with particular reference to intergenerational relations as a particular kind of context. In a situation with increased longevity and economic austerity caused by failing financial institutions and the pressure on welfare states, issues of intergenerational relations, intergenerational conflict and solidarity are likely to be at the forefront of public debate. While much of the current debate concerns intergenerational support for the growing population of older people, the focus is now shifting to the current generation of young people many of whom are finding difficulty in gaining a firm foothold in constantly changing labour markets, in raising the necessary resources to live independently and contending with the withdrawal of welfare benefits. The implications of longer education, increased difficulties in the world of work and the highly inflationary housing context in many countries have led to the postponement of parenthood to an older age with major consequences for their families of origin. These are pressing matters for further intergenerational research (Brannen 2015 in press).

As research on parenting makes clear, parenthood today is ever more demanding as parents are increasingly required to take greater responsibility and are made morally accountable for their children's welfare and progress (or lack of it) in diverse spheres in bringing up children (see Brannen 2015 in press). However parenthood in relation to their 'adult children' is less discussed or researched. Future research needs therefore to take a longer term perspective as young people move into adulthood but remain dependent upon parents. It needs to examine intergenerational relations not just as outcomes, for example, of occupational and social mobility, but also to the processes involved in transmission and transfers. We therefore suggest that future research on the transition to adulthood would benefit from a contextualist life course approach in which intergenerational relations are treated as an important layer of the social context in which young people's lives unfold.



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<sup>i</sup> They adopt this term from Merton (1968, cited in Elder et al 2006) and define it thus: Theoretical orientations establish a common field of inquiry by providing a framework for descriptive and explanatory research (Elder et al 2006, p. 4).