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Diverse Pathways in Becoming an Adult: The Role of Structure, Agency and Context

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Abstract
Although the transition from education to work has been a topic of much research, there is still lack of understanding regarding experiences of recent cohorts of young people. Moreover, much of the debate has focused on the polarization of youth transitions, at the neglect of a large group of young people who fall outside this dualism. This paper introduces a diverse pathways view offering a more comprehensive understanding of changing youth transitions and examines how transitions are shaped by interactions between structure and individual agency. The study is based on data from the British Household Panel Study (BHPS) and the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UK-HLS) using sequence analysis to identify transition patterns among cohorts born in 1980-84 and 1985-1989. Five distinct clusters could be identified, differentiating between those who participate in extended education, two pathways dominated by continuous employment, either directly after completing compulsory schooling at age 16 or after some further education, and two pathways characterized by exclusion from the labor market (either through prolonged experience of unemployment or inactivity). Both structural and agency variables are associated with variations in transition patterns, pointing to the need of conceptualizing the role of the agent as well as that of structures and resources for a better understanding of the processes underlying the selection into different pathways.

1

1. Introduction

The transition to adulthood is establishing itself as a major topic of social research, with relevance across disciplines. Among the many transitions across the life course it ranks very high in terms of importance, complexity, and relevance for later outcomes (Schulenberg, Sameroff, & Cicchetti, 2004; Schulenberg & Schoon, 2012). It is a demographically dense period involving multiple and inter-related social role changes, including completion of full-time education, entry into paid employment, and the step into family formation and parenthood, all during a relative short period of time. Since the 1970s the transition to independent adulthood has on aggregate become more extended across most Western societies (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011; Shanahan, 2000). Indeed, it has been argued that the transition to adulthood can be conceptualized in terms of a new normative developmental stage of 'emerging' adulthood (Arnett, 2000), characterized as 'the age of possibilities' and 'identity exploration' and later timing of transitions.

Yet, although social change has affected all young people, it has not affected all in the same way. There are variations across countries, reflecting for example differences in education and employment systems, as well as differences in preferences and cultural norms. The assumption of a new normative life stage characterized by prolonged education and the delay in responsibility undermines the appreciation of diversity of youth transitions, and ignores the social dimensions and structural constraints shaping young people's lives (Cote, 2014; Schulenberg & Schoon, 2012). Young people have to carve their pathways to adulthood based on the resources and opportunities that are available to them. Moreover, not all young people can afford to pursue an academic career, nor do all want to continue in higher education, and

2

educational aspirations and access to educational and employment opportunities remain shaped by socio-economic background and structural constraints (Schoon, 2015).

Although the transition from education to work has been the topic of much research, most of this work has focused on specific events, single time points and is based on cohorts born between the 1940s and 1970s (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011). Moreover, most of transition research concentrated on the effects of structural constraints, and there is a lack of understanding regarding the role of the agent. There is thus a need for robust empirical evidence, mapping changes and diversity in transition pathways since the 1990s, and how these are linked to structural constraints and individual agency. The aims of this paper are thus threefold: first, to introduce a diverse pathway view of youth transitions; second, to assess changes in patterns of school-to-work transitions among recent cohorts of young people in Britain (i.e. those born after 1980), and third to assess the role of structural and agentic factors in shaping the transition from school to work. This paper adds to the evidence base in three ways. First, it examines change and variations in the timing and sequencing of transition experiences among a current cohort of 17 to 23 year olds, born after 1980. Second, it uses information on regional youth unemployment to take into account characteristics of the wider socio-economic context, and third, the inclusion of person and background characteristics helps to identify the potential role of social background and individual agency in shaping transition experiences.

The study adopts a life course perspective as a framework to integrate assumptions regarding the structural context and individual action orientation (Elder, 1994; Elder & Shanahan, 2007). In life course theory it is argued that transition experiences and pathways through life are always embedded within a larger socio-historical and cultural context, and are shaped by complex interdependent relationships, including

3

opportunity structures, social networks and institutions, and individual agency processes (Elder, 1998). The next sections of the paper will

discuss the structural and agentic factors shaping youth transitions in more detail, introduce a diverse pathways view of youth transitions, specify

the empirical assumptions, then introduce the applied method, i.e. sequence analysis, and some details about the data and the sample selection

before presenting the results and the discussion.

2. Structure and agency in transition research

The notions of structure and agency are prominent explanatory factors of changing youth transitions. Transition experiences at a given point in time can be understood as the result of social background, previous transition histories, individual agency, and contextual factors (Heinz, 2009; Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009). It has been argued that since the 1970s an 'ideational shift' has taken place, characterised by changing social practices and the breakdown of many class, gender, and age based constraints shaping demographic events (Lesthaeghe, 1995). It is assumed that individual biographies have become more removed from traditional life scripts and more dependent on individual agency (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). The assertion that individuals are now free to choose has however been questioned, as there is persisting evidence of unequal access to educational and career opportunities (Bynner, 2005; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Schoon, 2007), of 'bounded agency' (Shanahan, 2000), involuntary delay (Buchmann, 1989) or 'arrested adulthood' (Cote, 2000) where choice is embedded in social constraints.

1.1 *Structural constraints*

This paper focuses on transitions in the UK context, which is characterised by a medium level of stratification of the education system (compared to the highly structured German system or the less structured systems in the U.S. and Canada), a low level of standardization of education (especially compared to France), and a liberal market economy with relative low levels of vocational specificity (Hannan, 1996; Kerckhoff, 2001). Compared to other European countries the UK has a relative high rate of early school leavers. Despite efforts of the government to increase participation rates in post-secondary education (e.g. adopting the Europe 2020 goals aiming for at least 85 percent of all 22-year-olds to complete upper-secondary education), the rate of early school leavers in 2012 was still above 10 percent (European Commission, 2012) and the participation rate in higher education among 17 to 30 year olds was 49 percent (BIS, 2013). Thus a large group of young people in the UK do not continue in education or go to university.

It has been argued that compared to other countries, such as Germany with its strong linkage between school and employers, in the UK educational credentials do not carry the same weight for either the young people themselves, or for employers, and thus many young people enter the labour market earlier and encounter more turbulence at labour market entry, i.e. faster rate of job change and more periods of

4

unemployment (Scherer, 2001). Moreover, an increasing degree of flexibilization of employment in the UK implies that continuous employment is becoming less frequent, a trend which is especially pronounced at career entry (Ashton & Bynner, 2011), and which has become more marked following the 2008 Great Recession. We would thus expect that unstable transition patterns and prolonged periods of unemployment have increased for more recent cohorts.

Structural factors, including the effects of changing economic conditions (such as the 2008 global economic downturn) as well as institutional arrangements for transition pathways, cannot be generalized because they differ across societies (Heinz, 2009), and they have different effects on individuals, depending on their social strata, their gender and age. There is for example evidence of an increasing polarisation into fast versus slow transitions (Jones, 2002), i.e. a distinction between those who take a slower route to adulthood involving longer education and delayed assumption of adult roles, and those who follow the traditional fast track transition leaving school at minimum age, followed by early entry to the labour market and family formation. This differentiation of pathways has been linked to cumulative disadvantage, and a polarisation into optimal versus problematic pathways (Jones, 2002; Kerckhoff, 1993; McLanahan, 2004). Generally, the preparation for adulthood has been elongated for those who can afford to invest in their education, while young people from less privileged background are leaving education earlier and are less likely to continue in higher education than their more privileged peers, reflecting persistent social inequalities in life chances and opportunities (Erikson & Jonsson, 1996; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005).

Yet, the assumption of a polarised life course does not take into account the experiences of a 'forgotten middle' (Roberts, 2011) who successfully balance the structural and individual resources available to them (Schoon, 2015). 'Success' in transition experiences in this context has been conceptualised in terms of objective (i.e. access to permanent employment and avoidance of long-term unemployment) as well as subjective indicators (levels of life satisfaction). To focus on a process of polarisation due to structural constraints does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the heterogeneity in youth transitions. The contemporary youth period is not characterised by dualistic modal patterns (Schulenberg & Schoon, 2012; Settersten et al., 2005) and it is important to gain a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the paths young people travel on their way to independent adulthood. Moreover, we have to gain a better understanding of interactions between structure and agency shaping youth transitions.

5

Agency

Agency is a central term in life course theory (Elder, 1994; Elder & Shanahan, 2007) and is understood as an individual-level construct fundamental for social action and choice. Yet agency has remained an underspecified, 'slippery' theoretical concept within sociological research (Hitlin & Elder, 2007). As a non-structural factor agency is not universally accepted or valued in sociological theory (Fuchs, 2001; Loyal & Barnes, 2001), or it is assumed that structural factors fundamentally constitute the selves of individual actors (Hitlin & Elder, 2007). Here we argue that it is important to conceptualise the role of the agent as well as structural constraints for a better understanding of diverse transition pathways. The transition to adulthood is not a routine situation, but requires active decision making and choice within structural constraints.

Recent attempts to conceptualise agency within life course research draw on the psychological literature, in particular social cognitive theory, and illustrate the significant role of agency to shape developmental outcomes (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015). Empirically agency has been conceptualized through multiple dimensions, including self-efficacy, intentions, forethought, and self-directedness (Bandura, 2001). Academic attainment, although an important resource, is not a central concept in the conceptualization of agency. The notion of agency is focused on concepts of self-regulation and self-awareness as well as volition and orientation to the future, which are, in turn, shaped by other factors, including academic attainment as well as structural constraints. Well-formulated goals, and a good sense of one's capabilities and potential enable the person to envision future "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986), and plan strategies to attain them.

In our analysis we focus on the role of education aspirations which have shown to shape education participation and related processes in the transition to work (Reynolds & Johnson, 2011; Schoon, Martin, & Ross, 2007; Sewell & Hauser, 1975). We consider not only high versus low aspirations, i.e. whether young people want to leave after compulsory schooling or stay on in education, but also uncertainty in aspiration. While the role of high versus low aspirations as a predictor of later education and employment outcomes is well established, relative little is known

6

about the consequences of uncertainty in aspiration. The few existing studies suggest that uncertainty can be either beneficial or harmful, encouraging exploration and preventing foreclosure of choice, or indicating aimlessness and floundering, depending on the wider socio-historical context in which decisions are made (Schoon, Gutman & Sabates, 2012).

Children born into less privileged families (characterised by low levels of parental education, low income or unemployment) have, in general, lower levels of educational attainment (Breen & Goldthorpe, 2001; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2013; Shavit, Arum, & Gamoran, 2007), are less likely to aspire to go to university (Reynolds & Johnson, 2011; Schoon, 2010), and are more uncertain regarding their educational and occupational choice (Schoon, Gutman & Sabates, 2012). Explanations of these association refer to cumulative risk effects (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006), the lack of financial resources, time or energy of parents to invest in the education of their children (Guo & Harris, 2000), familiarity with the dominant culture, social networks and connections (Van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010).

Beyond influences in the direct family context, there is also evidence pointing to the role of the wider social context in shaping agency processes. For example, the British (as well as the American) system offer students greater freedom to make educational choices compared to the less flexible German system (Heckhausen & Chang, 2009; Kerckhoff, 2001; Parker, Jerrim, Schoon, & Marsh, in press). Yet, changes in employment and shifts in the occupational structure since the 1970s have made it more difficult to foresee what kinds of opportunities will be available (Heinz, 2009). These changes have been associated with increasing uncertainty regarding vocational development as well as a growing focus on obtaining high levels of education to succeed in a changing economy (Gutman, Schoon, & Sabates, 2012; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). This situation has become even more difficult due to the recent global economic downturn.

It has been argued that planfulness matters more when viable options exist between school and work (Shanahan, Elder, & Miech, 1997), while when labour markets are poor, family social background is likely to play a more important role (Heinz, 2009). Economically privileged young people may warehouse in institutions of higher education, which could position them more favorably in the job market when economic conditions improve. In contrast, more disadvantaged youth, irrespective of their planfulness, may be forced to take whatever job is available, simply to make ends meet. Yet, although uncertainty regarding employment opportunities makes it more difficult to plan ahead, at the same time these longer-term changes may render agentic orientations even more critical. In particular young people who disengage and withdraw from efforts to enhance their skills and capabilities either through education and training or through paid work, may flounder in an ever more competitive labour market (Schoon, 2014; Vuolo, Staff, & Mortimer, 2012). It has to be kept in mind however, that many young people fail to

7

achieve their ambitious educational goals. After spending several years in higher education they leave without qualifications, are left unprepared for alternative pathways, and struggle to establish themselves in the labour market (Rosenbaum, 2001; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). It could thus also be the case that having uncertain aspirations may allow young people to keep their options open, and enable them to adapt more readily to changing employment conditions and new opportunities, while a narrow focus could prevent flexibility and adjustment. For a better understanding of variations in the transition to adulthood it is thus important to take into account multiple interlinked structural and individual factors and how they interact in a changing socio-historical context.

A diverse pathways view

We argue for a diverse pathways view of youth transitions (Schoon, 2015), postulating that there are distinct transition patterns that lie between

the often assumed to be 'optimal' transition involving extended education participation and the more 'problematic' transition involving extended

periods of unemployment or inactivity. Moreover, we assume that transitions are shaped by interactions between structure and individual

agency. These assumptions are of relevance for several reasons. First, conceptualising diverse pathways will enable us to gain insight into the

complexity of the youth period, and identify and even address the ways social inequality manifests in the lives of those who, on the surface at

least, might appear to be 'getting by'. We would also get a better grasp of the extent of social exclusion and appreciation of the constraints

experienced by those in the 'middle' in relation to those on more successful transitions as well as the more problematic ones. Secondly, turning

our attention to the middle group means that greater consideration can also be given to the diversity of experience and outcomes of those within

a 'successful' transition: for instance, what does 'success' mean when extended educational transitions do not lead to the anticipated occupational

outcome, or experiences of graduate un- and underemployment; or in case where an early work orientation enables financial independence to

obtain home ownership? Thus, moving towards a more comprehensive conceptualisation of youth transitions will inform the debate and

empirical research in youth studies.

8

To understand how young people navigate the transition to adulthood it is necessary to examine how individuals construct different types of life courses within the opportunities and constraints they are facing. The diverse pathways view (Schoon, 2015) adopts an agentic perspective towards human development, and argues that transitions can have different meanings, antecedents, consequences depending on how they fit into larger sequences or trajectories. Both structural forces, as mediated by the family and local opportunity structures, and agency, as represented by individual planning and choice, create this heterogeneity by shaping the timing and sequencing of transitions to independent adulthood. It is thus important to understand how individuals and social context influence each other.

3. **Empirical expectations**

There is still a lack of understanding of how pathways to adulthood have changed, especially among younger age cohorts, among different subgroups of the population, and regarding the role of structure and agency behind that change. A more detailed understanding of the pathways taken by young people can provide better insight and leverage of how to target policy interventions. The aim of this paper are to examine changes in patterns of school-to-work transitions among recent cohorts born in the UK, i.e. those born after 1980. Using sequence analysis we investigate change and variations in the timing and sequencing of transition experiences between ages 17 to 23 years among cohorts born in 1980-84 and 1985-1989. The main questions are whether distinct patterns of entering the labour market can be empirically identified and how they differ for different age cohorts, for different subgroups of the population, and for young people with different education aspirations. As the emphasis is on the process of entry into work, we concentrate on the first seven years after completing compulsory education at age 16 drawing on yearly employment status information. Moreover we take into account the changing context, such as the impact of the recent economic

9

downturn on young people's transitions. To this effect we use information on regional youth unemployment rates. We will test the following

assumptions:

A1: According to a diverse pathways view, we expect diversity in transition patterns, reflecting structural constraints as well individual preferences. In addition to pathways characterized by extended education (often assumed to be 'optimal' transitions) and precarious transitions, characterized by unemployment or economic inactivity, we expect to find pathways indicating a middle way.

A2: More specifically, we assume that socio-economic resources and agency interact in shaping transition pathways. We thus expect young people with fewer socio-economic resources to leave school earlier than their more privileged peers, especially if they do not want to continue in higher education (reflecting cumulative disadvantage). Vice versa, we expect young people with fewer socio-economic resources who want to stay on in education or who are uncertain to be more likely to stay on in education beyond compulsory schooling, and maybe also go to University. To test these assumptions we assessed main effects as well as 2-way interactions between structural resources and individual agency as predictors of transition experiences.

A3: Given changing economic circumstances (i.e. higher regional youth unemployment rates), we expect that unstable patterns and prolonged periods of unemployment have increased for the most recent cohort.

A4: We also assume that in an ever more competitive labour market disengagement from education, especially among less privileged young people, might represent a distinct risk factor undermining chances of employment. We thus tested 3-way interactions between higher unemployment rate, social background, and education aspirations.

4. Methodology and Data

Most previous studies differ in how transition events are operationalised, focusing on a comparison of cohorts born between the 1940s and 1970s, and are restricted to the study of one event at a time, such as the timing regarding entry into first employment or family formation (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011). Yet, transitions such as leaving school, entry into the labour market, and timing of first birth are not discrete, clearly bounded events - they are interdependent, often requiring compromises regarding the coordination of different roles (Elder & Shanahan, 2006). A limitation of analysing transitions as single events or change from one status to another is that it does not account for potential U-turns, detours, and zig-zag movements (Dewilde, 2003), such as returning to education or moving in and out of employment. Standard population based approaches, calculating average coefficients regarding the timing and sequencing of transitions do not take into account the dynamics and potential non-linearity of transition experiences (Gauthier, Bühlmann, & Blanchard, 2014). This leads to a static perception that prevents

10

researchers from understanding (a) the real temporal nature of transitions, (b) how transitions are constructed through interdependent biographical processes, and (c) the diversity in timing and sequencing of transitions. Methodological advances, such as the development of sequence analysis (Abbott, 1995; Abbott & Tsay, 2000) enable a more holistic understanding of changing youth transitions, taking into account multiple transitions simultaneously as well as the complexity and reversibility in their timing and sequencing. Despite criticism of its underlying assumptions (Hollister, 2009; Wu, 2000) recent evolutions of sequence analysis (Aisenbrey & Fasang, 2010; Brzinsky-Fay & Kohler, 2010; Gauthier et al., 2014) suggest that it has the potential to enhance our understanding of changing youth transitions, their patterning and temporal nature, and will be applied in this study.

1.1.1 *The Sample*

To test our assumptions we use data collected for the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and Understanding Society (UK-HLS). The BHPS is a nationally representative annual household based survey which captured information on 5500 households comprising 10300 individuals in since 1991. In 2009, the BHPS was replaced by UK-HLS, an expanded annual survey of 40000 households. BHPS members re-entered the UK-HLS panel at Wave 2. Thus, the combined BHPS and UK-HLS dataset represents a continuous series, save for 2009 where no data were collected. Since 1994 BHPS included all young people in the sampled families who were 11 to 15 years old through a dedicated survey known as the British Youth Survey (BYS). At age 16 young people enter the adult panel of BHPS.

In our analysis we concentrate on younger cohorts (post 1980), an under-explored age group in the context of transition research. In particular we focus on age cohorts born between 1980-84 and 1985-1989 following their role transitions between ages 17 to 23 years, a crucial period after compulsory school leaving age.

Analytic approach

For the sequence analysis, we use the reported current economic activity in each wave (that is, every year). Due to small number of respondents in some groups we had to combine different categories, differentiating between indicators of education (dominated by academic education), employment (full and part time employment are combined), unemployment, and inactivity (i.e. looking after the family home, being sick or other reasons).

For our analysis we select the waves where the respondent was between the ages of 17 and 23 inclusive, using data collected between 1986 and 2012. Due to temporal limits of the observation window some information about the activities is not complete or has not started (right censoring).We retain respondent with missing data on the condition that they have at least 60 percent of their employment information present. This allows us to include reasonably complete employment histories whilst not biasing our sample toward older cohorts too much. Our analytic sample comprises 828 panel members contributing 4854 person years of information.

11

The sequence analysis was conducted using the sequence analysis for Stata ado (Brinzksy-Fay et al. 2004), using the Needleman-Wunsch algorithm to perform optimised matching, with InDel costs set to 0.7, substitution costs set to 0.5 and identical between states. Sequence analysis does by itself not give any classifications, but creates interval-level measures of dis-similarities between sequences which can be used as input for further analysis such as cluster analysis. We perform cluster analysis using hierarchical clustering using Ward's distance clustering with the number of clusters determined by Duda-Hart statistic. The resulting clusters can then be used in multiple regression modeling as a dependent variable to assess the antecedents of transition patterns, i.e. the predictive role of structural and individual agency factors. Structural variables are operationalised through indicators of parental occupational status and parental education at the meso-level, and through an indicator of regional unemployment rates among 16-24 years olds. Individual agency is operationalised through indicators of education aspirations. In addition we include gender and birth cohort as predictive variables.

1.1.2 *Independent Variables*

In our analysis we identified the highest level of parental social class and education, using the dominance approach (Erikson, 1984). Parental social class is measured through the Goldthorpe occupational classification (Goldthorpe, 1997). We differentiate between professional (Class I and II) versus other occupational status of the parents. Our measure of parental educational background differentiates between those with high levels of education, comprising any university degree (including those with a Higher National Diploma (HND) or certificate (HNC) or teaching qualifications). Advanced (A-)level and equivalent qualifications enabling access to university counted as medium, and GCSE or lower qualifications as low level of education. We include the youth unemployment rate in the relevant Government Office Region when the respondent was age 16 as a measure of regional unemployment. This is obtained as an aggregation from the number of respondents aged 16 to 23 being unemployed. We then include the respondent's educational aspiration measured at age 14, as our indicator of individual agency. Respondents were asked 'do you want to leave school when you are 16, or do you plan to carry on in education, for instance in the sixth form or a college?' We contrasted between the baseline of wanting to remain in full time education to those who were unsure or who wanted to leave education after compulsory schooling at age 16. Since education aspirations were part of the youth module, we are forced to restrict the regression analysis to respondents born after 1980 since this module was included only since 1994. Table 1 gives an overview of the variables included in the analysis.

2 Results

4.1. Identifying transition patterns – Results from the Sequence analysis

12

Table 2 present the Duda-Hart stopping rule statistics for the sequence analysis, where lower T square values indicate better fit. The lowest values is for the 5 cluster solution which provided sufficient detail regarding variations in education and employment transitions.

Fig. 1 presents the 5 sequences extracted in the form of sequence chronograms, where the overall proportion of the cluster in a particular state is denoted on the ordinate, and the progression between age 17 to 23 on the abscissa. In Table 3 we show cluster membership by birth cohort. To describe the clusters we use information from both Fig. 1 and table 3.

Cluster 1 is characterised by an *early work orientation,* involving more or less continued employment following leaving school at age 16. Roughly 80 percent of respondents in this cluster are employed by age 17. The proportion employed rises to more than 90 percent by age 20. The proportion of other states in this cluster is negligible. This cluster accounts for 25 percent of the overall sample observed and is the largest cluster for cohort members born between 1980 and 1984 (30.1 percent versus 17.5 percent among the cohort born between 1985 and 1989).

Cluster 2 represents the *transition to employment after some education*, comprising about 24.8 percent of the overall sample. Regarding the composition of the cluster we see in Fig. 1 that the proportion of respondents in education is high at the early stages of this cluster, but rapidly falls off to amount to no more than 20 percent of respondents being in education by age 19 and negligible proportions at age 21. In contrast the proportion of respondents in employment increases rapidly, from about 5 percent at age 17 to 90 percent by age 21. This cluster comprises about a fourth of the sample in each of the cohorts.

Cluster 3 is characterized by the experience of *persistent unemployment*. Respondents in this cluster start being employed, unemployed or in education with transitions to mainly unemployment such that unemployment at age 19 in the modal state is nearly 60 percent. There has been a considerable growth in the prevalence of this cluster: the proportion in this cluster rises from 4.49 percent to over 16 percent in the 1980-84 and 1985-89 birth cohorts respectively.

Cluster 4 represents a small cluster (6 percent of the total sample) characterized by

inactivity due to looking after the family home, sickness and other reasons. About 50 percent of this cluster are already inactive by age 17, mostly due to family roles (30 percent of members in this cluster are looking after the family home by age 17), with substantial minorities taking part in education (22 percent), work (9 percent) or being unemployed (19 percent). Family activities rapidly come to dominate the cluster

13

however, the proportion of respondents in family activity increasing to 70 percent by age 20, largely at the expense of educational activity and unemployment. Some degree of work persists; the proportion of the cluster employed never falls below 10 percent. There is a relatively large spike in unemployment at age 18.

Cluster 5 represents a pattern of *extended education participation*. As can be seen in Fig. 1, the proportion of education in this cluster is consistently high, with in excess of 80 percent of respondents engaged in educational activity up to age 20. This is followed by a transition to work, with about half of respondents in this cluster working at age 23. The proportion of all other states is very small at all ages. As shown in table 3 this is the largest cluster, accounting for 34 percent of the overall sample with a skew toward younger cohorts. The proportion of respondents in this cluster increases from 33 percent in the 1980-84 birth cohort to 35 percent in the 1985-89 birth cohort.

4.2. Antecedents of transition patterns

Multinomial logistic regression analysis (Table 4) is used to determine key structural and individual agency factors predicting cluster membership, taking cluster 5 '*extended education participation'* as the reference category. Due to small numbers we collapsed cluster 3 (unemployment) and 4 (inactivity) to indicate *exclusion from the labour market*.

Table 4 gives the result of the main effects in the multinomial regression (Model 1). There are no gender differences regarding cluster membership. The probability of belonging to the cluster characterized by *early work orientation* is lower among respondents in the younger cohorts: the relative risk ratio for the 1985-89 cohort is below 1. Those with less educated parents and parents from a non-professional background are more likely represented in this cluster, as are those who want to leave education after compulsory schooling. Higher rates of local unemployment are also associated with a greater probability of being in this cluster. The cluster reflecting entry to *employment after some education* is more prevalent among young people with less privileged parents (low occupational status and less than degree level education), but otherwise there are no significant effects, suggesting considerable similarity to the profile of the baseline cluster (extended education).

14

Exclusion from the labour market was more prevalent among the younger cohort, among youths from a non-professional background, those with less educated parents, and among those from areas of higher unemployment. Furthermore, disengagement from education, i.e. wanting to leave school after completion of compulsory schooling, shows a strong and significant risk effect regarding membership in this group.

In a next step we added interaction terms to examine interlinkages between structural and agency variables in shaping youth transitions. We focused on interactions between cohort x education aspirations; parental social class x education aspirations; parental education x education aspirations; regional youth unemployment x education aspirations; and three way interactions between regional youth unemployment x parental social status x education aspirations. Only the interaction between parental social class and educational aspiration showed a significant effect and is reported in Table 4 (Model 2) – and only in predicting membership in the cluster describing transitions to *employment after some education*. Young people from a non-professional family are more likely in this cluster if they do not know whether to continue in higher education or not. The findings thus suggest that for them membership in this cluster might be associated with ambivalence (or wanting to keep one's option open), rather than forming part of a career plan.

To test the effects of the independent (or explanatory) variables on the absolute probability of cluster membership (as opposed to the relative effect provided by regression coefficients) we generated predicted probabilities of cluster membership (see Table 5). Probabilities are generated by setting the variable of interest to 1 and multiplying the sample proportion by the regression coefficient and then inverting the score

15

to probability terms (rather than logits). The predicted probability is the probability that a respondent with the characteristic indicated will be a member of a given cluster: higher values indicate a greater likelihood of cluster membership. In interpreting the predicted probability of the independent variables it has to be considered that the effect of a unit change in an independent variable depends on the values of *all* independent variables and *all* of the model parameters. The results suggest small to medium strength effects, confirming largely the findings from the multi-nominal regression. Moreover, we see that extended education is more likely among young people from relative privileged family background and high education aspirations.

3 Conclusion

The findings illustrate the heterogeneity as well as considerable changes in transition experiences for two cohorts born in 1980/4 and 1985/9 respectively (assumption A1). We identified five distinct patterns of transition experiences reflecting more or less 'successful' pathways to employment. About a third of the sample in both age cohorts were characterized by *extended education participation*, followed by entry into employment after the age of 20 (suggesting completion of a degree level qualification). Another cluster indicated entry to *employment after some education*, mainly at the age of 18, representing about a fourth of the sample in both age cohorts. Furthermore, a cluster defined by an *early work orientation* and continuous employment directly after completing compulsory schooling could be identified, which represented about a third of the sample in the older cohort and about a fifth in the younger cohort, suggesting that a considerable decline in this type of transition. The two latter clusters reflect a relative early start into the labour market, and represent a major group in the sample - the often 'forgotten middle' who succeed in securing continuous employment and thus appear to 'get by' without major problems.

In addition we identified two clusters reflecting *exclusion from the labour market*, characterised by persistent experience of unemployment or inactivity. Remarkably, in the relative short time frame of observation, we note that the later born cohort encounters more problematic transitions characterised by persistent unemployment than the cohort born just four years earlier, confirming assumptions A3. Indeed, the prevalence of the cluster indicating extended periods of unemployment has more than tripled for the younger cohort. The findings suggest increased turbulence for young people making the transition during times of an economic downturn, characterized by reduced employment opportunities. The older cohorts might have been protected to some extend due to having acquired more skills and experience or being more settled in their employment when the economic crisis hit Britain.

16

There is also evidence to suggest cumulative disadvantage. We find that compared to the extended education transition all other transition patterns are associated with a less privileged family background. Moreover, early work orientation and exclusion from the labour market are associated with area disadvantage, suggesting that it matters where one lives (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber, 1997). Yet, social inequalities appear to be more finely graded - and the findings suggest the need to move beyond the conceptualization of youth transitions in terms of a dichotomy between 'successful' and 'problematic' transitions. There is a large group of young people who fall outside this dualism - the 'forgotten middle' (Roberts, 2011) – who try to gain independence through the previously standard route of continuous employment after the completion of secondary education, either at age 16 or after some further education. It is this group of young people who generally has fallen off the radar of policy makers, and who receive the least support in their transition to independence. Moreover, there were two distinct groups who encountered prolonged periods of unemployment or who were inactive.

Regarding the role of individual agency, our findings suggest that education aspirations play a significant role in shaping subsequent transitions, after controlling for parental background and regional employment opportunities. Aspirations to leave education after compulsory schooling are associated with an increased likelihood of being excluded from the labour market, involving longer periods of unemployment or inactivity. Wanting to leave education is also associated with early work transitions, but not with transition to work after some further education. The aspirations of young people thus appear to play a crucial role in steering the timing and sequencing of transition, reflecting the central role of agency in life course theory.

Regarding the interactions between education aspirations and socio-economic resources, the findings do not confirm assumption A4. We find that disengagement from education does not matter more in a competitive labour market characterized by high youth unemployment, and especially among less privileged young people – it seems to be generally important. Moreover, our assumptions regarding interactions between structural resources and education aspirations (assumption A2) are only partly confirmed. We find no significant interactions between structural factors and the aspiration to leave education. Educational disengagement generally mattered, as described above. Interaction effects are generally difficult to identify, and small sample size in some of the groupings could have undermined our power to detect them. However, we find a significant interaction effect between parental social class and uncertain education aspirations, suggesting that young people from non-professional families who are uncertain regarding whether to continue or to leave education after compulsory schooling are likely in stay on a bit longer in education before entering employment. It could be that they wanted to keep their options open, or thought about going to university, but might then have entered employment, simply to make ends meet, or because they found a job with prospects for continuous employment. Although not constituting a career plan, uncertain aspirations might have a beneficial effect for the less privileged young people (i.e. those from non-professional family background), preventing early school leaving and enabling them to gain more skills and qualification to smooth the transition to employment. Future research should examine the role of uncertain aspirations in career development more closely, as it seems to reflect underlying struggles and ambivalence, in particular among less privileged young people who try to navigate a changing landscape of education and employment opportunities.

17

Our findings point to a crucial role of proper career advice as well as the need to create viable alternative pathways to an academic career. Even in countries with high participation rates in higher education such as the U.S., only about 40 percent of young people have obtained either an associate's or bachelor's degree by their mid-twenties (Symonds, Schwartz & Ferguson, 2011). Although young people are under increasing pressure to complete higher levels of academic qualifications in order to compete in the current knowledge economies, a large percentage do not attend university - because they cannot afford to study, because they do not necessarily want to, or because they are uncertain about what lies ahead. Following the recent global recession, there are now increasing concerns regarding how to prepare young people for the transition to independence (Settersten & Ray, 2010). There are questions regarding the value of a degree, prolonged education periods without income, rising student debt, and recognition that the fastest job growth is likely among occupations that require an associate's degree or a post-secondary vocational award (Symonds et al., 2011), or lower skilled occupations in caring, health and leisure (UKCES, 2014).

Leaving education relatively early with a good post-secondary qualification and engaging in continuous full-time employment might thus not necessarily be a bad strategy - if there are jobs available that pay a decent salary. Income earned through longer-term full-time employment enables financial independence, the move into one's own home, and supporting one's own family at an earlier pace than among those who continue in higher education. What is required is the creation and provision of pathways to prosperity among future workers at every education level (Symonds et al., 2011). Young people have to carve their pathways to adulthood based on the resources and opportunities that are available to them. Not all young people can or want to pursue an academic career, and access to educational opportunities remains shaped by social background as well as individual agency processes.

Adopting a diverse pathways view in the study of transition experiences enables a more detailed and holistic understanding of changing transition experiences and has the potential to inform policy regarding the diverse templates for transitions and the challenges young people are facing. Current policy thinking is dominated by the assumption of a linear career path moving from full time education (generally implying the completion of a University degree) to full time employment (Birdwell et al., 2011). The findings presented here suggest the need for the revision of currently dominant templates and the consideration of more diversified life course models, taking into account the experiences of different subgroups of the population and their need for opportunities to achieve a tolerable living standard.

In interpreting the findings a number of limitations have to be considered. Firstly, the analysis is able to make only limited inferences. We are unable to include cohorts older than the 1980-84 birth cohort in our regression due to data limitations, and as such cannot generalise our findings to older cohorts. Secondly, like in all longitudinal studies we are faced with the problem of missingness in response and have to make do with the information available in the data set. Thirdly, since we focus on cross cohort differences within the life course, it is difficult for us to make firm claims about the effect of period events which may influence labour market transitions, such as the recession of the early 1990s or the Great Recession. We do however include local unemployment rates as a measure of labour market context. Moreover, our study is based on data

18

collected in the UK and different transition patterns might be found in a different context. Moreover, in other countries aspirations to go to college might be less suitable as indicator of agency as they are more normative, and thus less predictive of subsequent transitions.

Despite these limitations this study is one of the first to examine changes in transition experiences in cohorts born after the 1980s. The findings presented here question the assumption of a dichotomy in the timing and sequencing of the transitions to adulthood, and point towards the need of moving beyond a dualistic assumption of smooth versus problematic transitions. Adopting a diverse pathways view acknowledges the existence of a large group of young people who fall outside this dichotomy, the forgotten middle. We find persisting social inequality and young people from less privileged backgrounds are less likely to participate in extended education transitions. Instead they try to forge a career through a work focused route directly after compulsory school leaving or after some further education. While some encounter problematic transitions or remain excluded from the labour market, an even greater proportion succeeds to find continuous employment. This latter group of young people has become invisible in the debate concentrating on the polarization of experiences, and future research should move towards a more pluralistic and differentiated understanding of youth transitions. Moreover, conceptualizing the role of the agent as well as of structures offers a better comprehension of the processes underlying the selection into different pathways.

19

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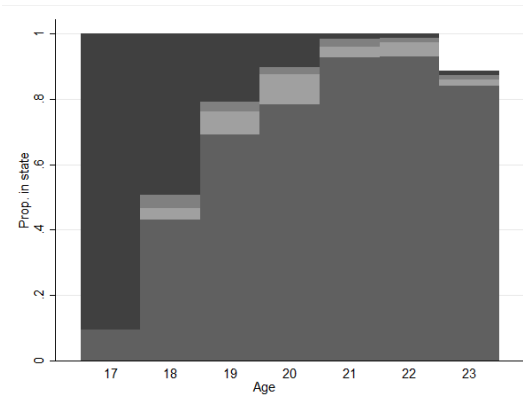
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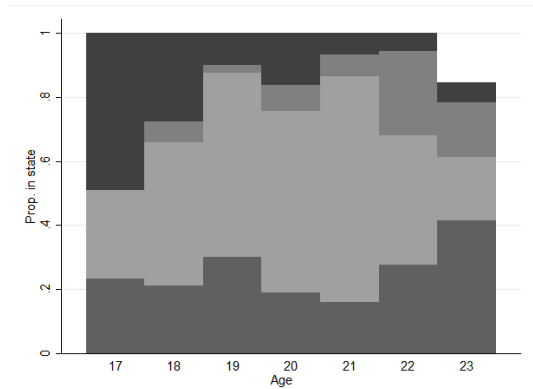
Figure 1: Extracted 5 cluster solution

Cluster 1: Early work orientation
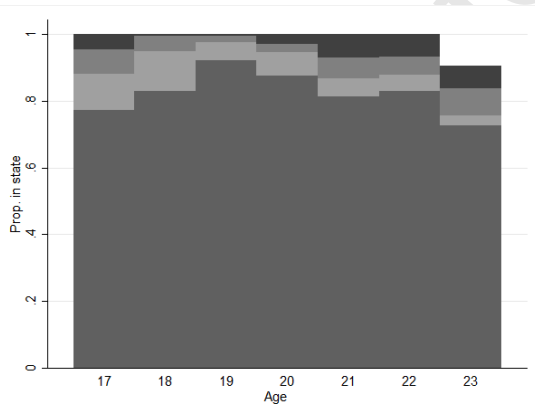
Cluster 2:Employment after some education

Cluster 3: Persistent unemployment

Cluster 4: Inactivity

Cluster 5: Extended education
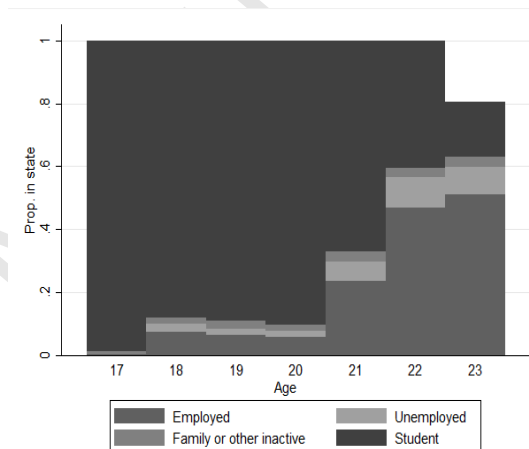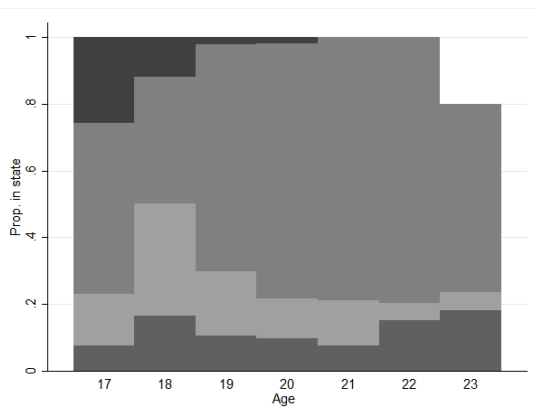
28

Legend: Employed | Unemployed | Family or other inactive | Student

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics by age cohort and historical time of observation

Variables	1980-84 1996-2005	1985-89 2001-2010	Total
Economic activity - Proportion time spend in:			
Employment	0.5	0.4	0.4
Unemployed	0.1	0.1	0.1
Other economically inactive	0.1	0.1	0.1
Education	0.3	0.3	0.3
Right censored	0.0	0.1	0.1

29

Sex			
Male	48.7	44.9	46.3
Female	51.3	55.1	53.7
Parental education			
Parental education (low)	47.3	47.2	47.3
Parental education (medium)	26.8	25.6	25.9
Parental education (high)	25.7	27.1	26.7
Parental social class			
Parental social class (Non-Professional)	73.9	69.7	71.2
Parental social class (Professional)	26.0	30.2	28.7
Own educational aspirations			
Own education aspirations (stay on)	70.6	72.6	71.9
Own education aspirations (don't know)	17.8	17.1	17.4
Own education aspirations (leave)	11.5	10.2	10.6
N	468	360	828

Source: Birth cohorts 1980-1989 from the British Household Panel Study (BHPS) and Understanding Society (UK-HLS), own calculations

Table 2 Duda-Hart stopping rules for sequence analysis

Cluster Number	*Duda-Hart Pseudo T-Square*
2	0.80
3	1.55
4	1.62

30

5	0.30
6	2.62
7	1.85
8	1.43

Table 3 Cluster membership by cohort and years during which they made the transition (%)

Cluster	**Birth cohort** (Years observed)		Total
	1980-84 (1996-2007)	**1985-89** (2001-2012)	
Early work orientation	30.1	17.5	24.6
Employment after some education	25.2	24.4	24.9
Persistent unemployment	4.5	16.7	9.8
Inactivity	7.0	6.1	6.6
Extended Education	33.1	35.3	34.1

31

N		468	360	828

Source: Birth cohorts 1980-1989 from the British Household Panel Study (BHPS) and Understanding Society (UK-HLS), own calculations

Table 4 Multinominal Regression predicting cluster membership: Relative Risk Ratios (RRR) and standard errors (Ref: Extended Education). Main effect model (Model 1) and Main effects and interactions (Model 2)

	Early work orientation		Employment after some education		Exclusion from employment	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Sex						
Male (Ref)						
Female	0.82 (0.15)	0.82 (0.15)	0.89 (0.16)	0.90 (0.16)	1.46 (0.32)	1.46 (0.33)
Birth cohort						
1980-84 (Ref)						
1985-89	0.52 (0.10)**	0.52 (0.10)*	0.88 (0.16)	0.89 (0.16)	1.91 (0.42)**	1.92 (0.43)**
Parental social class						
Professional (Ref)						
Non-Professional	2.25 (0.50) **	2.11 (0.52)**	1.81 (2.86)**	1.97 (0.46) **	5.35 (1.71)**	5.65 (2.08)**
Parental education						
High (Ref)						
Medium	1.46 (0.42)	1.42 (0.41)	2.43 (0.63)**	2.48 (0.65)**	1.11 (0.39)	1.12 (0.40)
Low	1.80 (0.44) *	1.79 (0.44)*	2.08 (0.49)**	2.12 (0.51) **	1.52 (0.42)	1.52 (0.43)
Educational aspirations age 14						
Stay in education (Ref)						
Don't know	1.19 (0.39)	1.27 (0.63)	0.98 (0.29)	1.16 (0.51)	0.83 (0.35)	0.61 (0.66)
Leave	4.14 (1.96) **	2.20 (1.89)	1.88 (0.93)	2.79 (2.13)	6.59 (3.26) **	9.79 (8.85)**
Mean regional unemployment rate (%)	1.05 (0.16) **	1.05 (0.01)**	0.99 (0.01)	0.99 (0.01)	1.05 (0.01)**	1.05 (0.01)**
Interactions						
Parental social class x Educational aspirations age 14						
Non-professional x Don't know		0.88 (0.56)		1.96 (0.46)**		1.34 (1.59)

32

Non-professional x Leave		2.19 (2.25)		0.52 (0.53)		0.63 (0.67)

Note: Figures presented are exponentiated coefficients with standard errors (in parentheses). Significance for individual coefficients is indicated by: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01;

Source: Birth cohorts 1980-1989 from the British Household Panel Study (BHPS) and Understanding Society (UK-HLS), own calculations

Table 5 Predicted probabilities of cluster membership (95% confidence intervals presented for approximate tests of significance)

Variable	Predicted probabilities of cluster membership (95% confidence interval)			
	Early work orientation	Employment after some education	Exclusion from employment	Extended education
Sex				
Male	0.27 (0.24-0.29)	0.28 (0.25-0.30)	0.13 (0.11-0.14)	0.33 (0.30-0.35)
Female	0.22 (0.19-0.24)	0.23 (0.20-0.25)	0.19 (0.17-0.20)	0.34 (0.31-0.36)
Birth cohort				
1980-84	0.30 (0.27-0.32)	0.25 (0.22-0.27)	0.11 (0.09-0.12)	0.33 (0.30-0.35)
1985-89	0.17 (0.15-0.18)	0.24 (0.21-0.26)	0.22 (0.19-0.24)	0.35 (0.32-0.37)
Parental social class				
Professional	0.19 (0.16-0.21)	0.26 (0.23-0.28)	0.06 (0.04-0.07)	0.48 (0.44-0.51)
Non-Professional	0.26 (0.24-0.27)	0.24 (0.22-0.25)	0.20 (0.18-0.21)	0.27 (0.25-0.28)
Parental education				
High	0.21 (0.19-0.22)	0.20 (0.18-0.21)	0.17 (0.15-0.18)	0.40 (0.37-0.42)
Medium	0.22 (0.18-0.25)	0.34 (0.29-0.38)	0.11 (0.08-0.13)	0.31 (0.27-0.34)
Low	0.27 (0.24-0.29)	0.28 (0.25-0.30)	0.19 (0.16-0.21)	0.24 (0.21-0.26)
Educational aspirations age 14				
Stay in education	0.23 (0.21-0.24)	0.24 (0.22-0.25)	0.15 (0.13-0.16)	0.36 (0.34-0.37)
Don't know	0.26 (0.21-0.30)	0.29 (0.24-0.33)	0.10 (0.06-0.13)	0.32 (0.27-0.36)

33

Leave	0.34 (0.27-0.40)	0.21 (0.15-0.26)	0.32 (0.26-0.37)	0.11 (0.06-0.15)

Source: Birth cohorts 1980-1989 from the British Household Panel Study (BHPS) and Understanding Society (UK-HLS), own calculations

Highlights

- There is a lack of understanding regarding the diversity of youth transitions, especially among more recent cohorts
- Current debates are dominated by a dualistic view of optimal versus problematic transition which does not capture the complexity of young people's experiences.
- We introduce a diverse pathways view that enables a more holistic understanding of youth transitions and a move towards a more fine graded understanding of social inequalities in the transition from school to work.
- Using sequence analysis we assess changes in the timing and sequencing of early education and employment transition among two age cohorts born between 1980 and 1989.
- We identify five distinct pathways which are shaped by individual agency as well as structural variables, including regional youth unemployment

34