

“Becoming an Adult: an International Perspective on the Transitions to Adulthood”

McGill University, Montreal, 15-17 June 2006

Workshop Report

This workshop was organized by the IUSSP Scientific Panel on the Transitions to Adulthood in Developed Countries, with the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the MacArthur Foundation (Network on Transitions to Adulthood) and the IUSSP.

Aims

Transitions to adulthood, as defined in the literature, usually consist in a series of events including the transition from school to work, the transition to economic independence and independent living, and the transition to partnership and parenthood. These events tend to be complex, interlinked, and associated with major changes in young people’s psychological development. And while their analysis has traditionally been restricted to one event at the time (e.g. leaving parental home or having a first child), a central aim of the workshop was to explore new methods to study the inter-dependencies between the various transitions. Furthermore, the workshop also aimed at drawing explicit comparisons between developed nations.

More specifically, the comparative perspective adopted in the workshop provided a strategic site for understanding how and why changes in the nature and timing of the transition to adulthood have, and are, taking place in quite varying national contexts. While the broad demographic dimension of these changes is apparent, little is known about how they come about and about their consequences for society, families, and individuals. A burgeoning interest in youth and early adulthood is evident in North America and Europe, but many important questions remain including the diversification of the trajectories that comprise the transitions to adulthood, the individual and societal factors that constrain or expand young people’s options, the links between demographic changes and personal characteristics, and the capacities that seem necessary to successfully navigate the transition to adulthood today.

Workshop structure

The meeting took the form of an in-depth workshop. Each paper was discussed during a 90-minute period giving authors sufficient time to present their work, and for participants to engage in lively discussions. Each paper was also reviewed by two discussants. This format was much appreciated by participants as it allowed them to get rich feedback on their work: something that is usually not possible in conference settings. The discussion of each paper challenged the theoretical positions presented and explored alternative methods for achieving the stated aims. The format also allowed junior members to interact with more senior researchers including researchers at the cutting edge of quantitative method in social demography.

Fertility, partnerships, residential independence, education and employment were the main transition areas explored during the workshop, as well as issues of de-standardization and individualization of life-courses. Papers covered a wide range of geographical areas and used innovative methods for understanding the processes underlying the transition to adulthood.

One of the central challenges of the workshop was to analyse the transition to adulthood as a series of interrelated events. Several papers used sequencing methods to explore trajectories. **Toulemon** and **Winkler-Dworak** used sequence analysis showing that French men follow the same sequence of events today as they did in the past while the lives of young French women are becoming more variable. **Billari**, **Aassve**, and **Piccarreta** employed optimal matching analysis to compute dissimilarities between individuals in order to explain differences in family trajectories. They also experimented with different methods of presenting and interpreting the results of such analysis using a *medoid* and a *tree-based* approach.

Liefbroer and **Elzinga** presented several new methods for studying the sequencing of young people's lives. They proposed the use of an indicator of turbulence, a measure of homogeneity of sequences and family typologies. Drawing on previous work of group members, **Fussell**, **Evans** and **Gauthier** explored the heterogeneity in period patterns of status combinations using census data in Canada, Australia and the United States. They used entropy analysis to construct measures of entropy, joint entropy, and mutual information. This approach differs from the sequencing one used in earlier papers as the use of census data necessitates the construction of synthetic cohorts rather than the event histories of individuals.

In addition to the exploration of methods of sequencing, papers also employed regression techniques. **Bignami** and **Billari** used ordered logit models to examine parenthood in low fertility societies. **Toulemon** and **Winkler-Dworak** used hazard models to explore convergence of gender differences in fertility and union formation in France. They found that both events show evidence of convergence of patterns over time. **Hango** and **LeBourdais** used Cox regression to examine first relationships in Canada. They found that the timing of school exit impacts the timing of first union formation, more so for women than for men.

Poverty was the focus of the paper presented by **Aassve**. He presented the results of propensity score estimation techniques designed to analyse the causal effect of leaving home on entering poverty. He found that the event of leaving home does have a particularly strong effect on entering poverty in Scandinavian countries, but a rather weak one in Mediterranean countries. **Grant** and **Furstenberg** presented data on selected developing countries to examine the extent to which the types of transitions explored in the other papers (namely marriage, childbearing, education and work) are useful for understanding the transition to adulthood in developing and transitional societies. The paper highlighted the differences in the lives of young people who live in affluent societies compared with those who live in poorer nations. There is also evidence of great variation between countries from different developing regions: variations that appear to be related, among other things, to the prevalence of HIV/AIDS and to the level of economic development of the country.

Settersten's paper presented ideas on the transition to adulthood drawn from a variety of projects related to human development. His presentation highlighted the hardships faced by vulnerable populations and also stressed the need to adjust social institutions to the new realities of young adults.

Publication plans

The papers from this workshop are expected to be submitted as a special issue of the *European Journal of Population* to be published in 2007. Papers will all be peer-reviewed. In addition, a paper outlining the policy implications of the changing nature of the transition to adulthood is currently in preparation and will appear in the journal *Policy Options*.

Future of the Panel

The workshop concluded with a discussion of the Panel's future agenda. It was clear from the discussion that the group has a strong desire to continue working on this topic as the use of new techniques are allowing for a greater depth of research than was possible when the group began its work. The group has developed a plan of research and activities for the 2006-2009 period (with Francesco Billari as the new Chair). The aim is three-fold: (1) to explain patterns in transitions to adulthood across time and space using a multilevel, multidisciplinary approach; (2) to understand the consequences of these patterns for individuals, families, and societies; (3) to discuss and assess methods that are useful for the explanation of transitions to adulthood and for understanding their consequences. Each of these aims is briefly described below.

First, recent research, including research developed by the Panel members during the 2003-2006 period, has shown that transitions to adulthood in developed countries vary greatly across societies, and often change quickly within a society. Also, societies are heterogeneous both because of social stratification and because of cultural variation. Institutional variation (e.g., welfare regimes) and cultural differences (e.g., normative expectations) are however not sufficient to explain such variations across time and space. A multilevel approach, where macro-level determinants are studied together with micro-level determinants (at the family, household, or individual level), is therefore essential to explain transitions to adulthood. Meso-level factors (e.g., related to the community or to the region) may also play important roles. This macro-(meso)-micro explanatory framework will be further explored by the Panel.

Second, the consequences of transitions to adulthood, especially when conceived as complex trajectories, have not been thoroughly investigated so far in the literature. Some of the social and economic consequences are well known, for instance the adverse consequences of teenage motherhood on education, work careers and income, but their international variations (and therefore the role of macro-level factors) is under-investigated. Other consequences, such as the demographic ones, are also under-investigated. For example, does the transition to adulthood matter for parenthood and fertility? Does it matter for union stability? This will constitute the second line of research of the Panel.

Third, methods for the study of transitions to adulthood have advanced significantly during recent years. Some have been used for complex descriptions (e.g., sequence analysis, information theory), others have been used in order to explain the transition to adulthood (e.g., hazard models and their generalisations, causal modelling). In the explanatory study of transitions to adulthood, as well as in the analysis of their consequences, the Panel aims to further explore methodological avenues that might shed new light on the subject. This approach should allow for the exploitation of longitudinal data available in a wide range of societies.

Papers presented at the 2006 IUSSP Meeting on the Transition to Adulthood

1. Transition to parenthood in low fertility societies: regional differences. **Simona Bignami, Francesco Billari**
2. Socio-economic change and first union formation in Canada. **Darcy Hango, Celine LeBourdais**
3. Gender differences in the transition to adulthood in France: is there convergence over the recent period? **Laurent Toulemon, Maria Winkler-Dworak**
4. Standardization and de-standardization of the life course: Myth or reality? **Aart Liefbroer, Cees Elzinga**
5. String of adulthood: Analyzing work-family trajectories of young women and men using sequence analysis. **Francesco Billari, Arnstein Aassve, Raffaella Piccarreta**
6. Transition to Adulthood in Three Liberal Welfare Regimes: U.S., Canada, and Australia, 1970-2000. **Elizabeth Fussell, Ann Evans, Anne H. Gauthier**
7. The cost of early adulthood: a comparative analysis across nations and time. **Arnstein Aassve**
8. Challenges to the Transition to Adulthood: A Comparison of the Experience of Developed and Developing Countries. **Monica Grant and Frank Furstenberg**
9. How Demographic Change Matters for Human Development: The Case of the Transition to Adulthood. **Rick Settersten**

List of participants

1. Aart Liefbroer (Netherlands)
2. *Alyssa Borkosky (Canada)
3. *Ann Evans (Australia)
4. Anne H. Gauthier (Canada)
5. Arnstein Aassve (UK)
6. Celine LeBourdais (Canada)
7. *Darcy Hango (Canada)
8. Elizabeth Fussell (USA)
9. Francesco Billari (Italy)
10. Frank Furstenberg (USA)
11. Laurent Toulemon (France)
12. *Maria Winkler-Dworak (Austria)
13. *Monica Grant (USA)
14. Rick Settersten (USA)
15. *Simona Bignami (Canada)

*: Denotes a junior member (student, post-doc, or entry-level professor).