

# Gender and the Transition to Adulthood: A Diverse Pathways View

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## Abstract

The transition to adulthood can be considered as a status passage in the institutionalized life course, involving the assumption of new social roles, such as the completion of education, entry into the labor market, and family formation (Shanahan, 2000). It is guided by age-related legal norms as well as population-based norms and informal expectations regarding appropriate ages for the completion of education, marriage, or becoming a parent, and the sequencing and combination of these roles (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011). These norms and expectations, or “scripts of life” (Buchmann, 1989), can vary by gender, ethnicity, and social class—and are also highly responsive to social change. In this essay, I introduce a diverse pathways view examining variations and changes in transition experiences among men and women, as well as similarities in pathways to independent adulthood between the 1960s and today. The essay also addresses the intersection of multiple inequalities (focusing on class and gender) that shape individual transition experiences, and introduces the notion of “bounded diversity” taking into account the institutional framing of transitions. It is argued that existing templates for the transition to adulthood are dominated by the assumption of a linear career path moving from full-time education to full-time continuous employment, which is more typical for males than females, ignores the dynamics of human lives, and the need to combine work and family roles. To address the complexities and variations in transitions of men and women and in different subgroups of the population, it is necessary to revise existing templates and increase awareness of persisting inequalities. Moving toward more flexible and dynamic conceptions that represent the changing everyday arrangements between men and women, it can be possible to undercut traditional views of status differences and open up new potential for life projects. I first review key findings regarding gender differences in transition experiences, followed by a brief consideration of recent research, and a discussion of issues for future research.

## INTRODUCTION

The transition to adulthood is a demographically dense period, involving multiple and interrelated social role changes across the “big five” role transitions, including completion of full-time education, entry into paid

employment, leaving the parental home, and the step into family formation and parenthood (Settersten, 2007). Each of these role transitions brings with it new challenges and opportunities, and completing most, if not all, of these role transitions is often considered to be the marker for reaching independent adulthood (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011; Shanahan, 2000). The transition to adulthood is set in a changing sociocultural context and there can be variations in the timing, sequencing, and patterning of transitions based on gender, socioeconomic background, ethnicity, culture, and historical period (Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005). The timetable for completing specific transitions is not globally valid, but is culturally based (Buchmann, 1989; Marini, 1984) and structured through institutional settings. Age-related expectation regarding the timing and sequencing of transitions are subject to change, often brought about through influences from the wider sociohistorical context in which these transitions are embedded, through individual agency or collective action (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2004). Examining the timing and sequencing of transition experiences as well as the role of multiple macro- to micro-level influences on individual development, life course theory (Elder, 1985) provides a comprehensive framework, especially regarding issues of gender variability in experiences during times of social change.

The life course can be understood as a series of role transitions that denote changes in status or social roles, such as leaving school and entering full-time employment. Each role and status change can be understood as a turning point with significant social, emotional, and economic implications. Transitions are, however, not single, isolated events, but often overlap and occur simultaneously. For example, young people might be in higher education and at the same time are engaged in paid employment, have a partner and may even have children. The combination of multiple social roles at a given time point has been conceptualized by the notion of role or status configurations to describe patterns of discrete social roles that individuals occupy (Macmillan & Eliason, 2003). The life course thus comprises a sequence of status profiles where status or role configurations at a given point in time can be understood as the result of previous transition histories, individual agency, and contextual factors. Individual experiences and agency interact with the wider sociohistorical context to shape the occurrence, timing, and order by which individuals assume configurations of social roles.

### CHANGING PATHWAYS TO ADULTHOOD

Up to the 1960s, transition experiences of young people have been characterized by a normative linear timetable of events, characterizing a gendered life course. Men generally could expect to follow a pathway from schooling

through full-time continuous employment to retirement, while women were expected to marry and support their husband's careers and to look after the family. The breadwinner/homemaker template provided a guideline about careers by creating a divide between paid work and unpaid family-care work, and thus a gender divide regarding occupational prospects and opportunities (Buchmann, 1989; Levy & Widmer, 2013; Moen & Roehling, 2005). Today, the gender division is disputed and is more permeable.

Following the youth and student rebellions during the 1960s and early 1970s, young people began to experiment with new ideas and life styles, bringing with it pervasive value changes (Inglehart & Norris, 2003). These were manifested in demographic variations such as delayed marriage and childbirth, the rise of nonmarital unions, divorce, and remarriage, and ideational claims to autonomy and self realization. The transition into independent living became disassociated from the traditional markers of adulthood, such as getting married. The women's movement also played a crucial role in reshaping the lives of both women and men, encouraging women to pursue education and careers partially independent from family formation. The expansion of further education as well as the increasing participation of women in the labor market have been considered as explanations for the increasing prolongation and destandardization of life course transitions (Blossfeld & Hofmeister, 2006).

Owing to the increasing participation in higher education and the labor force since the 1960s, it has furthermore been argued that the life course of men and women has become more similar (Charles, 2011). Moreover, women are increasingly taking on the role of main breadwinner in the family (Crompton, 2006; Cunningham, 2008), pointing toward new templates defining social relations between men and women. However, gender equality in opportunity and attainment remains an aspiration, and the gender revolution that started in the 1960s has stalled (England, 2010; Schoon & Eccles, 2015). This is due to a number of reasons, including the lack of change in the personal realm and in the cultural and institutional devaluation of activities associated with women.

### PERSISTING INEQUALITIES

Some have interpreted the changes in transitions as a widening of life chances and opportunities, characterized by changing social practices and the breakdown of many class- and gender-based constraints shaping demographic events, such as employment and family formation (Lesthaeghe, 2010). Individual biographies are considered to have become more removed from traditional life scripts and more dependent on individual decision making and choice (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The notion of individual decision

making has, however, to be understood against the background of persisting inequalities in transition experiences due to gender, ethnicity, and class. The notion of bounded agency (Shanahan, 2000) takes into account persisting evidence of unequal access to educational and career opportunities and interprets the changes in life course transitions as difficult and sometimes involuntary adaptations to external constraints. Participation in higher education, for example, has shown to be more strongly influenced by social background than ability, suggesting persistent inequalities in educational opportunities (Breen & Goldthorpe, 2002; Schoon, 2008, 2010). Furthermore, women generally make the step into family formation and parenthood earlier than men (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Blossfeld & Hofmeister, 2006; Martin, Schoon, & Ross, 2008) and in most Western countries they also leave the parental home earlier than men—either to start their own family, or increasingly so, to live independently.

#### AGENCY AND STRUCTURE

It has been argued that men and women develop different preferences, aspirations or values regarding their future careers (Hakim, 2000; Watt & Eccles, 2008). Men are considered to be motivated by the desire for mastery and self-reliance, while women strive for social approval and an orientation to others. Furthermore, women perceive they are more capable than men in reading, writing, the social sciences, and humanities, while men perceive they do better in mathematics, sciences, and technical fields. These self-perceptions, in turn, are reflected in the choice of post-high school careers, college majors, professional degrees, and occupations (Correll, 2004; Eccles, 1994). Gendered preferences and beliefs do not, however, develop in a vacuum, and have to be seen as embedded within the social contexts in which they emerge, and which, in turn, they can influence and shape (Schoon & Eccles, 2015).

Previous research has shown that attainment gaps between men and women are closing. Since the 1980s, women perform better than men in education, are more motivated at school, more ambitious regarding their educational and occupational aspirations (Reynolds & Burge, 2008; Schoon, 2010), and gender differences in higher education enrolment have disappeared in most countries (Schofer & Meyer, 2005) or even reversed. In adulthood, however, women do not reach the same social positions as men. Although they are increasingly entering the professional “pipeline,” they do not make it to the top executive positions (Moen & Roehling, 2005; Scott *et al.*, 2010). This pattern holds also in female-dominated occupations, such as nursing or teaching. Furthermore, in addition to a rising demand for highly qualified young people, recent labor market changes also led to

an increasing demand for low-skilled, low-paid, mainly service jobs (Goos & Manning, 2007; Karoly, 2009), pointing toward a growing polarization of employment opportunities, with women being overrepresented in relatively low-status occupations, for example, care assistants and low-skilled service occupations.

The lack of progress regarding gender equality has been attributed to a “glass ceiling,” an invisible barrier to advancement or cumulative disadvantage of blocked opportunities based on attitudinal and/or structural bias. Gendered beliefs can be understood not just as individual beliefs but as culturally hegemonic in that the depiction of men and women is institutionalized in the media, government policy, normative images of the family, and so on, implying a gender hierarchy (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). In their analysis of gender as a social interactional construct, West and Zimmerman (1987) have argued that “gender is an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society” (p. 126). Considering gender as a multilevel structure, or institution of social practices that mutually reinforce processes at the individual, the interactional (social relational), and the macro-level, Cecilia Ridgeway (2009) argues that changes in political, economic, and technological factors that alter the everyday arrangements between men and women by undercutting traditional views of status differences could in the long run bring with it changes in gender beliefs (Ridgeway, 2009).

For example, considering the role of parents in supporting the career development of their children, previous studies among students in the 1950s and 1960s have shown that although girls attained, on average, higher grades than boys, they received less encouragement from their parents and had lower educational aspirations (Sewell, Hauser, & Wolf, 1980). In the wake of education expansion and increasing female participation in the labor market, more recent research however indicates changes in aspirations both among parents and their children (Reynolds & Burge, 2008) and a reversal in gender stereotyping due to the changing social relational context. In current cohorts, girls have generally higher education and career aspirations than boys. Furthermore, parental support for higher education is generally higher for daughters than for sons, especially among relatively less privileged families (Schoon, 2010). These findings suggest complex interactions between institutional change, social background, and gender in shaping the formation of aspirations. While aspirations are generally raised, among working class parents boys appear to be perceived as less suited for participation in higher education than girls, suggesting that there are persisting templates for male careers in traditional manual occupations. The processes shaping gender differences in transition experiences in times of

social change are not yet fully understood, and the effects of the correlated structural and individual level variables are difficult to disentangle.

### TIMING AND SEQUENCING OF TRANSITIONS MATTERS

One way forward in gaining a better understanding of the multiple and intertwined influences on development is to look more closely at the timing and sequencing of transition experiences and how these are shaped. In every society, age is used as a mean of placing individuals in a template defining and regulating possible transitions. There are cultural norms and expectations about the timing of transitions: the right time to leave school, to get a job, to find a partner, and to start a family (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011; Marini, 1984), although these norms can vary by cultural context and gender. Normative, or “on-time transitions” are “culturally prepared” by socialization and institutional arrangements and are understood to be psychologically salutary. Those who are “off-time”: too early or too late are thought to be the target of negative social sanctions and to experience psychological strain (Heckhausen, 1999). Furthermore, the timing of one transition (such as early parenthood) often has implications for other transitions (i.e. continuing in education or entry to employment).

The time frame for achieving most of the developmental demands might have expanded for later born cohorts, and more recent cohorts might feel more relaxed about not fulfilling all five transition demands by their late twenties, in particular the step into parenthood (Shanahan, 2000). Early transitions, in contrast, such as leaving school at compulsory school age (instead of continuing in higher education), or early parenthood are generally considered as social problems. On the other hand, it has been argued that early transitions can be beneficial for certain individuals (Booth, Rustenbach, & McHale, 2008). For example, the effects of parenthood on well-being depend on marital status as well as other circumstances in life (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). According to “developmental match/mismatch models” (Eccles, 1994) transitions that provide a progressive increase in developmentally appropriate challenges through which young people can experience competence enable the individual to successfully master the transition. If, however, the demands of the developmental transitions are not matched to the capabilities of the individual, or if they amplify previous difficulties, there can be a negative effect on mental health and well-being. This points to the role of institutional structures in shaping and channeling life course transitions over and above individual agency and socioeconomic constraints, and the need for flexibility.



#### MULTIPLE, INTERLINKED TRANSITIONS

Existing templates and life course models are oriented toward a linear sequence of education, full-time employment and retirement. Yet, human lives do not follow such a lock-step sequence (Moen & Roehling, 2005). A number of recent studies looking at transition experiences across different countries found that there is not one normative way to successfully negotiate the transition to adulthood, that there is heterogeneity in transition experiences. Unlike previous studies, which mostly looked at single transitions, such as the transition from education to employment, these studies used more holistic, or person-based approaches (Schulenberg & Schoon, 2012), examining how different transitions (i.e., education, work, housing, family formation, and parenthood) weave together in people's lives.

These studies demonstrated the usefulness of latent class or latent transition analysis to map out diversity and heterogeneity in role configurations in young adulthood (Macmillan & Copher, 2005), as well as sequence analysis to assess the ordering and duration of multiple transition events simultaneously (Barban & Billari, 2012; Schoon *et al.*, 2009). These studies found, for example, that the active engagement and simultaneous commitment to multiple meaningful social roles is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction and well-being. For instance, in the UK context, 26-year-olds who were delaying commitment to adult roles, who were focusing on only two transitions, that is, education and work without establishing a committed relationship or their own home, expressed reduced levels of life satisfaction and higher levels of drinking (Schoon *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, through comparison of different birth cohorts, changes in trends and transition experiences can be revealed, and comparisons across countries can inform on the role of different sociocultural contexts in shaping the timing and sequencing of transition events (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011; Schulenberg & Schoon, 2012).

#### A DIVERSE PATHWAYS VIEW

Most men and women want to have it all, a career, a family, and a home of their own. Yet, social and gender differences in transition experiences persist, as do gender specific expectations and career templates. As more women have entered the workforce and have taken on new roles, they have retained their position as the person responsible for childcare (Crompton, 2006; Moen & Roehling, 2005). Women, wives and mothers, increasingly try to maintain continuous employment, even if this means to work in low-paid jobs that enable flexible working times, and continue to do most of society's care work without pay (Moen & Roehling, 2005). They are also more likely than men to drop out of the labor market completely, mostly to look after their families and children (Blossfeld & Hofmeister, 2006; Moen, 2003). For women,

the roles as mother and labor-force participant appear to be interdependent and in conflict, while for men their roles as father and worker are more independent and easier to combine, although many men, husbands and fathers, have to put in long hours at work—and try to help out at the home (Moen & Roehling, 2005).

Pathways to independent adulthood have diversified, especially for women who have to develop more flexible strategies to combine different social roles. Yet the diversity of pathways is not unlimited, and a set of models mostly account for a large majority of individual lives (Levy & Widmer, 2013; Schoon, Ross & Martin, 2009). These templates are shaped by social background, gender, ethnicity, previous transition experiences as well as institutional structures, suggesting bounded diversity. Some have argued that there has been a polarization of transitions, differentiating between fast versus slow transitions (Jones, 2002) or problematic versus smooth pathways (Kerckhoff, 1993; McLanahan, 2004), reflecting the accumulation of (dis-)advantages. There is however also a large group of young people who fall between this dualism, who develop distinct strategies in navigating the multiple demands of becoming an independent adult, juggling the resources available to them, and finding adaptive solutions (Schoon, 2014).

Moving beyond a dualistic conceptualisation of transition experiences, I suggest a diverse pathways view, taking into account human plasticity and the potential for change. For example, defying the notion of a predetermined trajectory, a considerable number of young people are able to turn round an initially problematic transition, such as early school leaving (Schoon & Duckworth, 2010) or early parenthood (Furstenberg, 2003; Schoon & Polek, 2011) and lead a happy and satisfied life. Finding a supportive partner or support from the family and wider social community, for example, can play a vital role. Moreover, participation in lifelong learning can have a significant protective effect by keeping adults close to a changing labor market (Evans, Schoon, & Weale, 2013). Especially during conditions of growing social inequality and economic uncertainty, workers of the future will be expected to learn new skills throughout their labor market career, not just at the beginning. This might also imply shifting to new lines of work when old ones have become obsolete.

There is considerable dynamic in life course transitions, and each transition can bring new challenges and opportunities, including the potential for change. The potential for change is however not unlimited, is not always positive, and depends on the constellations of pre-existing and concurrent circumstances. The life course can be understood as a series of interlinked sequence of status profiles, characterized by consistency and coherence as well as discontinuity and change, involving the reorganization of previous patterns. This dynamic and the interdependence of role transitions suggests



the need for new conceptual models as well as empirical methods that account for the multidimensional and multidirectional associations between transition events, their antecedents, and associated outcomes.

### SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

Previous research has shown a convergence in the male and female transition to adulthood, with an increasing female participation in higher education and employment. There is however considerable heterogeneity in transition experiences due to persisting gender and social class differences. Current policy thinking is still dominated by the assumption of a linear career path moving from full-time education to full-time employment. Crucially, what is lacking is the recognition that careers extend beyond conceptions of full-time, uninterrupted education and paid work, into other domains of people's lives, such as family careers and other social roles. The findings presented here suggest the need for the revision of currently dominant templates and the introduction of new, more flexible and diversified life course models, taking into account the experiences of different subgroups of the population, their need for career path flexibility, which includes support for occasional time-outs, second chances, and life-long learning. Existing social arrangements provide guidelines for action and shared expectations and beliefs, yet they are outmoded conventions regarding education, paid work, unpaid care, and gender differences that hinder the development of new career regimes that integrate education and learning, work and family-related commitments as well as wider social contacts across the life course. The findings draw attention to the need for a more flexible, dynamic, and multilevel conceptualization of transition experiences—a diverse pathways view. Methodologically this implies the use of both population- and person-based approaches. Recognizing the interdependence of transitions, their dynamics, and the role of the wider sociohistorical context in shaping individual aspirations and beliefs, offers new avenues for future research on the changing transition to adulthood and its implication for social and individual development.

To adequately map changing trends in transition experiences, it is important to collect comparable information across different age and birth cohorts, ideally on an international level and with large enough sample sizes to represent experiences for different subgroups of the population. To capture the dynamics in transition experiences, it is vital to collect longitudinal data, following up on individuals over time. Over time, new measures that reflect new developments and changes in everyday social relations and experiences (e.g., involving new communication technologies) have to be introduced. Moreover, great care has to be taken to also ensure comparability with previous measures, such as indicators of occupational status. Furthermore, it is

important to collect good data on both structural and contextual factors as well as individual experiences and preferences, requiring the collaboration across disciplines, such as economics, sociology, psychology, demography, and epidemiology. In addition, research of the future on gendered transition experiences should also take into account biological and physiological differences; for example, changes occurring during puberty, that can have long-term influences regarding the timing and sequencing of transition, as well as cross-cultural and ethnic variations. Not only should variations in transition experiences be accurately depicted and analyzed but it is also necessary to discern the meaning and mechanisms of these differences in more detail.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The analysis and writing of this essay were supported by a grant from the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC): RES-594-28-0001 (Centre for the Study of Learning and Lifechances in the Knowledge Economies and Societies [Llakes]) and the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin (WZB).

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