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## ARTICLES IN ENGLISH

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### **TRANSITIONS INTO ADULTHOOD AND INEQUALITIES: THE INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

The life course approach and, more specifically, the transition to adulthood have become important fields in social science. The creation of the family unit, finishing one's education, entering the labour market, accessing social security and progressing on the property ladder have all been the focus of systematic inquiries based on different theoretical paradigms that examine the backgrounds, trajectories and destinations of these transitions. This paper reviews debates in the contemporary field of transition research and argues that public policy outputs do not necessarily form coherent normative patterns. Nevertheless, they may provide an important reference framework for norms and expectations. This research has demonstrated systematic class, ethnic and gender differences in biographical pathways, despite the trend towards more deliberate biography construction. It is suggested here that the timing and sequence of the various stages of transition to adulthood depends on the compatibility existing between different life domains, i.e. the various societal and individual, structural and cultural levels. Such compatibility can be achieved by means of public policies that facilitate a "normal" transition through normative prescriptions and resource re-distribution.

*Key words:* transition to adulthood, institutional perspective, life course, Europe

When considering the function of age in sociological terms, it appears to be linked to society's need for social integration, division of labour and social control.

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It can be seen as a means of satisfying a fundamental need to establish the predictability of life, as frames of reference and standardized ways of perceiving the world (Hagestad 1997). Age is also an important factor of social differentiation and, as such, plays a role in social (intergenerational) conflicts (Corsten 1999). Both social and cultural reproduction is directly linked to the notion of age through concepts of generation, cohort, and life course. According to Jenny Hockey (2009:232), the concept of *youth* as a life stage is defined as "being single, spending money on age-specific socializing, renting accommodation, being in training, travelling or having a "rubbish job"". The concept of *adult* is a negation of all these characteristics. This process of moving from one mode of life organization, such as the shift from a mode characterized by dependency and a small number of responsibilities to one of personal autonomy and the status of a fully-fledged citizen, is the focus of studies on transition to adulthood.

Rather than viewing the transition to adulthood as a one-time event, social sciences conceptualize this changeover as a process in which complex role attributes are acquired gradually. Such a transition is traditionally seen as a series of steps: finishing school and entering the labour market, starting independent living, creating a first long-term partnership and having a first child (Shanahan 2000). Earlier research demonstrated that public institutions play an important role in facilitating an individual's movement through the life course. They do this through the use of rights and obligations that are age-graded and by providing support for those population groups who cannot fully care for themselves. This paper looks to examine the institutional perspective, which links biographical outcomes to the individual attributes and structures of opportunities. Furthermore, empirical evidence will be reviewed, revealing patterns of inequalities in transition to adulthood and allowing suggestions as to which institutional factors are worth examining when one looks to understand these inequalities.

### **What does the institutional paradigm suggest and how is it challenged?**

Analytical and empirical connections between formal institutions and life course are difficult to define as public policies are rarely designed to intervene in the life trajectories (Mayer, Schoepflin 1989). From the institutional perspective, an individual's progression in social time and space is ordered by a set of formal rules that prescribe rights and obligations in accordance with various positions and roles. Individual biographies have become increasingly ordered among a larger and larger part of the population than ever before through age-graded access to public schooling, military service and the labour market (Hogan, Astone 1986). As a result, better prospects for security and predictability in one's life course can be expected to emerge.

Welfare policies are especially relevant for discussions of institutional frameworks as they facilitate the individual's movement by offering age-graded definitions

of rights and obligations and providing support for those groups of population who "failed" in the transition to adulthood and/or cannot fully care for themselves, (Anxo 2010). Important similarities and differences were observed in patterns of transition to adulthood. Focusing on family formation, for instance, Maria (Iacovou 2002) demonstrated links between Gøsta Esping-Andersen's (1990) welfare regimes and the timing and sequence of several transition events. According to the author, *Scandinavian* countries, with their generous individual-based welfare provisions, demonstrate a clear pattern of early transition from the parental home, widespread cohabitation with and without children, and a weak link between marriage and children. In *southern European* countries, where families and informal welfare provisions play a more prominent role, young people stay at the parental home much longer and leaving the parental home usually coincides with marriage, with children arriving relatively quickly after marriage. Other countries tend to lie between these two opposite and more extreme poles.

Basing his work on the general principles in the societal approach to adulthood, as well as socioeconomic and institutional frameworks, Andreas Walther (2006), has distinguished between *universalistic*, *minimal*, *employment-centred* and *sub-protective* transition regimes. These categories capture not only the levels of standardization in the passage into and from education but also reveal opportunities to make flexible choices, and demonstrate the accessibility of social rights and the labour market. Similar to Iacovou's regimes, Walther's approach builds on Esping-Andersen's typology as he groups countries in a similar way. Universalistic regimes are present in Nordic countries, which provide high levels of standardization in the provision of and flexibility in exercising social rights. They also retain a large public sector and active labour market programmes. The UK and Ireland, which belong to the minimal regime, create differentiated biographic routes through support for early economic independence, the provision of diversified academic and vocational training programmes and the presence of a "fluid" labour market. Continental countries fall into the category of the employment-centred regime, structuring occupational careers on a somewhat segregated labour market. Finally, the sub-protective countries of Southern Europe are characterised by the low standardization of education system and low flexibility of work arrangements for young people.

This institutional perspective has been challenged by long-term comparisons of age cohorts in their experiences of transition in adulthood, which suggest a shift away from relatively predictable and linear life courses to more pluralized and de-standardized ones, which are constructed by individuals no longer suffering the pressure of traditional normativity. The diversity of life course trajectories in a "globalizing", "fluid" and "individualized" world is seen to reflect the increased role of agency in the processes behind the deliberate and creative construction of individual biography (Bruckner, Mayer 2005). Modernization theory has emphasised the disembedding of traditional collec-

tively based institutions and revealed the increased role of agency in the process of deliberately and creatively constructing an individual biography.

Individualization, in turn, suggests that in making sense of adulthood today, young adults rely on individual choice and a personal sense of maturity. This gives a priority to responsibility for one's self and consideration to and responsibility for others rather than to any biological or behavioural transformations (Arnett 2001). This liberation from the constraints of the traditional life-course path and pressures of collectivities opens opportunities and, in fact, often demands that the individual should deliberately define their status as adults, often relying more on their personal sense of maturity than on the attainment of certain social roles. These discussions are often disconnected from discussions on inequality, as the capacity to reflect and take responsibility is not conceptualised as a result of access to economic, cultural, social or symbolic resources. However, while social differentiations have become more obscured and difficult to interpret, they are nevertheless important for the (re) shaping of individual biographies (Furlong et al. 2011).

While studies that bring together subjective understandings of adulthood and institutional frameworks are rare, the importance of normative foundations for welfare (re)distributions has been the subject of research in the past. For instance, it has been demonstrated that the sustainability of welfare arrangements is directly affected not only by income inequalities but also by the perceived fairness of redistribution principles and the quality of government in operation (Svallfors 2013). On the other hand, it has been shown that individual values can be influenced by policies mitigating social risks (Kulin, Svallfors 2013). Looking specifically at norms associated with specific transitions (Aassve et al. 2013), it can be seen that institutional factors such as education, the labour and the accessibility of credit affect variation in these norms between European countries; when formal institutions facilitate entrance into these spheres, the age deadlines for transitions are earlier.

Moreover, institutionalization does not necessarily entail direct social pressures towards conformity (Hogan, Astone 1986). Under some conditions, state guaranteed security may provide opportunities for a certain degree of pluralization and de-standardization in the forms, timing and sequence in which these events take place. The overall interpretation of systematic variation among life course patterns and institutional frameworks, however, can be that legal provision for social rights and responsibilities allows the reconciliation of various social roles (when they might be in conflict) without a loss of income and strives to ensure equality between different population groups in achieving such reconciliation (Anxo et al. 2010).

### **What does the empirical evidence show?**

The above-mentioned thesis on the pluralization/de-standardization of the life course is empirically challenged by studies that specifically focus on the processes of social stratification. They have demonstrated that race/ethnicity, class and gender

are essential components of norms and status hierarchies influencing variations in age norms and the content of transition events. Socio-economic, racial and ethnic variations in family formation, schooling, employment and housing continue to contribute to the maintenance of differences in the normative and behavioural aspects of the life course development. These characteristics can be viewed as personal attributes but they are also, more importantly, structural factors embedded in the institutional mechanisms of differentiation and inequality.

Research on racial differences in family relationships in the USA has demonstrated that Black American young adults achieve less financial and emotional autonomy and often are not able to achieve residential autonomy (Garasky 2002; Gutmann et al. 2002). There are also differences in the sequence of the transition to the family role, with childbearing preceding marriage among Black American adults more often than among White Americans (de Valk, Liefbroer 2007). Similarly, it has been shown that young adults of migrants in Europe enter marriage and parenthood earlier than native adults. Differences in these patterns of transition are explained by normative definitions of earlier age limits transmitted between generation among ethnic minorities (Uecker, Stokes 2008). But more often they are seen in the context of discrimination and broader structural constraints in gaining access to social rights, such as housing and birth control.

Examining various forms of socio-economic inequalities permits further exploration of the meanings behind the above-mentioned individualization thesis. Evidence suggests that individuals with the most resources will extend their transition the longest (Bynner 2005) and as a result follow different trajectories and arrive at varying endpoints in their transitions (Roberts, Pollock 2009). They will also have an opportunity to postpone the transition and formulate more individualised targets. For individuals from lower economic classes, adulthood could be tied to building a family, in the middle classes it could be more linked to economic independence, while the upper classes may conceive adulthood in terms of continual personal development (Plug et al. 2003). Young adults who are deprived of resources and traditional identities can be assigned with an individualized responsibility for making "wrong choices" in their biography construction (Kravchenko 2014).

Earlier studies have also shown that men and women, following formal and informal normative prescriptions for masculinity and femininity, make different choices when it comes to making the transition into adulthood. This includes variation in selecting disciplines and types of education (and subsequently careers) and the association of adulthood with different social roles (Plug, Zejl, Du Bois-Reymond 2003). Women tend to leave the parental home a few years earlier than men (Spéder et al. 2014) and often do so in order to form a relationship (Billari et al. 2001). Further variations in age norms are observed with women tending to separate the question of fertility from that of marriage (Oesterle et al. 2010) and to formulate higher age norms for residential autonomy. (Aassve et al. 2013) Women also tend to view adulthood as closely linked to one's ability to take responsibility for others (Westberg 2004) and

face with questions of dependence, independence and interdependence somewhat earlier than men (Gordon, Lahelma 2002).

A closer look at geographical differences in biographic events highlights persistent patterns of institutional variation. When it comes to the transition to tertiary education, Elisabeth Fussell (2002) has demonstrated, for example, that Scandinavian and East European countries have lower enrolment rates and peak at the later ages of 21–22. The author also demonstrated that young people in western and northern Europe are less likely to enter the labour market while attending school, unless they are engaged in vocational education. In Eastern Europe, although the traditional state-regulated approach to job assignments, hiring regulations, and wage rates has disappeared, the patterns of association between education and occupation have remained stable, suggesting continuity in institutional arrangements despite the dramatic transformations witnessed in the region (Gerber 2003).

Standardisation in the organisation of the educational system, employment structure, housing allocation, health care and social protection may produce different results. Under socialist regimes, for instance, the formation of partnerships in Eastern Europe was marked by marriage, and cohabitation was not widespread (Katus et al. 2007). Since the necessary breaks in the work record were already included into the system of social security provision (in the form of job protection and parental leave regulations), and childcare services were generally available, women faced no insecurity around the decision to have children. Consequently, people in socialist societies tended to marry and have their first child relatively early, especially when compared to Northern European welfare countries where the opposite trend was observed. After the collapse of socialist regimes, East European countries started developing more heterogeneous patterns in transition to adulthood. Differences in normative perceptions of suitable timing and in the development of housing and labour markets are usually considered to be the key factors behind the emerging heterogeneity (Philipov 2002; Thalberg 2003). These recent tendencies have been vividly summarized (Juang, Silbereisen, Wiesner 1999) as, on one hand, diversifying the life course trajectories within the former socialist bloc and, on the other hand, converging with those in the West at different pace.

Finally, leaving the parental home can be seen as a series of semi-transitions. This includes living at the parental home with occasional habitation elsewhere, living elsewhere with occasional visits to parents and leaving/returning for periods that are relatively long (Mandic 2008). Comparative research has highlighted distinctive differences between the Nordic countries and the southern parts of Europe. For instance, the age by which 50 percent of young adults have left the family home in Finland is 20 years for women and 21 years for men, compared to 27 years for females and almost 30 for men in Italy (Iacovou 2002). Iacovou (2002) also revealed significant differences between the regions in arrangements of living conditions for individuals who still live at home: living with extended family is most common in Austria and among black and Hispanic Americans, as well as southern European.

To summarize, cross-national comparisons provide not only empirical evidence that improves understanding of variation between the countries, but can also be used to challenge the paradigmatic assumptions about the transformation and continuity of biographical paths in contemporary societies. Intra- and inter-country comparisons reveal great variations in individual normative ideas regarding the appropriate strategies and timing in different stages of adulthood (Smith 2004), as well as their actual practices. Coming of age is a multidimensional and "heterochromatic" process that has been studied from various perspectives. It is during the period of young adulthood that individuals formulate and act upon their preferences with regard to nuptial and reproductive behaviour, joining the market as commodified producers and consumers of goods and services, and, in turn, acquiring an opportunity to put into action their civic and political rights. The place of young people in the structure of intergenerational relations, their socialization into the dominant system of values, and their potential for reproducing the established social order are of particular interest for social scientists and policy-makers.

### **How can institutions matter?**

Young adults are a common object for studies that focus on the diversity of lifestyles within and across nations, and the de-standardization and reflexivity of the contemporary life-course. Social class is also a prominent factor in the theoretical problematization of differentiations in biographical trajectories, especially in relation to structural differences. Discussions about the reproduction of structural inequalities in contemporary societies in the process of transition to adulthood are equally widespread. The level of socio-economic inequality, unequal access to education and employment are proven to be important determinants in the timing of transition to adulthood (Goldscheider, Goldscheider 1999). In this section, which is based on earlier research and comparative cross-national data, I discuss which institutions may be relevant for the transition to adulthood and how they influence the transition process.

The role of social structures, institutional norms and policy frameworks can be operationalized, interpreted and explained in different ways. When examining the legal frameworks that regulate adulthood status, no clear progression in terms of the accumulation of individual, civic and social rights can be observed. While indicators such as the age of majority is often mentioned to show the existence of legal regulations, it would appear that no cross-national analysis involving this type of institutional data has been conducted to discover whether they actually influence individual norms and behaviour. Actually, there is uniformity in the ages of majority, voting and obtaining a driver's licence among EU countries, which appears to be a result of the unifying process of emancipation and technological development that worked against influences from specific national traditions of the family and economic practices. At the same time, there are other formal norms which vary rather significantly, which is further described below.

Table 1.

## Legal age-graded regulations, 2006

Country	Sexual relationship with consent	Marriage with parental consent	Marriage without parental consent	Full-time compulsory education	Employment	Youth transport discounts	National ID	Military draft
Austria	14	16	18	15	12	14	16	18 <sup>d)</sup>
Belgium	16	no	18	15	15	12	12	18
Bulgaria	14	16	18	16 <sup>b)</sup>	15	26	14	18
Cyprus	17	14	18	15	15	no	12	18 <sup>d)</sup>
Denmark	15	16	18	16	13	26	12	18 <sup>d)</sup>
Estonia	14	16	18	16	13	no <sup>c)</sup>	15	18 <sup>d)</sup>
Finland	16	no	21	16	13	16 <sup>c)</sup>	18	18 <sup>d)</sup>
France	15	no	18	16	13	12	18	17
Germany	14	16	18	16	14	18	16	18 <sup>d)</sup>
Hungary	14	16	18	18	14	26 <sup>c)</sup>	14	18
Ireland	15	no	18	16	15	16 <sup>c)</sup>	no	17

Latvia	16	16	18	16	13	10	15	18
Netherlands	16	16	18	17	13	11 <sup>e</sup>	16	20
Norway	16	no	18	16	13	no <sup>e</sup>	18	18 <sup>d</sup>
Poland	15	18	21 <sup>a)</sup>	16	15	24	18	18 <sup>d)</sup>
Portugal	14	16	18	15	16	25 <sup>e)</sup>	10	18
Romania	15	no	18 <sup>a)</sup>	16	15	10	14	18
Russia	16	16	18	15b)	14	10	14	18 <sup>d)</sup>
Slovakia	15	16	18	16	15	15	15	17
Slovenia	15	16	18	15	13	26 <sup>e)</sup>	18	17
Spain	13	16	18	16	16	26 <sup>e)</sup>	14	20
Sweden	15	no	18	16	13	25	13	18 <sup>d)</sup>
Switzerland	16	no	18	15	16	16	18	19 <sup>d)</sup>
UK	16	16	18	16	13	25 <sup>e)</sup>	no	16
Ukraine	16	14	18 <sup>a)</sup>	15	15	14	16	18

Notes: <sup>a)</sup>earlier marriage age for women; <sup>b)</sup>no publically financed second higher education degree; <sup>e)</sup>student-status related discount is also available; <sup>d)</sup>drafting was obligatory in 2006.

In relation to family formation, it is relevant to explore the importance of legally established norms for sexual consent and marriage with and without parental consent. The age of consent is normally defined by criminal law and varies with regard to actual age limits, the type of sexual act, the age and gender of the actors involved and their prior relationship with each other. As we see in Table 1, while most countries set the minimum age for consent between fourteen and sixteen years old, Spain stands out at one end with the age limit on thirteen and Cyprus, at the other end, with seventeen years. The age for marriage without parental consent is usually defined in civic legislation and is in most cases established at the age of eighteen. However, it can be defined differently for men and women, and exceptions can be introduced depending on whether a child is expected. Some regulations do not prescribe age-graded norms but, rather, set conditions that may shape the individual's ability to plan their life course and/or bring those plans to fruition, including the accessibility of contraception, abortion and in-vitro fertilization.

Education systems have at least two relevant normative deadlines; the age of full-time compulsory secondary education, which in Europe is either fifteen or sixteen years old, with the exception of the Netherlands and Hungary, where the age limit is seventeen and eighteen respectively. While tertiary education is normally not age-graded, two countries established an upper age-limit for enrolment into publically-funded higher education. The latter is not relevant in systems that do not offer privately-funded education programmes, for instance Sweden, or where tuition fees are charged to all students, for instance the UK. Earlier research has indicated that the structural organisation of education is relevant not only for any subsequent transition into labour market (Evans, Heinz 1994), but also for processes of identity formation (Rudd, Evans 1998). Such structural features may include the introduction of vocational training as a part of secondary education and flexibility in how the system tracks students from both secondary and tertiary levels into work (Iannelli, Smyth 2008).

While all European countries have ratified the ILO Convention No. 138 "On the minimum age for admission to employment and work", which is established at the age of sixteen, national labour legislation in many countries provides conditions for minors to join the workforce earlier if the work is not deemed to intervene with their studies, entail a heavy workload or bring any harm to the child's physical and psychological development. In practice, the first entrance into the labour market may occur without reference to education, often in low-qualified temporary positions and under parental consent. It is noteworthy that in most countries, labour market participation is one of the earliest officially scripted markers of independence. In some countries the first official work contract can be obtained already at the age of twelve or thirteen (Austria, Denmark, Estonia and Sweden). In most countries one can work before reaching the age of consent, with the exception of Spain, Portugal and Bulgaria. The structural organisation of the labour market, its links with the educational system, its relationship with fluctuations in economic

growth and recession have direct consequences for young people's economic activity and occupational success (Iannelli, Smyth 2008).

The process of leaving the parental home is constructed as a series of steps related to (or independent from) all the above-mentioned transitions. It can emerge as a result of marriage, relocation to attend education or obtaining financial independence. Not only legal regulations, however, are relevant in this context. There are usually no formal public instruments that may directly regulate the transition from the parental home. However, a national identification document may be needed in order to establish a rental contract, and status/age-related transport-fee discounts may reduce overall expenses and thus allow other types of spending, such as sharing accommodation with other young people. The latter varies the most among the examined indicators: this sharing can begin from ten years old in Latvia, Russia and Romania to twenty-six years old in Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovenia, Spain and the UK. Many countries combine youth discounts with students' discounts, while others have one or the other. Leaving home for military service or other public duties, although reversible, is an important symbolic event that is still obligatory in many European countries, prompting young adults to make what can be their first geographical move. Apart from age-graded legal norms, young adults establishing themselves as housing consumers are usually subject to housing policy interventions in the form of housing allocation, including student accommodation, and loan provisions, as well as regulations of rent levels in the private housing market (Ford et al. 2002; Kemp, Rugg 2001).

The outlined set of legal norms and structural conditions do not reveal the exact mechanisms by which institutional outputs produce attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. Such an analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. For public institutions, addressing the needs of young adults creates a challenge in accommodating a variety of biographic trajectories into a sequence of sanctioned statuses, while complying with the rules of the market, adapting to changing business cycles and increasing geographic mobility. In some contexts, these regulations may create a stable pattern that steers the timing and the sequence of transition events, in other contexts they may offset each other but still remain meaningful reference points for individual decision-making. It is important to note, however, that despite the standardizing efforts of policy inputs, they all contain some degree of conditionality that generates structural inequalities between sexes, ethnic groups, individuals with differing resources, all of which affect the process of transition to adulthood.

### **Concluding discussion**

Age is one of the conceptual tools that help the individual and society to structure life and assign meaning to it, both as a whole and in its different stages. Transition to adulthood is one of the key points in individual's life that determines their access to various kinds of resources and social status throughout the longest period of their life (Hogan, Astone 1986). While finishing school, entering the labour

market and leaving the parental home underpin the individual's movement towards independence, acquiring a partner and having a first child do not per se lead to greater independence. They tend to coincide and interfere with other transition events, providing additional normative points of reference for other role transitions. This research suggests that the timing and sequence of the various stages of transition to adulthood depends on the compatibility between different life domains, i.e. the various societal and individual, structural and cultural levels.

The interplay between societal and individual-level factors has puzzled sociologists for decades. Different paradigmatic approaches have produced a variety of theoretical arguments, methodological tools and empirical evidence. Earlier studies have linked the biographical progression to normative prescriptions and various kinds of resources as well as to individual capacity to critically reflect upon their own experiences and opportunity framework. Research has demonstrated systemic differences in biographical pathways, their sequence, timing and final configuration of roles, which are being reproduced across generations and geographical space despite the trend towards more deliberate biography construction. Young adults are prone to the risk of social insecurity and poverty due to the precariousness of their status as workers and consumers. As a result, social policy becomes crucial for facilitating a "normal" transition through normative prescriptions and resource re-distribution.

The scope of public welfare provisions, the functioning of the labour market and the family support systems may influence the occurrence, the sequence and the timing of such transition events as leaving the parental home, partnering and having children (Vogel 2002). Combined with the levels of standardization/flexibility in the organization of educational systems, social and labour market policies shape the "interpretative background" (Walther 2006), a reference system for young people's orientations and aspirations. Furthermore, public policies divide one's biography into a sequence of clearly distinguished events; such as entering education, employment, marriage or retirement and strives to ensure that certain population groups do or do not experience those events and at certain points in time. The connections between policies' regulating these elements and life course events are often rather obscure. The classics of life-course theory asserted that public policies are rarely conceived with the idea of intervening in life trajectories. Nevertheless, state interference, explicitly based on age grading or those affecting life-course transitions by formulating conditions for access to public institutions and resources, bring with them normative representations of age-appropriate behavioural conduct.

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