

Class matters? Examining the mediating effects of socio-economic background on young people's education and employment pathways

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Abstract

This paper reports on wave 11 of the Life Chances Study which began in 1990 and has since followed a group of babies - now young adults - and their families. Wave 11 focuses on the education and employment pathways of the now 24-25 year olds. In this wave, in addition to longitudinal analysis, we used an initial survey and semi-structured interviews to gain insight into the nature of these pathways.

Our initial findings highlight the role that socio-economic background plays in the quality and length of the transition from school to satisfactory employment. For example, those from higher income families were more likely to attain a qualification than those from medium or lower income families (46% compared to 28% and 26%). Those from high income families were also more likely to be living at home at age 24-25, and to receive financial assistance from their parents than those from low income families, who were more likely to provide financial assistance to their parents. Most of the young people who had jobs were from high or medium income families, while most of those who were unemployed were from low income families. There were also more unemployed young men than young women. We draw on Bourdieu's concepts of capital, field, and habitus to examine the mediating effects of socio-economic background on young people's transition from school to work. We also consider what these young people thought had helped or hindered their path towards satisfactory employment.

Youth transitions

The move from education to work is commonly referred to as **youth transitions**. Youth studies scholars (such as Joanna Wyn and colleagues, 2010 and Kitty te Riele) talk about youth transitions as being **complex and uncertain** and criticize the notion of **linear trajectories**

Some researchers (such as Dan Woodman & Wyn 2013) highlight the **impact of social, economic and political changes** on the lives of young people.

Others (like David Raffe 2011) challenge the idea that the transition from school to work has become **more complex**, arguing that **for some groups of young people this period of life has always been uncertain**.

Recently Woodman & Wyn (2015) argue that **class, gender and generation matter**.

We're interested in why some young people do better than others and our key point is that class matters but it is not fate.

The study

The Life Chances Study is a longitudinal study initiated by the Brotherhood in 1990 to explore the **impacts of family income and associated factors on children over time**.

What I find fascinating about the study is that:

- it has been running for **25 years**
- participants are both men and women, from rich and poor families and are ethnically diverse
- and importance has been placed on maintaining relationships with the **original 167 infants** and their families, so there is a **very high retention rate**

We are now up to **wave 11** of the study and the 'infants' are **now 24/25 year olds**. **The focus of wave 11 is on their education and employment pathways**. We also asked them about whether they considered themselves to be an adult and asked about their aspirations for the next 5 years.

Wave 11 has **2 parts**:

- (1) a **survey** sent to 135 young people, for which we received 98 responses, as well examination of **longitudinal data** for these 98 participants, and
- (2) **in-depth interviews** with around 30-40 of these young people, which we are about to begin.

There were **more women** than men who responded to the survey and more respondents from **higher income families**.

I interviewed some of these young people in wave 10, when they were 21 year olds, and I'm looking forward to having another chat to see how they're going.

This presentation is based on **analysis of the survey responses and longitudinal data**.

ILO definitions

There are **different ways of understanding** the move from education to employment. The ILO model is useful as it focuses on **regular and satisfactory work**, however it doesn't capture the **complexity**, so we have **adapted** it.

The ILO defines the transition from school to work as '**the passage of a young person (aged 15 to 29 years) from the end of school to the first regular or satisfactory job**' (ILO 2009, p. 8).

'Regular' work is defined in terms of duration of contract or expected length of tenure; 'satisfactory' work is based on the jobseeker's self assessment.

Therefore, those young people who are *employed in a temporary and unsatisfactory job* are defined as being **in transition**, while those in a *satisfactory but temporary job* are defined as having **transited**.

We focus on the stages of **in transition and transited**. **[Click to fade out the not yet transited]**

We also add the category of **students** to the framework.

The ILO acknowledges that **students** are a **different** category but **excludes** them based on the idea that the main activity of the young person is studying and that working or looking for work is likely to be a secondary activity.

Students could be a sub-category of 'in transition' but we **separate** them because we are interested in the **different nature of pathways to employment**.

So we analysed survey responses and case summaries over 24 years using this adapted framework.

We also drew on French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of **social, cultural and economic capital and habitus** - or an understanding of the rules of the game – which are useful in making sense of the persistence of inequality. Importantly, while he is sometimes criticised as being **overly deterministic**, his concepts allow for improvisation and adaptation.

Employment pathways

So what are the different pathways to employment?

Our Initial findings show that our sample of 98 is fairly evenly spread, that is, there are similar numbers of young people who have **transited (38%)**, who are **students (33%)** and who are **in transition (29%)**.

Smooth and rocky pathways

Young people who had a relatively easy transition from education to employment had what we call a '**Smooth**' pathway. They had the economic, social and cultural capital associated with high income and professional families. For example, they were more likely to have 2 parents, to be from high income families, to go to a private school, to participate in extra-curricular activities, and to have stable lives. Some had encountered challenges along the way – such as parental divorce, or death, or illness - but they had the resources to cushion the impacts.

Those who had a **'rocky' pathway** had challenges in their lives, and whether they overcame these challenges depended on their access to economic, social and cultural resources. Those with fewer resources were more likely to have longstanding challenges. These young people tended to be from low income families, with single parents, unemployed parents, and to have attended state school and missed out on extra curricula activities due to cost.

We will now look at **who** had transitioned to regular or satisfactory work, **who** were students and **who** were in transition, and examine the **nature of their pathways** as well as their understandings of **adulthood and aspirations**.

Transitioned

So what do we know about those who have secured a regular or satisfactory job?

They were more likely to:

- Be women
- Be from high or medium income families
- Be from Non-English Speaking Background families

Transitioned - example

Most of the 37 who had transitioned had had a smooth pathway from education to employment, with:

- A Link between qualifications and current employment
- Most were Living with parents
- Most had Enough money
- Most had no health issues
- Most had a HECS debt

The handful that had had a rocky pathway tended to have:

- **No link** between qualifications and current employment, which perhaps suggests a lack of knowhow or understanding about how the fields of education and employment operate ("the rules of the game")
- They were **less likely** to live with parents
- They were **More likely** to have a debt other than HECS debt, such as a car loan (indicating a lack of economic capital)

Transitioned - adulthood

The young people who had secured regular or satisfactory work tended to equate **adulthood** with financial **responsibility and independence**.

'I have reached adulthood. I take responsibility for my actions. I pay for bills, mortgage and a car, I am my own person and I am developing my career.' (26)

Some also equated **adulthood** with **relationships**.

Transited - aspirations

In terms of aspirations, most were career focussed. Other aspirations included buying a house, having a family and travelling.

'Continue pushing forward with my career and spend time travelling. Save up for a mortgage on a house' (55)

'Be happy in my job and have a set plan on my career - Get married, and potentially consider having kids - Travel overseas' (97)

Students

Now we move on to the **students**. The numbers were **evenly distributed** in terms of gender, socio economic background and ethnicity.

Students - example

Most of the 32 students had had a smooth - but extended path - from education to employment.

- Most **had a link** between current employment and qualifications
- Most lived with their parents
- And most had enough money

As students they were **accruing social, cultural and economic forms of capital**.

The few who had had a **rocky road** had financial issues and were more likely than the other students to have debt other than HECS, such as car and personal loans.

The students tended to comment on the challenges of **managing the balance between work/study and relationships**. However their prolonged study was mainly due to postgraduate or professional training.

A few were still students because they had **changed direction** – they had the resources to change their minds.

Students - adulthood

Most students tended to believe they would become an adult when they **completed their study and got a job**.

'Full adulthood for me would mean a permanent part-time or full-time job after I am fully qualified' (111)

Students - aspirations

Not surprisingly, **many students** hoped to **finish studying and establish a career**.

'Successfully complete my [...] degree and secure permanent part-time or full-time work in the [...] sector. Travel overseas and perhaps put a mortgage on a house' (111)

A handful wished to go on to **further study**.

Some also mentioned hopes of **moving out of home** and **paying off debt/saving money**.

Unemployed or in unsatisfactory work (In transition)

The young people who were unemployed or in unsatisfactory work were **more likely** to:

- Be men
- From a low income family
- With numbers **evenly distributed** between Non-English Speaking Background families and Australian-born-parent families.

In transition - example

Most of the 29 young people who were **in transition** had had a **rocky pathway** from education to employment. **They had struggled.**

Most had **no link** between qualifications and employment.

And compared with the other groups, they were:

- **Less likely** to have enough money
- **More likely** to have debt other than HECS including personal loans and fines
- **More likely** to have health issues

They tended to have **fewer resources** – or social, cultural and economic capital.

In transition - adulthood

Those in transition were **more ambivalent** about adulthood.

They tended to equate adulthood with **responsibility** in addition to **financial independence.**

‘Although I live at home, I feel as though I have reached a level of maturity when I am able to take full responsibility for my actions and the choices I make in my life, and support myself’ (152)

Some felt **not yet adult**, and **stuck** in transition.

In transition - aspirations

Some of the 24 year olds who were in transition hoped to **start a career**, others **just wanted to get a job.**

Some wished to do **further study.**

Those in transition had the **same kinds of aspirations** as the other young people - to travel, buy a house and form a family of their own – but without a regular or satisfactory job they **lacked the resources.**

Some conclusions

Often there is a tendency to refer to ‘young people’, ‘youth’ and ‘youth transitions’ **without recognising the mediating effects** of class, gender, ethnicity and other structuring factors.

Our initial analysis shows that socio-economic background has a **strong and persistent effect** on life chances.

Socio-economic background matters, but it is not fate. Formal services and policies can smooth the path. For example:

- Free public education and assistance with meeting costs for camps for example
- Career advice - which my colleague Sharon will cover in the next presentation
- Access and equity programs for young people who are the first in their family to attend university – and so on...

The findings also show that **insecure or unsatisfactory work** affects young people's understandings of themselves as adults and their aspirations.

Next steps

- Part 2 of wave 11 of this research is due to **commence very soon**.
- It entails **in-depth interviews** to explore **young people's understanding of the impact of their family background on their pathway** to regular and satisfactory work.
- We are **keen to exploit the longitudinal insights** available from 25 years of rich data.

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