

Role statuses and transitions in adolescence and young adulthood: reflections and implications

John Bynner

Centre for Longitudinal Studies

Institute of Education, London

jbynner@slls.org

Abstract

The reflections begin by considering the methodological challenges in undertaking comparative youth transition research as exemplified by the Special Section papers. The paper then moves to the findings of the analysis reported and their interpretation in context. The final sections discuss substantive and methodological issues raised by the research and finish with some conclusions about next steps in what needs to be a continuing comparative programme.

Keywords: longitudinal, comparative methodology, youth transitions, role statuses, latent classes

Previous papers in this Special Section have reported four independently designed and executed research projects on role status configurations and the 'latent classes' with which they can be identified in the United States (US) Great Britain (GB) and Finland. To detect secular changes in these latent classes and their antecedents and outcomes, two cohorts were compared - separated by a birth interval of about 12 years - in single longitudinal studies in the US and in GB and in two separate longitudinal studies in Finland. This discussion paper is devoted to the broader comparative aim of bringing the studies together in a single framework for examining differences and similarities, drawing some general conclusions and considering next steps.

Introduction

Comparative research involving surveys conducted in different countries is a major challenge for social and developmental scientists. Cross-sectional surveys, including those comprising the panoply of performance indicators that make up national 'league tables' like OECD's 'Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies' (PIAAC) and 'Programme for International Student Assessment' (PISA), make heroic assumptions about 'commensurability' - what comparativists describe as the *problem of*

equivalence (e.g. Sztompka 1990). In the case of developmental processes such as life course trajectories, and the transitions they comprise, such problems of equivalence are compounded. For as Kohn (1987) points out, an investigation of similarities and differences between, in his terms, 'countries as context', as in the studies reported here, confronts the confounding of explanatory variables of numerous kinds with the cross-national categorical variable 'country' or 'nation state'. A glance at some of the Vienna Centre comparative projects involving countries from both sides of the Iron Curtain in the 1980s, such as *Youth and New Technology* (Fürst-Dilic 1991) or more recent initiatives such as *Rural Young People in a Changing Europe* (Helve 2000), display in abundance the complexity of establishing equivalence. Even a two-country project, *Transition to Work in England and Germany*, based on equal samples of young people matched at four occupational levels and by gender, in towns matched on whether they had expanding or contracting labour markets, had difficulty in explaining differences in transition outcomes, such as self-assessed skills. Quantitative research alone could not resolve the comparative issues raised (Bynner and Heinz 1991).

The Special Section offers the opportunity to compare role statuses and their antecedents and outcomes cross-nationally, bringing to light a

number of analytic and interpretative challenges that need to be addressed. This means that in the case of the three countries for which research is reported - four if you treat northern Finland, with its relatively sparse population and Sámi (Lapp) minority population and traditions, as culturally distinct from the central part of Finland where Jyväskylä is located - analysis needs to embrace the multiple interactions between the explanatory variables of interest and the three value categorical variable, 'country'. It is worth the effort because of the insights that may be gained into the ways in which institutional arrangements in different national contexts affect entry into the role statuses, identities and later wellbeing of the young people exposed to them (Côté and Bynner 2008).

My discussion begins by considering these challenges, then the outcomes of the analyses reported and their interpretation in context, followed by the substantive and methodological issues raised by the research. The paper finishes with some conclusions about next steps in what needs to be a continuing comparative research programme. Many of my points pick up and develop, with a slightly different slant, those made in the excellent overview paper by John Schulenberg and Ingrid Schoon (Schulenberg and Schoon 2012) with which the Special Section begins.

Comparative challenges

According to Scheuch (1990), the aim of comparative research is to resolve the tension between the '*search for universals*' and the '*elucidation of uniqueness*'. The former seeks replication across countries of law-like relationships deducible from a general theory; the latter views each country holistically as a complex system of interacting individuals and institutions. Even if ostensibly the same measures, translated into the relevant language(s), are used in a comparative study - including identical survey questions, attitude scales and psychological tests - we still have to confront cultural differences. These reside not only in each country's institutions and the cultural assumptions on which they are based, but in the meaning of the words used to describe the constructs to which the measures refer (Bynner and Chisholm 1998). For example the term 'youth training' has quite different connotations in German-speaking countries, because of its association with apprenticeship, than it does in

other European countries. In the US, the concept barely exists (Heinz 1999).

Moreover, countries are going through similar historical processes, not necessarily at the same time, in relation to the management of youth transitions. Finland, in common with other Nordic countries, experienced a major economic recession following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989-90. The effects of a 'lost generation' arising from the labour market consequences, are still felt today even if overlaid with the economic downturns encountered subsequently. The US and the GB experience of recession fluctuated since the 1970s, peaking in the early 1980s and early 1990s (plus early 2000 in the case of the US) and in company with Finland, reaching crisis point with the collapse of the banking system in 2008, from which the US has been recovering the most quickly. In March 2012, youth unemployment (15-25 year olds) in the US stood at 16% compared with 22% in the UK, 19% in Finland and 23% across the whole of the European Union.

It may be that such economically driven events are largely marginal in their effects on the key transitions to adulthood - at least in form, if not always in timing - and therefore unlikely to show marked differences between countries. As Kohn (1987) concludes, when differences do exist, explaining them requires insights that only socio-historical investigation outside the framework of quantitative enquiry can supply. The point is developed further by Ragin (1987) who argues for a '*dialogue*' between '*cases*' (individuals, regions, countries) and '*variables*', rather than treat them in isolation.

In the case of the Special Section studies, analysis was based on longitudinal data relating to role statuses at (average) age 26, collected in continuing longitudinal surveys in the US and GB, for two cohorts separated by a 12-year birth interval (broadly defined as 1974-1986). In Finland, two different longitudinal surveys were used to cover the same two cohorts and broadly the same birth interval, one in northern Finland and the other in Jyväskylä in central Finland. Not surprisingly, as we extend across studies, the methodological challenges multiply - not only in relation to the different national contexts of the transitions the survey members were experiencing, but also in the details of survey design, including sample selection, the questions asked, and variables included. Thus,

across the studies, the samples at age 26 varied in size from around 8-10,000 in each cohort in GB and in the older cohort in Northern Finland, through 5-6000 (total) in the US, and 400 in the younger cohort in Jyväskylä. The British samples are nationally representative birth cohorts based on all births in a single week in 1958 and 1970; the US samples, selected from the repeated cohort study 'Monitoring the Future' and with comparable birth dates to the British samples, are nationally representative of 12th grade graduation year students leaving high school in 1976/77 and 1988/89; the Northern Finland sample comprises all births in the provinces of Oulu and Lapland in 1966, and the Jyväskylä sample, all 2nd grade students in a random sample of 12 secondary schools born in 1959 and first contacted at completion of grade 2 in 1968.

Notably the Jyväskylä survey, unlike the others, experienced relatively little attrition since the study began in 1968. In the case of the Northern Finland study at age 26, to make good missing data and non-response in some follow-ups, there was heavy reliance on the Finnish Government's Population Registers. Data collection methods vary across the studies between face-to-face and telephone interviews and self-completion questionnaires and tests, as described in the separate papers.

As Schulenberg and Schoon (2012) make clear, the coordinated programme of secondary analysis projects for which the four papers report the findings, was clearly not constructed from scratch as a comparative study. It was more a case of exploiting existing longitudinal data to test theoretical propositions about youth transitions in ongoing surveys covering much the same age group, at much the same time, and sharing much relevant data. (See Hofer and Piccini 2009 for a discussion of model analytic strategies for this kind of programme). Survey coverage similarly shared common features for most role statuses, but with some variations including, in the case of Northern Finland, no identifiable distinction between part-time and full-time employment nor between the statuses of 'single', 'cohabiting', 'divorced' and 'widowed'. In the case of the US, Monitoring the Future coverage did not include experiences post-16 of that section of the population who failed to graduate from high school, i.e. mainly those who had dropped out by Grade 12.

If data can be linked only weakly across studies to achieve comparability, as Schulenberg and Schoon (2012) point out, comparative analysis can still be pursued but more at the 'functional' rather than 'measurement' level. That is to say, the modelling approach adopted is, in terms of shared constructs that the measurement reflects in much the same way, rather than through precisely matched data. Thus comparable role statuses, as outcomes of transition through the period of adolescence and young adulthood up to the mid- to late-twenties, will be experienced in all countries and in all cohorts: 'being employed', 'being married or in a partnership', 'having one or more children', 'being in education', 'living in the parental home' or in a 'home of your own' – i.e. those role statuses identified as outcomes of the 'Big Five' youth transitions classified as such by Settersten (2007).

Similarly, the demographic predictors of these outcomes can be identified in much the same way across studies – most obviously those to do with gender, socio-economic status (US)/social class (GB) and education. But even here, questions of commensurability and meaning in relation to social class, and especially to educational pathways and levels, start to become apparent.

The predicted outcomes of role statuses in terms of subsequent psychological states – 'depressed', 'satisfied with life' – measured by tests or single item self-assessment scales at a variety of ages, become even more difficult to pin down, involving different variables in the different studies. But all reflect, in varying degrees, self-appraisals of 'positive' as opposed to 'negative' affect (Crawford and Henry 2004), and all studies share much the same measure of *life satisfaction*. In the case of the US and, to a much lesser extent, Jyväskylä, post-26 analysed outcomes extend to health-related behaviours such as smoking, drinking and drug-taking. But as such variables were not available or were not analysed in all studies, and because the focus is on comparative themes and conclusions, they are not pursued centrally here. Full details can be found in the preceding individual papers.

Traditionally, analysis of these different transitions and their role status outcomes would have been treated independently (e.g. as in analysis of youth transition outcomes at age 26 using the same cohort study data source as reported in Schoon et al 2012 (see Bynner et al 2002). Paralleling the case argued by Kohn (1987) for the

use of 'latent variables' as deployed in structural equation modelling to achieve commensurability in comparative research, the studies seek a deeper level of understanding by means of latent class analysis of inter-relationships between the different role statuses (e.g. married/employed). The aim is to identify latent classes or 'types' in terms of which all sample members can be (probabilistically) classified. Returns to be expected are first to increase the reliability of classification, and second, to optimise data reduction to reflect the patterning of key features of the statuses and their interactions in terms of a smaller number of fundamental 'types' (McCutcheon 1987).

Latent role statuses

Although in the analyses reported there are variations between the variables to which the latent class analysis is applied, and in the choices made against statistical criteria for the optimum number of classes to best represent the data, some clear patterns begin to emerge. Schulenberg and Schoon (2012) identify five types of role status configuration, linked to transition processes principally by the way the key longitudinal variable, education level, relates to them: 'highly educated' (in the US study, labelled 'students'); 'work orientation without children'; 'traditional families'; 'fragile families'; 'slow starters'.

The five latent classes to which these patterns relate include three that are broadly common to all three countries, including the two Finnish samples, 'work orientation without children' (described in the Jyväskylä study as 'Academic orientation with no children' and in the Northern Finnish study as 'higher education without family', 'traditional families' and 'slow starters'. The other two 'Educated students without children' and 'Fragile families' are more country-specific. 'Educated students without children' is restricted to the US, reflecting the relatively large numbers still studying in the US at age 26 (e.g. in graduate schools) and the restriction of the analysis sample to high school graduates. The GB, Northern Finland and Jyväskylä studies included in their latent class analysis only the educational level achieved.

The selective nature of the US sample may also be the reason for the apparent anomaly of the lack of any evidence of a US 'fragile families' latent class, clearly identified in the GB sample. There were also early signs of fragile families in Jyväskylä described

as 'precarious', that did not carry through to the last stage of the analysis - 5% of the sample compared with 13% in GB. It is reasonable to conclude that whereas the GB analysis split the family group into two, one of which comprised 'traditional families' (20%) and the other 'fragile families' (16%), the Jyväskylä analysis kept the two groups merged (35%). It may also be, as Räikkönen et al (2012) suggest, attributable to the substantially different sample sizes. There was not even indicative evidence of the fragile family latent class in Northern Finland, which may in part reflect the disproportionate loss of this group to the study through sample attrition. However in one form or another, the idea of families under economic stress and relatively marginalised, reflecting the increasing polarising pressures to which these cohorts were subjected, is a feature of all Western countries. Its prevalence, if not its existence at all, appears to be much lower in Finland, possibly because of the relatively strong labour market and substantial welfare benefits to which the Finnish population in both locations had access at the time. But we can never discount entirely the possibility of sample loss reducing the likelihood of identifying such a group.

Another anomaly of more substantive significance, relates to 'slow starters', identified in the US, GB and Northern Finland in the sense that in Finland, because of high levels of welfare provision, including accommodation support, staying at home with parents rather than living independently is not an attractive option. So in this case, the Finnish slow starters, though still to get fully established on a route to adulthood, at least had the benefit of a state-supported first major step towards it.

Finally and perhaps reassuringly, we see that although prevalence of some features of role status, such as higher qualifications, were evident in the more recent cohort, the distribution of latent class membership probabilities did not differ much between cohorts in the US and GB; nor did their relationships with the antecedent condition variables. It can be inferred therefore, that the transition processes leading to the classes are reasonably robust to cohort effects, at least in the US and GB samples. The Finnish cohorts, located in quite different surveys, and finding different numbers of latent classes, raise issues of comparability that cannot be so easily resolved. But there are some signs of mapping between them. For example the 'traditional work and family' and

(higher education-based) 'career and family' statuses, appeared quite strongly in both Jyväskylä and Northern Finland. However, in contrast with the US and GB cohort comparison where the latent class membership probabilities were quite similar, between the two Finnish cohorts the membership probabilities were quite different suggesting that their comparability should be treated cautiously.

Comparative meaning

The five latent role statuses are important to identify because they reflect in many respects the structure of adult society, which young people in all three countries were entering, and the distribution of the probabilities of individuals in each country of being located in each of them. I consider here the three that are common to all three countries, as identified in the previous section with fairly large latent class probabilities for each of them. They can be seen as lying at the *core* of shared transition experiences and the role statuses arising from them.

Work orientation without children, often following some experience of higher education reflects the attractions of, and extent of, prolonged single status as popularised in such US television series, as 'Friends'; not universally as suggested by Jeffrey Arnett's 'Emerging Adulthood' thesis (Arnett 2004), but largely restricted to just one of the five groups. This status reflects the rising aspirations and achievements of a section of the generation that had access to further and higher education on a scale that was unheard of in their parents' generation. Although their relative affluence, individualistic values, and relatively high life satisfaction have some attraction, their resistance to the long-term commitments of partnership and parenthood, point to some of the undoubted stresses on identity development that such continual postponement of commitment will inevitably represent. The association of this lifestyle with a relatively high drinking level, though marginally less in the British sample than that of the 'highly educated without children group', points to its hedonistic aspects but also perhaps to incipient strains connected with it, that are also beginning to show.

For example, young women, who in company with young men over the last twenty years, have extended continually the transition to parenthood, may have to confront, regardless of their personal

goals, the biological obstacle of losing the opportunity to have children. Young men may not be faced with this quandary on quite the same timescale, but nevertheless their reluctance to give up a lifestyle that in so many respects is glamorous and carefree without the costs and commitment associated with marriage and family may prompt them ultimately to lose interest. Arnett suggests that by the 30s, i.e. four years later than the groups with which we are concerned here, pressures begin to build towards matrimony and parenthood, but it is still the case that in the 1958 cohort, which formed the basis of the GB study, 42% of the women with degrees had still to become parents by the age of 37 (Bynner and Parsons 2002).

Traditional families, is interesting and challenging in a different way. It reflects the relatively early move from education into work, with partnership and parenthood following naturally as the means by which independence from the family of origin is achieved. Many of these young adults in the GB and Finnish contexts, if not to the same extent in the US context, would have reached the status via vocational rather than academic courses. Their vulnerability is that which GB politicians describe as the 'squeezed middle'. That is to say, they are the group who, at times of recession, may bear the brunt of austerity. Not only are they more at risk of redundancy, but their income level may remove them from the welfare provisions for which the really vulnerable, such as the fragile families, are eligible.

The *slow starter* category comprises individuals whose family formation is not yet on the horizon; nor has the pathway towards it properly begun. Financial independence is still some way off and the tendency to stay on in the parental home or move in and out of it (mainly young men) as in the US and GB, or in Finland to take up the opportunity of state supported housing, is common. Unlike the first group, modest qualifications and slow progress in the labour market are also features, pointing perhaps to a less educated and less attractive form of 'emerging adulthood'. The difficulty for this group, as the Finnish welfare state recognises, is that family comforts become addictive. And even when the break with the parents does occur, it may be temporary, at least for young men who, compared with young women, tend to be more limited in their capability for undertaking household tasks and exercising life-management skills (Helve

and Bynner 1996). The findings suggest that in the mid-20s, psychological stress associated with a frustrated lifestyle is beginning to be evident. As the status extends to the 30s and especially the 40s we might expect a more pronounced picture of reduced psychological wellbeing – ‘bamboccione’ as Italians describe the extremes of male stay-at-home helplessness, leading ultimately in some cases to forced eviction!

All the classes were linked in various ways, within each study, to measures of wellbeing, either at the time at which the role statuses were established, or later on in life, using the longitudinal data relating to measures of psychological states, such as depression and life satisfaction. The common picture that emerges is of relatively little variation across the latent classes, challenging the hypothesis that completion of multiple transitions is a source of stress (Schulenberg and Maggs 2002) as Maggs et al (2012) point out. Insofar as negative affect (depressive symptoms and low life satisfaction) is evident at all, it is in the most vulnerable group, ‘fragile families’ and least common for the ‘work-oriented without children’ and ‘traditional families’ groups and, in the case of the US, the ‘highly educated (student)’ group proceeding to post-graduate qualifications. Slow starters tend to be located towards the bottom end of the distribution, reflecting perhaps as Salmelo-Aro et al (2012) suggest, dissatisfaction with the status of having still to complete the key ‘developmental tasks’ of partnership leading to parenthood. Another significant feature is the general shift towards more negative affect - especially as reflected in depressive symptoms - in the more recent cohort in all countries. Although life satisfaction also reduced across cohorts, that shift was much weaker.

Contextualising the latent classes

How can we best characterise these role status configurations, contextualising them in their own national contexts historically and culturally, and relate them to theories concerning the transition to adulthood in contemporary conditions and to adult functioning more generally? The nature of transition in three countries is the first issue to consider.

As GB industrialised first, it is perhaps not surprising that the cultural assumptions underlying GB youth transitions reside in residual Victorian

beliefs about the role of education in society, i.e. supporting an ability hierarchy that maps into the occupational layers of the labour market, with professional and managerial occupations, for which the highest qualifications are needed, residing at the top. For the others, the routes are seen as primarily ‘vocational’ – leading to either skilled non-manual or skilled manual occupations - and until relatively recently, a large semi-skilled or unskilled group working in manufacturing or in such sectors as the building trade, for which no qualifications were needed.

Unskilled work declined steadily from the late 1970s through the 1980s (the period of cohort comparison) and has continued to do so ever since. Its replacement has come largely from the marginalised group embracing the adult members of fragile families, with a poor labour market record rooted in poor educational achievement, and the ubiquitous policy label describing their status when still teenagers as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) (Bynner and Parsons 2002). For men, the adult record was likely to comprise casual work interspersed with unemployment. For women, it often included early entry to parenthood. Although aspirations rose in all sectors, the expectations going with them were still fundamentally that white-collar jobs were for the more educated and middle class groups. For the others, expectations lay in gaining skills through vocational pathways in further education colleges or via apprenticeships, or learning what they needed to know to do the job, on the job itself. Unlike the US and Finland, home ownership, or aspiring to it, was also a strong component of all GB latent class membership, many of the work orientation without children and traditional family groups were already property owners.

The US is not hugely different, except that the great majority of all young people have expected, for a much longer time, to progress post-18 to higher education. The goal is to make the key transition from high school by moving either direct to university or via two-year college, which may also offer a vocational preparation programme. Those who do not pursue this track, i.e. fail to graduate from high school by leaving before the 12th grade, are variously described as ‘non-college-bound youth’, ‘sub-baccalaureate’ or more simply, ‘dropouts’ (Norton Grubb 1999). However, reinforced by such provisions for war veterans as

the post-World War II 'GI Bill' offering free access to higher education, and perhaps a stronger individualistic 'can-do' ethos than in other countries, the aspiration to go to college remains. And for those with very poor educational achievement behind them, doing evening classes, to take the General Education Development (GED) tests in place of high school graduation, is always a possibility.

The numbers involved in higher education at the time of the study were therefore substantially higher in the US than in GB and Finland. But despite the very high entry into some form of post-18 college education, dropout at this stage was also considerable. Social class is much less in evidence as an explanation than in GB, tending to be replaced by 'race' i.e. the black ethnic minority and immigrant population; though again, long-term education goals still tend to be retained.

In Finland, much regarded for its world-beating levels of educational achievement, (e.g. the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA] survey), we see another transition variation. This time, there was a clear division at 16 between general educational (academic) high school (gymnasium) routes to higher education and the professions, versus vocational school of a very high standard to skilled occupations, which all other young people not going to gymnasium were likely to enter; less than 2% fail to do so. A place in a polytechnic - the more technically-oriented counterpart to university - may follow. The expectation is that all except a negligible minority will gain the relevant qualifications before leaving. The other main feature of the Finnish system, as indicated earlier, is the strong welfare provisions to support the transition from family home to adult independence.

The most striking contextual change for youth transitions in all western industrialised countries, is that following the labour market transformation of the 1970s and 80s (Rifkin 1995) the structurally determined 'standard' routes to positions in the adult labour market - 'like father like son', 'like mother like daughter' - gave way to a much bigger role for personal agency and resources - 'individualization' subject to *risk* (e.g. Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). However in practice, then and now, parental support is likely to be needed for some time to establish the personal autonomy that is sought. It is not surprising therefore that as Schulenberg and Schoon (2012) point out, although there has been a

clear shift in the way pathways to adulthood are shaped, structural constraints remain very much part of them, i.e. 'bounded agency', the term used by Shanahan (2000) or 'structured individualization' as Furlong and Cartmel (1997) and Roberts, Clark and Wallace (1994) describe it.

Such constraints operate at all levels of the labour market to which different levels of education give access, but are felt most strongly at the bottom levels, where educational achievement on the part of job applicants is likely to be weakest. The lack of personal and family resources to bolster progress in education and the labour market tends to close down access to opportunity, and in the long term, the prospect of long-term social exclusion strengthens. Nevertheless, aspirations do not remain unresponsive to strong motivational advice and opportunity. The idea, that the foundations of pathways to adulthood are firmly fixed in the early years, fails to recognise the potential fluidity of experience in keeping open the possibilities of movement from a disadvantaged track (fragile families and slow starters) to a relatively advantaged one.

These effects can be seen in the four studies, especially through the role that education played in relation to each of the five classes. 'Work orientation without children' and 'highly educated' were the *resource rich*, with access to the highest occupational levels that good qualifications brings. For them, individualization had real meaning. 'Traditional families' and 'slow starters' had more modest educational accomplishments, typically based in Finland and GB, on vocational education and training (VET). Their opportunities for identity 'exploration' (Arnett 2004) were more restricted and in the case of traditional families, their freedom was further constrained by family responsibilities and associated costs. The most limited opportunities were with the 'fragile families', lacking the human capital bound up with qualifications to improve life chances, and faced with family pressures that probably gave their top priority to 'making ends meet'.

Whether these characterisations of our latent classes identify them as precursors of the grim 30/30/40 society that Hutton (1995) predicts (30% excluded; 30% insecure; 40% affluent), is an open question; but they certainly resonate with parts of it. As considered in the next section, more research along the same lines is needed to find out.

Substantive and methodological considerations

The latent classes identified in the four studies reflect of course, not just role statuses at age 26 and the transitions that led to them, but trajectories established through the whole of the life course. The lives in which such trajectories are embedded, may have been subject to unresolved conflicts and strains and the building of negative 'affect' in which psychiatric disorders are founded. This makes the point that the slice of life taken at age 25 to 27 and implicitly the period leading to it is just that: a relatively small but highly significant part of a stage of the life course, that may involve numerous 'false starts, labour market test runs, cyclical revolving door trajectories between education, training and employment over an extended period of time' (Bynner and Chisholm 1998). The outcome statuses are unlikely to stabilise fully much before the mid-thirties. All model fitting, involves to a certain extent, 'capitalisation on chance', cautioning against placing too much trust in cross-sample model stability. There is also a risk in attaching undue theoretical significance to the role status classes – a reflection of the danger of 'reification', which many writers about latent class analysis warn against (e.g. Sandefur et al 2005). Within these limitations, on the positive track, we may expect partnership, family and employment statuses and on the negative track, the possibility of a set of mentally disabling conditions rooted in economic disadvantage and earlier maladjustment.

The process can be seen as a virtuous cycle to wellbeing and fulfilment, or a vicious cycle downwards, often accompanied by drug abuse and crime, towards the fringes of mainstream society and long-term exclusion.

Despite the effects of social stratification from an early stage on the basis of family class and circumstances, trajectories start with a degree of homogeneity as structured by the statutory requirements of the education system. Differentiation is mainly evident from 16 onwards in Finland and GB and mainly from 18 in the US. Schulenberg and Schoon (2012) use the idea of 'fanning out' of trajectories, into the various occupational and domestic family situations and geographical locations in which adulthood is located. This is the so called 'Matthew effect', whereby 'the rich get richer and the poor get

poorer' (Merton 1968). And its existence underlines the potential complexity of the interactions between the developmental processes involved.

For those young people continuing to higher education, the prospect of an established career and good earnings is some way off. It is therefore all the more surprising that a small but significant minority, driven by the biological need to achieve this 'developmental task', manage, and appear to gain psychologically from the experience, compared with those who instead pursue an occupational career without children, at least initially. Clearly, the latent role statuses tap into these developmental processes. But to understand them more fully, the longitudinal features of the data such as job, housing, relationship histories and so on need to be exploited, where available, to reveal the dynamics of development, as well as its outcomes. The idea of slow and, by implication, fast tracks, implies a life course process towards an outcome role status that has yet to be completed, or has completed perhaps too quickly. But as Schulenberg and Schoon point out (2012), this conceptualisation tends to downplay the continuation of and complexity, of what are sometimes, temporary, transient or intermediate staging posts on the route to stability that not all longitudinal data sets are able to capture.

Complementing the cross-sectional features of role configurations analysed by latent class methods, latent trajectory analysis, available for longitudinal data but rarely reported (Muthén and Muthén 2007), supplies a means of doing this. It is with this suggestion in mind that the authors of the research presented in this Special Section need to consider taking previous studies to a further stage in a more integrated research design.

Such a design would still be constructed post-hoc, but have comparative study built into it from the outset. The design would be based ideally on a harmonised matched dataset, drawing on longitudinal studies that have comparable designs in all countries e.g. the cross-national equivalent file (CNEF) compiled from harmonized household panel data in first 5 and now 8 countries (Burkhauser and Lillard 2007). The long term longitudinal cohort studies deliver the antecedent conditions of family, economic circumstances and educational achievement, from which the role statuses at age 26 arise. Comparing studies against the quite different national contexts of the US, GB and Finland, and

perhaps more countries, for two cohorts across a 12-year interval makes good sense. But perhaps the age of 30 or 35 rather than, or in addition to, age 26 for comparison, would offer the prospect of strengthening further the insights already gained into the impact of labour market transformation on young people's transitions and role statuses. It would also give some leverage on the 30/30/40 hypothesis, i.e. that the gap between cohorts should be getting wider with age.

The possibility of matching individuals between datasets on demographic characteristics such as gender, socio-economic status and education level, should also be considered as another option, i.e. to avoid the confounding of statistical significance with sample size, and to strengthen the analysis of interaction. That is to say, each study sample would be used as a sampling frame for what amounts to a quasi-experimental design (Bynner and Heinz 1991; Shadish, Cook and Campbell 2001). The measurement could also be matched more precisely across cohorts in terms of content and timing, and robustness. It could also be strengthened further, by taking account of measures prior to role status achievement at age 26 as well as after it, i.e. by conditioning out earlier psychological states and wellbeing measures, from the effect on later wellbeing of role status itself.

Finally there is a need to contextualise the latent class models in terms of the history of which the particular transition processes under investigation are a living part (e.g. see Wadsworth and Bynner 2011), and to uncover the role of cultural meanings and assumptions in them. Such a programme involves quantitative and qualitative enquiry through ethnographic study, anthropology and also cultural history.

Ascending and descending methodology

Grootings (1983) makes the point that comparative research cannot sensibly be seen as simply a matter of comparing nation states comprising individuals, their families, their communities and the society of which they are a part. The exercise is fundamentally a study of the interactions between individual agency, social relations and cultural location, with society as a whole. In this scenario, the unit of analysis therefore should properly be defined by the interaction between the individual and the society

of which they are a member, i.e. as it is effectively in the four studies examined here.

Trying to understand the significance of such interactions in the development of life course trajectories, including their transitions and their outcomes, forcefully reminds us of the need for methodology equipped to handle this, of which latent class and latent trajectory analysis clearly have a central part to play both inductively – '*ascending methodology*' and deductively '*descending methodology*' – as Van Meter (1990) describes the distinction. Descending methodology derives, exhaustively, sub-classes of a population from variable-based splits, such as by social class and gender, of a representative sample. In contrast, ascending methodology derives such groups from their shared characteristics i.e. capitalising on their inter-relationships, to construct, sometimes overlapping, populations of scientific significance from the bottom up, i.e. '*fuzzy sets*' (Ragin 2000). Such a strategy sees levels of analysis (not synonymous with aggregation) as lying at the interface between society and developmental science, extending Ragin's '*dialogue*' between '*cases* and *variables*' (Ragin 1987) to '*levels of analysis*' as well.

Conclusion

The strategies suggested offer much promise, for using the data sets and methods deployed in the Special Section projects, for improving understanding of youth transitions in a changing socio-historical context in each of the three countries and cross-nationally. They point to the need for unlocking data from a, perhaps at times, too tight adherence to hypothetico-deductive reasoning, at the expense of new insights to be gained from observation of the life course as it unfolds. Ascending methodology builds on qualitative explorations of the possibility of new configurations between statuses and transition patterns that are given statistical realisation from the communalities among individuals through the characteristics that they share. The aim will be, through such a dialogue between *cases* and *variables* and *levels of analysis*, to reshape continually existing constructs and structural models of their relationships, on which descending methodology, including model fitting and hypothesis testing, can then be put to work.

The present studies make an important contribution to scientific understanding in a particular way. As Schulenberg and Schoon point out (2012), most past studies have concentrated on only one type of transition at a time, such as the transition from education to employment, or the transition to parenthood. There is a pressing need to move away from studying these different youth transitions in isolation. For as Schulenberg and Schoon' put it ...“Failure to recognize their interdependence constitutes a key gap in the literature, and addressing this gap is at the core of the four studies in this Special Section, conceptually and methodologically.” The studies' alternative strategy favours the more *holistic* approach of capitalising on the interdependency to identify, by means of latent class analysis of age 26 transition

outcomes, key components of the processes through which this stage of the life course is constructed.

The research teams are therefore to be commended in helping to open the door to the much richer programme of comparative research that should follow. The benefits that ensue are likely to be considerable not only scientifically, but in pointing to, and clarifying more effectively, the strengths and weaknesses in national systems for managing youth transitions. The insights thus gained will help supply the means of both strengthening the positive pathways to fulfilling outcomes in adult life, and protecting young people against the negative ones. The US, GB and Finland projects reported in the Special Section are a major step on the way.

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