A cohort comparison of life course transitions among young adults in the U.S.

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Backgrounds

Massive social and economic changes occur during the past few decades in the United States, influencing individual values, attitudes, and life choices (Thornton & Young-DeMarco 2001). Evidence of this change exists in the extended transition from adolescence to adulthood (Arnett 2004; Shanahan 2000) and less age normative markers of entry into adulthood (Tanner & Arnett, 2011). Compared to those in their 20s during the 1960s whose life transitions were fairly sequenced (Marini, 1984), their counterparts since 1970s have experienced delayed and diverse paths toward adulthood (Mouw, 2005). Furthermore, as social change continues, generational gaps in life transitions have grown (Smith, 2005).

The entry into adulthood is delineated by several demographic transitions; leaving the parental home, forming one's own family via birth, marriage, or cohabitation, completing school, and entering the workforce (Aassve, Billari, & Piccarreta, 2007; Mouw, 2005). For example, using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979, Mouw (2005) found that approximately 90% of the sample has completed education, entered workforce full-time, and left the parental home by age 35. Through these transitions, young people become financially and emotionally independent and slide into adulthood (Arnett 2004). Moreover, the ordering of these events in the transition to adulthood are associated to later life-course trajectories such as income and poverty (Mouw, 2005).

Despite these findings, few studies have taken into account the timing and sequences of multiple life-course events (Aassve, Billari, & Piccarreta, 2007) and how the transition to adulthood has changed across cohorts (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005). Many studies have paid attention to each transition separately using other life course events as control variables and ignoring possible dependency between the transitions (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005). Moreover, demonstrating the importance of historical time and social context, studies have employed data from only one birth cohort (Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005; Smith, 2005) and thus our knowledge about *changes* in the transition to adulthood across cohorts is limited.

Therefore, research questions in the current study include:

1) What is the sequence of the transition to adulthood among young people in the NLSY79 and NLSY97?
2) Has the transition to adulthood become less structured across cohorts?
3) Do the different pathways affect adult outcomes?

Data and Methods

We use public and geocode data from the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth 1979 and 1997 (NLSY79 and NLSY97). The NLSY79 has interviewed 12,686 individuals who were born between 1957 and 1964 from 1979, ages 14 to 21, to 2010, their late 40s and early 50s. The NLSY97 has collected information from 8,984 individuals who were born between 1980 and 1984 annually from 1997, their ages 12 to 18, to 2011, their mid to late 20s. The samples experience dynamic social changes in the U.S. at different developmental stages, and therefore, comparing life transitions from the two longitudinal datasets will inform us variability in the pathways to adulthood across cohorts and how individual life transitions are embedded in social changes.

To compare the two datasets, we restrict our sample to ages 18 to 30 in both NLSY79 and NLSY97. In addition, we have omitted two subsamples from the NLSY79: a military sample of 1,280 individuals who have unique life course transitions and 1,648 individuals from a sample of economically disadvantaged non-Hispanic and non-Blacks who have not been interviewed since 1990. The final samples include 9,722 and 8,760 individuals from the NLSY79 and the NLSY97, respectively. The demographic transitions investigated in the current study are 1) completing schooling, 2) starting full-time work, 3) having the first child, and 4) marriage. *Completion of education* is measured by respondent's highest degree ever received by using information on educational attainment and the date of the highest degree completed every survey year. For *employment status*, monthly employment status is created using data from the employment status history file in both datasets. Those who work on average more than 39 hours per week in a month are coded as being employed full-time. The date of first marriage, regardless of previous cohabitation history, is used to create a marriage variable and the birth date of first child is used for a childbirth variable.

We will describe sequence of these transitions for each cohort, and then, cluster similar sequences together after comparing the sequences using distance measures obtained via optimal matching (Abbott, 1995; Brzinsky-Fay, Kohler, & Luniak, 2006; Aassve, Billari, & Piccarreta, 2007). This sequence analysis gives a holistic point of view by synthesizing the timing, order, and quantum of several events (Billari & Piccarreta, 2005). Although the clustering process to reduce the complexity of multiple sequences could be arbitrary (Wu, 2000), the analysis is suitable to describe changing patterns of life course transitions across birth cohorts. After grouping similar sequences, we will estimate OLS model of how the different pathways are associated to future outcomes (i.e., individual incomes).

Preliminary Results

Preliminary results are presented in tables 1 and 2. Table 1 describes the percentage of respondents who had completed adult transitions between ages 18 and 30 by cohort. Young people from a recent cohort (NLSY97) complete adult transitions later than those from the earlier cohort (NLSY79). The transition to forming a family (i.e. marriage and childbirth in the current study) is delayed among the NLSY97 compared to the NLSY79 respondents; only about 38% and 50% of the NLSY97 respondents have married and had a child compared to 66% and 61% of the NLSY79 sample has had. Most young people have made a transition to economic independence; 91% and 88% of those from the NLSY79 and NLSY97, respectively, have been employed full time by age 30. However, we do not find a substantial difference in completion of education. About three quarters of young people from both cohorts have finished schooling by age 30.

Table 2 describes the sequences of life transitions by cohort. In the NLSY79, we observe 9,691 sequences and 87.8% of them appear to have different sequences in terms of order and length. On the other hand, 8,686 sequences are observed in the NLSY97 and 70.5% reveal different sequences. In addition, 33.3% and 27.6% of those from the NLSY79 have completed 3 and 4 life transitions, respectively, while only 11.7% of those from the NLSY97 have completed all 4 life transitions by age 30. The description indicates that the life transitions of those from the NLSY79 appear more diverse because they are more likely than their counterparts from the NLSY97 to complete all of the 4 life transitions between ages 18 and 30.

We will cluster the sequences with an optimal matching and compare them across cohorts. In addition, we will estimate how the different clusters influence individual's incomes at age 30.

Table 1. Percentage of young people completing transition, by age and cohort

Age	Marriage		Childbirth		Full-time Employment		Education	
	79	97	79	97	79	97	79	97
18	5.2	0.8	7.5	7.2	15.1	20.6	13.2	10.0
19	11.0	2.8	12.1	11.6	32.1	37.8	36.3	35.9
20	17.7	5.6	18.0	16.7	47.3	52.6	44.1	43.4
21	25.0	9.1	24.1	21.5	61.6	62.1	49.9	45.6
22	32.2	12.6	29.6	26.1	71.1	69.3	56.4	48.7
23	39.0	16.7	35.0	30.6	78.6	76.9	63.0	56.1
24	45.5	20.9	39.9	34.5	83.4	82.1	66.1	61.4
25	50.9	24.9	44.5	38.2	86.1	85.3	68.0	64.6
26	55.2	28.6	48.6	41.6	87.8	86.7	70.0	67.9
27	58.8	32.1	52.4	44.6	89.0	88.0	70.9	70.6
28	61.8	34.8	55.6	47.4	89.8	88.1	72.2	72.4
29	64.2	36.9	58.7	49.2	90.6	88.1	73.3	73.6
30	66.3	38.3	61.3	50.5	91.1	88.1	74.1	74.6

Table 2. Description of sequences by cohort

	Number of observed Sequences	Number of different sequences	Number of different elements in a sequence			
			1	2	3	4
NLSY79	9,691	8,513 (87.8%)	10.4%	28.7%	33.3%	27.6%
NLSY97	8,686	6,124 (70.5%)	23.2%	36.5%	28.7%	11.7%

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