

# **The Role of Parental Social Class in the Transition to Adulthood: a Sequence Analysis Approach in Italy and the United States.**

**Maria Sironi**, University of Pennsylvania  
**Nicola Barban**, University of Groningen  
**Roberto Impicciatore**, Università degli Studi di Milano

## **Abstract**

In comparison to older cohorts, younger men and women in the developed societies delay their transition to adulthood and follow more complex trajectories. However, within cohorts there remain variations in timing and sequencing of events. Two of the major determinants of life course events related to transition to adulthood, and in particular family formation, are gender and social class. These two characteristics can influence the sequence of events characterizing the transition to adulthood in terms of socioeconomic inequalities through a different availability of opportunities for social mobility. Several studies show that in North America, a higher familiar status tends to decrease the complexity of trajectories or, in other words, to push towards a more “traditional” pattern, i.e. a trajectory in which the end of education and the first job precedes union formation, which in turn precedes parenthood. On the other hand, it has been highlighted that in Europe the familiar status has a different effect with an increasing complexity among higher status.

The aim of the research is to examine in details the sequences of transitions highlighting, in a comparative perspective, how the life trajectories are influenced by parental social class and gender in the US and Italy.

Keywords: transition to adulthood; social class; parental background; sequence analysis

## **Introduction and Background**

In the last fifty years the process that brings adolescents and teenagers to adulthood has changed greatly, in many – if not all – countries in the West developed world. After World War II adult roles, such as being employed full-time and financially independent were achieved by the early 20s. Nowadays it takes much longer to assume such roles, and the whole transition has been postponed to the late 20s, early 30s. The general postponement that has been found in the first steps of the transition to adulthood (Sironi and Furstenberg 2012) is most likely transferred also to the subsequent events in life trajectories, such as leaving the parental home, starting a co-residential union, and having children. As a result, in developed societies young adults, as compared to older cohorts, experience a delay in the transition to adulthood (Aassve et al. 2002; Furstenberg 2010; Settersten, Furstenberg and Rumbaut 2006). However, the patterns leading to adulthood are not simply postponed. Because of profound structural and cultural changes that occurred in the western world in the last few decades, life trajectories had to adapt and have become more diverse. The “second demographic transition” theory would use the word *individualization* to characterize changes in the life course (Lesthaeghe 1995; Van de Kaa 1987). But as Elzinga and Liefbroer

(Elzinga and Liefbroer 2007) pointed out, this term includes many different aspects, such as the de-institutionalization, the de-standardization, and the differentiation in the life trajectories of young adults. This means that, first, the order of events become less clear and less guided by normative rules of the society; second, it means that the timing at which the events occur may vary substantially between individuals, as well as the duration in different states. Finally it means that the “number of distinct stages that young adults occupy increases” (Bruckner and Mayer 2005).

Within the framework of postponement and individualization of trajectories shaping the life course, timing and sequencing of events in the patterns of transition to adulthood are still strongly influenced by family background (Elzinga and Liefbroer 2007; Ravanera, Rajulton and Burch 2006). The exact mechanisms by which socio-economic status affects the transition to adulthood and the ability to achieve economic self-sufficiency are largely unknown, but presumably include factors such as role modeling, labor market connections, neighborhood influences and parents’ ability to make monetary investments in their children.

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

The aim of this study is to investigate the role of parental social status on the sequence of events characterizing the transition to adulthood, i.e. exiting school, entry into the labor market, leaving the parental home, entry into a co-residential union, and parenthood. All of these events mutually influence each other in terms of timing resulting in major challenges in lifestyles, responsibilities, and autonomy (Gauthier and Furstenberg 2002). Thus, focusing on single events makes it difficult to understand the interrelationships of these different steps. We address this issue by implementing a sequence analysis, an approach that gives “holistic” perspective and in which life course is seen as one meaningful conceptual unit (Billari 2001). Moreover, we compare two very different countries – the United States and Italy – in order to understand if and how the institutional structure and context can fill the gap stemming from disadvantaged family background. Background literature and preliminary results enable us to formulate the following hypotheses.

*H1:* A higher parental socio-economic status (higher level of education and/or better occupation) is associated with a postponement in the transition to adulthood and a higher probability of ‘normative’ sequencing of events.

*H2:* The relationship between family background and life course trajectories differs in different contexts. We expect that in the US children of upper social status tend to follow more normative sequences whereas the same group in Italy tends to be more innovative compared to children from lower classes. We also expect a stronger effect of social class in Italy – where welfare state support is very weak and family is the substitute for it – than in the United States.

## Data and Methods

In this paper we use two different data sets, one for each country, containing similar information on the life course of young adults. For the United States we use data collected through the NLSY79. The sample includes 8,636 individuals, born between 1957 and 1964, interviewed each year from 1979 to 1994, and every other year since 1994. We consider waves from 1979 to 1996, in order to follow young adults starting when they are 14-22 years old (born between 1957 and 1964) until they are 31-39 in 1996. The NLSY79 collects information on a nationally representative sample of young men and women, designed to gather information at multiple points in time on their labor market activities and other significant life events. For Italy instead we use the Multipurpose ISTAT survey called “Famiglia e soggetti sociali”, including 40,962 individuals born between 1899 and 1985 and interviewed at the end of 2003. We do not use the entire sample, but we select the same birth cohorts included in the NLSY79 to make the samples more homogeneous and comparable.

The method we intend to use to investigate the relationship between the social class and the life course trajectories is based on *sequence analysis* (Abbott and Tsay 2000). We adopt a life course perspective, looking at the entire development of family history. Parental social status strongly affects the environment in which individuals grow up, and so can have a large association with young adults’ life trajectories and the sequence of events in their transition to adulthood. Individuals build their future on the basis of the constraints and opportunities they have faced in the past (Elder 1994). The process is iterative and cumulative, so it is important to take a unitary, *holistic* approach and look at the effect of family background on the whole life course rather than at single events of the transition to adulthood (Barban 2011; Billari 2005).

The events we take into account are the following: end of education, entry into labour force, leaving the parental home, first union (marriage and/or cohabitation), and parenthood. Parents’ social status is defined on the basis of education level<sup>1</sup> when the respondent was 14 years old. More specifically parental socioeconomic status can be low, medium or high depending on the level of parents’ education. Given the disparity in the distribution of education level between Italy and the United States, we define a low socioeconomic status in Italy if both parents attained just primary education, a medium level if at least one attained lower secondary education, and a high level if at least one attained upper secondary education. In the United States a low level corresponds to both parents with primary or lower secondary education (9 or fewer years of education), a medium level

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<sup>1</sup> We also built parental social class using the type of occupation of parents when the respondent was 14 years old. Preliminary results do not change significantly and are more solid when using education. Hence we just report results obtained with education level.

corresponds to at least one parent with upper secondary (12 or fewer years of education), and a high level corresponds to at least one parent with tertiary education (more than 12 years of school).

After defining the different sequences and describing them in terms of *timing*, *quantum*, and *sequencing*, we try to identify specific typologies of life trajectories – dealing simultaneously with timing, quantum, and sequencing – in order to study how social class is related to the likelihood of ending up in a certain typology. The analytical strategy adopted in this case is the Optimal Matching Analysis (OMA), whose goal is to compute a matrix of dissimilarities between pairs of sequences, and so of life courses (Billari 2005). The dissimilarity measure is based on how much effort is required to transform one sequence into another one. Once the dissimilarity matrix is built, one possibility to identify a limited number of typologies is to apply a cluster analysis (Aassve, Billari and Piccarreta 2007).

### **Preliminary Results**

We present a descriptive table showing the median age of each event we consider in the analysis, by country, gender, and by parental social class. Table 1 shows how the timing of events is very different across countries. Italy reports a substantial delay both among men and among women with respect to the United States in all the events, except for completing education (this may be due to the fact that the general level of education is lower than in the U.S. and so people exit school earlier).

**Table 1**

Also, there are differences based on parental social class and they are not always the same in the two countries. As a matter of fact, age at each event goes up in Italy as family social class is higher. In the United States instead, this is not true for “starting the 1<sup>st</sup> job” and “leaving the parental home”. The median age at which American young adults start their first job does not change as the parental social status changes. Moreover age at leaving parental home is lower among those with parents with a high socioeconomic status (23) than for those coming from a lower family background (25). They probably move out before because they go to college or they achieve independence earlier because they can find good jobs paying good wages.