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SURVEY QUESTION BANK: Topic Overview 8 (February 2012)

# YOUTH TRANSITIONS

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## 1. Introduction

Youth transitions are a central theme that runs through the sociology of youth. The patterns of youth transitions are the subject of numerous post-war studies (Clarke 1978). An accessible overview of the study of youth transitions is provided by Furlong and Cartmel (2007). Historically, leaving school and leaving the family home were regarded as fundamental rights of passage. The young person passed between these *twin pillars of Hercules* and entered adulthood. Therefore the study of these areas has been fundamental to youth research because they are indicative of the movement to more permanent 'adult' lifestyles. In the course of making these transitions social divisions frequently deepen and are reproduced. Understanding transitions to adulthood are therefore key to understanding patterns of social change.

Historically transitions from education to employment, and housing and domestic transitions have been inter-related (Coles 1995). The post-war period has broadly been characterised by increasing numbers of young people remaining in education for longer periods of time (Furlong and Cartmel 2007). It has become more common for young people to live away from their parental homes in early adulthood (Mulder 2009). In Britain cohabitation has become more common (Murphy 2000). Young people now routinely cohabit before marriage (Holdsworth and Morgan 2005). It is increasingly likely that young people will have had other cohabiting partners before the cohabiting partner that they eventually marry (Seltzer 2004). Consequentially, young people now marry later than they would have in earlier decades (Ermisch and Francesconi 2000). Statistical evidence reports that patterns of fertility have also changed, and young people are more likely to have a first birth later, and fewer children than in previous generations (see Social Trends 2006).

## 2. School-to-Work Transitions

Much contemporary research has been bound up with what is colloquially termed as 'the school-to-work transition' (see Ashton and Field 1976; Wallace 1987; Hollands 1990; Wallace and Cross 1990; MacDonald *et al.* 1993; Irwin 1995; Gayle 1998; Muller and Gangl 2003). In the decades following the war the vast majority of young people in the UK left education at the first opportunity. In more recent decades this situation has reversed and official data illustrate that an increasing proportion of young people have remained in education beyond the compulsory period (Department of Employment 1993; FEFC 2000; Social Trends 2006). This reorientation has been commented upon by a number of authors (especially Paterson and Raffe 1995; Biggart and Furlong 1996; Cregan 2001). Banks *et al.* (1992) note that there was always a minority of young people who remained in education for long periods before entering the labour market, but by the late 1980s only a minority followed the traditional path and made an early transition from school-to-work at the end of compulsory education.

There is generally agreement amongst sociologists that the background against which young people grew up in the closing decades of the twentieth century was dramatically transformed. Gayle, Lambert and Murray (2009) label this as the 'changing times consensus'. It is now widely agreed that the accepted school-to-work transition that characterised the traditional rite of passage from youth to adult status has been disrupted (Irwin 1995). Therefore sociologists have deployed a series of adjectives such as 'long', 'broken', 'fractured' and 'uneasy', in order to describe emerging patterns of youth transitions (Craine 1997).

Within the 'changing times consensus', sociologists agree that the transformation was driven by a series of interrelated social and economic changes. The most catastrophic of the economic changes was the virtual collapse of the youth labour market in the early 1980s. This dramatic change received a great deal of sociological attention (see Ashton *et al.* 1982; Atkinson and Rees 1982; Raffe 1984; Raffe 1988; Roberts 1984; Roberts 1997; Brown and Ashton 1987; Furlong 1987; Bynner 1996; Maguire and Maguire 1997). The growing levels of youth unemployment in the 1970s and 1980s are well documented (Casson 1979; Jackson 1985; Gallie and Marsh 1994). Concurrently, there was a sharp decline in the number of apprenticeships offered to young people during this period (Maguire and Maguire 1997). The overall economic environment was one in which there was a reduction in the number of jobs that were suitable for young people. The effect was most stark for those young people who left school at the minimum age, because they usually had lower qualification levels and fewer employment skills.

This pattern of economic restructuring led to a number of policy responses, most notably the widespread introduction of 'youth training' provisions (Raffe 1982; Raffe 1983; Chapman and Tooze 1987; Stoney and Lines 1987; Roberts 1984; Deakin 1996). The introduction of youth training was coupled with a number of reforms to the benefits system that changed young people's entitlement to welfare benefits (Maclagan 1992; Irwin 1995; Dean 1997). The provision of further education expanded in the 1980s (Smithers and Robinson 2000; Hyland and Merrill 2003). This was followed shortly afterwards by an expansion in higher education provision (Daniel 1993; Dearing 1997; Archer *et al.* 2003).

These transformations in the social and economic climate in which young people grew up largely took place in the 1980s. By contrast, the 1990s was a decade of employment growth in the UK (DfEE 2000). It is plausible therefore that in the 1990s young people may have benefited from a more buoyant economy. There were also policy changes related to education and training in the 1990s. Young people became eligible for new, nationally recognised, vocational qualifications (Smithers 1999). 'Modern Apprenticeships' were also established in order to enhance the technical and vocational skills of young workers (Saunders *et al.* 1997; Ainley and Rainbird 1999).

Throughout the 1990s minimum age school leavers continued to be excluded from the unemployment benefits available to older workers (CPAG 1998; Mizen 2004). The New Deal for Young People (NDYP) was introduced. The NDYP resonated within the wider New Labour 'welfare to work' agenda (Riley and Young 2001; Brewer *et al.* 2002; Fraser 2004). The scheme aimed to provide opportunities to work, gain new skills, and get work experience for 18-24 year olds (Wilkinson 2003). Participation was mandatory for young people claiming unemployment benefits (i.e. Jobseekers Allowance) continuously for six months (IER 1999).

The Low Pay Commission was established as a result of the national minimum wage legislation in 1998. From April 1999 workers aged 18-21 were entitled to a minimum wage at the development rate (i.e. a lower level than the adult rate). This legislation was introduced explicitly to target poverty and social exclusion. The minimum wage was later extended to include workers aged 16 and 17.

Since the turn of the millennium the UK labour market has performed very well on a variety of measures, including employment growth and unemployment. The UK and the European economies entered recession in 2009. Many labour markets have weakened substantially since the near-collapse of worldwide financial markets, and youth unemployment is once again being viewed as a pressing economic and social problem (Bell and Blanchflower 2009). Given the overall picture that has been painted by economic forecasts we envisage that high levels of youth unemployment in the UK are likely to persist in the immediate future. The introduction of a new

system of higher education fees in some parts of the UK looms large on the horizon. McCaig (2011) provides an account of the potential impact, although the effects of this change in policy on educational participation will not be fully observed for some time.

### **3. Housing and Domestic Transitions**

Historically a young person's housing and domestic transitions were interconnected. Leaving the parental home was usually triggered by marriage but in more recent decades it is routinely connected to a preference for independence (Buck and Scott 1993). The increased popularity of cohabitation has resulted in both a delay to, and a reduction in, marriage. In the UK the number of first marriages registered in 2005 was half those registered in 1970, and the median age at first marriage rose for both men and women (Heath 2009).

New patterns of residence among young people can be explained by changes in economic, political and demographic factors (White 1994). Since the 1970s it has become common in many countries for young people to spend time living alone, or with peers, prior to making a domestic transition to cohabitation or marriage (Heath and Cleaver 2003). Many young people now move away to enter higher education whereas others leave the family home to live in shared accommodation or accommodation provided by employers (Jones and Wallace 1992; Iacovou 2001). Leaving the parental home still continues to be widely regarded as a key transition into adult life.

Patterns of youth housing transitions differ across European countries, for example young people leave the family home early in countries such as Finland and Denmark, but remain within the family much later into adulthood in Italy and Greece (Aassve *et al.* 2005). Kerckhoff and Macrae (1992) report that it is fairly common for young people to return after the initial departure from the family home. Therefore some social scientists have argued that leaving the parental home should be regarded as a fluid process rather than a sharp transition (e.g. Cherlin *et al.* 1997). Researchers have also noted that arrangements that fall between living in the parental home and complete residential autonomy are a common feature of the youth phase (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1999).

### **4. Social Survey Datasets**

Large-scale social science survey datasets provide infrastructural resources that are imperative for the study of youth transitions. Britain is internationally renowned for its survey portfolio and many of these datasets are specifically designed for the

study of children and young people. There are other datasets where the unit of focus is the household, and intrinsically these surveys collect data on children, young people and family life. There are also surveys of the general population which naturally include young adults.

Studies of youth transitions often rely on cross-sectional survey datasets. Much progress can be made with cross-sectional surveys, particularly in the study of trends over time. Theoretically the concept of a transition is inherently temporal and therefore repeated contacts (i.e. longitudinal) data generally have great utility for the study of youth transitions. It has been pointed out many times that the most important questions concerning individual development can be answered only by applying a longitudinal design whereby the same individuals are followed through time (Bergman and Magnusson 1990). Therefore longitudinal datasets are crucial for the comprehensive study of youth transitions.

The UK leads the world in the collection of birth cohort datasets. These datasets have a myriad of information appropriate for the study of youth transitions. The first of the major British birth cohort studies was the MRC National Survey of Health and Development (NSHD), which is colloquially known as the 1946 birth cohort. The NSHD is a prospective birth cohort, and is one of the longest running large-scale studies of human development. The National Child Development Study (NCDS) was established in 1958 and the British Cohort Study (BCS70) was established in 1970. These two birth cohorts have similar designs to the earlier 1946 cohort. There have been many comparative analyses using the data from the British birth cohorts. Bynner and Joshi (2002), Ferri, Bynner and Wadsworth (2003) and, more recently, Blanden and Machin (2007) are well known examples of such cross-cohort analyses. We argue that the suitability of the three older birth cohorts for the study of contemporary youth transitions is questionable, however we note that they are still used for youth transitions research (see Yates *et al.* 2010).

There was a lacuna in the UK birth cohort study portfolio because there was no new national birth cohort established in either the 1980s or the 1990s. The paucity of cohort data for this time period has had a negative impact on youth transitions research (Gayle 2005). The Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), which is also sometimes known as Children of the 90s, partially plugs the gap. ALSPAC is a regionally based sample and therefore has a more restricted scope.

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) was the next nationally representative birth cohort dataset. The MCS is a multi-disciplinary research project following the lives of around 19,000 children born in 2000/1. The overall design and sampling differs from the three earlier British birth cohorts. The field of inquiry covers a wide variety of topics and can facilitate an extremely wide range of investigations in social and

medical research. The participants are now coming into scope for early youth and adolescence research, but it will be a few more years until the majority begin to make key youth transitions.

Shortly after the establishment of the MCS the Growing Up in Scotland Study (GUS) was commissioned. GUS began in 2003 and tracks a sample of babies born in 2004/5 and a group of slightly older toddlers. In time it will support analyses of youth transitions. GUS is geographically restricted but provides a rich source of information on children in Scotland. The data could plausibly be used for comparative research, especially with the MCS.

A new UK birth cohort study is planned for 2014. In the longer term data from this proposed cohort will also support research on youth transitions. The new birth cohort will be strengthened by the establishment of a new Cohort Resources Facility (CRF). This will be a leading global resource and will play a vital role in maximizing the analyses and the impact of the British birth cohort studies.

The UK data portfolio contains a number of data resources that are specifically focused on collecting data on young people. These datasets are especially useful for studying youth transitions. A prominent example is the Youth Cohort Study of England and Wales (YCS). The YCS is a major longitudinal study which began in the 1980s. The study is designed to monitor the behaviour of young people as they reach the minimum school leaving age and either stay on in education, enter the labour market or undertake training. The YCS is organised into school cohorts that are tracked and participants are usually contacted for three waves of data collection. Currently there are thirteen cohorts of YCS data available from 1985 - 2007. This timespan means that the YCS makes a contribution to the gap in the portfolio of cohort data resources. The YCS has supported a wide range of analyses of education and youth transitions (for example Drew 1995; Payne 2000; Payne 2001a; Payne 2001b; Gayle *et al.* 2009).

The Scottish School Leavers Survey (SSLS) is similar in design to the YCS. It has facilitated analysis of education and youth transitions in Scotland. Howieson, Croxford and Howat (2008) reviewed various options for collecting data on youth transitions in Scotland. A decision has since been made to discontinue the Scottish School Leaver's Survey (Croxford 2009). Raffe *et al.* (1999) made the case for curating comparative youth data resources using the YCS and the Scottish data. Croxford *et al.* (2007) have undertaken the enormous task of harmonising data to construct the Youth Cohort Time Series for England, Wales and Scotland, 1984-2002 dataset.

The Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), also known as Next Steps, is an innovative major study of young people. The study began in 2004 and its main role is to support analyses of the key factors affecting young people's

transitions. The LSYPE brings together data from a number of different sources including interviews with young people and their parents, as well as administrative data. Because the LSYPE is explicitly designed to study youth transitions, possibilities are legion. Ermisch and Del Bono (2010) and Strand (2011) are recent examples of analyses of the LSYPE. It is regrettable that to date there is only a single LSYPE cohort.

In addition to the youth datasets a number of other resources in the British social science data portfolio support research on youth transitions. The British Youth Panel (BYP) was introduced into the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) in 1994. An overview is provided by Gayle (2005).

The BYP now has a reasonably long run of data spanning part of the 1990s and part of the first decade of the twenty first century. The BYP collects data on young people from a representative sample of British households. It is a standard rotating panel design. Young people growing up in a BHPS sample household enter the youth panel at age eleven and are interviewed yearly until they are age fifteen. At age sixteen the young person enters the adult sample of the BHPS and becomes subject to the full annual adult interview.

On its own the BYP is limited for the analysis of the main youth transitions. Because BYP members move into the BHPS and they continue to be tracked as they move along their pathways and trajectories, the possibilities for youth transitions research are therefore greatly enhanced. Prospective information on education, qualifications, training, employment, housing, relationships, cohabitation, marriage and fertility are collected providing a wealth of data suitable for the study of youth transitions. In addition individual data are collected from parents and step-parents, siblings and other household members. Household level data are also acquired. The design of the BHPS follows sample members beyond their original households and collects information on others living in the sample member's new household. This means that information on household sharers, such as friends and partners, is also available within the BHPS.

Youth transitions can also be investigated with sub-samples of young adults from the main British Household Panel Survey. Murray (2011) successfully constructed 'synthetic' cohorts of young people from the adult data files for youth transitions research. The BHPS has now been extended and augmented and its replacement Understanding Society (US), which is also known as the UK Household Longitudinal Study, is a world leading study of the social and economic lives of 100,000 individuals living in 40,000 British households. The large sample size and overall coverage of Understanding Society are promising, and our initial inquiries indicate that it has even greater potential for facilitating analyses of youth transitions. A new



feature of Understanding Society is that the age range of the youth survey has been extended to include children as young as age ten (McFall 2011).

The British data portfolio also includes surveys of the general population which naturally include young adults. Two notable examples are the General Household Survey (GHS) and the Labour Force Survey (LFS). Whilst these resources are not specifically targeted to collect information on young people they contain information on younger adults. These data resources also have a long history and lend themselves to analyses of aggregate trends over time. For example Payne, Payne and Heath (1994) use the GHS to study youth unemployment, and Berrington, Stone and Falkingham (2010) undertake comprehensive analyses of youth transitions using the LFS.

In principle the UK Census, and related products such as the Sample of Anonymised Records, provide data suitable to study young adults. The analysis of trends over time is feasible but in practice the level of detail within the Census will limit the study of youth transitions. The Scottish Longitudinal Study (SLS) and the ONS Longitudinal Study of England and Wales, are both developed from Census data and contain additional social and medical data. These two resources could potentially support analyses of some aspects of youth transitions.

## 5. Future Directions

It is observable that the social and economic conditions under which British young people grow up and make transitions into more adult lifestyles have altered appreciably over the course of the post-war decades. The period that has traditionally been termed as the 'youth' phase appears to be extending further into adulthood. These changes are an obvious motivation for studying youth transitions. Indeed young people's lives are frequently held up as a barometer of wider social change (Jones and Wallace 1992).

Some commentators argue that the study of youth transitions should no longer be a research priority (see Jeffs and Smith 1998; Cohen and Ainley 2000). We disagree and maintain that investigating transitions is still important. We argue that in making transitions the structural differences among young people widen, deepen and are consolidated. These divisions are then maintained in the adult lifecourse, and reproduce wider structural difference within society. We concur with Roberts (2003) who asserts that it is impossible to explain what is occurring elsewhere until the substructure of young people's lives has been analysed properly.

We envisage that transitions from education into employment, and transitions in housing and domestic life will continue to be inter-related. For the majority of young

people the transitions from full-time education to the labour market now occurs later than it would have in earlier decades. The *Education and Skills Act 2008*, has extended the period during which young people must remain engaged in education or training. The introduction of a new system of higher education fees will probably impact upon patterns of participation.

The cause of the current UK recession may be substantively different from earlier downturns, but we foresee that some of the previous labour market consequences will be experienced. Earlier British recessions have had a stronger effect on younger rather than older workers in the economy. It is probable that a shortage of suitable jobs and insecurity will be a feature of the youth labour market for the foreseeable future.

The trend in moving away from the parental home and living independently in young adulthood is unlikely to be completely reversed. The availability of affordable accommodation in the current economic climate might have an effect on young peoples' housing options and choices. We do not expect that cohabitation before marriage will be any less popular and the trend in countries like Britain for later marriage and having fewer births than in previous generations appears to be well established. Considered in combination, these social phenomena point to the necessity of studying youth transitions in contemporary society.

Much of the research undertaken within the sociology of youth does not engage with the analysis of social survey data (MacDonald, Banks and Hollands 1993; Gayle 1998). We argue that the scale and coverage of social surveys position them as an extremely central tool for the study of youth transitions. The portfolio of British youth data is impressive but could reasonably be extended to better facilitate youth transitions research.

As we have argued, cross-sectional survey data is often suitable to study the lives of young people. In particular progress can be made by using repeated cross-sectional data to study trends over time. We have stated that many general surveys include data on young adults and young workers. The 2011 Census is due to be released soon and we expect that this will facilitate a limited amount of youth research.

Longitudinal data is best suited to the study of the intrinsically temporal nature of youth transitions. We expect that the collection of birth cohort data will remain a central feature of the UK research infrastructure. Birth cohort data has proved useful but is usually expensive and time-consuming to collect. We are not wholly convinced that an aperture of over a decade between pairs of birth cohorts represents a suitable timeframe to ensure an appropriate flow of data for the study of youth transitions.

Specially targeted youth datasets are obviously well suited to the study of youth transitions. Despite its long run a question mark currently hangs over the future of the YCS. The design of the LSYPE is unique and has the potential to fully support research that charts youth transitions in a depth that is greater than any other existing UK dataset. Collingwood *et al.* (2010) undertook a review of the LSYPE and provided recommendations for a second cohort. Their review was commissioned prior to the last General Election and published a few months later, and at the time of publication the new Government's priorities had not yet been established.

A second cohort would be an extremely valuable resource for contemporary youth transitions research. While there are areas of overlap between LSYPE and other datasets, LSYPE is the only major longitudinal study that comprehensively focuses on young people's experiences and entry into adulthood. Collingwood *et al.* (2010) make a case for commissioning a single longitudinal study and they argue that overall it is likely to provide better value for money than commissioning a number of smaller cross-sectional studies.

Scotland has a different education system, distinctive educational traditions and different qualifications (Paterson 2003). With the withdrawal of survey data collection it will not be easy to undertake youth transitions research in Scotland until Scottish participants in the MCS and GUS participants age into scope. Whilst the education system in Wales is similar to England, since devolution the Welsh Assembly has been responsible for education and skills. Across all of the home countries policies are becoming increasingly differentiated. Therefore data at the territorial level is fundamental to comparative analyses of patterns and trends within the UK.

We have indicated that large-scale household survey data can be productively used to analyse youth transitions. The scope and sample size of Understanding Society increase its analytical potential. We observe that an increasing proportion of children and young people reside in more than one household under joint custody arrangements. This is an area that has received little investigation, partly because of the paucity of survey data. The design of Understanding Society, which tracks separating parents into new households and later collects information on new partners and co-residents is likely to greatly extend research possibilities in this area.

We believe that administrative data resources will become more important in social science research. The ESRC funded Administrative Data Liaison Service has been established and a programme of research and training was funded by the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods through the Administrative Data – Methods, Inference and Networks Node. A current example of progress in this area is the planned linkage between the Understanding Society and The National Pupil Database (NPD).

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