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Frank Furstenberg, Natalia Melgar y Máximo Rossi

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When do people become adults?

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Frank Furstenberg

Natalia Melgar

Máximo Rossi

Abstract

We explore what are the key facts that Uruguayans consider relevant for being an adult. In particular, we assess the linkages between adulthood and skills, income, labor market participation and marital status, among others personal attributes. With the aim of identifying behavioral patterns, we estimate ordered probit models. Our dataset is the 2008 survey carried out by the International Social Survey Program in Uruguay.

This article points out that gender, age and the educational level are critical factors for understanding opinions about adulthood. Moreover, we extend previous findings by showing that living some circumstances does not make people to consider that they are relevant experiences. For example, regarding parenthood, there are non-significant differences between those who have had a child and those who have not.

Keywords: adulthood, transition, life course, Uruguay

Resumen

Este trabajo explora cuáles son los factores clave que los uruguayos consideran relevantes para calificar a alguien como adulto. En particular, se analiza la relación entre la adultez y la educación, el ingreso personal, la participación en el mercado laboral y el estado civil, entre otras características personales. Con el objetivo de identificar patrones de comportamiento, se estiman modelos probit ordenados. La base de datos es la encuesta de 2008 llevada a cabo por el *International Social Survey Program* en Uruguay.

Este artículo señala que el género, la edad y el nivel educativo son factores críticos para entender cuando se considera que alguien es adulto. Por otra parte, se extienden los resultados de investigaciones anteriores, mostrando que el hecho de vivir ciertas circunstancias como la paternidad, no hace que la opinión pública considere que esas personas son adultas.

Palabras claves: adultez, transición, ciclo de vida, Uruguay

Clasificación JEL: D01, J19, Z13

1. Introduction

Adulthood is a multi-dimensional concept that may involve education, labor market participation, social status, marital status, parenthood, etc. It is clearly that the dimensions are deeply intertwined but at the same time, they involve different roles that people are in. While some people may feel completely adult others may not even in their 30s because in some spheres they do and in some spheres they do not.

For example, Shanahan et al. (2005) and Reitzle (2007) show that this is specially true in the case of young people who tend to indicate feeling like adults when they are at work, with romantic partners or spouses, or with children, but are less likely to feel like adults when they are with their parents or friends.

Hence, our research is not based on a direct question such as “are you an adult?” or “do you think that you are an adult?” Indeed, we consider indirect questions about the occurrence of some events. This article explores what are the relevant facts that Uruguayans consider as key factors to being an adult.

Following previous demographic research on the transition to adulthood, we concentrate on six life experiences: being economically independent, leaving home, completing formal education, working full time, getting married and having a child.

As gender roles have been changing, we also investigate whether there are significant differences in men’s and women’s views. Given that people’s views may change as they navigate the terrain of adult life, we also consider whether age plays a relevant role in explaining differences in opinions. Finally, we expect that education matters, therefore we also explore whether opinions change among educational levels.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section two is devoted to the existing and well-developed theory and evidence on the subject. Section three sketches the dataset and the econometric methods applied in this paper. In section four, we present and discuss the results, while we draw conclusions in section five.

2. Theory and evidence on the subject

Previous findings show that the transition to adulthood has become more ambiguous and that it happens in a more gradual fashion due to social changes that pose new opportunities for individuals and their families (Billari and Wilson, 2001; Blossfeld et al., 2005; Chisholm and Kovacheva, 2002; Corijn and Klijzing, 2001; Furstenberg, 2002; Settersten et al., 2005; Shavit and Mueller, 1998).

For example, education is now more valuable than a century ago. The extension of schooling may cause a delay in labor-force participation, achieving economic independency later and a postponement of marriage and childbearing. Hence, we expect that people find highly important finishing formal education and therefore, it may imply that working full time, being married and parenthood are considered less relevant.

In line with the previous argument, Furstenberg et al. (2004) show that being married and parenthood are largely unrelated to adulthood definitions in American public opinion polls, with financial independence, finishing schooling and being able to support a family most often mentioned as important indicators of adult status. The same may be true in other national contexts such as the Uruguayan case where marriage and parenthood have been delayed.

The consequences for families and societies are both remarkable and undeniable. Schoeni and Ross (2005) show that American parents spend about a third part of the costs of raising a child to the age of 18 again between 18 and 34 (providing both material and direct cash assistance). On the other hand, Goldscheider et al. (2001) hold that there is a substantial generation gap, with relatively few American mothers indicating willingness to provide financial help relative to the number of children expecting any. Furthermore, authors also find that mothers are more likely to be willing to support young adult children if they are in school.

Moreover, research on the timing of births has provided clear evidence on its causes and consequences. Couples who have a child earlier have fewer savings and lower income (Coombs and Freedman, 1966), women with early first birth achieved a lower educational

level and a lower occupational status (Presser, 1971 and Bumpass et al. 1978) and Riblett (1981) hold that women who delay the first birth have more education and higher occupational status.

On the other hand, education, working full-time, marriage, parenthood, etc. may be related not only to adulthood and personal targets but also with socialization and social control issues. As proof, Barber (2002) argues that children whose mothers prefer early marriage, large families and low levels of education, enter parenthood earlier and *vice versa*. The study concludes that mothers' preferences have a strong influence on when their children become parents by guiding them on different pathways toward adulthood.

From these vantage points, we expect that people's views change according to their age, educational level and gender.

3. Data source and methodology

Our dataset is the 2008 survey carried out by the *International Social Survey Program* (ISSP) in Uruguay. The survey asks respondents their opinions on a great variety of issues, including abortion, trust and religion, as well as demographic and socio-economic information, such as age, gender, education, religiosity and others.

The dependent variable seeks to grasp respondent's opinions on the relevance of the occurrence of some facts to consider that someone is an adult: *"people have different views about what is needed to become an adult. Please consider the following statements, how important are the following facts for you?"*. The questionnaire included the following cases: being economically independent, leaving home, completing formal education, working full time, getting married and having a child. The set of answers were: "very important", "fairly important", "somewhat important", "not very important", "not important", "can not choose / do not know".

Answers to these questions allow us to derive information about the relative importance of this set of facts without asking directly whether or not people feel completely adult and

why. Direct questions may cause ambiguous answers (Shanahan et al., 2005 and Reitzle, 2007).

We consider answers to the first five categories and construct new variables that equal: 0 if respondent indicates “very important” or “fairly important”, 1 if respondent answers “somewhat important” and 2 if he/ she points out “not very important” or “not important”. Table 1 shows the weighted frequency distribution of the answers to this question.

Insert TABLE 1 – Distribution of answers

As table 1 shows, all the considered facts are relevant to consider that someone becomes an adult. However, the ratios vary from 40.24 percent in the case of getting married to 78.48 percent in the case of completing formal education. In line with previous findings (Furstenberg et al., 2004) finishing formal education, working full-time and financial independence are the most relevant facts as indicators of adult status.

These categories are followed by leaving home (54.95 percent). As Goldscheider and Goldscheider (1987) state, living alone before marriage is a new social phenomenon that is proof of a different pattern of family and demographic change that have characterized modern societies since the '50 but it is a relatively new phenomenon in the case of developing countries. The authors also showed that young men (more than young women) expected to live away before marriage.

As Goldscheider and Goldscheider (1987) state, living alone before marriage is a new social phenomenon that is proof of a different pattern of family and demographic change that have characterized modern societies since 1950 but it is a relatively new phenomenon in the case of developing countries.

Marriage and having a child are found at the bottom of the ranking. This finding is not surprising given that in Uruguay these decisions have been delayed, however, it is worth noting that having a child seems to be more relevant than marriage.

Moreover, table 2 shows the correlations among these variables, even when they are always positive, correlations are, in general, not high. The highest figure is registered between getting married and having a child (0.60). This finding may imply that, in general, these opinions are shaped by different personal attributes.

Insert TABLE 2 – Correlation matrix

Given that our dependant variables are multinomial, we estimated ordered probit models. An ordered probit model aims at determining how the set of independent variables affects the formation of opinions towards corruption. After estimating the model, we compute the probability that the dependant variable equals five (the highest level) and we also estimate the marginal effects of the independent variables. The description of the included variables is reported in table 3.

Insert TABLE 3 – Description of independent variables

4. Results, what characteristics shape people's views?

Findings are reported in Table 4, it presents the marginal effects after ordered probit models estimation. These figures are the changes in the above-mentioned probability given a change in the independent variables.

Insert TABLE 4 – Opinions on adulthood, marginal effects

Considering that gender roles have been changing, we give particular attention to gender differences. As we hypothesized, there are significant differences in men' and women' views. Men are more likely to consider that the set of assessed facts are important to become an adult with the exemption of completing formal education that is more important for women.

The picture that emerges from this result indicates that as completing formal education is more relevant for women, they understand that it may imply delaying marriage and/ or parenthood, economically independence (while she are studying) which also implies the

impossibility of working full time or leaving home. There are a large set of studies that provide econometric evidence on the fact that having a child earlier reduces income and savings (Coombs and Freedman, 1966) and the chances of achieving a high educational level or occupational status (Presser, 1971, Bumpass et al., 1978 and Riblett, 1981).

We provide clear proofs that, in general age matters, hence personal experiences tend to shape people's opinions and personal judgments seem to be adjusted as people become older. On one hand, there are no significant differences regarding opinions on being married and completing formal education. On the other hand, in other cases, findings indicate that there are relevant life-course adjustments but in different directions.

Firstly, being economically independent becomes less relevant as people become older (given the significance and magnitude of the marginal effects) and the opposite is true in the case of working full-time and having a child. Secondly, leaving home is less relevant for those between 45 and 63 years of age while there are no significant differences among the other groups. This group of people is likely to have a son or daughter who could leave their home. Hence, it may indicate that parents prefer that they do not leave their home.

Additionally, in almost all cases, education is a relevant predictor of people's attitudes. An overwhelming result is that one of the exemptions is completing formal education. Hence, there are no significant differences between those people who have completed their studies and other people. Leaving home is the second exemption, while education could be used to hasten progress toward adulthood; the educational level makes non-significant differences of opinions on whether it is an important part of becoming adult. Considering the other cases, of particular interest is our finding of the negative effect of education. This result could be explained by the fact that more educated people are likely to delay decisions such as working full-time, marriage, having a child and/ or achieving economic independency.

As table 4 shows, income matters in two cases. Firstly, as people place themselves higher in the income scale, less important is having a child. The crucial issue that explains this result is that people tend to postpone parenthood in order to achieve personal targets such as a better social status that may imply higher income. Secondly, richer people tend to consider relevant being economically independent is relevant.

Regarding marital status we also find significant differences. Only those who are married consider that this characteristic is relevant to become an adult. Moreover, married people do not value being economically independent and leaving home as relevant facts. Finally, no significant differences are found among single people and others.

It is worth noting that those who are parents link adulthood to being economically independent and working full-time. Regarding the relevance of parenthood, we highlight that there are non-significant differences between those who have had children and those who have no child.

Although no hypotheses were formulated for religious affiliation, such influences are of interest. Firstly, in general, Catholics tend to positively value these facts, and following religious principles is not surprising that the highest impact is found in the case of being married. Secondly, non-significant differences are found in the case of Evangelists and other people. It is also worth noting that religiosity only positively influences people's opinions towards marriage.

Table 4 also shows that unemployed people are less likely to consider that completing formal education is relevant. We argue that this negative effect is associated to a characteristic of the Uruguayan labor market. Firstly, unemployment rates have been relatively low since 2004 and unemployment is specially associated to middle-aged unskilled workers. Therefore, a great part of unemployed people has transited to adulthood without completing formal studies and hence, they do not consider that it is relevant.

We find significant differences among those working in the public sector and those working in the private sector. In particular, civil servants do not consider relevant being economically independent and leaving home. Self-employed people deals more frequently with labor market fluctuations and could have experience more stressed situations. Therefore, this group of workers is less likely to considering that being economically independent is relevant. Marriage is more relevant for those who work full-time, however, there are no significant differences between this group of workers and the others.

Finally, accepting that living in a large city involves significant differences in everyday life, we include a variable that equals one if respondent lives in Montevideo, the capital city where more than 50 percent of the inhabitants live. In Uruguay, this characteristic implies very different opportunities and access to the labor market, to the university and other public services such as primary or secondary schools and the health system. We find that leaving home and completing formal education is more relevant for those who live in Montevideo.

5. Conclusions

The contributions of this paper to the literature on this field are three-fold and show that opinions of people living in developing countries are in line with previous findings in the developed world.

Firstly, it is well-known that some facts are often mentioned when defining adulthood. However, we provide clear evidence that people's opinions are shaped by personal attributes.

Secondly, we highlight the role of gender, age and education which proves that firstly, even when gender roles have changed, differences in opinions are significant. Secondly, life course adjustments and the educational level are in general relevant.

Finally, we show that opinions are not necessarily influenced by whether the person has experienced this fact. For example, completing formal education is not considered significantly more relevant by high educated people, regarding having a child, regarding the relevance of parenthood, we find non-significant differences between those who have had a child and those who have no children. Working full-time makes no significant differences in opinions towards the relevance of this characteristic. The exemptions are marriage and economic independency because the former is positively associated to adulthood only by married people and the latter is positively associated to the income level.

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Annex - tables

TABLE 1 – Distribution of answers

| | Being economically independent | Leaving home | Completing formal education | Working full time | Getting married | Having a child |
|-------|--------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| 0 | 13.61 | 27.73 | 11.71 | 12.01 | 44.64 | 35.74 |
| 1 | 16.42 | 17.32 | 9.81 | 11.51 | 15.12 | 15.22 |
| 2 | 69.97 | 54.95 | 78.48 | 76.48 | 40.24 | 49.04 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

TABLE 2 – Correlation matrix

| | Being economically independent | Leaving home | Completing formal education | Working full time | Getting married | Having a child |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Being economically independent | 1.00 | | | | | |
| Leaving home | 0.37 | 1.00 | | | | |
| Completing formal education | 0.10 | 0.23 | 1.00 | | | |
| Working full time | 0.29 | 0.20 | 0.25 | 1.00 | | |
| Getting married | 0.16 | 0.15 | 0.19 | 0.31 | 1.00 | |
| Having a child | 0.11 | 0.19 | 0.19 | 0.29 | 0.60 | 1.00 |

TABLE 3 - Description of independent variables

| Variable | Description | Mean |
|-------------------|---|-------------|
| Age2 | 1 if respondent is between 30 and 44 years old | 0.27 |
| Age3 | 1 if respondent is between 45 and 64 years old | 0.32 |
| Age4 | 1 if respondent is 65 years old or older | 0.20 |
| Catholic | 1 if being Catholic | 0.53 |
| Child | 1 if having children | 0.75 |
| Education2 | 1 if years of education are between 6 and 9 | 0.43 |
| Education3 | 1 if years of education are between 10 and 12 | 0.24 |
| Education4 | 1 if years of education are 13 or more | 0.21 |
| Evangelist | 1 if being Evangelist | 0.09 |
| Full time | 1 if working full time | 0.49 |
| Man | 1 being a man and 0 if being a woman | 0.38 |
| Married | 1 if married or living as married and 0 in other case | 0.36 |
| Montevideo | 1 if living in Montevideo (the capital city) | 0.48 |
| Public sector | 1 if working for the government or public owned firm and 0 in other case | 0.15 |
| Religiosity | 1 if attending to religious services at least once a week and 0 in other case | 0.13 |
| Self-employed | 1 if being self-employed | 0.27 |
| Single | 1 if being single and 0 in other case | 0.22 |
| Subjective income | Self-placement in 10 point income scale | 4.58 |
| Unemployed | 1 if being unemployed | 0.06 |

TABLE 4 – Opinions on adulthood, marginal effects

| | Being economically independent | Leaving home | Completing formal education | Working full time | Getting married | Having a child |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Men | 0.077** (0.034) | 0.056* (0.028) | -0.061* (0.031) | 0.092*** (0.031) | 0.143*** (0.036) | 0.147*** (0.037) |
| Age2 | -0.087* (0.053) | -0.042 (0.052) | -0.026 (0.045) | -0.022 (0.044) | 0.007 (0.050) | 0.010 (0.053) |
| Age3 | -0.137*** (0.054) | -0.110** (0.055) | -0.017 (0.047) | 0.032 (0.045) | 0.006 (0.053) | -0.007 (0.057) |
| Age4 | -0.182*** (0.068) | -0.061 (0.065) | 0.005 (0.055) | 0.142*** (0.042) | 0.056 (0.062) | 0.115* (0.064) |
| Education2 | -0.088 (0.056) | -0.058 (0.059) | 0.026 (0.049) | -0.149** (0.061) | -0.102* (0.055) | -0.097* (0.057) |
| Education3 | -0.146** (0.064) | -0.001 (0.067) | 0.004 (0.056) | -0.206*** (0.074) | -0.165*** (0.058) | -0.045 (0.066) |
| Education4 | -0.080 (0.068) | -0.033 (0.073) | -0.047 (0.064) | -0.312*** (0.082) | -0.253*** (0.054) | -0.205*** (0.066) |
| Subjective income | 0.018* (0.011) | -0.013 (0.011) | -0.002 (0.009) | 0.007 (0.009) | -0.003 (0.011) | -0.019* (0.011) |
| Single | -0.036 (0.049) | -0.056 (0.051) | -0.043 (0.047) | 0.061 (0.041) | -0.028 (0.050) | -0.058 (0.052) |
| Married | -0.080** (0.037) | -0.082** (0.039) | -0.001 (0.034) | -0.049 (0.034) | 0.081** (0.038) | -0.013 (0.040) |
| Child | 0.125*** (0.045) | 0.037 (0.047) | -0.029 (0.041) | 0.092** (0.045) | -0.030 (0.047) | 0.019 (0.049) |
| Catholic | 0.063* (0.034) | 0.001 (0.037) | 0.056* (0.031) | 0.045 (0.031) | 0.089** (0.035) | 0.061* (0.037) |
| Evangelist | 0.079 (0.056) | -0.068 (0.067) | 0.057 (0.046) | 0.045 (0.049) | -0.039 (0.066) | -0.073 (0.065) |
| Religiosity | 0.021 (0.051) | -0.022 (0.055) | 0.055 (0.038) | 0.016 (0.045) | 0.179*** (0.056) | 0.036 (0.055) |
| Unemployed | -0.072 (0.073) | 0.039 (0.077) | -0.126* (0.079) | 0.081 (0.055) | -0.118 (0.070) | -0.001 (0.088) |
| Public sector | -0.073 (0.049) | -0.123** (0.050) | -0.003 (0.044) | -0.050 (0.044) | -0.048 (0.046) | -0.079 (0.050) |
| Self-employed | -0.064* (0.037) | -0.041 (0.040) | -0.016 (0.034) | -0.011 (0.034) | 0.004 (0.038) | 0.005 (0.039) |
| Full time | -0.055 (0.038) | 0.031 (0.041) | 0.015 (0.034) | 0.016 (0.034) | -0.070* (0.040) | -0.043 (0.040) |
| Montevideo | 0.041 (0.033) | 0.080** (0.035) | 0.096*** (0.029) | -0.030 (0.031) | -0.035 (0.034) | -0.036 (0.036) |
| Observations | 990 | 990 | 990 | 990 | 990 | 990 |

Notes: 1) Robust standard errors in parentheses

2) * significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%