Examining Pathways of Adult Education Taken by Young Women in Britain: The quantitative stage of a mixed methodological approach

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Examining Pathways of Adult Education Taken by Young Women in Britain: The quantitative stage of a mixed methodological approach

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Abstract

Longitudinal data from a British panel survey are used to examine the paths taken by 345 females over a 15-year period (1991-2005) from early to mid adulthood. The life course is conceptualised as interdependent trajectories of social roles over time. The simultaneous interplay among social roles is investigated using latent class models estimating the probability of participation in formal adult education in relation to other social roles at four time points. We identify distinctive paths through these role configurations from early to mid adulthood and evidence that, whilst the relationship between early and later patterns of participation is complex, some paths are more conducive to the probability of being a participant in adult education than others.

In order to get deeper insights into the place of learning in peoples lives, the next stage in the analysis will involve bringing these findings together with the findings from our case study participants to tease out the complex interplay between the underlying (subjective) reasons for following particular paths and the forces that have driven a life to pan out the way it has. This involves exploring the extent to which case study participants can be placed on emerging probabilistic pathways and then unravelling the chain of events, experiences and the ways in which these have been subjectively experienced, that have propelled that life in one direction rather than another and with what consequences for learning.

Introduction

Continual skill (re) formation is now seen as a necessary response to a rapidly changing society and an ever-expanding skill need within the labour market. Education is no longer seen as a phase completed in the early stages life. Increasingly, in the developed world, participation in adult education is not just an option but a duty for which individuals must take responsibility as their employability and financial security depend on the continual acquisition of new skills and knowledge in relation to the world of work (e.g. OECD, 2003). Economists are no longer just interested in studying the economic rates of return from qualifications obtained in initial education (e.g. Bundell, et al 1999), but also the economic benefits of education undertaken by adults later in life (e.g. Jenkins, 2006). Yet adult education remains an area which is
under-theorized and under-explored using reliable longitudinal quantitative datasets.

The question of who participates in formal adult education early in adult life is an important one, not least because adult education is seen as a ‘second chance’ educational opportunity and the means through which social mobility may be achieved. Also there is evidence to suggest that the factors that determine whether an individual participates early in adult education opportunities also determine their participation (or non-participation) patterns later in the life course (e.g. Gorard and Rees, 2002). Our particular interest in this paper is to study the ways in which decisions taken by young female adults and the timing of events in their lives impinge on the likelihood of their participation in adult education.

Specifically we answer the following questions: Do different individuals take different paths from early to mid adulthood in terms of their involvement in the roles that have traditionally marked out adulthood? And, if so, with what consequences for their likelihood of participating in formal adult learning opportunities? What is the relationship between early and later patterns of participation?

**Theoretical framework**

We draw on Elder’s (1985) conceptualization of the life course as a series of interlocking trajectories of social roles over time. According to Elder, movement through social institutions normally involves taking on an institutionally defined role such as being a student, an employee, a husband or wife, a mother or father. Each role’s trajectory indicates the extent to which a particular individual is embedded in a given social institution over time. Trajectories are seen as longitudinal involvement in, or connection to, social institutions such as work, marriage and parenthood. Trajectories, together with transitions (i.e. movement in and out of trajectories), are the conceptual tools used by Elder to help understand and describe the life course because they indicate stability and change over time and can be used to map out broader life course dynamics by showing the ways in which trajectories interconnect and unfold in unison over time. This is because the shape of one trajectory influences, and is influenced by, the shape of another as occurrences in one trajectory influence occurrences in another. For example, marriage and parenthood have, traditionally, configured in relation to one another with a marital transition preceding a parent transition. Timing of an event in one trajectory may vary, influenced by events in other life course trajectories. For example, an individual who drops out of school early, may marry and have children earlier than would normally be anticipated. According to Elder, it is necessary to give attention to the timing of occurrences in different but interlocking trajectories in order to describe and understand learning across the life span. We take this theoretical position as our starting point.
**Modeling the life course**

We follow Macmillan and Eliason (2003) by adopting a two-stage latent class model approach to identify configurations of social roles over time and life paths that link these role configurations over the life course. Their methodological approach views individuals as being probabilistically distributed across various role configurations and life paths.

Macmillan and Eliason’s research approach assumes underlying categories. That is, it seeks out sub-groups or collectives within populations. Latent class analysis, like all classification systems, involves a process of dividing a large heterogeneous group into smaller homogeneous groups where members are similar to each other while different from individuals in other groups (Gordon, 1983). These classifications can be a useful way of tracking individual life course pathways (e.g. Richters, 1997). A major advantage of latent class modeling is that a mixture of categorical and continuous variables can be used without any estimation threats.

**Data and measures**

We use data from the British Household Panel Survey which is considered to be one of the most authoritative British surveys. These data were collected from a national sample of 5000 households resulting in 10,000+ adults (16+) when they were first interviewed in 1991. Since then original sample members have been surveyed annually. The longitudinal structure of the data allows us to model the life course over an extended period of time. Our analytic sample in this paper consists of 345 female original sample members who were aged 20-25 in 1991 and 33-39 in 2005 with birth dates ranging from 1966 to 1971. We increased our sample size and statistical power by focusing on six adjacent birth cohorts (1966-1971). This increased our ability to consider greater homogeneity in the structure of the life course. At the same time, these cohorts are closely related in historical time and are thus likely to have experienced unique cohort or period effects that could also have impacted upon the structure of the life course (Elder, 1998).

Whilst we accept that there is no precise way of determining which years constitute early and mid adulthood, we believe that with this sample we are able to examine movement of these young British women through a period of their early adulthood which is a time of restructuring of relationships and commitments in respect of family, work and parenthood. We were particularly interested in the three roles, work, marriage and parenthood, as they are seen as key markers of the transition into adulthood (Booth, Crouter & Shanahan, 1999; Shanahan, 2000). We use five dichotomous variables to denote these social roles plus two others at four time points (1991, 1996, 2001 and 2005): (1) whether they participated in formal adult education; (2)
whether they were geographically mobile; (3) whether they were in the workforce; (4) whether they were married; and (5) whether they were parents.

We operationalised involvement adult education based on whether respondents answered ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the question: *Apart from the full-time education you have already told me about) Have you taken part in any other training schemes or courses at all since September 1st [the previous year] or completed a course of training which led to a qualification?* We judged that this question represented a meaningful basis for our analysis as it tapped into participation in education potentially leading to a wide range of qualifications available to adults in the UK from the lowest to the highest. We defined ‘move’ as a geographical move within the UK, that is, a move out of the area in which they had been living. We defined work as either being in the workforce irrespective of whether they were self-employed or employed on a part or full time basis. This meant we tapped into those who were out of the workforce not just for reasons of unemployment, but also because of illness, disability, caring for dependents, or other such reason. We defined marriage by its legal status meaning that the single, divorced and those who were in a state of co-habitation or civil partnership were classified as ‘not married’. Finally, we defined parenthood in terms of whether each respondent had dependent children living with them, irrespective of whether they were the birth parent or not. Our data did not allow us to differentiate.

While more complex operationalizations of these five social roles would have been possible using our dataset, these were well-suited to our interest in modeling interlocking pathways of roles over time. For all of these states, we examined their joint occurrence at four time points, 1991, 1996, 2001, and 2004. Our choice of time points was made on theoretical and empirical grounds. Since our interest was to broadly map the life course over an extended period of time, we took the first and last points of data collection available to us (1991 and 2005 covering a 15-year period) and two points in between, 5 years from the first point (1996) and 5 years from that point (2001).

**Analysis and results**

After conducting our first stage analysis (not shown), we found three contrasting qualitative pictures were unfolding towards work, parenthood and adult education at age 20-25 (1991), our baseline observation point. We characterised these as parent orientators, work orientators and multi-taskers. We then examined the extent to which these orientations shaped their future social role configurations, and, by definition, their pathways to the future.

Following our sample through for the next 15 years, we found that the parent-orientators had the highest likelihood of following path I and were very unlikely to follow either paths II or III (table 1 and figure 1). Path I indicates a high likelihood of an early transition into parenthood which, for many, is not accompanied by a transition into marriage. For them the likelihood of marriage
and movement into the workforce increases as they move into their late twenties and thirties. This is accompanied by a slight increase in their likelihood of participating in adult education and a decrease in their likelihood of moving area. These role configuration changes over time may indicate early instability followed by (relative) stability later on as they take on new family and work related roles and responsibilities. Whilst there is a very slight increase in their likelihood of participation in adult education alongside these changes, the ‘InFormEd’ flat line (fig. 1) would indicate that this trajectory remained relatively unaffected by the changes in the shape of the other trajectories.

### TABLE 1 Conditional Probabilities for Latent Life Paths

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age-stage</th>
<th>Latent Role Configuration</th>
<th>Latent life path</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
<td>II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>0.0833</td>
<td>0.4845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.7100</td>
<td>0.0744</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.2067</td>
<td>0.4411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>0.7568</td>
<td>0.0438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.0362</td>
<td>0.9102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.2070</td>
<td>0.0460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>0.0150</td>
<td>0.0352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.0700</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.9150</td>
<td>0.1456</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33-38</td>
<td>0.0947</td>
<td>0.0300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.9053</td>
<td>0.9700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latent Class Probabilities</td>
<td><strong>0.4957</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.2660</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The work-orientators, on the other hand, were most likely to follow path III and were least likely to follow path I. Path III indicates that the likelihood of achieving the other social role transitions remains low over time. The chances of a marital transition peaks at 25-30 but, even then it is only low to moderate. For them, their work role remains dominant throughout their early to mid adulthood. Alongside this apparently strong work orientation, their continued likelihood of participating in adult education declines.
FIGURE 1

Path I (p=4957) Parent-Orientators

Path II (p=0.2660) Multi-Taskers

Path III (p=0.2384) Work-Orientators
The multi-taskers were most likely to follow path II but were highly unlikely to follow path I. Path II indicates that they are most likely to delay parenthood until their late twenties with a sharply increased propensity towards parenthood as they move through their thirties. This is accompanied by a slight increase in their likelihood of moving out of the workforce and a decrease in their likelihood of moving or participating in adult education. Up until their thirties, they are more likely to make a transition into marriage before they make a transition into parenthood. However once into their thirties, the parent transition is more likely to occur than a transition into marriage, which may suggest some of these women are making an agentic transition into parenthood with or without a marital partner. For them the changing shape of their other social role trajectories over time lessens the likelihood of their participation in adult education.

Concluding remarks

The relationship between early and later patterns is highly complex. The latent class probabilities in table 1 indicate that interpretation of the probability of a transitions from and to a latent role configuration at a subsequent age point is complicated by the variable content of latent role configurations at each age/stage. Our analysis is ongoing and the above represents only a small part of our emerging findings. Nonetheless, we can see from this analysis how our sample of females born in Britain between 1996 and 1971 was probabilistically distributed across role configurations and life paths.

Acknowledgement

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British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) User Documentation and Questionnaires www.iser.essex.ac.uk/ulse/bhps/doc/vola


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