

The transition to adulthood of two cohorts: over time success or decline?

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This paper compares 2 cohorts of U.S. adolescents, one born in the 1960s (NLSY79) and the other born in the early 1980s (NLSY97) in how they transition into adulthood, and shows how various sub-groups of these two cohorts differ in their transitions.

This is a work in progress and we present preliminary results for the younger cohort (NLSY97) only in this extended abstract. For the PAA presentation, the same types of analyses will be performed on the older cohort (NLSY79). The investigation of intercohort changes in the transition to adulthood will be the central focus of the paper.

We use the life course perspective as the conceptual framework for investigating life pathways, and differences in those pathways among persons by gender, race and ethnicity, and family resources (Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson & Crosnoe, 2003). The life course perspective also guides our analysis of inter-cohort changes in the configurations that make up life course pathways, and the pace at which the alternative pathways lead to adult positions by their mid-twenties. As is customary in the analysis of the early adult life course, we focus our analytic attention on transitions marking adolescence or early adulthood and the roles and statuses accompanying such transitions (Hogan & Astone, 1986; Modell, Furstenberg, & Hershberg, 1976; Shanahan, 2000). In contrast to many previous studies which examined various transitions (e.g., into marriage, out of school, into employment) independently as single outcomes, we use a second-order hierarchical latent class model which allows us to examine these transitions simultaneously, taking into account their relationships of one another.

We follow Macmillan and Eliason's (2003) model, which posits that all individuals occupy several roles at any one point in time (e.g., students, parents, spouses, workers). They call the totality of roles occupied by individuals at various points in time "age-graded role configurations." These age-graded role configurations change over time and the combination of all role configurations that any individual occupies over time constitute "across-age life-paths". The structure of these role configurations and life paths combine to constitute the life course. Thus, life path schema embed role configuration schema, which, in turn, embed roles, which, in turn, embed individuals. Moreover, multiple pathways through life characterize highly differentiated modern societies. In this paper we identify the most prevalent ways in which adolescents transition into adulthood in two different cohorts.

We expect that young people will combine their age-graded roles (such as being a student, a worker, a partner and others) in different ways as they become older, and the sequences of these role configurations will also vary between our two cohorts because of important behavioral and attitudinal shifts that took place in the 20 year period separating our two analysis cohorts. For instance, it is well known that in developed countries young people, especially women, spend more years in school than they spent in the past. Also, childbearing outside of marriage became more acceptable and more prevalent over time, especially for certain groups.

Data and Measures

The dataset is based on the two cohorts of the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY 1979 and NLSY 1997). These two nationally representative surveys followed two different cohorts over time, and recorded similar life information, and thus

provide an unique opportunity for cross-cohort comparison. In this abstract we focus only on the life course of the NLSY97 cohort, but a similar description of NLSY79 will be provided in the final paper.

NLSY97 is a sample of 8,984 young men and women born in the years 1980-84. The respondents, who were ages 12-17 when first interviewed in 1997, were followed annually until 2005 (this is the last year for which NLSY1997 publicly released data on event history variables, although the study continues today). Retrospective questions going back to 1994 are asked of many variables such as birth history and the start of employment. Yearly questionnaires included a large battery of items tapping early experiences in work, school performance, family formation and living arrangements.

A person-months file was created providing monthly records of educational attendance, living arrangements, labor force participation, entering partnerships, and becoming parents, all of which will be examined simultaneously as latent pathways to adulthood in the current study. Thus respondents were coded with dummy variables in each month as employed/unemployed, enrolled in school/out of school, living with parents/living independently, being single/cohabiting or married, and being parents/not being parents.

Methods

We used the Latent Gold software to run a second-order hierarchical latent class model with a set of latent variables capturing the within-age role configurations and a latent variable capturing the across-age life path schema. The latent life path model partitions the within and across age association among the full set of observed role indicators into (1) a set of age-specific latent role configurations that capture the within-age association among the observed role indicators and (2) a latent life path variable capturing the across-age association among the observed role indicators. This model estimates conditional probabilities showing the degree to which each observed role (e.g., employed/unemployed, enrolled in school/out of school, living with parents/living independently, being single/cohabiting or married, and being parent/not being parent) is embedded in, or constituent of, each age-graded latent role configuration, and also the degree to which each latent role configuration is embedded in each latent life path. The model is estimated in a single stage using a nonparametric multilevel latent class specification.

Results

Using measures on schooling, work, family formation, and living arrangement roles, our results show that the transition to adulthood for this cohort could be well-represented by six role configuration and six life paths.

The six role configurations are given (see Table 1 & Figure 1) by: (1) the **Traditional student role** (being enrolled in school, living at home with parents, not being employed, not being married and not being a parent), (2) **Dependent working student** (in school, not independent, fully employed, not being married and not being parents), (3) **Dependent worker** (not being in school, living at home with parents, working, not being married and not being parents), (4) **Dependent parent** (Not being in school, not living independently (living at parental home), not employed, not being married *but having children*), (5) **Independent worker** (Not in school, living fully independently, being employed, not being married and without children), and (6) Married **Independent Adult**

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(Not being in school, living independently, being employed, and being married with or without children).

Figure 1 shows the prevalence (probability) in this population of each role configuration at any given age. Until about age 19 the most predominant role configuration in this NLSY97 sample of youth is that of a traditional student living at home, followed by that of a dependent working student. After this age, the traditional student role decreases and the other role configurations increase in probability.

Figures 2a-2f show the six latent life pathways prevalent in this population. The first life path (Figure 2a) is dominated by the traditional student role configuration up to about age 18, and then this role configuration is replaced by that of a dependent worker (being out of school and working but living in the parental household). The second lifepath (Figure 2b) is also dominated by the traditional student role configuration until age 19, but then it is replaced by the independent worker role configuration. Those who follow this life path are thus similar to those following the first life path, with the exception that they are able to move out of the parental household and live independently. The third life path (Figure 2c) is dominated by the traditional student role configuration until age 16, and then it is replaced by the dependent working student role configuration. The main distinction between this life path and the previous two life paths is that those who follow this third pathway to adulthood continue schooling in addition to getting a job. The fourth life path (Figure 2d), as all previous ones, is dominated in the early ages by the traditional student role configuration, which then is replaced by the dependent parent role (those having a teenage or early adulthood pregnancy who continue to live at the parental home, and who are not employed). The fifth life path (Figure 2e) is characterized by replacing the student traditional role configuration from early teenage years with the independent married adult role (being out of school, being employed, living independently, being married and being or not being a parent). Finally, the sixth life path (Figure 2f) is represented by those who prolong their studies beyond age 22 (typically to earn advanced degrees), and remain dependent on their parent without establishing their own families.

The second part of our analysis is concerned with exploring which groups of teenagers to young adults follow various life paths. Table 2 shows the results of a multinomial logistic regression of a multiple category variable indicating the various life paths teenagers could follow when they transition to adulthood on nine independent variables. The reference category is the life-path 5 in which all the transitions are made (Independent Residence, School Finished, Full Time Employment, Marriage, and Possibly Parenthood). The model represented in Table 2 indicates what categories of teenagers are likely to follow various life-paths relative to the reference life-path (life path 5—the transition to independent adult role configuration).

Results show significant gender differences, in that females are less likely than males to follow the other life paths relative to the reference life path (life path 5-transition to independent adult role configuration). However, females are more likely than men to follow life path 4 (transition to dependent parent role configurations) relative to their likelihood of transition to independent adult roles. Even as late as the cohorts born from 1980-84, then, women are more likely than males to transition to adulthood through either marriage or parenthood, rather than through work. They are also less likely than males to follow life path 6 of prolonged studies, and thus they tend to transition to

adulthood earlier than their male counterparts (assuming that studying while being dependent of own parents represents a delayed transition to adulthood).

Important racial differences are also reflected in our results. Blacks are almost five times more likely to follow life path 4 (to become dependent parents) relative to life path 5 compared to whites, reflecting blacks' much lower prevalence of marriage and their much higher prevalence of out-of-wedlock births. However, other things being equal, blacks are also significantly more likely than whites to follow all the other life paths relative to the reference life-path, except that of a dependent working student.

Hispanics are also significantly more likely than whites to follow the two life paths of dependence (becoming a dependent worker or a dependent parent), being the least likely group to become residentially independent (to move out of the parental home). This finding may reflect either their lack of ability to move out (due to inadequate financial means) or their cultural preference for living in extended households.

The young people coming from families with low parental education are themselves *less* likely than those with more educated parents to follow life paths where schooling is part of the sequencing of role configurations over time. The same is true for those growing up in single-parent or step-parent families, and for those growing up poor relative to those from two-parent and wealthier families, respectively.

Those who attended a private school are more than twice as likely as those attending public school to follow the lifepaths of prolonged schooling, either as dependent on their parents or working in parallel with attending more schooling into their early adulthood. Finally, those who have a severe disability and those who have mental health problems are significantly less likely to follow the "independence" lifepaths, and to remain dependent of their parents into early adulthood, for reasons other than furthering their education. In contrast to more privileged youth, the disabled and depressed young people are likely to follow lifepath 1 (transition into dependent worker) and 4 (transition into dependent parent), and not the lifepaths involving attending more education while depending on one's parents.

Our results indicate persistent inequalities across generations, as those coming from disadvantageous background are more likely to follow "less successful" paths to adulthood compared to their more advantaged peers. Also, significant gender and racial differences in the pathways to adulthood were revealed by our preliminary results. Our plans for the future include an examination of the life paths to adulthood followed by the 1979 cohort of youngsters (born in the 1960s), and compare how they fare relative to the younger cohort of NLSY1997. In this comparison, we anticipate a reduction in gender differences, but possible increases in racial disadvantage, particularly for young black women. We also will investigate whether life course pathways have become more closely linked to the socioeconomic resources of family origin, signaling greater intergenerational transmission of disadvantage.

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Table A. Most prevalent latent role configurations represented as clusters of observed roles in a sample of 8984 adolescents to young adults (NLSY 97).

	Cluster1	Cluster2	Cluster3	Cluster4	Cluster5	Cluster6
Estimated Degree of Legitimacy	0.5874	0.1385	0.1009	0.0694	0.0629	0.0409
Observed Roles						
Being Enrolled in School						
0	0.0101	0.2329	0.9808	0.7898	0.5003	0.8615
1	0.9899	0.7671	0.0192	0.2102	0.4997	0.1385
Living Independently						
0	0.9907	0.9886	0.9285	0.7533	0.001	0.0843
1	0.0093	0.0114	0.0715	0.2467	0.999	0.9157
Being Employed						
0	0.9068	0.0005	0.3952	0.4912	0.2397	0.2561
1	0.0932	0.9995	0.6048	0.5088	0.7603	0.7439
Being Married						
0	0.9957	0.9577	0.8527	0.6355	0.8697	0.1093
1	0.0043	0.0423	0.1473	0.3645	0.1303	0.8907
Being Parent						
0	1	0.9997	0.9891	0.0391	0.9968	0.5188
1	0	0.0003	0.0109	0.9609	0.0032	0.4812

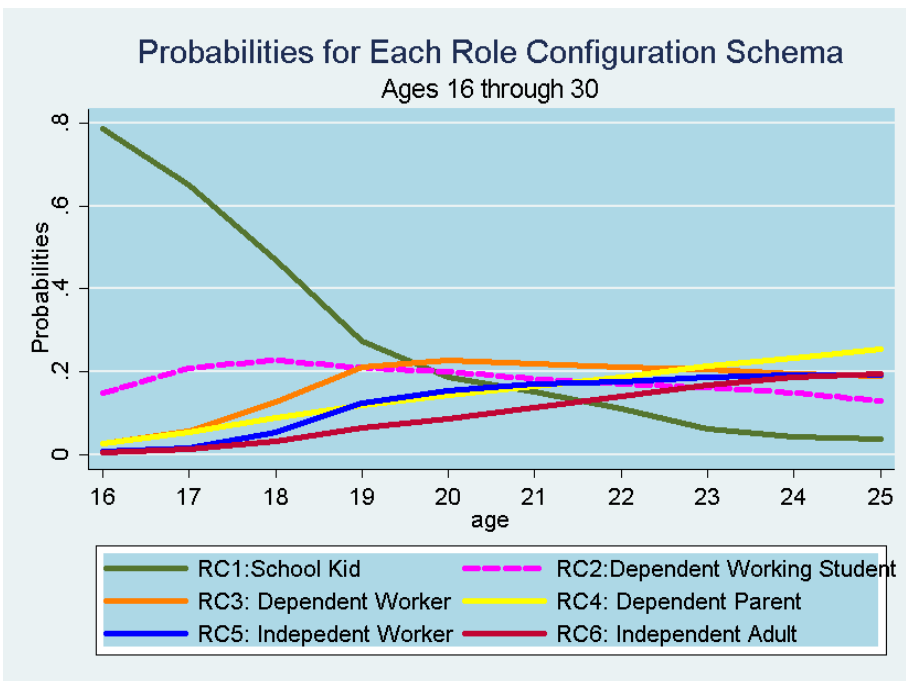


Figure 1.

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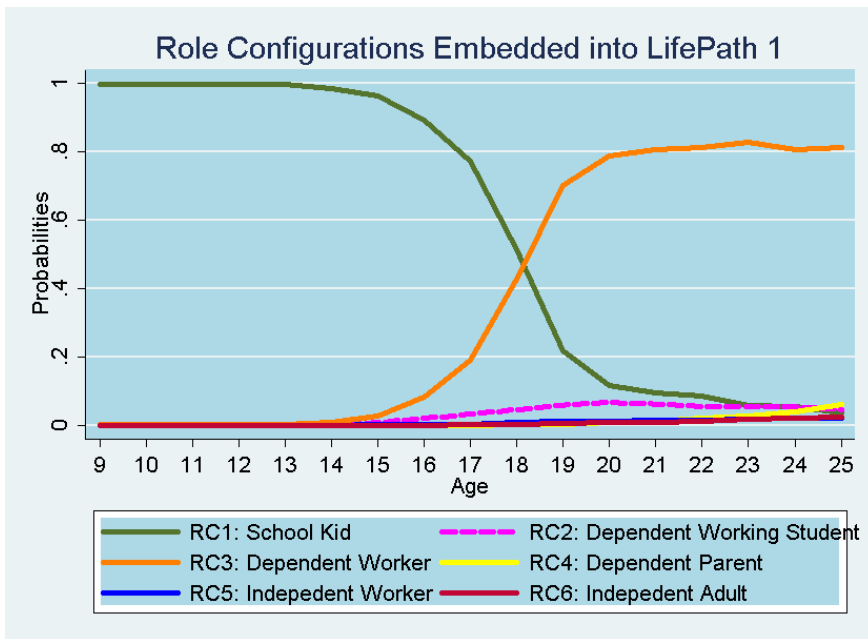


Figure 2a

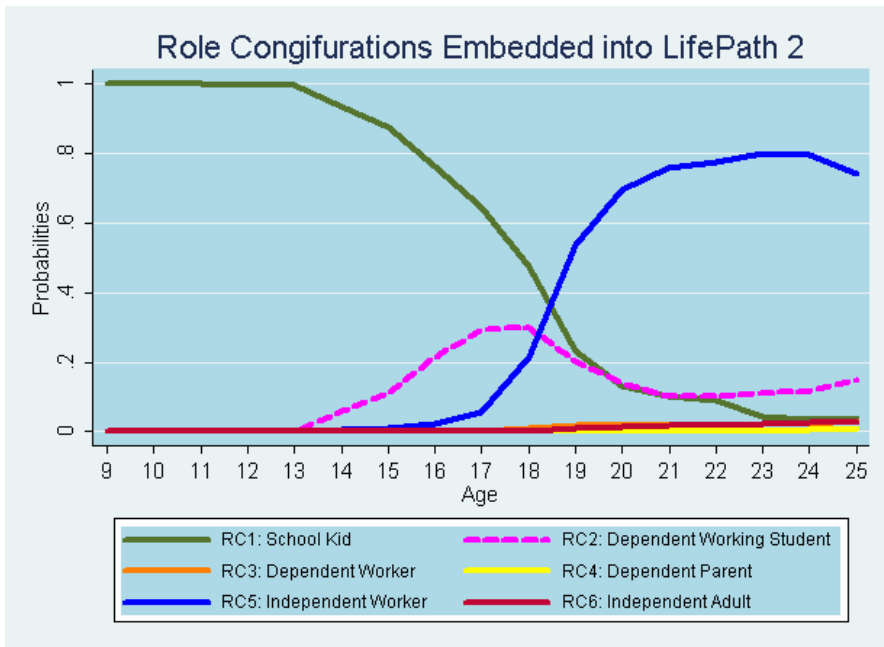


Figure 2b

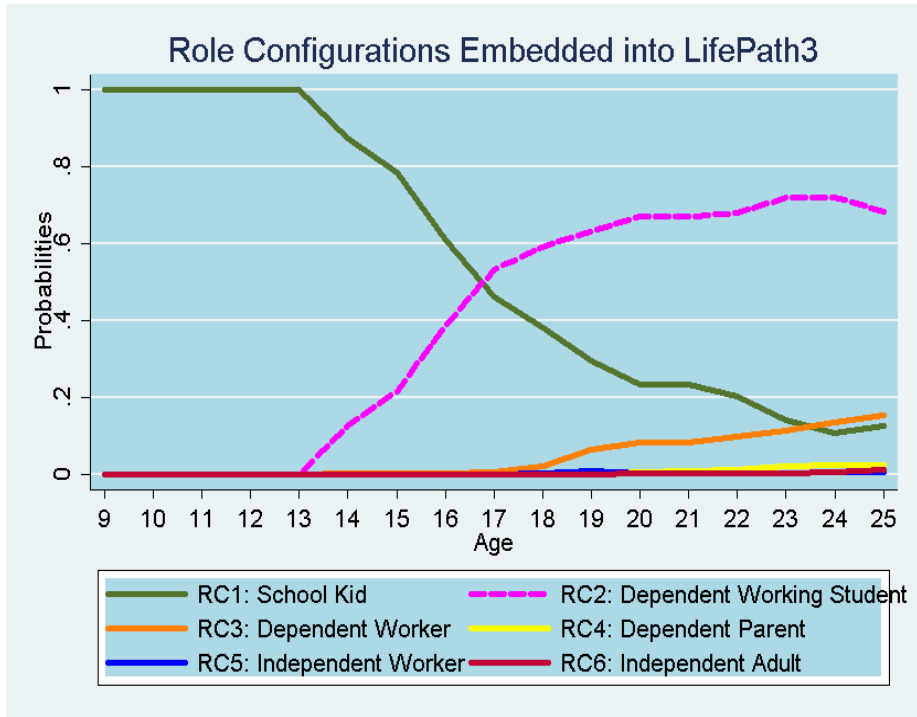


Figure 2c

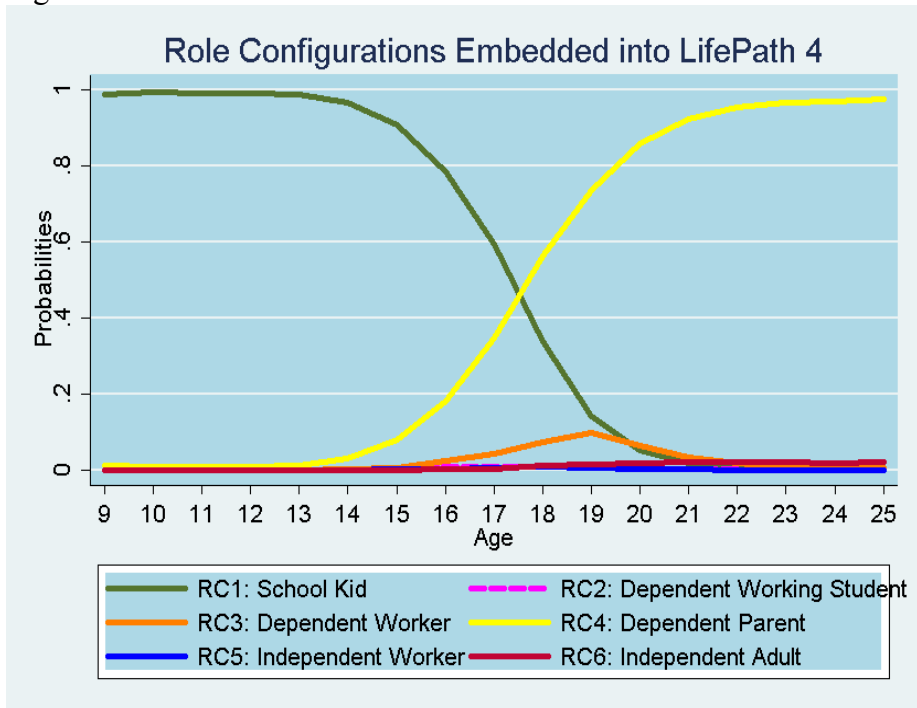


Figure 2d

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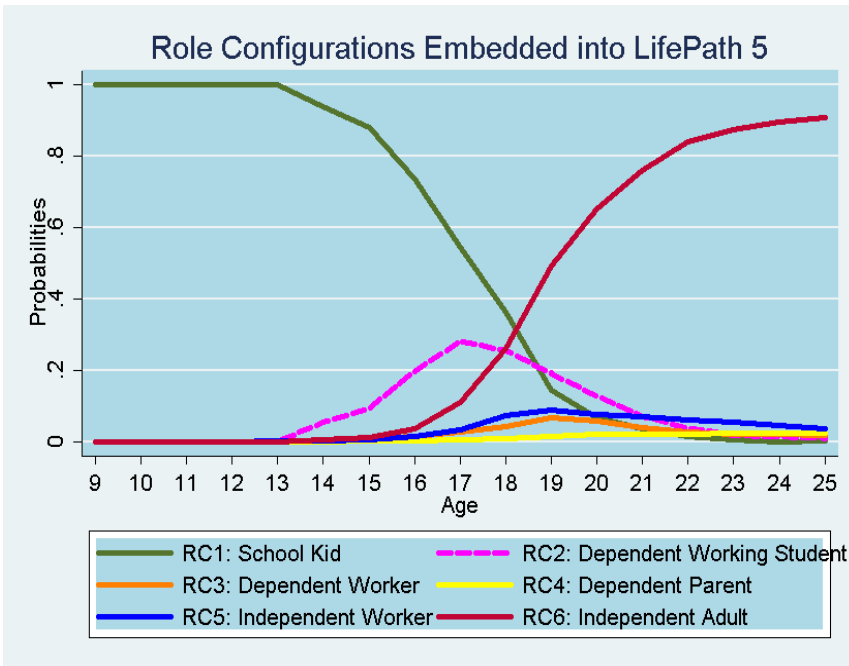


Figure 2e

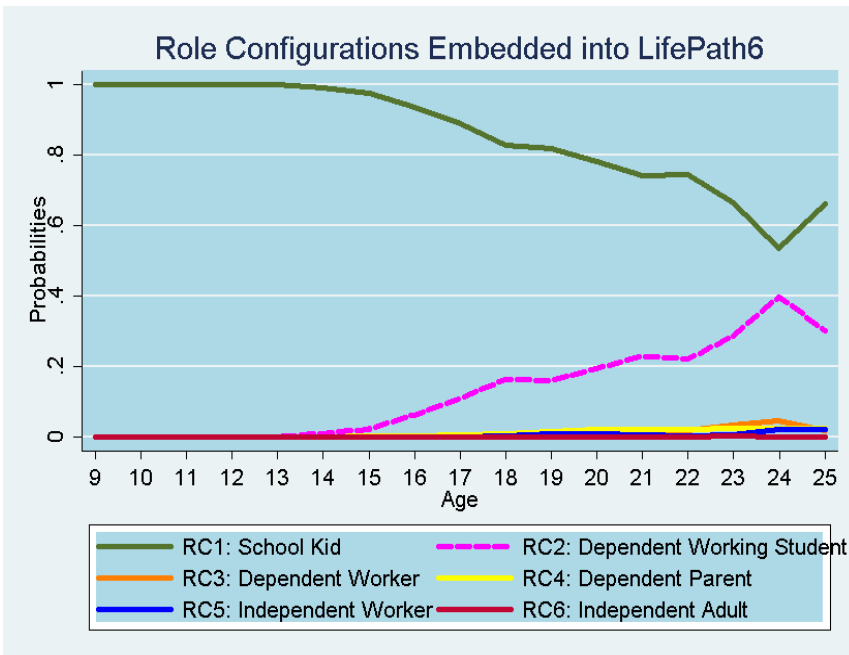


Figure 2f

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics- NLSY1997

Variable	Mean	Std.Dev.	Min	Max
<u>Independent Variable</u>				
black	0.264	0.441	0	1
hispanic	0.213	0.410	0	1
white*	0.523	0.499	0	1
female	0.489	0.500	0	1
parent education less than HS diploma	0.107	0.309	0	1
parent education is HS diploma	0.522	0.500	0	1
parent education is at least four year degree*	0.241	0.427	0	1
income below poverty line	0.253	0.435	0	1
single parent home	0.381	0.486	0	1
step parent home	0.046	0.211	0	1
other family structure	0.180	0.384	0	1
two parent home*	0.393	0.488	0	1
age 9-15	0.388	0.487	0	1
age16	0.087	0.281	0	1
age17	0.086	0.281	0	1
age18*	0.085	0.279	0	1
age19	0.084	0.277	0	1
age20	0.082	0.274	0	1
age21	0.071	0.257	0	1
age22	0.054	0.226	0	1
age23	0.037	0.188	0	1
age24	0.020	0.141	0	1
age25	0.006	0.076	0	1
private school	0.063	0.243	0	1
public school*	0.909	0.288	0	1
depressed 1997	0.125	0.331	0	1
Not disabled*	0.756	0.429	0	1
Having a mild disability	0.093	0.290	0	1
Having a severe disability	0.028	0.164	0	1
Having poor overall health	0.051	0.220	0	1
<u>Dependent Variable</u>				
Employment	0.382	0.486	0	1
School enrollment	0.715	0.451	0	1
Married	0.097	0.296	0	1
Parent	0.092	0.289	0	1
Independent living	0.142	0.349	0	1

* refers to variables used as reference categories in analyses

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TABLE2. Multinomial Logistic Regression of a Multiple Category Variable Indicating the Various Life-paths Teenagers Could follow when they Transition to Adulthood on Nine Independent Variables. The Reference Category is the Life-path 5 in which All the Transitions are Made (Independence, Marriage, School Finished, Full Time Employment and Possibly Parenthood). The Model represented in this Table Indicates What Categories of Teenagers are likely to follow various Life-paths relative to the Reference Life-Path

Covariates	LifePath 1: At Age 25 Dependent Worker (Rel. Risk Ratios)	LifePath 2: At Age 25 Independent Worker (Rel. Risk Ratios)	LifePath 3: At Age 25 Dep. Working Student (Rel. Risk Ratios)	LifePath 4: At Age 25 Dependent Parent (Rel. Risk Ratios)	LifePath 6: At Age 25 Still Studying (Rel. Risk Ratios)
Sex (Ref.: Male)					
Female	0.361***	0.611***	0.641***	1.310**	0.643***
Race/Ethnicity (Ref.: White)					
Black	2.564***	1.688***	1.203	4.840***	2.293***
Hispanic	1.465***	0.828	0.921	1.750***	1.217
Parents' Education (Ref.: College Grad)					
Less Than High School	0.922	0.211***	0.329***	1.314	0.207***
High School	0.968	0.359***	0.572***	1.197	0.343***
Family Structure (Ref.: Two Parents)					
One Step Parent	0.835	0.839	0.613*	1.213	0.381***
One Single Parent	1.044	0.792*	0.642***	1.392**	0.506***
Other	1.109	0.848	0.676*	1.558*	0.548**
Poverty Status (Ref.: Not Poor)					
Poor	0.886	0.539***	0.540***	1.114	0.616***
Type of School (Ref.: Public)					
Private School	1.183	1.705**	2.105***	0.482*	2.999***
Health Status (Ref.: Above Good)					
Fair & Poor Health	1.423*	0.682^	0.596*	1.464*	0.740
Disability Status (Ref.: Not Disabled)					
Mild Disability	1.389*	0.777^	0.781^	1.169	0.906
Severe Disability	2.634***	1.332	0.948	2.000*	0.706
Mental Health Status (Ref.: Not Depressed)					
Depressed	1.567***	0.945	0.969	1.528***	1.148

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, ^ marginally significant at 0.05

Data: NLSY97 (8984 respondents).