

INVITED SYMPOSIUM EARA 2018

**Adolescent Agency and the Transition to Adulthood**

*Chair: Ingrid Schoon, University College London, Institute of Education, UK*

*Discussant: Marlis Buchman, University of Zurich, Switzerland*

Thursday September 13<sup>th</sup>, 8.30-10.00, Auditorium 3

The transition to adulthood is a crucial phase in young people's lives – a make or break period involving the assumption of new social roles and responsibilities. In this symposium we ask: what is the role of adolescent agency in shaping the transition to new social roles – and how can agency be supported. We bring together evidence from the UK, Ireland, Switzerland and the EU in general examining different aspects of young people's agency in becoming independent adults, focusing in particular on the transition from school to work and active citizenship. The first paper provides a conceptualisation of individual agency in shaping the transition to adulthood, drawing on theories of life-course sociology and life-span psychology and providing empirical evidence of studies conducted within the UK. The second paper examines existing programs within the UK and Ireland aiming to support young peoples' work readiness competencies and their agency in young adulthood. The third paper, based on evidence from the Swiss longitudinal COCON study, asks whether adolescent agentic competences as well as personality traits matter as predictors of earnings shortly after entry into the labour force. The fourth paper, reports first findings from a Horizon 2020 project studying the role of self-efficacy as a predictor of active citizenship in eight European countries. Together the papers provide a rich account of the multiple influences shaping adolescent's agency but also the role of agency as a predictor of productive youth transitions.

**PRESENTATION 1: Conceptualising the role of individual agency  
in the transition to independent adulthood**

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This paper introduces a socio-ecological perspective for the conceptualisation of individual agency in the transition to adulthood. Recognising that a comprehensive theory of human agency needs to address the interplay of societal structure and individual agency, the paper draws on theories of life course sociology and life-span psychology to inform a better understanding of the dynamic interplay of social structure and individual agency. Agency is understood as a multi-dimensional construct, comprising indicators of intention, foresight, self-efficacy and self-regulation. The development of agency is dependent on interactions with others, is embedded in a wider socio-historical and cultural context, and by access to socio-economic resources. For example, variations in socio-cultural and economic conditions influence the 'horizon of perceived possibilities', e.g. notions about what career options are available and appropriate to strive for. Yet, individuals are not passively exposed to structural constraints - they are both a product and producer of their social world. A key question to be addressed in this paper is whether and in what circumstances can agency potentially compensate against the exposure to socio-economic hardship in the transition to adulthood, taking into account other individual characteristics, such as academic attainment.

This question is tested using data from the English Longitudinal Study of Young People (LSYPE) following the lives of over 15,000 adolescents from age 14 to age 20. Multiple dimensions of adolescent agency are assessed at age 14 and linked to experiences in the transition from school to work. Using multivariate analysis and Structural Equation Modelling it can be shown that adolescent agency has an independent influence on later outcomes, such as academic and occupational attainment, and that agency can indeed compensate the negative influence of socio-economic hardship. However the influence of agency is limited to situations in which socio-economic risks are not overpowering. Moreover, the findings suggest a potential 'dark side' of agency, in particular when agency beliefs are not matched to actual competencies. The findings drive home the fact that the manifestation of individual agency cannot be understood without considering the social conditions in which it is enacted.

## **PRESENTATION 2: Supporting young people's agency in the preparation for work**

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This study provides a critical examination of the programmes for supporting young people's 'work-readiness' competencies and employability, developed by Governments and other organisations in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Using the lenses of life-course theory and psychological agency theories, we analysed the design and impact of programmes for unemployed 15 – 24-year-olds, referring to material identified through a structured search of 61 Government and non-profit websites and the Educational Resource Information Catalogue (ERIC). The search yielded 202 publications that were reviewed using manual screening of titles and abstracts, to identify 18 major national and community programmes from Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the UK, that were conducted in the last decade. Of these, 9 had evaluations.

First, we analysed the programme designs and evaluations using a framework of work-readiness competencies that was also established through a structured search. These are soft skills desired by employers, that contribute to individual success in the workplace, and include job-specific skills, basic skills, thinking skills, social skills, personal qualities, and career motivation. We found that programme designs focused more on basic skills, such as interviewing, CV writing, and job searching, to move young people quickly out of unemployment. There was less attention to developing young people's social skills and personal qualities, and no programme explicitly targeted thinking skills i.e. critical and creative thinking. The evaluations were generally conducted by hired agencies, and focused on participant satisfaction with programmes, and on broad brush outcomes such as transfer into employment, education and training. Only two evaluations studied change in young people's work-readiness competencies.

Next, we interpreted our results using life course theory and psychological agency theories. There, we identified that historical time and place, i.e. the agenda and interests of Governments and non-profits, dictated the programme designs towards 'work first' outcomes, neglecting many transferable skills necessary for adaptive employability during and beyond young adulthood. The timing of programmes was critical but opaque, clearly there were interactions with school experiences and young adult priorities but these were not described in the documents, except for in ethnographic work by Simmons and colleagues (e.g. Simmons & Thompson, 2011). Linked lives was also important, with a strong impact of trainers, counsellors and workplace mentors. However, no attention was paid to other relationships that may have impacted programme experiences, such as young people's romantic partners and families. The programmes supported agency, when they enhanced competency development and career motivation. However, programmes also restricted agency through sanctions, and many missed opportunities to support agency, e.g. by ignoring barriers to employment such as drug and alcohol problems. The review points to the need for more robust, independent evaluation of work-readiness programmes, to form an evidence base that programmes can be built on. Currently, programmes are informed more by tradition and organisational priorities than by the evidence on what works to support young people's agentic transition out of unemployment.

### **PRESENTATION 3: The role of soft skills for young people's earnings shortly after labor force entry**

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Research has amply documented the role of formal skills (i.e., education and experience), gender, and firm characteristics for workers' earnings. The significance of so-called "soft skills", indicating the individual's agentic capacity and including informal competencies such as motivation, social competencies or personality traits, has been studied little in Sociology. This is surprising in view of Jencks (1997) earlier work providing convincing evidence of their significance for labor market outcomes. This paper thus attempts to partially fill this gap by examining whether social and productive competencies as well as personality traits matter for the earnings of 21-year-old workers shortly after their transition into the labor force.

Theoretical considerations suggest that, on the one hand, certain types of jobs require workers endowed with soft skills like agreeableness, teamwork skills or autonomy, for which they are rewarded by employers (Bowles et al., 2001; Duncan and Dunifon, 1998). On the other hand, personality traits and informal competencies are likely to play an indirect role by influencing young people's choice of occupation (Caspi et al. 2005; Holland 1973; Barrick & Mount 2005), which in turn determines their earnings (e.g., Farkas 1988).

We use data from the Swiss longitudinal study COCON including a representative sample of 21-year-olds residing in the German- and French-speaking parts of Switzerland. The data, collected in 2006, provide detailed information on the respondents' life course, family context, cognitive, social, and productive competences, values as well as personality characteristics. The analyses are based on respondents with completed (upper) secondary education having transitioned into the labour market by the age of 21. We run linear regression models with monthly income as dependent variable. Our main independent variables are agentic capacities, including the social competence of the ability to reach consent and cooperation; the self-competencies of self-efficacy and autonomy; the productive competence referring to the willingness to exert effort; and the Big Five.

The findings show that, already at the beginning of young people's careers, young people's agency referring to personality characteristics (openness, agreeableness) as well as social and productive competencies (ability to reach consensus, autonomy, willingness for achievement) play a role in explaining their earnings.

## **PRESENTATION 4: Active citizenship of late adolescents in European context:**

### **A longitudinal study in eight European countries**

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The purpose of this study is to examine (a) whether and how European youth actively engage in national and EU issues, and (b) whether and how youth's own attributes promote or hinder their active citizenship in national and European context. Moderations by country will be examined. The study is based on results from the Horizon 2020 CATCH-EyoU project, standing for Constructing Active Citizenship with European Youth: Policies, Practices, Challenges and Solutions. Scientists from different disciplines (Psychology, Political Science, Sociology, Media and Communications, Education) took part in the project. Three research questions will be tested: (a) whether level and change in political participation and civic engagement differ in these 8 countries, (b) whether and how individual-level factors predict individual differences in level and change in political participation and civic engagement, and (c) whether country moderates this link. Participants were from eight European countries (Sweden, Estonia, UK, Germany, Czech Republic, Greece, Portugal, Italy). The total sample consisted of 4,482 late adolescents at T1, 15-18 years of age, (Mean age= 16.46, 43% male and 57% female). Based on a survey developed for this project, we assessed youth's (a) political participation and civic engagement, and (b) political efficacy, self-efficacy and alienation, as individual-level predictors of the different ways in which young Europeans engage (or do not engage) with social and political issues and become active European citizens. The data are two-wave longitudinal with repeated measures. Research questions will be addressed using multi-group structural equation modelling, assuming measurement equivalence across countries and time points. Cross-country latent means and latent changes of engagement will be estimated and compared (first research question). Individual-level predictors of engagement will be examined (second research question). Finally, structural equivalence of the predictions across the eight countries will be tested (third research question).