

Navigating the Transition to Adulthood: The Role of Structure and Agency

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Outline

- Conceptualising the Transition to Adulthood within a Socio-Ecological Life Course Framework
- Focus on school-to-work transition
- Can adolescent agency compensate for socio-economic disadvantage in the school-to-work transition?
- What is a successful school-to-work transition?
- Evidence from LSYPE (and some from GUI)
- Conclusions

Transition to Adulthood

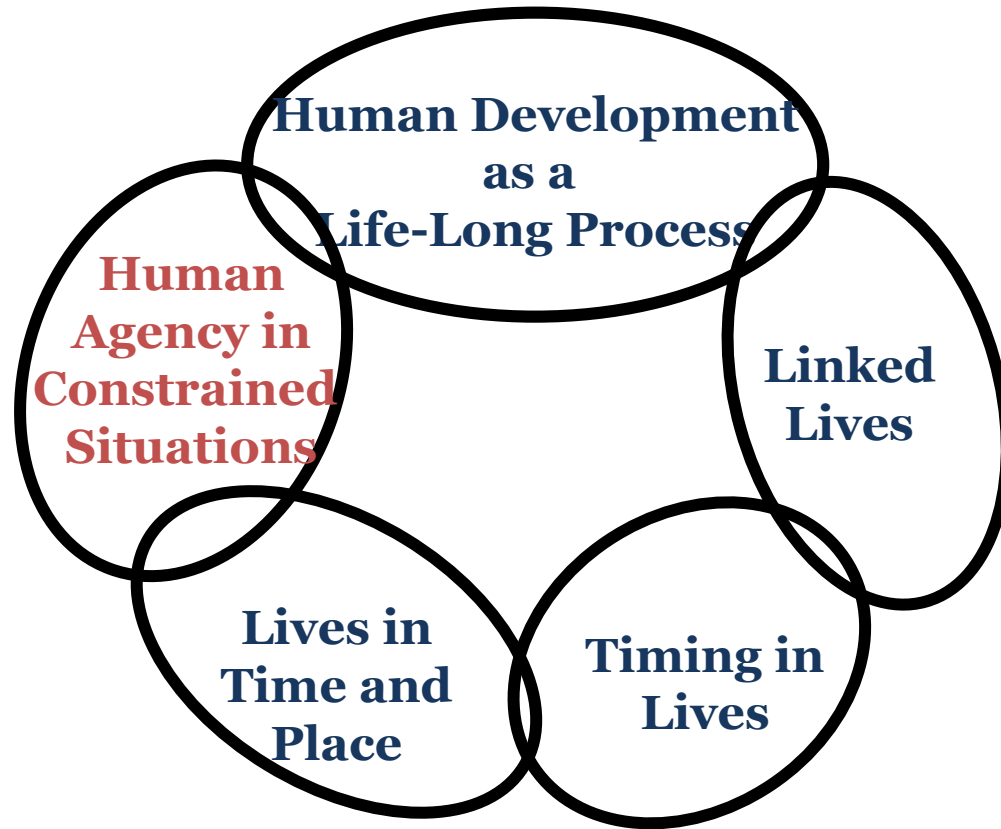
- Pivotal in setting the scene for adult functioning and adjustment; is both formative and risk laden
- Demographically dense period involving assumption of multiple, interlinked social roles: The Big 5
- Shaped by previous experiences, current conditions, and anticipation of the future



A Life Course Approach

- Within a life-course approach **transitions** are conceptualized as changes in status or identity, both personally and socially, that open up opportunities for behavioural change (Elder, 2006).
- Transitions are embedded within **trajectories** that give them a specific form and meaning (MacMillan, 2005).
- **Societal institutions** set up age-graded structures of opportunities and constraints
- **Societal structures** of inequality moderate access to opportunities
- **Individual Agency:** individuals are understood to construct their own life-course through the choices and actions they take within opportunities and constraints, whereby they both reproduce and transform the structures in which they are embedded.

A Life Course Perspective: Paradigmatic Principles (Elder, 1993, 1998)



Individual Agency

- An individual level construct highlighting the role of individual planning and choice
- Central term in life course theory (Elder, 1994; Elder & Shanahan, 2006)
 - Yet, has remained an unspecified, ‘slippery’ concept within sociological research (Hitlin & Elder, 2007)
 - As a non-structural factor it is not universally accepted or valued in sociological theory (Fuchs, 2001; Loyal & Barnes, 2001)
 - Or it is assumed that structural factors fundamentally constitute the selves of individual actors (Hitlin & Elder, 2007)
- Motivational theories of lifespan development (Brandstädter & Lerner, 1999; Heckhausen, 1999, 2017)
 - Conceptualised as a multi-dimensional construct
 - Expectancy-value model of goal selection (Eccles, 1993)
 - Developmental regulation during goal pursuit
 - Little attention to contextual and structural influences

Structure and Agency

- Structure without agency
 - The life course is largely determined by characteristics and processes of social settings and by locations of individuals within those settings
- Agency without structure
 - The life course is largely determined by individual decisions and actions
- Blended models
 - Agency within structure: asking how individuals set goals and take action within constraints
 - Interactions between structure and agency

(Settersten & Gannon, 2005)

A Socio-Ecological Model of Agency

- Integrative approach
- Ecological theories of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elder, 1985):
 - proximal and distal influences
 - Focus on social structures, institutions and wider socio-historical context
- Motivational Theories of Lifespan Development (Brandstädter & Lerner, 1999; Heckhausen, 1999, 2017)
- Agency as a relational process – emerging through person-environment interactions (Schoon, 2007, 2018; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017)

A Socio-Ecological Model of Agency

How do individual and social context define each other?

- a) The role of the wider socio-historical and cultural contexts that shape transition pathways
- b) Social structures as proximal setting that moderate access to opportunities
- c) Individual agency identified across multiple dimensions
- d) Processes linking structure and agency:
 - Cumulative effects
 - Independent effects
 - Compensatory effects
- e) Overall subjective evaluation of one's life

CHALLENGES IN THE TRANSITION TO INDEPENDENCE

- Unequal life chances
- Gap between aspirations and reality
- Youth unemployment (even among graduates)
- Precarious employment (short term contracts, low pay, under-employment, insecurity and lack of progression)
- Housing

Children living in poverty



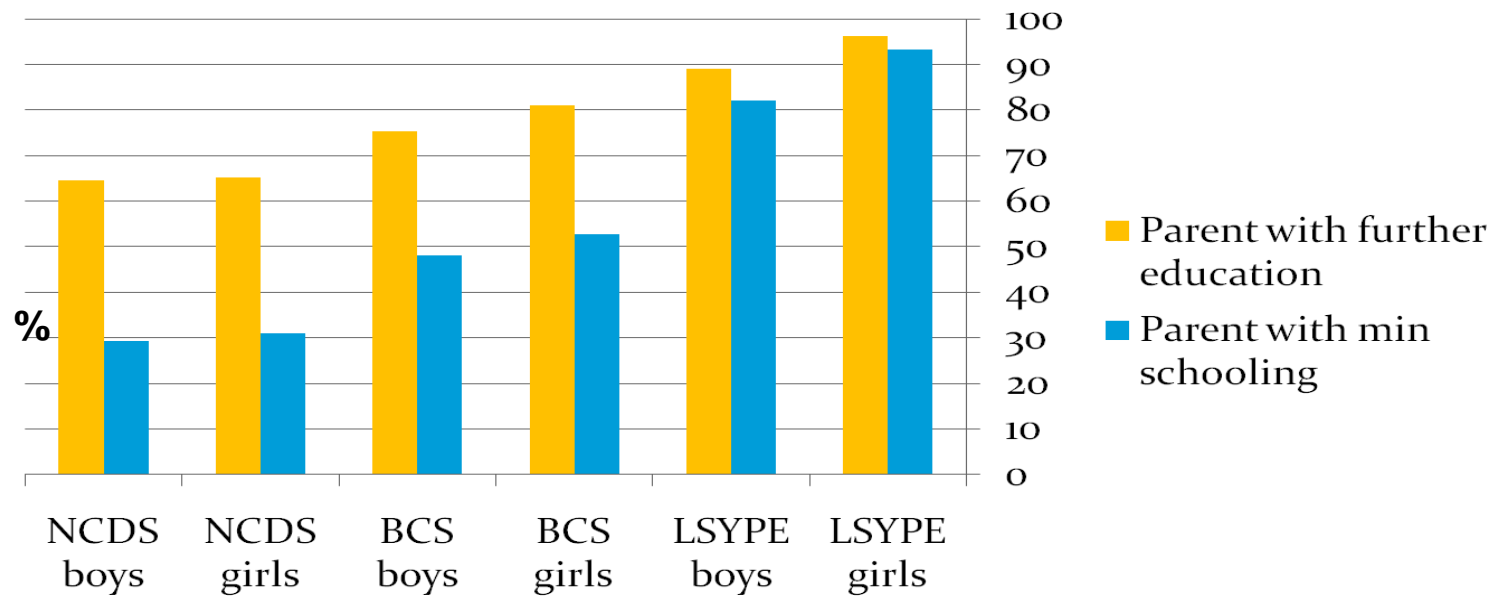
- In 2016/17 there were 4.1 million children living in poverty in the UK. That's 30 per cent of children, or 9 in a classroom of 30.
- Child poverty reduced dramatically between 1998/9-2011/12 when 800,000 children were lifted out of poverty. Since 2010, child poverty figures have flat-lined.

Department for Work and Pensions, 2018.

Social inequality

- Children and young people growing up in relative disadvantaged families (characterised by low levels of parental education, low income, low social status, family instability) have less resources
 - More stressed parents with less energy for effective parenting
 - Poor housing, disadvantaged area, less resourced schools
 - Lower levels of academic attainment and socio-emotional capabilities
 - School drop-out and early school leaving
- Cumulation of disadvantages and adversity – a vicious cycle

Teenage expectations for further education by gender and parental education



born: 1958

1970

1989/1990

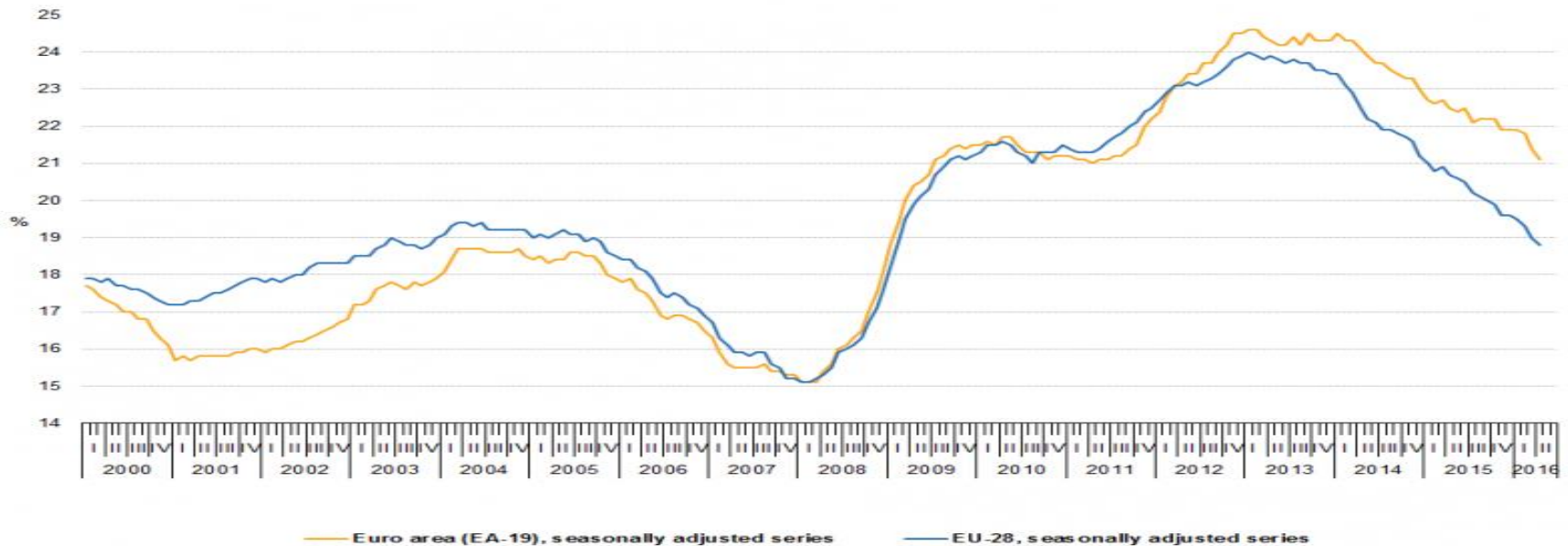
Age 16 1974

1986

2005/6

The Great Recession

- Rising youth unemployment
 - especially among less educated young

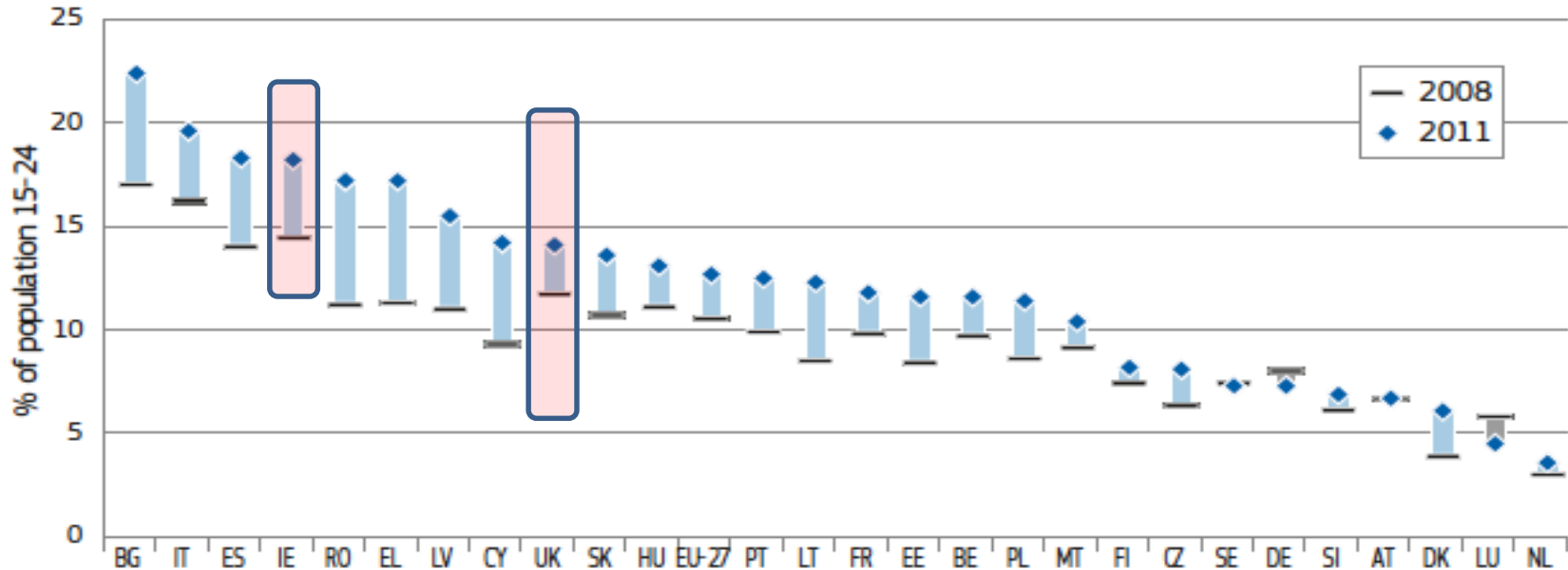


Increase of the “Gig Economy”



NEET (age 15-24) across Europe

Chart 12: NEETs in the EU Member States, 2008-2011

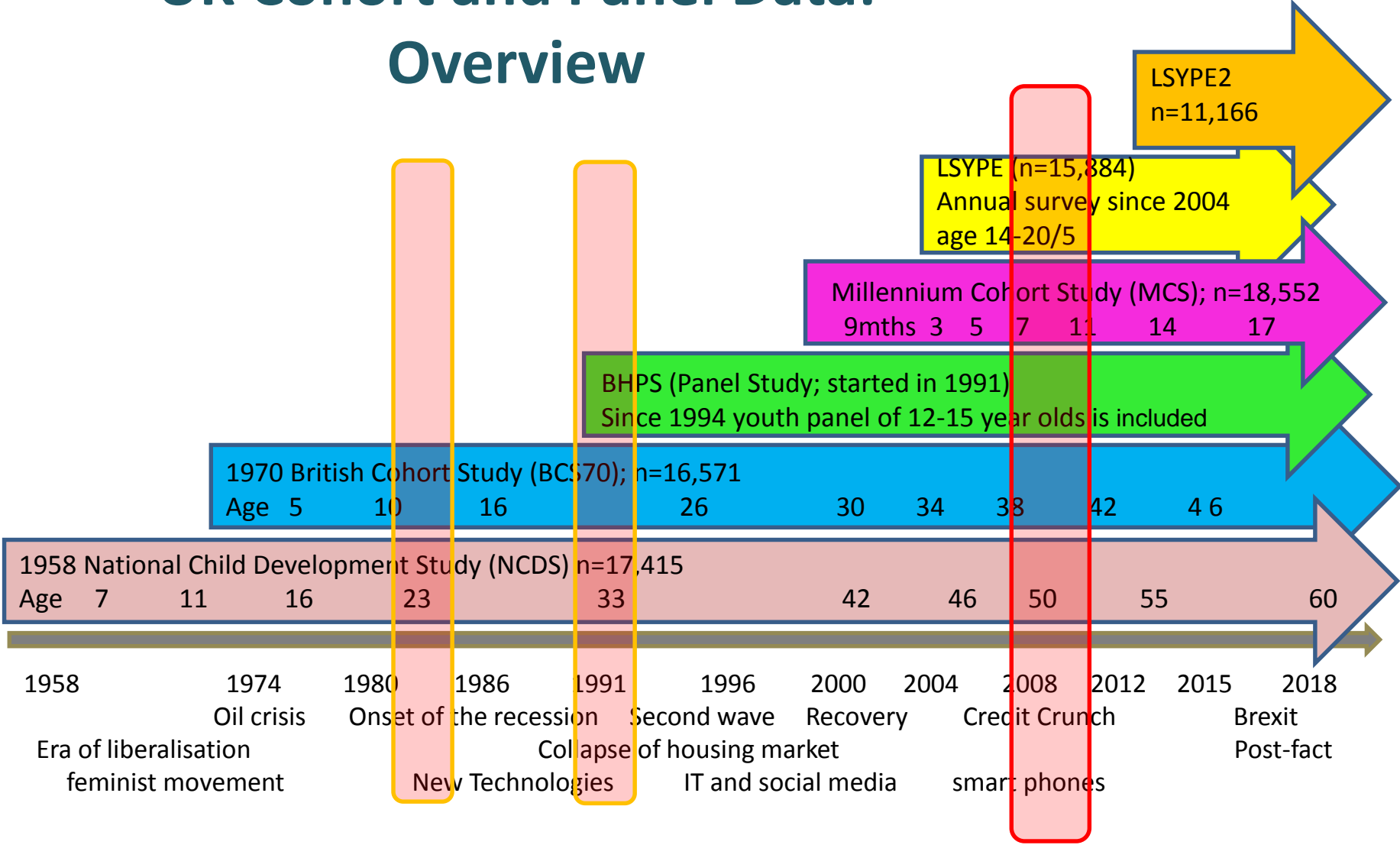


Eurostat, EU-LFS.

Data Sources

TRANSITION EXPERIENCES

UK Cohort and Panel Data: Overview



Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) Child Cohort

Wave of GUI	Survey numbers	Year	Age
1	8,568	2007/8	9
2	7,700	2011/12	13
3	6,500	2015/16	17/18
4		2018/19	20

Transitions in historical context

- Comparing experiences in three age cohorts at age 18

	BCS: born 1970, aged 18 in 1988	LSYPE: born 1990, Aged 18 in 2008	GUI: born 1998 Aged 18 in 2016
FT Education	25%	45%	93%
Employed (with or without training)	68%	40% (33% paid work, 6% apprenticeship s)	2% in paid employment 2% in training
Out of the labour force (NEET)	7%	16%	2.5%

Educational Expectations

	Young Person	Parent
Likely to apply to University		
LSYPE 1 Aged 13/14 in 2004	64.3%	58.7%
LSYPE 2 Aged 13/14 in 2013	75.1%	70.5%
Expected highest qualification at Degree level		
GUI Aged 13 in 2011	50.0%	76.8%

FOCUS ON THE LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN ENGLAND (LSYPE)

Evidence from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE)
born in 1989/90

Sequence analysis of monthly activity data collected between September
2006 to May 2010 – 45 months period following the end of compulsory
schooling: FT education, FT employment, Apprenticeships, NEET

Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE)

Wave of LSYPE	Survey numbers (young people ¹)	Year	School year	Age of young person	Key Stage
n/a		2001	6	10/11	KS2
1	15,770	2004	9	13	
2	11,952	2005	10	14	KS3
3	12,148	2006	11	15	
4	11,053	2007	12 (p-c +1)	16	KS4 (GCSE)
5	10,430	2008	13 (p-c +2)	17	
6	9,799	2009	First year uni (p-c +3)	18	KS5 (Alevels)
7	8,682	2010	Second year uni (p-c +4)	19	

Link to National Pupil Data for exam results

Detailed monthly activity histories from September 2006 to May 2010 – 45 month period following the end of compulsory schooling : FT education; FT employed; Apprenticeship; NEET

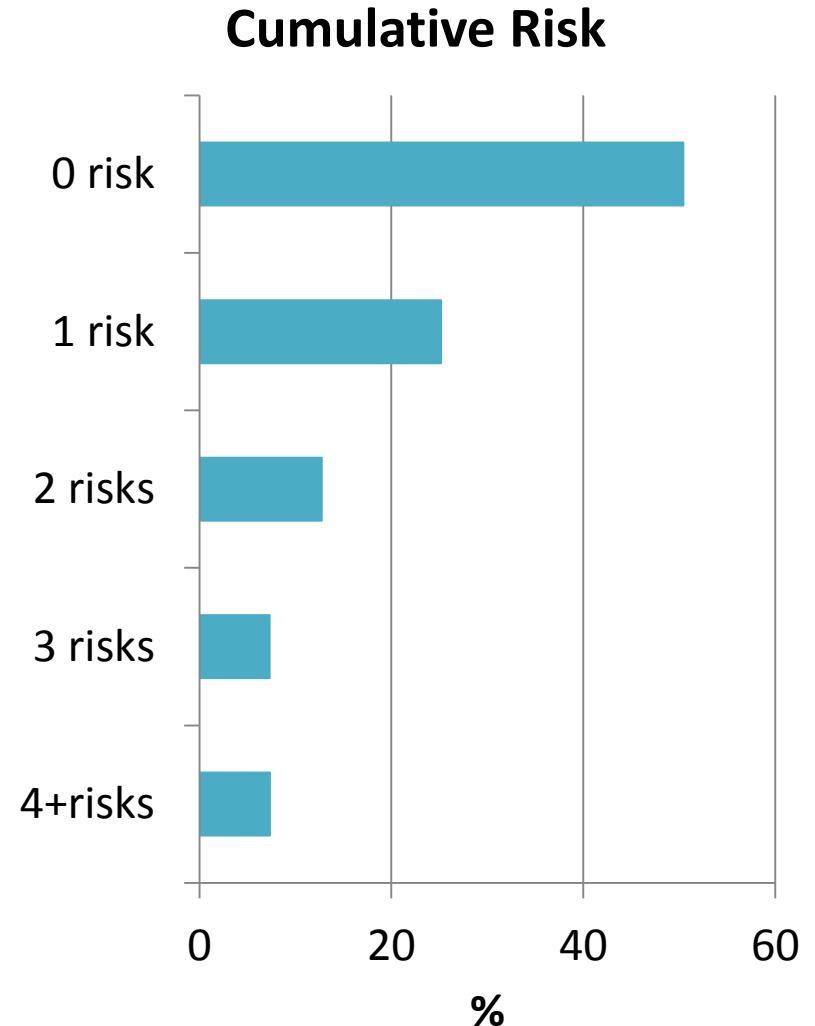
Agency – A multidimensional construct

Domain Specific Indicators

Dimensions	Indicator
Intention	Education expectations Likely to apply to University
Foresight	Goal certainty Likely to be accepted if apply
Self-efficacy	Ability concepts Math, English, Science, ICT
Self-directedness	School engagement Happy at school, likes school, works hard

Socio-Economic Family Resources

Indicators	%
Low parental education	25.3
Low income (less than £10,400 per annum)	12.9
Parental worklessness	12.8
Single parent household	21.8
No housing tenure	26.7



Association between Socio-Economic Resources and Agency

(Bivariate Correlations)

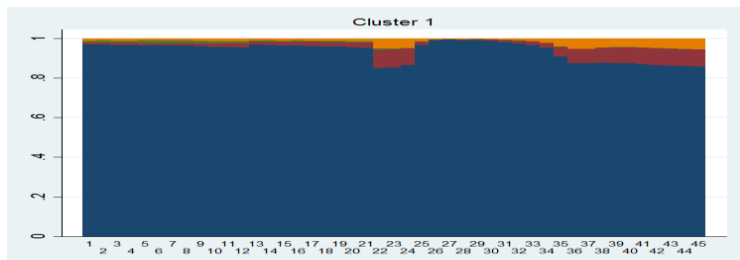
Indicators	Socio-economic resources
Expectation to go to university	-.08
Goal certainty	-.08
Academic self-concept	-.02
School engagement	-.04
Academic attainment at age 11	-.30

Transitions

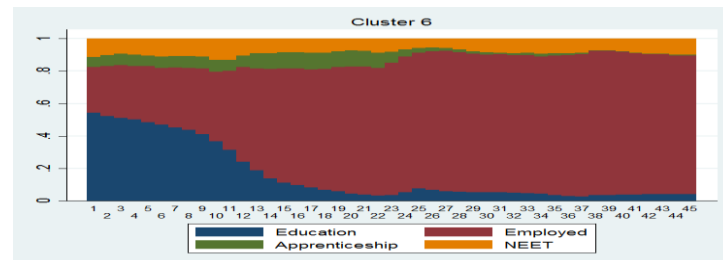
- Monthly activity data following the end of compulsory schooling
- September 2006 to May 2010 – 45 month period
- Indicators:
 - FT education;
 - FT Employment
 - Apprenticeship/Training
 - NEET
- Sequence Analysis
 - Stata ado (Brinzksy-Fay et al. 2004)

Transitions between age 16 to 20 (LSYPE)

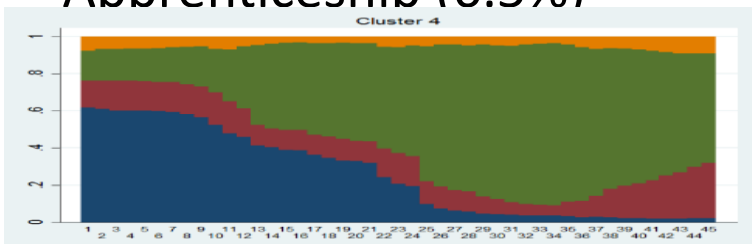
- Mostly education (45.2%)



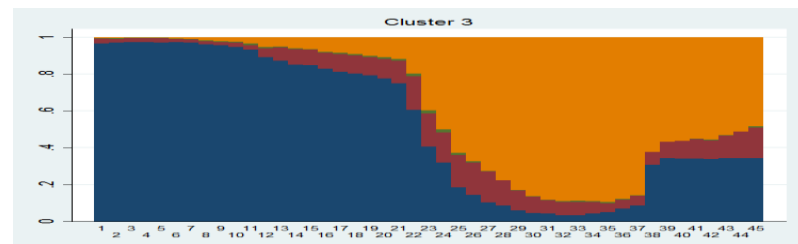
- Early work orientation (21.1%)



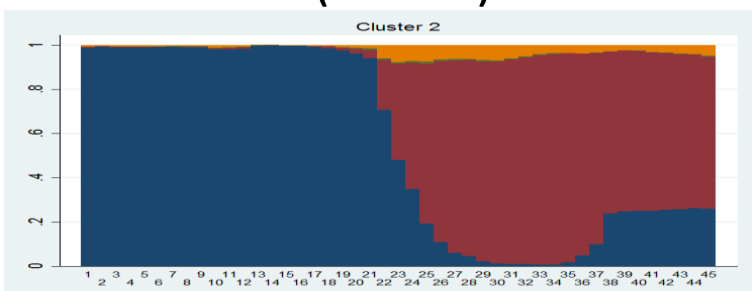
- Apprenticeship (6.5%)



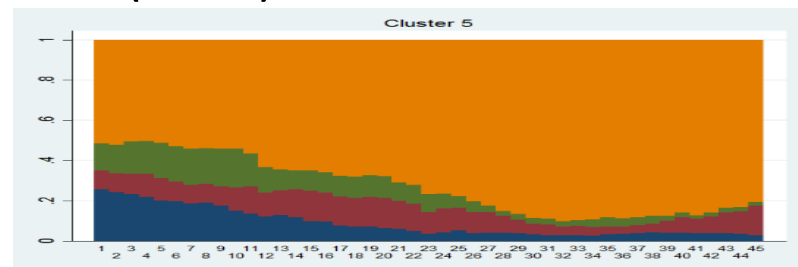
- NEET after further education (7.1%)



- Employment after further education (15.5%)



- NEET (5.6%)



Predicting Transitions (Relative Risk Ratios)

REF: Mostly Education	Apprenticeship	Employed after some education	Early Work-focus	NEET after some education	NEET
Socio-economic resources					
Low Family resources	.95	1.02	1.12#	1.19**	1.48***
IMD	1.01**	.996	1.01#	1.01*	1.02**
Urban	1.24	.91	1.41	1.37	1.70
Agency					
Likely to apply to Uni	.72***	.83***	.67***	1.03	.87
Expectation of success	.79#	.93	.95	.80#	.69*
Self efficacy	.71***	.84**	.78***	.83#	1.01
School engagement	.94	.95	.86*	.93	.65***

Predicting Transitions – Controls

(Relative Risk Ratios)

	Apprentice- ship	Employed after some education	Early Work- focus	NEET after some education	NEET
Female	.35***	.99	.67***	.70**	.96
Non-white	.25***	.46***	.18***	.57**	.23***
Academic attainment at age 11	.68***	.97	.56***	.85	.46***
Life Satisfaction at age 14/15	.88	.95	.86**	.92	.86

Interaction Effects

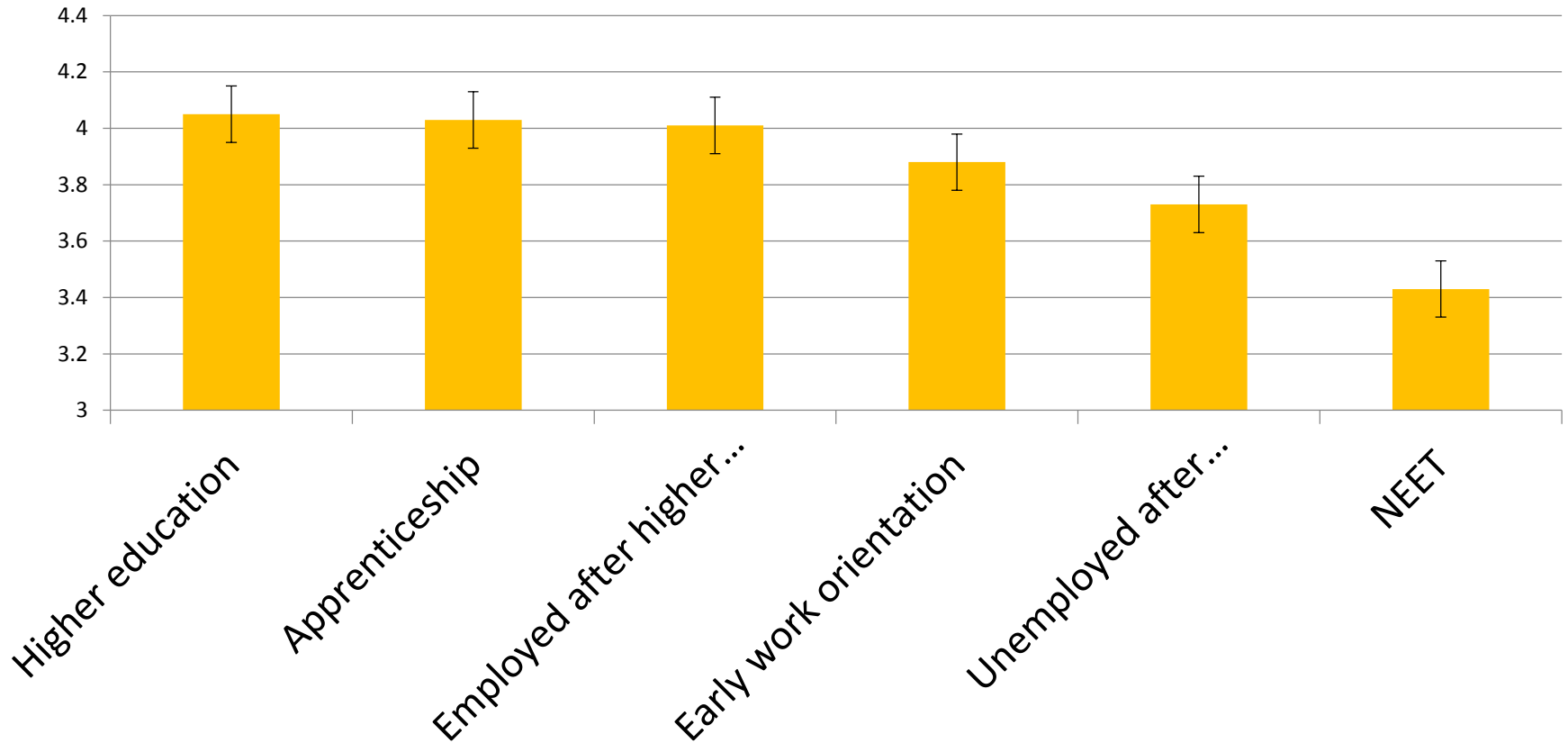
- Does agency play a significant role in high risk conditions?
- We identified 2 significant interaction effects:
 - socio-economic risk by expectation of success: higher likelihood to enter employment after some further education
 - socio-economic risk by self-efficacy: higher likelihood to be unemployed after some further education

WHAT IS A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION?

What is a successful transition?

- Doing ok - Adjustment within the average for a normative cohort
- Meeting developmental tasks
 - Objective achievements (income, education, occupational position)
 - Timing and sequencing
 - Normative, or 'on-time transitions' are 'culturally prepared' by socialization and institutional arrangements (Buchman, 1989; Marini, 1984, Model, 1989) and are understood to be psychologically salutary
 - those who are 'off-time': too early or too late are thought to be the target of negative social sanctions and experience psychological strain (Heckhausen, 1999; Rossi, 1980)
 - Subjective evaluation (life satisfaction, health and wellbeing)
- Who decides?
 - Can vary by age, culture and historical context

Life Satisfaction by Group



Predictors	Life Satisfaction at 19/20 (OLS regression)		
Family resources	-.03*	-.02	-.02
IMD	-.003**	-.003*	-.003*
Urban	-.05	-.03	-.02
Agency			
Likely to apply to Uni	.02	.01	.01
Expectation of success	.07***	.06*	.05#
Self efficacy	.01	.004	.02
School engagement	.07***	.05**	.05#
Transitions			
Apprenticeship		.09	.11
Employed after some educ		-.05	-.04
Work focus employed at 16		-.15***	-.14**
Unemployed after some educ		-.25***	-.25***
NEET		-.55***	-.63***
Controls Female			.94**
Life satisfaction at 14/15			.10***

Summary: Structures

- Transition to Adulthood has to be understood within a changing socio-cultural context
 - Historic events (e.g. economic boom and bust)
 - Institutional structures (e.g. compulsory school leaving age, VET, study grants)
 - Social structures
 - Local opportunities
 - Social relations and networks

Summary: The Role of Agency

- Indicators of agency are associated with transition experiences independent of structural constraints
- Evidence for independent and compensatory processes
 - Individuals steer the course of their life independent of structural constraints
 - In England: more than one optimal pathway

Under which conditions is agency effective?

- More prominent if institutional structures are lacking
- When social structures are flexible, enabling switching between tracks
- If socio-economic risks are not overpowering
- If agency is matched to individual competences and capabilities
- If goals are closely matched to available opportunities

Conclusion

- Transition to adulthood - a holistic experience, a purposeful creation, and social formation
 - Contextual challenges: Recession and economic downturn
 - Institutional challenges: Opportunity structures
 - Structural challenges: Parental social position and assets
 - Individual motivations, aspirations and previous achievements
 - Social expectations
 - Zeitgeist: gradual shift and emergence of new realities

Thank you

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