



Understanding the transition to independent living among urban youth: A decomposition analysis for Hong Kong



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ABSTRACT

The trends and determinants of young adults' living arrangements across a wide range of societies have been a hot topic in multi-disciplinary literature on contemporary youth transitions and urban and housing studies. Extant literature has identified both macro-structural and micro-individual factors to explain the living arrangements of young adults in developed and developing societies. Empirical studies to assess their relative contribution to the spatial and temporal heterogeneity in young people's transition to adulthood, however, remain scarce. This paper attempts to fill this research gap by conducting a case study of Hong Kong young adults. Through descriptive and regression analyses of the population census data in 1991, 2001, and 2011, the paper identifies a declining trend in independent living arrangements in Hong Kong over the past two decades. Such change has been found to be associated with a compositional shift of young adults in their socio-economic characteristics in terms of place of birth, ethnicity, educational attainment, and income and employment status. Further decomposition analysis revealed that over 80% of the change could be attributed to urban institutional and policy contexts beyond the control of young individuals. The pursuit of residential independence among young adults has become an increasingly challenging task in this Asian's world city because of the worsening structural and institutional environments in the 2000s. The case study highlighted the selective nature of Hong Kong's welfare regime, which prioritizes the extension of assistance and benefits to the elderly at the relative neglect of the demand of young adults.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, understanding the nature and pattern of the transition to adulthood has become a topic of incessant discussion both in scholarly literature on contemporary social change and the mass media (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Furstenberg, 2013). It has been well documented that the passage to adulthood of current generations across a wide range of societies has become more protracted, and the sequence of transitions less organized and predictable than that of baby boomer generation (Forrest & Yip, 2013; Settersten & Ray, 2010; Stone, Berrington, & Falkingham, 2011; Yeung and Alipio, 2013). Compared with their parents' generation, young adults today take longer to complete their schooling and settle into stable employment, and are also delaying marriage, childbearing, and the establishment of their own households (Danziger & Rouse, 2007; Elzinga & Liefbroer,

2007; Forrest & Yip, 2013). Researchers have documented a general increase in the proportion of young adults living with their parents and delaying the average age of leaving home in both Asian and Western societies since the mid-1980s (Fry, 2013; Yeung and Alipio, 2013). Although the normative judgment over the social desirability, significance and consequence of delayed transition to adulthood varies across different cultural contexts, it is commonly recognized that the way in which young adults navigate the bumpy waters of adulthood is closely linked to their social well-being and life satisfaction, inter-generational relationship, and the housing and social policies of the wider society (Bos & Jaffe, 2015; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Karsten, 2015; Settersten & Ray, 2010).

The protracted transition of the youth has attracted growing academic interest and public attention. While social planners and decision-makers are challenged for the implementation of innovative policies, scholars are demanded for the generation of knowledge to explain the nature and dynamics of this ongoing process. In general, scholarly controversy has centered on where to assign causal priority to explain the uneven transition of youth to

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residential independence, whether to the micro-level agency concerning individual resources and preferences or the macro-level structural factors, which determine the set of opportunities and constraints that individuals encounter when making choices (Billari, 2004; Mandic, 2008; Mykyta, 2012). Although both structural and individual factors are believed to be indispensable to the full account of heterogeneous transitions to independent living experienced by young adults, empirical evidence on the relative explanatory power between agency and structure remain scarce. Does the pattern of change in living arrangement of the youth represent the choice of youth adult groups with shifting composition of socioeconomic status or a “failure to launch” (c.f. Bell, Burtless, Gornick, & Smeeding, 2007) in the face of considerable structural constraints and historical circumstances over which individuals have no control? Given that micro-level individual factors may play different roles in various institutional and cultural contexts, the answer to this question requires empirical assessment to disentangle the relative contribution of individual versus structural effect in a concrete society.

Against this research backdrop, this paper examines the changes in living arrangement of young adults in an Asian society through a case study in Hong Kong. Based on the population census data in 1991, 2001, and 2011, the paper identified a declining trend in independent living arrangements and concomitantly an increasing trend in dependent living arrangements in Hong Kong over the past two decades. The proportion of young adults living with their parents in the city increased from 43.1% in 1981 to 50.9% in 2011, with the increase being most pronounced for young adults aged 25 and above. Both descriptive and regression analyses suggested some correlation between the living arrangements of young adults and the changing composition of socio-economic status in terms of gender, place of birth, ethnicity, educational attainment, and employment status. Further decomposition analysis found that over 80% of the decline in independent living of youth can be linked to changing social and economic contexts in the city, making it increasingly difficult for low-resourced young generations to embark on an independent life. The case study indicated the selective nature of Hong Kong's welfare regime, which prioritized the provision of assistance and benefits to the elderly at the relative neglect of the demand of young adults.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section is a critical review of existing literature on the determinant factors underlying the transition of young adults to independent living. A discussion of the data and methodology of this study follows. The next section describes the empirical results. The paper concludes with a summary of major research findings and a discussion of important policy implications.

2. Determinants of the living arrangements of urban youth: constraint or choice?

Theoretical discussion of the determinants of the transition to adulthood and other social changes at large has long been preoccupied with the distinctions, tensions and debate between the perspective of individualization in which individuals negotiating their life courses are increasingly unbounded by pre-existing social structures, and the perspective of institutionalization whereby the choices and coping strategies of individuals are continually subject to the influence of structural obstacles and normative constraints embedded in real social worlds. Following these different theoretical streams, an increasing number of country-specific and cross-national studies have been undertaken for empirical substantiation (Aassve, Billari, Mazzucco, & Ongaro, 2002; Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011; Danziger & Rouse, 2007; Iacovou, 2002; Mandic, 2008; Mulder, Clark, & Wagner, 2002). The results of these

empirical tests can be classified broadly into two categories based on their different scales of operation (Cote & Bynner, 2008). One group of factors centers on the individualistic dimensions of life courses and choices of young adults at the micro-level, whereas the other emphasizes the enduring and systematic impact of social structures and regulatory environments at the macro-level.

2.1. Individualistic view

For advocates of the individualistic view, leaving the parental nest is a relatively autonomous decision of young adults, conditioned by their skills, capacities, and preferences. The delayed youth transition into independent living is often interpreted as a sign of a broader trend of “second demographic transition” (Lesthaeghe, 1995; Van de Kaa, 1987) characterized by the postponement of the first marriage age, substantial decline in fertility, strong increase in divorces and union dissolution, cohabitation, and extra-marital child births, as a result of a major shift in values, lifestyles, and social norms towards more individualistic values of lifestyle choice and personal self-fulfillment (Emmanuel, 2013). Increased emphasis on individual autonomy and self-realization resulted in an analytical focus on individual socio-economic characteristics, including age, gender, ethnicity, income, educational attainment, employment status, high school performance and work experience, personal attitudes and behavior, and so on, as determinants of young adults' living arrangements (Aassve et al., 2002; Hill & Holzer, 2007; Iacovou, 2010; Mykyta, 2012).

From a resource-centered perspective, leaving home is not solely a matter of preference and available resources for young adults, but also involves other concerned actors. In addition to individual income, members of the extended family could also be a source of income protection for young adults against the adverse effects of economic change (Iacovou, 2010). On the one hand, parents with more resources can provide financial support to their children to facilitate residential independence. On the other hand, parents with considerable means of feathering their nests may devote more resources to make living at home more comfortable and convenient for their children, thereby prolonging their co-residence. These contrasting effects complicate the real impact of inter-generational transfer on young adults' propensity for independent living (De Valk & Billari, 2007; Emmanuel, 2013; Iacovou, 2010).

2.2. Structuralist view

The individualist view on young adults' living arrangement and leaving home behavior has been criticized for its heavy reliance on the experiences of more advantaged young adults who are more likely to have the capacity to explore various opportunities than their less-resourced peers and the “risk of underrating the importance of social influences on decision-making processes during young adulthood” (Billari & Liefbroer, 2007, p. 182). For proponents of the structuralist view, although the autonomy of young adults to act according to their own mindsets has increased, they are not making choices independently, but instead are subject to a set of structural, institutional and normative constraints (Aassve et al., 2002; Breen & Buchmann, 2002; Cote & Bynner, 2008; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007).

With respect to institutional factors, scholarly interests have focused mainly on the welfare state, stimulated by the seminal typology of welfare regime formulated by Esping-Anderson (1990). A number of comparative studies, mostly conducted in Europe, have identified an interesting relationship between the countries' welfare regime and young adults' transition to residential independence (Billari, 2004; Breen & Buchmann, 2002;

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