The diversity of pathways to adulthood in France: Evidence from a holistic approach

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A R T I C L E I N F O	A B S T R A C T
Keywords: Pathways to adulthood France Optimal matching analysis Life course Sequence analysis	Youth is often depicted as a transition from childhood to adulthood in the familial, residential and occupational domains. This approach brings in the idea of thresholds, such as leaving the parental home, getting married, having a first child or having a stable job. In practice, it has the advantage of allowing relatively simple comparisons of pathways to adulthood in time and space. However the study of thresholds has several limitations. First, it masks the problem of the reversibility of events, their non-occurrence and the difficulty of defining clearly bounded markers. Second, it barely apprehends the links between the familial, residential and occupational domains. Finally, it produces aggregated outcomes, partly ignoring the heterogeneity of individual processes of transition to adulthood. This work attempts to overcome these limitations by tackling pathways to adulthood in France through trajectory typologies built by means of optimal matching analysis techniques. © 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. The limits of a transition-based approach

The sociology of youth has attracted relatively belated interest in French sociology. Nonetheless, the evolution of familial and educational structures has gradually led to the construction of a new category of individuals: "young people". To facilitate understanding of this hazily outlined and often very heterogeneous category, attention has frequently been to the pathways to adulthood that they experience. Youth is represented as a transitional period between childhood and adulthood. The pathway to adulthood proceeds in different spheres, one is familial and matrimonial, the other is educational and occupational.

Central to the pathway-approach is the idea of transitions. Examples of such transitions are leaving the parental home, first union formation and first childbirth for the first sphere, and completion of education and entry

into a first stable job for the second one. From a practical point of view, the notion of transitions presents the advantage of allowing a relatively simple comparison between the different types of pathways to adulthood in time or space, once the events to be taken into account have been determined. Using this approach, several studies have shown the diversity of transition patterns across European countries (Chambaz, 2000; Van de Velde, 2004). For example, southern European countries, where people leave home late, contrast with northern European countries, where leaving home occurs at an earlier age. These differences in pathways reflect social, cultural and institutional differences between societies, for instance between the Mediterranean familialistic model and the Nordic public welfare model, leading to quite different forms of autonomy attainment. Other studies have emphasized the changes in pathways to adulthood. For instance, France faces a postponement of the entry into adulthood, through a desynchronization of familial and occupational transitions (Galland, 2000). The postponement of access to independence is linked to prolonged education and to a later entry into working life. A

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transitional period thus has appeared between the end of adolescence and the entry into adulthood. This period is sometimes seen as a period of progressive preparation for adult roles. More generally, western countries are witnessing the simultaneous development of standardization of pathways to adulthood, with an increasing compactness of the timing of transitions, and their individualization, with a decreasing orderliness of the sequencing of transitions (Shanahan, 2000). This reflects the modernization of societies, through the changes on the labour market, the growing role of state and the expansion of the education system.

Nevertheless, a focus on transitions has a number of limitations. First, it conceals the reversibility of certain situations, the fact that events may never be experienced by individuals, and the difficulty of clearly defining the occurrence of an event. For example, leaving the parental home is an increasingly complex process (Goldscheider, Thornton, & Young-DeMarco, 1993; Villeneuve-Gokalp, 1997). The transition to total residential independence is gradual. As a consequence of prolonged education and the delay in entering a stable job and attaining financial independence, new residential situations are developing, such as living in multiple households at the same time. For example, some students live alone during the week, but with their parents during week-ends and holidays. Moreover, parents may keep on supporting their children after they left home by paying for their accommodation. Young people also often return to the parental nest, thus becoming "boomerang kids" (Mitchell, 2006) or leave home very late. The distinction between leaving home and living away from home (Buck & Scott, 1993) or between leaving home, autonomy and independence raises the problem of defining markers. On the family side, the hugely improved access of women to higher education and occupational autonomy has major implications for familial structures. Conjugal instability is increasing, with a rise in union separations, divorces and episodes of single life, and the drop in the number of marriages (Prioux, 2006). Familial schedules alter, as entry into a first union and first childbirth are postponed. As a consequence, new family models spread, such as unmarried cohabitation, single-parent families, blended families and "living apart together" relationships; familial biographies are becoming more complex and diverse. Finally, in a context of changes in labour market opportunities and increasing unemployment, youth transitions from school to work are getting more chaotic. Quite some time may elapse between the first time young people leave the educational and training system and the time they reach a stable occupational position. Indeed, this stable occupational position can be preceded by varying episodes of unstable jobs or unemployment. As a result, the transition from school to work is less an irreversible shift than a hazy process. Furthermore, the study of transitions barely apprehends the link between the multiple dimensions of the life course. The methods traditionally used, such as median age calculation or event-history models, allow one to study the timing of transitions and their predictors. But they generally focus on the simultaneous analysis of one or two events only. And yet, research has shown that predictors of transitions

are linked to the order in which the events happen (Kiernan, 1991; Marini, 1984; Rindfuss, Swicegood, & Rosenfeld, 1987). The existence of a normative order of events is sometimes even postulated (Elder, 1974), and convergence to this norm and its consequences for the life cycle can then be measured (Hogan, 1978). Lastly, the study of transitions produces aggregated results, partially hiding the heterogeneity of individual pathways to adulthood. Is the change in the timing of the different events marking the trajectory the result of a weakening or on the contrary of a strengthening of certain types of pathways to adulthood?

The purpose of this study is to overcome these limitations by tackling the question of pathways to adulthood through a holistic approach, which considers a trajectory as a whole, as a meaningful conceptual unit, rather than an atomistic approach based on the idea of events (Billari, 2001a). For over a decade, the pertinence of this perspective has been increasingly acknowledged in life-course research. But its empirical application is still limited in scope, especially in the French context. Moreover in the field of transition to adulthood, studies tend to concentrate on one or two of the life-course dimensions (usually related to family formation).

In this article, based on event-history data collected in the *Familles et employeurs* survey (2004–2005), individual trajectories are built as sequences of states integrating residential, familial and occupational situations, and subsequently grouped together according to their degree of similarity using optimal matching analysis techniques. The typology of trajectories produced constitutes an analysis tool that captures a large range of situations (uncompleted events, reversibility, etc.) and sheds new light on the heterogeneity of pathways to adulthood and their evolution. More specifically, through this approach the following questions are tackled: what are the various patterns of pathways to adulthood among French young adults born between 1954 and 1969? Are there differences between women and men in these patterns? How do these patterns change over cohorts?

2. Implementing a holistic approach

2.1. Data

The *Familles et employeurs* survey carried out by INED[1] and INSEE[2] in 2004–2005 examined the individuals' work-life balance. Its purpose was to describe how family and working life are reconciled. The first section of the survey involved families – 9745 men and women aged 20–49 in metropolitan France – and a second part gathered information about the interviewees' employers. We focus on the trajectories between ages 18 and 35 of individuals aged at least 35 at the time of the survey: our sample is composed of 2749 women and 2428 men born between