

MEASURING THE EARLY ADULT LIFE COURSE IN MEXICO: AN APPLICATION OF THE ENTROPY INDEX

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ABSTRACT

This research uses a new method of analyzing the demographic statuses of a synthetic cohort of Mexicans to examine how the life course has changed in Mexico during the past 30 years. I examine young people's statuses as students, workers, parents, spouses, and their position in the household using Mexican census data for 1970 and 2000. In doing so, I describe the stages of the early life course and the social institutions that structure each of these life stages. During this period there has been relatively little change in the timing of life stages and limited change in the statuses that structure each stage. The most significant changes have been the increase to nearly universal participation in education throughout childhood and early adolescence and the increase in women's employment during adulthood. Surprisingly, the age of first marriage and childbearing has not been significantly delayed during this period despite the substantial social change. Consequently, the structure of the life course for the majority of young people in 2000 is not much different from that of their

The Structure of the Life Course: Standardized? Individualized? Differentiated?

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parent's generation who came of age 30 years earlier despite dramatic economic and demographic changes that have occurred.

There are few summary statistical tools for describing the early life course in a holistic manner. Measures of timing, spread, and the integration of status transitions are useful, but difficult to pull together into a cohesive picture (Modell, Furstenberg, & Hershberg, 1976; Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005). Such measures are desirable, however, for describing how the life course has changed over time and for exploring the impact of social structures on the life course. I propose a new summary measure – the entropy index of age-specific status combinations – that accomplishes several tasks of interest to life course scholars. The entropy index measures the degree to which individuals of a given age are similar in their combination of demographic statuses, thus describing the age-graded stages of the life course. By comparing the entropy index at different points in time it shows whether and how the age-gradedness of the life course has changed over time. Furthermore, decomposition of the entropy index shows the extent to which particular demographic statuses structure particular stages of the life course. In accomplishing these tasks, the entropy index contributes a new descriptive tool to the life course tool box. In this paper I demonstrate the use of this tool by applying it to the 1970 and 2000 Mexican census.

YOUTH IN MEXICO

Life course analysis is fundamentally concerned with the interaction between individual biographies and social structures (Elder, 1999). A central debate in research on the life course focuses on how social structures have institutionalized the life course into a series of age-graded life stages and whether that process of institutionalization has now halted or even reversed (Fussell, 2004a; Held, 1986; Kohli & Meyer, 1986; Shanahan, 2000). This debate has centered on research in advanced industrial societies in Western Europe and North America. In contrast, life course research in Mexico is typically focused on analyzing labor and family formation processes (Blanco, 2002; Escobar Latapí & Roberts, 1991; Gomes, 2001; González de la Rocha, 1994; LeVine, 1993; Pries, 1996; Quilodrán, 1996; Tuirán, 2001, 2002).

Research on the life course in Mexico has focused on how economic transformations, particularly the prolonged period of economic crisis and restructuring, has impacted labor and family trajectories of men, women,

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