

Becoming adult in the 2000s

New transitions and new careers

Young people who are becoming adult in the 2000s are shaping new life patterns as they engage with contemporary social and economic conditions. Yet many of the frameworks that inform current thinking about the process of growing up derive from an era in which different conditions and options prevailed.

JOHANNA WYN

When considering the patterns of youth transitions from education to the workforce, there is a widespread tendency to focus on the “problematic” nature of such transition processes. Ever since the full-time youth labour market began its demise starting in the late 1970s, both policy and research on young people have treated “transition” as a significant social problem (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 1999).

The slow but steady rupture of the link between educational outcomes and employment outcomes has undermined a relationship that was seen as the “natural” order of things. As many policy documents acknowledge (for example, Pagawi 2002), the transition processes for the majority of young people born after 1970 are different from those of the majority of their parents’ generation.

This article focuses on contemporary patterns of transition and reflects on how we understand these patterns. It suggests that it may be time to rethink “normal” transitions for young people in Australia, and to discard outmoded assumptions about the relationships between education and work that were generated in a different social era.

As Cohen (1997: 180-181) has pointed out: “It is all too easy to read social changes through the grid of particular ideas and experiences which were strategic in forming the historical generation to which we

belong. The fact is that the youth question has to be continually rethought in the light of the changing circumstances of the times. Yet if we look at the political and theoretical assumptions which continue to govern so much of youth policy-making we find that it all too often is a case of old wine in new bottles.”

Since Cohen made this observation there has been widespread recognition of the effects of social change on young people’s lives in many domains (Dwyer and Wyn 2001; Furlong and Cartmel 1997). Yet in the main, the conceptualisation of youth transitions has held onto a belief in a pattern that derives from a previous era. Terms such as “generation on hold” and “arrested adulthood” have been used to describe young Canadians’ transitions (Côté 2000). In the United Kingdom, the term “post-adolescence” has been used. In Netherlands, the term “over-aged young adults” is proposed, and in Canada and Australia “extended transitions” is a common term (Dwyer and Wyn 2001).

These descriptions have in common the assumption that something is amiss; that young people’s transitions are faulty. They imply that young people are extending the period of adolescence, failing to grow up in a timely manner. These characterisations are reminiscent of traditional views of youth as “incomplete”, for which the only cure is “adulthood” (Wyn and White 1997).



The emergence of a discourse of faulty transitions is evident in media representations of young people. *The Melbourne Age* recently published a string of negative articles in which young people were labeled Gen X and Gen Y. In this series, Edgar (2003) maintained that young people “bludged” off their parents by staying in the parental home and, even if they left, tended to return home because they were unable to cope with “the inconvenience of caring for themselves”. Shanahan (2003) echoed this theme, claiming that Gen X is not capable of looking after themselves, having been brought up in luxury. Carr-Gregg (2004) claimed that the problem with Gen Y is that they are “underdone developmentally”. And Colebatch (2003) argued that parents pay all the bills and that Gen X and Y “lead the spending on mobile phones and nights out”.

However, as this article argues, the portrayal of young people’s transitions as faulty serve to perpetuate negative stereotypes and obscure the significance of changes that are occurring in the nature of youth and adulthood. Young people’s life patterns, priorities and attitudes are a response to the world in which they are living. It is important that the social conditions that young people are engaging with provide the context for understanding youth transitions. This is because, as young people are inevitably experiencing transitions in their *personal* biographies, as they move through

various forms of education (formal and informal) and occupation (paid and unpaid), so is our *society* changing (White and Wyn 2004).

Unless we link youth transitions with the social and political context of those transitions, we risk misunderstanding young people’s trajectories. The use of outdated assumptions trivialises young people’s transitions, and the use of outdated frameworks re-cycles youth “problems” while at the same time obscuring the emergence of new issues for youth.

Context of social change

Social researchers have identified one of the most significant effects of social change over the last 30 years as the processes of “individualisation” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Individualisation is a process that relates to the disintegration of traditional structures in people’s lives, so the “inherited recipes for living and role stereotypes fail to function. There are no historical models for the conduct of life” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 26). Many things that the previous generation took for granted are now not so certain. Young people growing up today have to deal with a world of unpredictable outcomes in which autonomy and personal development are now paramount. This individualisation of society places a person entirely responsible for their own success or failure.

As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 23) argue: “The ubiquitous rule is that, in order to survive the rat race, one has to become active, inventive and resourceful, to develop ideas of one’s own, to be faster, nimbler and more creative – not just on one occasion, but constantly, day after day. Individuals become actors, builders, jugglers, stage managers of their own biographies and identities and also of their social links and networks.”

Their concept of “choice biographies” has been employed by many youth researchers to describe the nature of young people’s transition processes from school to further education and work. As a recent government report (Pawagi 2002: 2) acknowledges: “For increasing numbers of young people the transition period is becoming longer, and transition patterns are becoming less defined and less certain than they once were. Young people seem more and more to be charting their own pathways and these do not always coincide with those that policy makers have developed.”

It is important to place patterns of transition through education and work in their historical context. The early 1990s represented a significant shift in the *majority* experience of transition for young Australians. This historical shift is analysed in detail in Dwyer and Wyn (2001). The post-1970 generation of young Australians (now in their 30s) were the first for whom post-secondary education became a policy imperative and an economic necessity. They are part of the first generation of Australians to be so well educated. They completed secondary school at a time when “education has been sharply redefined with reference to national economic goals and the completion of post-compulsory education or training is demanded as a prerequisite for active adult life” (Heggen and Dwyer 1998: 270-271).

The post-1970 generation can be seen as a “vanguard cohort” who, in the course of their lifetime have been confronted with new challenges and opportunities. The increasing complexity of the relationship between education and employment and changes in workplace relations involving greater insecurity of employment are realities to which they have had to adjust. But changes also extend beyond the education and work sphere. Family formation has also changed over the last 20 years (Gilding 2001) and consumer lifestyles have exerted a powerful influence on young people’s lives (Miles 1998).

These factors have altered the significance of traditional “markers” of adult status in industrialised

countries, introducing new elements of complexity in the stages of transition to adulthood. Despite this, older preconceptions about youth transitions continue to hold, making it difficult to incorporate new perspectives into our understandings of young people.

Life-Patterns Study

The above ideas form a reference point for considering the transition processes of the young people in the *Life-Patterns Research Project*, a longitudinal panel study conducted by the Australian Youth Centre at the University of Melbourne. The study has tracked the education, work and other life patterns of young Australians from the State of Victoria who left secondary school in 1991, and recorded the ways in which these young people have responded to a changing world from 1992 to the present (Dwyer and Wyn 2001; Dwyer et al. 2003).

In 1992 the entire school leaver cohort of 29,000 young people were surveyed to follow up their progress after leaving school. From these responses, a representative sample of 11,000 young people was constructed. In 1996 the Youth Research Centre surveyed a smaller, representative sample of this data set of 2000, maintaining consistency within the sample of gender, socio-economic background, and geographic location.

Table 1 describes the consistency of the data set and the gradual reduction in sample size from the 2000 who were surveyed in 1996 (returning 1926) to 752 in 2002. The data have been collected through the use of surveys of the entire sample and interviews with a sub-set of between 80 and 100 participants every two years.

The young respondents were in their last year of secondary school when the project began in 1991. In 2002 they were 11 years out of school. Their experiences and the ways in which they tell their stories provide a useful insight into the specific experiences of the post-1970 generation.

Convergence of findings

The findings of the Life-Patterns Study converge with those of longitudinal studies in other countries, and in particular in the United Kingdom (Ball et al. 2000), Germany (Evans 2002) and Canada (Andres and Wyn 2001). Across each of these studies, the trajectories of young people in the post-1970 generation reveal diversity and common patterns, reflecting specific local conditions and enduring social divisions based on class, gender and race. In discussing their findings of the trajectories of young people in Britain “post 16” years, Ball et al. (2000: 142) are cautious about essentialising and generalising the experiences and patterns of young

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Table 1 Sample consistency 1996-2002 (%)

Indicator	1996 (n=1926)	1998 (n=1430)	2000 (n=1121)	2002 (n=752)
Government school	60	56	58	56
Australian born mother	65	65	67	68
Father: professional/managerial	33	34	34	35
Mother: university qualified	13	14	15	15.5
Rural	33	31	34	34
Female	65	66	67	67

people from particular locations, such as London. As they point out, in reading patterns and representations into the data (through the discussion of “themes”), there is the risk that researchers create the appearance of closure and determinism.

Yet, like the Life-Patterns Study, these other researchers have found that across the spectrum of life circumstances, young people’s attitudes and subjectivities reveal distinctive patterns that warrant further study, because there have been “radical changes to the typical experiences of young people” (Furlong and Cartmel 1997: 8). Ball et al. (2000) explore the effects of “individualism” on young people. They find evidence that young people are “forced” to make active choices and to forge new identities within consumer cultures, which, for many, provide stronger sources of identity than occupational status.

New transitions

We found that their trajectories did not reflect the assumptions about the “transition from school to work” policies that had dominated thinking in the early 1990s (Australian Education Council 1991). Instead of following a linear sequence in which school is followed by work, the pathways these young people took were complex, divergent and multilayered. The life-patterns research found that there was a consistent pattern across both urban and rural areas for combining study and work. More than 30 per cent of young people in both rural and urban settings combined both study and work all the time, and a further 25 per cent were studying and working most of the time.

This reflects a preference, and also a necessity to mix study and work. In 1996, over a quarter of the sample (28 per cent) preferred to combine study



Evans (2002) also finds evidence of significant shifts in the lives of ordinary youth on the basis of extensive comparative research on young people in England and East Germany. She concludes that while the effects of traditional social divisions (gender, geographical location and class) continue to be visible, it is important to understand the subtle shifts in meanings, attitudes and priorities that young people attach to education, work and other life experiences.

Rethinking transition

In this section, some examples of ways in which new meanings are being shaped by young people in Australia are discussed.

In describing the themes that have emerged in the Life-Patterns Study, we are conscious of the need to acknowledge both the structural constraints on the lives of young people and at the same time the extent to which young people’s subjective interpretations play a role in their outcomes. The themes that have emerged challenge many of the policy assumptions that are commonly made about young people’s transitions during the first years after leaving secondary school.

and work. A further 23 per cent said that while they were both studying and working, their job had priority (Dwyer and Wyn 2001: 20). It is interesting to note that this pattern is established in secondary school. Well over half of 17 year olds have held a job at some time and it is usual for students in Australian secondary schools to combine study and work. There is evidence that young people who are combining study and work see this as a way of learning to manage conflicting responsibilities and that they place a positive value on learning in non-school settings (Stokes, Wierenga and Wyn 2003).

This means that the term “transition from school to work” is misleading. School and work are often simultaneous and there is not necessarily a relationship between the two. For this reason, it is necessary to view traditional factors affecting young people’s outcomes with a degree of caution. Early school leaving provides an example. While non-completion of secondary school education continues to correlate with disadvantage in employment outcomes (Lamb et al. 2000), this “pathway” should not be seen as a simple, homogenous or even determined category. The Life-Patterns Study found that over time, the effects of early school leaving were less negative than might have been expected. It is worth elaborating on the

trajectories of our early school leaving sub-set to explain this in more detail.

The life-patterns sample was made up of two separate groupings in 1992: a “studying” sub-set of those who went on to further study at the end of school; and a “non-study” sub-set of those who initially chose some sort of other alternative. It is significant that of these “non-studying” respondents, as many as 80 per cent had returned to study in the intervening years. This meant that of the entire sample, in 1996 90 per cent had undertaken courses of study since 1992.

It would seem that if a longer time frame is taken (of five years or more) then the effects of complex patterns of transition can be seen. Young people who leave school early often find their way back into education (despite the fact that schools often make this difficult). Other studies (McMillan and Marks 2003) have also found that, in terms of income, many early school leavers “catch up” with their school-completing contemporaries over a period of about five years. These findings suggest that older assumptions about the negative effects of early school leavings may be linked to out-dated linear assumptions. The Life-Patterns Study emphasises the need to re-think the implications of more complex transition processes for all young people.

New careers

By the year 2000, at the age of 27, 68 per cent of the respondents had achieved permanent jobs, and 76 per cent were in full-time jobs. Yet, the Life-Patterns Study has found that the jobs they get either do not fully use the skills they have acquired in years of education (and part-time work), or demand very long hours that ultimately undermine job satisfaction.

Perhaps it is not surprising that they have often found that work is not rewarding enough. Occupational boundaries have become more fluid and increasingly jobs are temporary. The interviews and open-ended sections of the survey highlighted a common complaint expressed by participants who felt that they were over-qualified for the work they got. Others found the hours too long and were stressed and felt that life was not in balance. This has left them having to weigh up the situations they find themselves in. Over a quarter of the respondents in 2002 wished that their health and fitness were better, and 21 per cent wished that their work situation or career was better (Dwyer et al. 2003: 14). The sources of their dissatisfaction were overwhelmingly in the difficulty they had in balancing commitments (63.5 per cent) and in work pressures (58 per cent) (Dwyer et al. 2003: 14).

One of the effects of credentialism is that the skills and capacities required by the available jobs do not necessarily reflect the levels of education required to attain the job. Reporting on the “clever society” policies adopted in the United Kingdom, Ainley (1998) found that many graduates are “overqualified” for the jobs they get. Similarly, concerns have emerged about the extent of “fit” between secondary education and employment. It is evident that not all young people who complete their secondary education gain the economic benefits that the education system is intended to bestow (Teese 2000).



In 1996, interviews produced evidence of a change in thinking as Life-Patterns Study participants were coming to terms with labour market uncertainties. While work remained an important element in their lives, other life spheres were emerging as the central focus of their identities, including relationships and leisure. Between 1996 and 1999, there was a gradual shift in orientation from a focus on job or occupation towards broader interests. For example, in 1996 10 per cent of the sample placed a priority on the “broad context” of life (for example, family, friends, lifestyle or field of work). By 1999, 24 per cent of the participants stated this as their priority. Pursuing a career in their area of interest was the most important priority for 27 per cent in 1996, but had reduced to 19 per cent in 1999 (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001: 178). By 2002, 75 per cent were in a full-time job, which is consistent with the national figures. They had embraced uncertainty and change, with 82 per cent having changed jobs since 1996 and nearly a quarter having held five or more jobs since 1996.

At the same time, we have seen the emergence of some distinctive attitudes towards the idea of career. The traditional idea that career equates with full-time employment in one occupation; involving upward mobility over time is not confirmed by their views. Instead, these young people have a subjective assessment of career as a “state of mind” rather than an objective and visible trajectory. More than 80 per cent of the participants stated that a career was a job that offers scope for *advancement*, offers opportunities for *commitment*, and an ongoing role that offers *fulfillment*. They stated that a career is not a permanent full-time job; it is not necessarily your current job, and does not have to be connected to your source of income.



Flexibility is seen as more important than predictability as a basis for future security in a post-industrial world. In the face of employment insecurity, many young people see that they are more secure if they can achieve “horizontal mobility” – or the capacity to move from one job to another, depending on their needs. This skill is valued over the older emphasis on vertical mobility within one occupation.

Young people today approach the transition process to adulthood with a broad perspective. For many, achieving a balance in life, between the different competing elements of work, study, leisure, relationships and personal development must be accommodated.

Wellbeing

Life-patterns participants were also asked to describe their subjective assessments and ideas about their health and wellbeing. Throughout the surveys and interviews, participants have had a focus on maintaining a balance between the different elements of their lives (Dwyer and Wyn 2001). In 2002, many of the participants were concerned that they had failed to achieve this balance, with negative consequences for their health. Just over half of the participants reported that they were physically healthy (55 per cent) and mentally healthy (58 per cent); 16 per cent reported concern about their mental health.

Other studies of young people's health provide support for these assessments. For example, health statistics are showing increasing rates of mental illness among young people, including depression and anxiety disorders (Donald et al. 2000). A recent Australian national survey of mental health found high levels of childhood mental health problems compared with a limited number of children and youth who receive professional help (Sawyer et al. 2000). This study found that 14 per cent of 4-17 year olds experience mental health problems. In Queensland, one in four females and one in eight males had symptoms that indicated a high level depression. The report found that as many as one in three young people had had suicidal thoughts at some time in their lives (Donald et al. 2000). In Western Australia, one in five teenagers has a mental health problem (Stanley 2002). Physical health is also emerging as a concern. A study by research conducted by Women's Health Australia found that one third of young women were smokers, and that 41 per cent did little or no exercise (Brown et al. 1998).

However, the aim of the Life-Patterns Study was not to identify objective health status, but to document and analyse young people's *subjective* assessments of their health and wellbeing because their decisions about life are significantly affected by subjective as well as structural or objective factors. In post-industrial societies, processes of individualisation have a powerful effect on the production of health and wellbeing, especially for young people. The life-patterns participants may well be articulating the increasing onus on individuals to manage their own health: to monitor, perform and choose their health status (Woodman 2003).

Young people's own subjective assessments of their health suggest that they have begun to identify new problems of transition, associated with health and wellbeing. Yet these issues are all but obscured by approaches that portray youth transitions as primarily about achieving a linear sequence from school to work, ignoring the broader dimensions of life that young people themselves value.

New transition timelines

The Life-Patterns Study provides an evidence base in support of a trend towards individualisation amongst youth, in which personal autonomy (and responsibility) is a high priority. In a recent report on the study, life-patterns researchers (Dwyer et al. 2003: 23) reflected on the difficulty of understanding the effects of social change on the time sequence of youth and adulthood, suggesting that the time sequence of transition to youth has not prolonged the experience of adolescence or postponed the realities of adulthood, but has caused an overlap between the two.

The evidence is that young people are engaging with adult responsibilities and experiences incrementally, early in their lives. Instead of having an “extended transition” into an adulthood such as that experienced by their parents, this generation are more likely to be entering a “new adulthood” earlier in their lives.

From an early age, school children are encouraged to present a portfolio of their skills and capacities, and to draw on a wide variety of experiences and learning settings to portray themselves. They have engaged very effectively with the “project of the self,” displaying a capacity to be reflective about their own lives. This is a necessary skill, because they are required to make active choices about their lives at every point. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) have pointed out, in order to survive circumstances that change daily, individuals have had to become “stage managers of their own biographies”.

Yet there is a reluctance to attribute adult status to older youth. The mismatch between the out-moded timeline and expected “normal” outcomes calls their adult choices into question. As noted by Dwyer et al. 2003: 23: “There is a reluctance to let go of established assumptions about what ‘ought to be’, and a failure to give due credit to a generation that knows it has grown up in a new kind of social environment and is making the necessary choices of coming to terms with it.”

Of necessity, this generation is forging new patterns of life, in response to their circumstances. They are developing patterns that will endure into their 30s and possibly beyond, as they are required to continue to juggle work and lifelong learning, and to try to maintain a balance between these in which leisure, relationships and personal development also have their place.

Shaping a “new adulthood”

Rather than seeing young people’s transition processes as problematic or faulty, the evidence from the Life-Patterns Study provides evidence that a new process for becoming adult is emerging. There are new structural conditions of young people’s lives these days – for example, an increasingly flexible labour market, dissolution of occupational boundaries, deregulation of labour, and increases in contract, part-time employment, increasing diversity in family structures, including decreasing rates of marriage and fertility and the increase in privatisation of both education and health services. These conditions have a powerful impact on the experiences of young people. They are the realities with which young people must engage.

Young people’s engagement with the new social and economic realities of the post-1970 (post-industrial) world makes it more appropriate to characterise their transition processes as “early” engagement with adult practices. The transition processes are not “faulty” – they are shaping a “new adulthood” in which transitions are incremental, uneven and unpredictable.

It is important that this new process is recognised. A narrow focus on the older, linear sequence of transition (study to work) limits our understanding of young people’s lives and obscures new problems that are emerging. Young people identify their health and wellbeing as an issue of concern to themselves. Young people today approach the transition process to adulthood with a broad perspective. For many, achieving a balance in life, between the different competing elements of work, study, leisure, relationships and personal development must be accommodated. The evidence suggests that while a majority manage this remarkably well, there is a significant minority who do not manage.

It is time for a new approach to understanding the process of becoming adult. Such an approach should recognise that social change has affected the meanings and experience of both youth and adulthood in the 2000s. It should shift from a narrow, economic approach that focuses only on young people’s academic and employment outcomes. It should incorporate a focus on health and wellbeing outcomes for young people, and develop frameworks for understanding the uses that young people make of education, work and leisure in shaping their lives.

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Wyn, J. & White, R. (1997), *Rethinking Youth*, Sage, London.

Professor Johanna Wyn is Head of the Department of Education and Deputy Dean of the Education Faculty at the University of Melbourne. She is Director of the Australian Youth Research Centre, where she leads the *Life-Patterns Research Project*.