

Abstract

The transition to adulthood across time and space: Overview of Special Section

Schulenberg, J. E. & Schoon, I.

In this Special Section of Longitudinal and Life Course Studies, we provide complementary findings from four well-established national and community-based studies about distinct patterns of social role combinations in early adulthood, along with the antecedents and health and well-being correlates of the distinct patterns ([Maggs et al 2012](#), [Räikkönen, Kokko and Pulkkinen 2012](#), [Salmela-Aro, Ek and Chen 2012](#), [Schoon et al 2012](#)). Collectively, our data span two birth cohorts (born 1958-59 and 1966-70) and three countries including the United Kingdom, the United States, and Finland, with each birth cohort represented in each country. This opportunity to compare and contrast patterns of transition outcomes across time and across cultures provides us with leverage on the understanding of the transition to adulthood, not typically available.

Across the studies, longitudinal data span childhood through early adulthood. Each study focuses on identifying distinct patterns of role combinations by ages 25-27 in terms of the "big 5" transition markers ([Settersten 2007](#)) comprising educational attainment, work status, independent living, romantic partnership, and parenthood. It has been argued that country differences in completing the five transition markers are largest around age 25 and relatively small before age 20 and after age 35 ([Cook and Furstenberg 2002](#)). Examining transition outcomes and role combinations of cohort members in their mid-20s thus provides a unique snapshot and important insights into similarities and differences in transition experiences of young people growing up in different cultural contexts and in different historical periods. For example, consistent with previous research ([Osgood et al 2005](#), [Ross et al 2009](#)), some common patterns we found include "traditional family" (limited college, full-time employed or homemaker, independent from parents, married or cohabiting, and with children) and "work orientation without children" (college graduate, full-time employed, independent from parents, average rates of marriage and cohabitation, and no children).

Each study also examines the demographic and educational antecedents and psychosocial correlates/outcomes of the patterns (including well-being and substance use). As will be shown, we find some expected differences across countries and cohorts in terms of configurations and prevalences of the distinct patterns, along with some remarkable similarities across time and space in these patterns and their antecedents and correlates. To set the stage for the empirical papers in this Special Section, we provide an overview regarding the transition to adulthood in developmental, historical, and international context. We furthermore discuss methodological opportunities and challenges involved in describing life course patterns and doing comparative research. We conclude with consideration of theoretical and methodological implications.

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