

Choice biographies and transitional linearity: Re-conceptualising modern youth transitions

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Abstract

It has been suggested that youth transitions have become increasingly protracted and complex and that routes between school and work, which were once viewed as linear and predictable, have been replaced by a set of movements that are more fragmented. Our aim in this paper is to contextualise these changes in an attempt to capture the degree of complexity characteristic of modern transitions and to explore the implications for patterns of labour market integration. We argue that there has been a tendency to exaggerate processes of de-linearisation and that the modern tendency to regard transitional complexity as symptomatic of «choice biographies» can help mask structures of disadvantage.

Key words: youth transitions, choice biographies, youth employment, youth unemployment.

Resum. *Biografies d'elecció i linealitat de la transició: la reconceptualització de les transicions juvenils modernes*

S'apunta que les transicions juvenils cada vegada són més llargues i complexes i que els camins entre l'escola i el treball, que abans es consideraven lineals i previsibles, actualment han estat substituïts per un conjunt de moviments que estan més fragmentats. L'objectiu d'aquest article és contextualitzar aquests canvis per tal de captar el grau de complexitat característic de les transicions modernes i explorar les implicacions que tenen en els models d'integració en el mercat laboral. Defensem que s'ha tendit a exagerar els processos de deslinealització i que la tendència moderna de veure la complexitat de les transicions com un fet simptomàtic de les «biografies d'elecció» pot contribuir a ocultar estructures de desavantatges.

Paraules clau: transicions juvenils, biografies d'elecció, treball juvenil, atur juvenil.

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Introduction

Over the last couple of decades it has been suggested that youth transitions have become increasingly protracted and complex resulting in a greater vulnerability to marginalisation and exclusion. Routes between school and work, which were once viewed as linear and predictable, are seen as having been replaced by a set of movements that are less predictable and involve frequent breaks, backtracking and the «blending» of statuses which previously tended to be quite distinct (Chisholm, 1995; Wyn & White, 1997; Du Bois Reymond, 1998; Looker and Dwyer, 1998; EGRIS, 2001). This new consensus on the changing nature of transitions is rarely challenged, however, there has not been any systematic analysis of the extent to which transitions have increased in complexity and lost their linearity nor of the implications for young people of following non-linear as opposed to linear routes.

Our aim in this paper is to contextualise these changes in an attempt to capture the degree of complexity characteristic of modern transitions and to explore the implications for patterns of labour market integration. To achieve these aims we first use cluster analysis to describe a set of typologies of transitional experience in the West of Scotland and then use these typologies to study the degree and type of complexity characteristic of modern labour market transitions. We go on to look at the characteristics of those following linear and non-linear transitions and examine the extent to which transitions are linked to patterns of labour market integration.

Data

The analysis that is presented in this paper is drawn from the project *Youth Transitions: Patterns of Vulnerability and Processes of Social Inclusion* funded by the Scottish Executive and Scottish Enterprise. The data used is from the West of Scotland Twenty-07 study conducted by the Medical Research Council's Social and Public Health Sciences Unit. The Twenty-07 Study is a longitudinal study, located in and around Glasgow, which commenced in 1987. A representative sample of 1009 15 year olds and their parents participated in the first round of interviews. The sample were subsequently followed-up at age 16, 18, 21 and 23 (postal surveys at ages 16 and 21 and face-to-face interviews at ages 18 and 23) and were interviewed again in 2001/02 at age 28/29. Discussion here is limited to experiences between the ages of 15 and 23. The response rates have been good with about 65 per cent of those in the initial sample of 15 year-olds responding at age 23.

The complexity of transitional experiences

Changes in education and the labour market are often viewed as having resulted in a situation where few individuals follow identical sets of transitional routes and most are faced with the need for reflexive interpretation and constant

negotiation in an increasingly unpredictable social world. For some, these trends are seen as associated with the emergence of «choice biographies» (Du Bois Reymond, 1995) while for others they are linked to new patterns of vulnerability and to perceptions of risk and uncertainty (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Wyn and White, 1997).

However the trends are interpreted, few researchers would dissent from the view that modern transitions are characterised by their complexity. Citing evidence from Australia and Canada, for example, Looker and Dwyer (1998) argue that young people tend not to regard their transitions as linear but «report them as complex and interconnected, as involving false starts and redefined possibilities, as requiring negotiation and redefinitions» (1998: 17). While we accept the proposition that modern transitions are frequently complex, two qualifications must be made. First, new evidence (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2002) has led us to accept the view that earlier British research on transitions (e.g. Ashton and Field, 1976; Carter, 1962) had tended to *understate* the level of complexity which characterised youth transitions in the 1960s and 1970s. At the time researchers tended to concentrate on macro-level analysis, highlighting class (and occasionally gender) specific patterns of reproduction while neglecting individual-level complexities and processes of negotiation. A notable exception to this being Willis (1977) who managed to illuminate some of the ways in which the everyday lives of working class boys involved forms of action, negotiation, penetration and resistance which were central to processes of social reproduction.

Our second qualification relates to the levels of complexity characteristic of modern transitions. Here we suggest that the case for the de-linearisation of transitions may have been *over-stated*. Whereas members of the earlier generation of youth researchers may have focused on structure at the expense of agency, in the rush to embrace late modern or post-modern perspectives, contemporary researchers have perhaps over-stated the significance of processes of reflexivity and life management. It is also important to recognise that the existence of complexity does not necessarily result in the emergence of «choice biographies», as du Bois Reymond (1995) seems to suggest: levels of complexity may actually signify a lack of choice and a vulnerability to the adverse effects of flexible labour markets. We need to distinguish between movement that is a consequence of labour market precarity from movement that suggests flexibility.

Before directly addressing the issue of complexity, it is necessary to outline the main sets of routes that young people follow between school and work. A variety of typologies have been used by researchers with distinctions tending to be made between routes involving relatively direct and indirect entry to the labour market, routes involving extended participation in post-compulsory education and training and patterns of movement punctuated by unemployment or training schemes (e.g. Raffe *et al.*, 1998; Anisef *et al.*, 2000; Walther *et al.*, 2002). In this paper cluster analysis is used to determine the main routes followed by young people between the ages of 15 and 23.

Table 1. Transitional cluster, by mean months spent in each status between the age of 16 and 23.

	School	FE	HE	Unemp	Scheme	FT Job	PT Job	Domest	Other
Long HE	23.76	2.2	50.6	3.25	1.29	15.48	0.53	0.005	0.69
Short-HE	22	1.45	23.21	4.33	2.36	43.18	0.65	0.02	0.77
Enhanced Ed	19.52	3.85	1.62	1.46	1.14	67.23	1.9	0.85	0.28
Direct job	8.14	0.28	0	1.43	1.01	85.7	0.61	0.08	0.7
Assisted	7.22	0.2	0.15	5.64	16.48	65.95	0.25	1.36	0.49
Unemployment	7.78	0.76	4.63	44.07	11.81	25.31	0.63	2.15	0.73
Domestic	7.8	0.95	0.52	3.8	8.8	24.04	2.19	49.04	0.47
Other	14	0	3.28	5.57	11.14	16.42	0.85	1.42	45.28

Note: Definitions of Long HE and Short HE (Higher Education) appear below.

In the Twenty-07 surveys information was collected on the main status of individuals for each month covered by the survey. As such, between the ages of 15 and 23 status «diaries» cover 96 time-points and provide details on whether young people were employed full or part time, were unemployed, in education or training, were looking after a family or were out of the labour force due to ill-health or a disability. Using cluster analysis, eight transition clusters were constructed using cumulative details of status derived from the monthly diaries collected between the ages of 16 and 23 and reflecting the total time (months) that young people spent engaged in each main activity. We begin by briefly describing these clusters and the characteristics of those making these different transitions. The mean number of months spent in each status by members of each cluster are described in table 1.

I. Higher Education Groups

The first two clusters (Long Higher Education (Long HE) and Short Higher Education (Short HE) both involve participation in Higher Education (HE). The average duration of HE participation in the first cluster (Long HE) (27 per cent of the sample) is just over 4 years¹ therefore in the main these are people who had completed full degree courses (74% had degrees at age 23 and a further 11% had higher diplomas² or equivalents). The second cluster (Short HE) (12 per cent of the sample) is comprised of individuals who had a shorter average period of HE participation: just under two years. Included here are those who had taken short courses, those who had dropped out of longer courses and those who had entered late or returned to education after a period away

1. In Scotland a typical honours degree takes four years to complete.

2. Higher diplomas are two year advanced courses at a sub-degree level.

and who were still at college at age 23. At age 23, 45 per cent of this latter group had higher diplomas or equivalent qualifications while a further 24 per cent had degrees.

Both of the higher education clusters contain similar proportions of males and females and, in general, these two clusters are comprised of relatively advantaged young people.

II. Employment transitions

The second two clusters describe those who experienced relatively direct school to work transitions. Within the first cluster (14 per cent of the sample), young people typically remained in education until the age of 18: the average period spent in school beyond the minimum leaving age being 19 months with some having followed Further Education (FE) based routes (these are described as the enhanced education group). Following educational completion, entry into work was fairly direct: the average time spent unemployed between the ages of 16 and 23 being a month and a half and with an average of a month being spent on government training schemes. With members of this group having made a fairly direct entry into the labour market, by age 23 they had been in full-time employment for an average of five and a half years.

The second employment cluster (17 per cent of the sample) tended to have left school at an early stage (described as the direct job group) having spent an average of eight months in school beyond the minimum leaving age. Average time spent unemployed and on schemes between the ages of 16 and 23 was similar to the above group (a month and a half and a month respectively). Having made early and relatively direct transitions, members of this group had the most extensive experience of full-time employment in the sample (average of 7 years).

In terms of characteristics, these employment clusters contained more females than males. Those who had followed enhanced education routes tended to be slightly more advantaged than those who entered the labour market earlier: they were less likely to live in a deprived neighbourhood or to have parents in the lowest social classes.

III. Assisted and unemployment based clusters

Some of the more difficult transitions are contained within the assisted and unemployment based clusters (accounting for 20 per cent and 6 per cent of the sample respectively). Many of those following assisted transitions had spent time on government sponsored training schemes (average duration of 16.5 months) and their average duration of unemployment over the time span was 5.6 months. These young people tended to have left school at a relatively early stage. However, their average duration of full-time employment is very similar to those within the enhanced education cluster (66 months compared to 67 months).

The labour market histories of those within the unemployment based cluster were dominated by unemployment and members had spent an average of 44 months unemployed between the ages of 16 and 23. Many had also spent time on government training schemes (average of 11.8 months) and some had spent short periods in Higher Education. Over the whole period they had spent an average of just 25 months in full-time employment.

At age 16, the educational qualifications of these two groups was poorer than any of the groups previously described, with the performance of the unemployment based group being particularly low. Nearly three in ten (29%) of the assisted employment group had no qualifications while almost seven in ten (68%) of the unemployment based group lacked qualifications. Both of these groups were dominated by males (56 per cent and 66 per cent respectively) and the majority lived in deprived neighbourhoods (56 per cent and 71 per cent respectively).

IV. Domestic and other clusters

The two remaining clusters are both relatively small: the domestic cluster (3 per cent of the sample) and the «other» cluster (1 per cent of the sample). The former had spent an average of 49 months working in the home while the latter mainly comprise of the few with long-term health problems and disabilities. The latter group is too small to discuss in any meaningful sense. While the domestic group is also small, they were all female, tended to come from the lower social classes and more than two in three lived in deprived neighbourhoods.

Conceptualising linearity

In discussing the concept of individualisation in relation to youth transitions, Roberts (1997) has argued that modern transitions can be viewed as individualised to the extent that few young people can now identify others who have followed identical trajectories. Without implying that our clusters represent homogenous sets of experiences it is important to recognise that although contexts have changed, some young people still follow smooth and linear routes. Here we aim move beyond the clusters introduced in the previous section in order to assess the extent to which complex non-linear transitions have become the typical experience of Scottish youth.

To address this question, we first have to determine what range of experiences should be defined as linear or non-linear. In our view, linearity involves a fairly smooth and straightforward transition in which there are no major breaks, divergences or reversals. It is important to recognise here that some experiences which were once relatively uncommon have become normalised and/or institutionalised. Few young people, for example, manage to avoid unemployment altogether and for early entrants into the labour market, government training schemes have become an important mechanism for training

Linear transitions	Non-linear transitions
School to employment	Any sequence of statuses not conforming to those listed on the left of the table
School-training scheme-employment	A single period of at least three months unemployment at any stage
School-HE-employment	Total (cumulative) experience of unemployment exceeding 12 months
School-FE-employment	A number of status changes which exceeds the median for a person leaving education at the same stage as themselves by two
School-FE-HE-employment	
School-any status-domestic work	

Figure 1. Conceptualising linear and non-linear transitions.

and occupational socialisation. As such, we suggest that a transition can still be described as linear if the young person making the transition has encountered short periods of unemployment or has been «trained» in the context of a Government programme. Thus someone who has a short period of unemployment between leaving education and gaining a job can still be seen as having made a linear transition.

In contrast, non-linear transitions involve breaks, changes of direction and unusual sequences of events. They can involve extended or repeated experiences of unemployment, frequent moves between jobs and returns to education and training after periods in employment.

The way in which we operationalised these two broad transitional patterns from the statuses listed in the diary is described in figure 1. Here, by operationalising core theoretical assumptions, non-linear transitions are defined as sequences that do not involve straightforward progressions through education or training to employment or domestic work. Even when overall transitions follow a «traditional» sequence, they are also defined as non-linear if an individual experiences a single period of unemployment lasting for three or more months or have a cumulative experience of unemployment of a year or more or has a high number of status changes over the period (defined here as exceeding the median for a person leaving education at the same stage by two).

Using this definition, similar proportions of the sample could be viewed as making linear and non-linear transitions (52 per cent as compared to 48 per cent) with males being more likely than females to follow non-linear routes (55 per cent of males compared to 42 per cent of females). Not only are linear transitions just as characteristic of the modern age as non-linear transitions, we also suggest that if the same criteria were applied to studies conducted in the 1960s or 1970s, there would also be a good mix of transitional types: Goodwin

and O'Connor (2002), for example, show that in the 1950s some young people moved jobs on a very regular basis while in periods of recession labour market experiences are frequently chequered by unemployment and enforced job changes.

Of those making non-linear transitions, some had encountered difficulties soon after leaving education while others had made fairly smooth transitions into the labour market but encountered difficulties some time later. Just over a third (33 per cent of males and 37 per cent of females) of those following non-linear routes encountered their first period of unemployment lasting at least three months directly after leaving education. More than four in ten (43 per cent of males and 48 per cent of females) first encountered unemployment after a job or Youth Training (YT) but within the first three years after leaving education. A smaller number, (24 per cent of male and 15 per cent of females) survived in the labour market for more than three years without a significant period of unemployment³. These findings challenge the view that young people who are unemployed for more than a few weeks are often not «job-ready».

Some young people had also clearly experienced more fragmented transitions than others. Given that our definition of linearity rests heavily on unemployment experience, we would expect to find a higher incidence of unemployment among those following non-linear routes. However, it is worth noting that among those who made non-linear transitions, some pathways are chaotic: at the extreme the maximum number of status changes for males is 17 and for females 15. Similarly the maximum amount of time that a male has spent unemployed was seven years (84 months), while for females it was nearly six years (71 months).

Non-linear transitions tended to be slightly more common among those from less advantaged class positions. In other words, complex transitions are best regarded as disadvantaged routes, not the «choice biographies» of the affluent. For both males and females, a small majority of those from social class I and II made linear transitions while for males, a majority of those from social class V and VI made non-linear transitions. Young people who had followed non-linear routes were also more likely to report that their father (but not mother) had experienced a significant period of unemployment (over 6 months) at some stage. Of those who had followed non-linear routes, 24 per cent of males and 32 per cent of females said that their father had experienced protracted unemployment, while the corresponding figures for those who had followed linear routes were 16 per cent and 21 per cent respectively.

Overall, linear transitions tended to be most common among those with the highest level of educational attainment (degree or equivalent) and least common among those with no qualifications. However, below degree level, the majority of males tended to make non-linear transitions whereas females with

3. Gender differences not significant.

lower level qualifications were still more likely to make linear transitions. In other words, educational qualifications were more strongly linked to the linearity of transitions for males than for females.

Linearity and the sequencing of experiences

While the cluster analysis that we introduced earlier helped us to describe the main transitional paths and the characteristics of young people who followed these routes, within each cluster young people will have had a range of experiences that have occurred in different sequences. With most clusters combining those who have made relatively smooth transitions with those encountering significant turbulence, they allowed us to group key routes and identify typical sets of experiences within them, but do not facilitate a full exploration of patterns of vulnerability. However, as operationalised here, the concept of linearity/non-linearity enables us to explore the extent to which those individuals who have made relatively turbulent transitions are concentrated within key «pathways» as represented by the clusters. In this section we discuss the relationship between clusters of experience and patterns of linearity.

The first thing to note is that some clusters are strongly dominated by those who we had defined as having made linear transitions (figure 2). The majority of those experiencing direct job transitions, long HE transitions and enhanced education transitions followed linear routes. Conversely, most short-HE transitions and assisted transitions are non-linear. With unemployment being central to our definition of linearity, all of those following unemployment based transitions had followed non-linear routes.

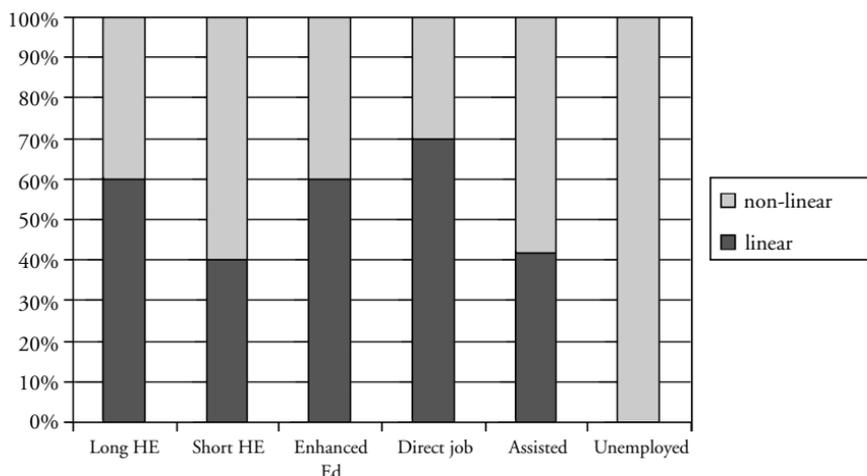


Figure 2. Patterns of linearity among transitional clusters.

To summarise the analysis, within each of the transitional clusters, among those who had made linear transitions similarities were greater than the differences, even though sequences were not uniform. Among those within the long HE cluster, for example, some encountered short periods of unemployment, while others moved directly to employment. Some took a year out to work, while others entered HE after having spent a period of time in further education. However, the vast majority remained as school until age 18 and, at some subsequent point, spent four years in Higher Education (not necessarily entering directly from school). The fifty per cent of the sample classified as linear (who are largely more privileged than those who made non-linear transitions) made relatively unproblematic transitions. Against this it is important to recognise that while these transitions may seem straightforward in an objective sense, the illustration diverts attention from the fact that some of the young people will be in jobs which are unfulfilling and working at levels which do not reflect their qualifications or skills.

Turning to those who had made non-linear transitions, we observed a considerable amount of complexity within each cluster. Here relatively few young people followed exactly the same pathways as their peers in the same cluster. Many of those following long HE transitions, for example, had experienced a period of unemployment, usually on leaving HE. Some had broken their studies to work full-time or had been unemployed for lengthy periods, others had found employment after university but subsequently became unemployed.

Within the short HE group there are a number who entered HE as mature students and some who had experienced Youth Training (although most of these found employment after YT and entered HE sometime later). Many of those who became unemployed did so after leaving HE although, in the main, periods of unemployment tended to be quite short.

Among the enhanced education cluster, complexity tended to be concentrated in the period immediately after leaving school with young people participating in FE, HE and schemes. Although many enhanced education transitions were complex, among this group prolonged unemployment is relatively uncommon. Long-term unemployment was also relatively low among those who had followed direct work transitions. However, it was not confined to the initial period of labour market entry and frequently occurred after relatively substantial periods of continuous employment.

Whereas most of those making direct work transitions found their first jobs without participating on training schemes, the majority of those on assisted transitions had spent time on YT. In contrast to those on linear assisted schemes who tended to enjoy a history of continuous employment after leaving YT, their non-linear counterparts had a more chequered labour market experience. Unemployment, and especially protracted periods of unemployment, tended to occur sometime after YT participation; frequently following relatively lengthy periods of employment.

As would be expected, young people within the unemployment based cluster had labour market histories that were dominated by unemployment. However,

unemployment among this group tended to become «problematic» at around the age of 20. Prior to this, many had experienced periods of full-time employment, often after a time on YT. Clearly these young people were not «unemployable», but perhaps provide an indication that some employers seek to fill some routine unskilled positions using low cost youth labour rather than paying the adult minimum wage. In other words, the main problem faced by these young people relates to the transition from the youth to the adult labour market.

Non-linearity and disadvantage

While non-linear transitions tend to be more difficult (and sometimes chaotic) pathways, it is also true that those whose transitions are most complex tend to be the least advantaged. Looking first at educational qualifications, within each transition cluster those who had made non-linear transitions tended to have fewer qualifications. This was true both at age 16 and at age 23. For example, within both of the HE clusters, more of those whose transitions were linear were in the top educational attainment group at age 16 than were those who made non-linear transitions. Among the assisted employment cluster, those who made linear transitions (who in some respects can be regarded as being successfully assisted) were more than twice as likely as those who followed non-linear routes to be in the top attainment group at age 16. Within the assisted employment cluster, there is also some evidence to suggest that the linear group had a more successful government training experience in so far as more reported having obtained a qualification on their programme (87% compared to 63%). As such, we conclude that young people who make relatively straightforward transitions tend to have stronger initial qualifications on completing compulsory schooling. These early advantages help smooth their access to further education, training and employment and provide some protection against subsequent unemployment.

However, while educational performance can help smooth transitions, other advantages and disadvantages can have an impact. Within most transition clusters those making complex, non-linear, transitions were more likely to live in deprived neighbourhoods. Similarly, in each cluster those making non-linear transitions were less likely to have parents in the professional and managerial classes and more likely to have fathers who had been unemployed for over six months.

In sum, within each of the transitional clusters, those who experience complex transitions tend to be disadvantaged educationally and socially and are over-represented in areas of deprivation. To test this finding further, logistic regression was used to predict the chances of a young person being employed at age 23. Variables were entered (figure 3) to represent personal characteristics and attainments (social class and educational attainments) and situational/experiential factors (deprivation indicators, fathers unemployment, and having being expelled or suspended from school) as well as whether individuals had followed a non-linear route.

Non-linear transition	Dependent
Upper working class (III&IV)	Reference category class I&II
Lower working class (V&VI)	
Educational category 1 (degree)	Ref category Cat 4 (5+ O grades)
Educational category 2	
Educational category 3	
Educational category 5	
Educational category 6 (none)	
Deprivation indicator	
Father been unemployed over 6months	
Expelled or suspended from school	

Figure 3. Logistic regression: variables.

Regression analysis showed that for both males and (particularly) females having made a non-linear transition was associated with a significant reduction in the chances of being in full-time employment at age 23 while for males having been expelled or suspended from school was also significant (table 2). While factors such as social class and educational attainment were not significantly associated with employment at 23, it must be remembered that the variable measuring non-linearity includes a number of features of disadvantaged labour market transitions (such as unemployment) which are themselves predicted by social class and educational attainment⁴.

Given the significance of linearity in explaining employment at 23, we also wished to identify the specific components of non-linearity which were disadvantaging young people. To achieve this, a further regression was undertaken to predict the chances of being in employment at age 23 using the specific variables used to create the non-linearity variable but also adding information on the time period in which a young person had first become unemployed (table 3).

This regression showed that total unemployment exceeding 12 months and a high overall number of status changes both significantly reduced the chances of being employed at age 23. For males, 12 months unemployment had the most powerful impact while for females a high number of moves were more significant. Young people seemed to be able to overcome the impact of short periods of unemployment, so long as the accumulation of unemployment didn't result in a total unemployment of over a year. An abnormal sequence

4. A separate regression was run with the linearity variable excluded. For females no other variables became statistically significant, while for males there was a marginal negative significance associated with having no qualifications.

Table 2. Logistic regression predicting employment at age 23.

	Males		Females	
	B	Sig	B	Sig
Upper working class	-.2602	.4885	.4954	.2228
Lower working class	.5808	.2239	.1162	.8173
Educational cat 2	-.1058	.8031	.2597	.5333
Educational cat 3	.0135	.9801	.4039	.5662
Educational cat 5	.4094	.2925	.1420	.7050
Educational cat 6	-.9018	.1165	-.2883	.6501
Non-linear transition	-.7854	.0121	-.1.1134	.0002
Deprivation	-.0779	.4366	-.0250	.8165
Dad unemployed	.0305	.9361	.2342	.5127
Expelled/suspended	-.7441	.0470	-.2782	.8045

Table 3. Logistic regression predicting employment at 23 (components of non-linearity).

	Males		Females	
	B	Sig	B	Sig
3 months continuous unemployment	-4.5477	.7363		
Total unemployment exceeding 12 months	-1.3656	.0023	-3.0677	.0001
High number of status changes	-.6945	.0377	-1.5850	.0000
«Abnormal» sequence of statuses	.4261	.5250	-1.0225	.1278
Unemployed straight after leaving education	4.0880	.7620	.4420	.4682
Unemployed within 3 years of leaving education ¹	4.3991	.7447	1.4078	.2430
Unemployed later in transition	5.1045	.7056	-.1361	.8444

1. Not including those unemployed immediately after school.

of statuses also appeared to be unproblematic, as did the period in which a short period of unemployment occurred. For males the period in which a short period of unemployment occurred was not significant although females who became unemployed within three years of leaving education (although not immediately after leaving) had an increased chance of employment at aged 23.

Conclusion

In this paper we have suggested that it is somewhat premature to argue that youth transitions have greatly increased in complexity over the last few decades. To argue for an increase in complexity it is necessary to reanalyse some of the major surveys conducted in the 1960s and 1970s with the benefit of modern conceptual and methodological sophistication. Our own view is that while it is probable that some increase in complexity has been associated with greater protraction of transitions and, particularly, with labour market changes involving a growth in precarious and «non-standard» employment, we are only just beginning to appreciate just how complex typical transitions were prior to the 1970s.

Linked to the views on the complexity of transitions to work, it is also important to keep a perspective on the supposed de-linearisation of transitions: again, we believe that the trend has been overstated. More importantly, there are significant problems with the tendency to characterise non-linear transitions as «choice biographies» associated with reflexive approaches to life management. In many respects non-linear transitions are less advantaged pathways while, for some, non-linearity is a synonym for chaos. Indeed, our analysis shows clearly that for each transitional pathway, the non-linear variant tends to be followed by the least advantaged: this is true of the more privileged pathways such as those involving Higher Education, as well direct and assisted labour market transitions.

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