

Customized Lives?

Multiple Life Course Activities of the Class of '88 Over 22 Years

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Introduction

Individuals do not progress from high school to post-secondary education and then on to work and other life sphere activities in a linear fashion. However, trying to capture the dynamics of numerous trajectories and transitions is not easy. The majority of studies examine transitions by considering only one type of trajectory (e.g., moving from one institution to another) with a focus on one life sphere (e.g., post-secondary participation). The order, sequence, and overlap of events such as post-secondary attendance, working, periods of unemployment, and returning to post-secondary studies after a period in the labour force or while engaging in other non-educational activities, remain largely unexamined. Also, the limited availability of data sets that can capture trajectories into, within, and out of post-secondary education in relation to other life events compounds the problem. The Paths on Life's Way data set (<http://blogs.ubc.ca/paths/>) is ideal in capturing the nature of such transitions and trajectories. This study tracked a sample of 1988 BC secondary school graduates for over two decades.

Details of the Paths project can be found at the Paths on Life's Way Project website: <http://blogs.ubc.ca/paths/>

In this report, we employ data from the Paths on Life's Way project and use the technique of sequence analysis to capture the complex types and nature of various trajectories of individuals over a 22 year period.

Analyses

Each type of life course activity is considered a "state." Individuals could have participated in more than one state at a given time (e.g., full-time post-secondary education and part-time work); however, each state must be mutually exclusive. For reasons of mutual exclusivity and ease of interpretation, we have collapsed the categories into eight different states, as portrayed in Figure 1 (see the full report at www.bccat.ca/publications/research/paths regarding how to read the graphs).

FIGURE 1. Life Course Activity States



Sequences of Life Course Activities, 1988 to 2010

In Figure 2 (next page), the sequence of life course activities from 1988 to 2010 is portrayed. In total, the 540 respondents in this study engaged in 540 different sequences over 22 years – in other words, none of the sequences are exactly the same.

A second key point is that although the sequences varied, most respondents experienced a large number of the seven possible states: 23% participated in five different states, 29% participated in six different states, and 20% participated in seven different states (as defined by Figure 1). In the full report, we also include figures related to analyses by gender, post-secondary completion status, parental educational background, and geographic location.

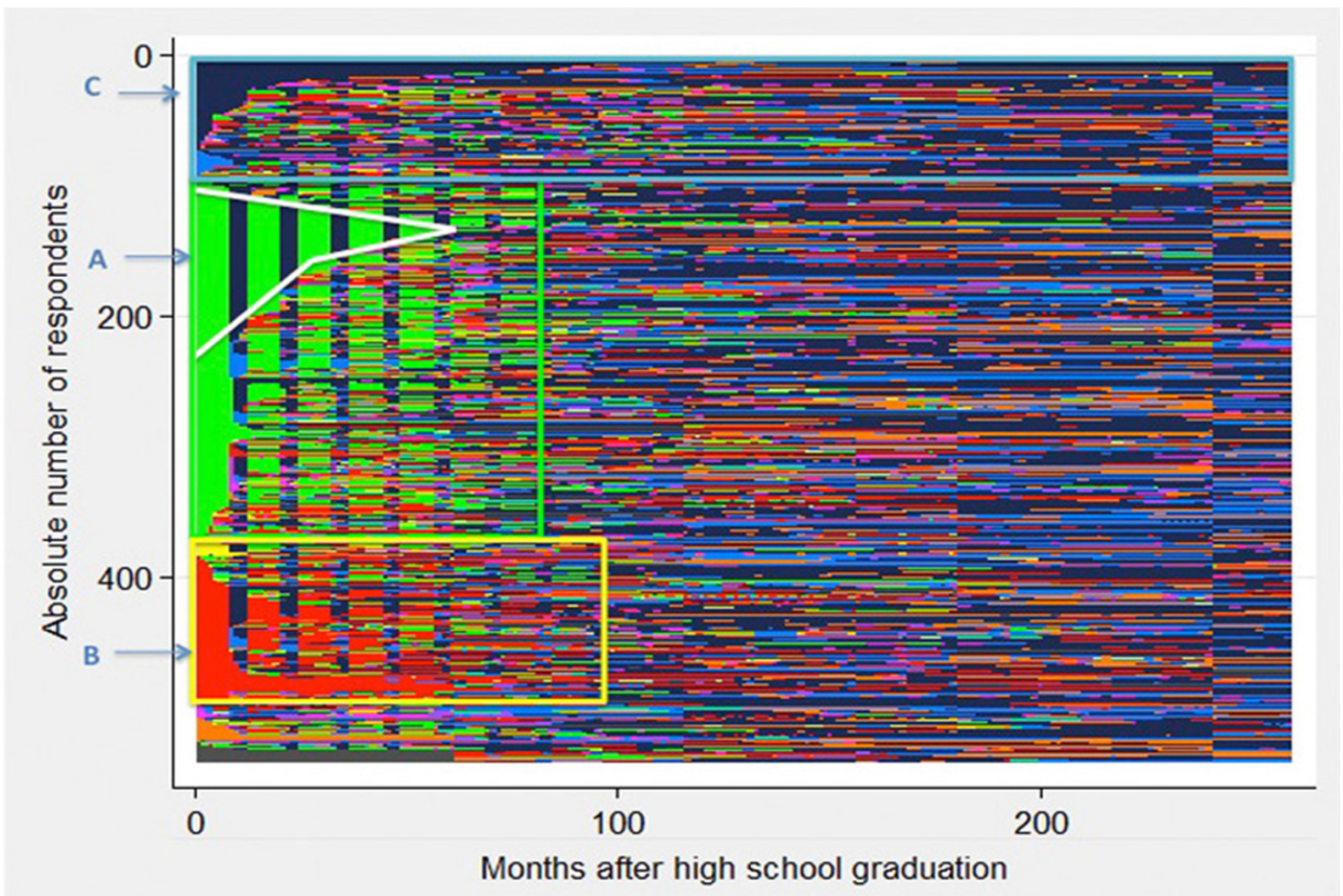
Summary Findings and Discussion

Can and do BC high school graduates customize their lives? Given that each of the 540 trajectories reported here is unique suggests that the answer to this question is “yes.” However, there are distinctive patterns indicating that gender, post-secondary completion status, parental education, and geographic region all contribute to the nature of each trajectory.

Since graduating from high school in 1988, 85% of female and 79% of male Paths respondents earned some form of post-secondary credential!

Of note is the resilience that the Paths respondents displayed to complete their post-secondary studies. Very few followed a traditional route through the system and trajectories became increasingly less traditional as they progressed through the post-secondary system. Various combinations of work and study are apparent in all of the graphs. However, in general, those who did not enter post-secondary institutions directly out of high school were less likely over time to do so.

FIGURE 2. Life Course Activities, 1988-2010



Gender

Second, life course patterns do differ by gender. Overall, women spent less time than men in full-time post-secondary studies; yet, they were slightly more likely to earn baccalaureate degrees or higher (59% versus 58% respectively) as well as other credentials (26% versus 21%, respectively). Their ability to juggle study and work could be interpreted as more efficient in that they spent a more condensed period of time than did men in post-secondary study during the early years following high school. However, over the course of 22 years, they were more likely to pursue academic studies in conjunction with work. The findings of this study concur with other studies that women spend much more of their adult lives than men working part-time rather than full-time. As Andres and Wyn (2010) demonstrated, ongoing issues of lack of affordable and available childcare and challenges around work/life balance continue to beg for a policy solution.

Post-Secondary Non-Completers

In some regards, those who commenced but did not complete their post-secondary studies resembled those who had earned some type of credential. A considerable proportion of both groups enrolled in post-secondary education and maintained their enrolment status for up to five solid years. However, a much higher proportion of non-completers than the other two completion groups began working directly following high school graduation and they were less likely to combine work and study. Their subsequent participation in post-secondary studies was both sporadic and short. Of late, the appropriateness of encouraging academic study for all young people, in particular in relation to an alleged shortage of workers in the skilled trades, has been making headlines in both policy circles and the popular media. By 2010, only 2% of men and no women in the Paths study held trades credentials. Might this be an option for those who initially engaged in work over study?

Parental Education

The relationship between parental educational background and life course trajectories is both a good news and less than good news story. A solid proportion of those whose parents' highest level of education was high school graduation or less participated in several consecutive years of post-secondary studies.

However, the ability to study full-time during the academic year, interspersed by full-time work in the summer, was much lower than for the other two parental education groups, suggesting that this option was not as affordable. Also, those in this category who worked directly out of high school showed little in the way of post-secondary participation over the next 22 years. This is in stark contrast to respondents with one or more parents who had earned baccalaureate degrees. This suggests a class effect rather than a preference effect. If the policy goal is to enhance participation by socio-economically disadvantaged groups, financial aid policies should be examined to ensure that they can participate in post-secondary education to the same extent as more well-off groups.

Geographic Region of Origin

Finally, participation patterns of those from remote regions are in stark contrast with those from metropolitan and urban/rural areas of the province. That very few respondents originating from remote regions combine study and work suggests two possibilities: they move out of their home communities to complete their post-secondary studies as quickly as possible, for reasons of affordability, family, and/or a desire to return to their home communities; they lack the connections to find work while studying that those from metropolitan and urban/rural students may have established through part-time work in high school; and/or they are able to earn good incomes in their resource-intensive home communities during the summers.

Conclusion

The analyses in this study provide a long view into the interplay of the multiple course activities in which people engage from early to mid-adulthood. It is a reminder to those of us interested in post-secondary system success that other dimensions of adult life activities play an important role in people's lives.

Reference List

Andres, L., & Wyn, J. (2010). *The making of a generation: The children of the 1970s in adulthood*. University of Toronto Press.



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