

A Look Back

A Retrospective Analysis of the Sequence of Life Course Events over 22 Years

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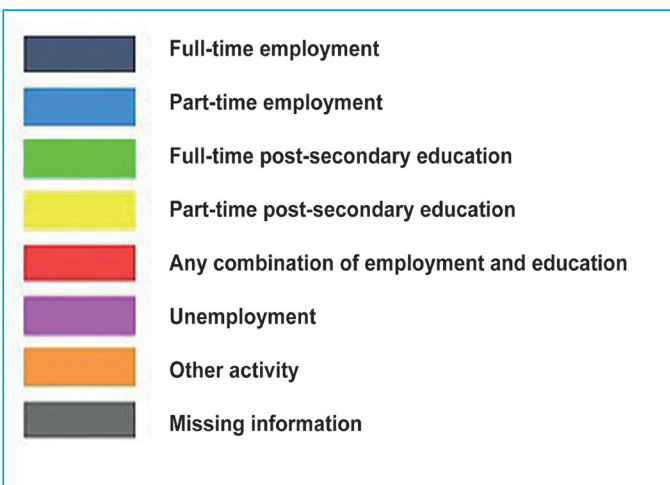
Introduction

At both the provincial and federal levels, a lively policy debate on the types of education, training, and skill acquisition required to meet the demands of the British Columbia and Canadian workforce is taking place. Despite acknowledgement of the need for lifelong learning and reskilling in light of frequent career changes over the life course, typically this debate finds its locus around the transition from school to work. Very little policy or research effort strives to examine, over the long term, the relationship between education and employment, let alone other life course activities such as unemployment and “other” activities. Also, it is rare to examine retrospectively the trajectories that led individuals to their current life space location. Also, a gender lens is critical when asking and answering questions about education and work. The *Paths on Life’s Way* data set (<http://blogs.ubc.ca/paths/>) allows for such a detailed retrospective examination of transitions and trajectories.

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FIGURE 1. Life Course Activity States



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, the categories are collapsed into eight different states, as portrayed in Figure 1.

In total, the 332 female and 208 male respondents in this study engaged in 540 different sequences over 22 years – in other words, none of the sequences are exactly the same. Although each individual’s trajectory was unique, most respondents experienced a large number of the eight possible states: 31% participated in six different states, 25% participated in seven different states, and 4% participated in eight different states, but less than 2% participated in only two different states (as defined by Figure 1).

Life Course Activities in Retrospect by Gender

In Figure 2, life course activities from 2010 to 1988 by gender are portrayed. Over the time period covered in this report, men were employed full-time only for an average of just under 15 years. Women worked fewer average years full-time only (10.8) but triple the number of average years part-time (3.2) when compared to men (1 year). The average number of months spent unemployed were approximately equal for women and men.

Males

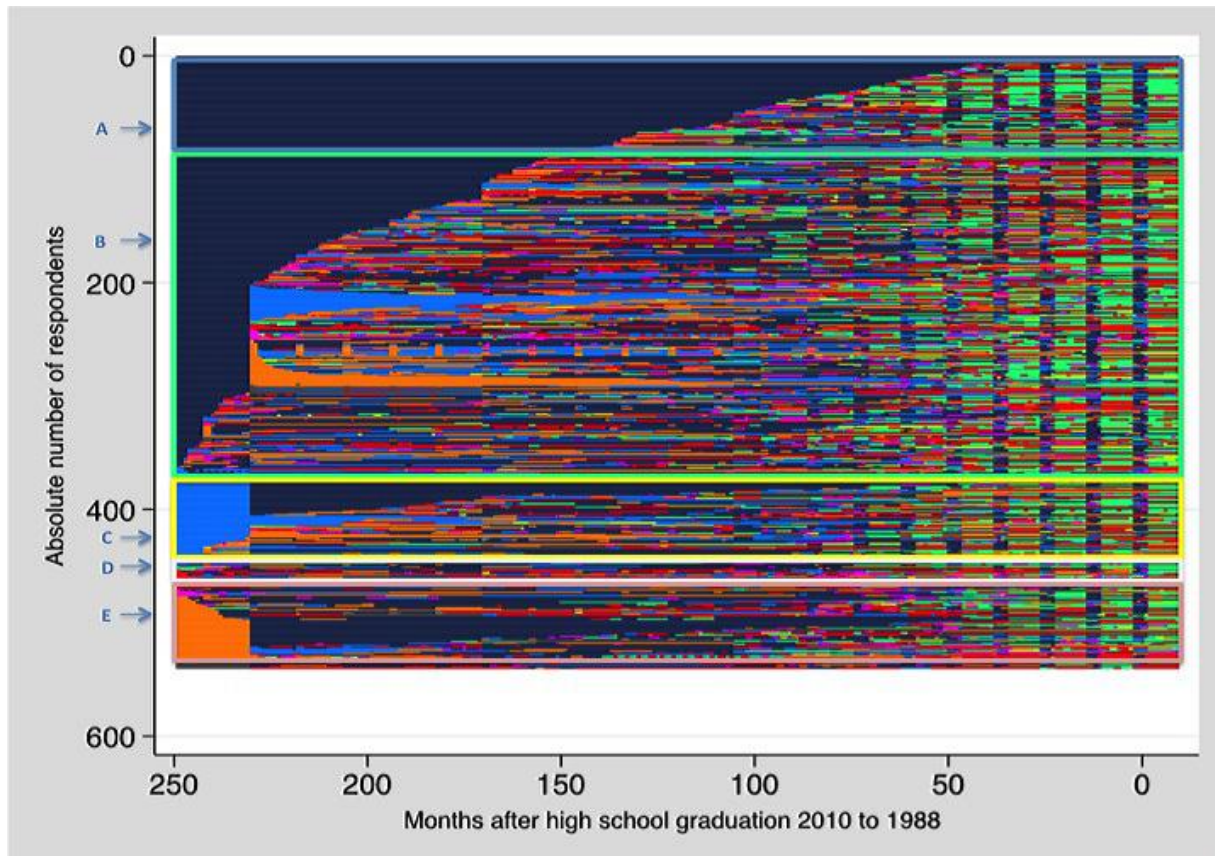
For 17% of men (pattern labelled A on the graph) almost exclusive full-time post-secondary attendance in the early years with periods of summer employment led directly into full-time employment only. However, it took just over eight years following high school graduation for those in pattern A to reach the state of continuous full-time employment. A tiny proportion (top of the graph) experienced full-time employment for almost the entire period since high school graduation. In the pattern labelled B, all (together with those in A) were in full-time work by March 2010.

Approximately 6% of men shifted from other states into full-time work and stayed in full-time employment only beginning in September 2008. This period was preceded by primarily participation in full-time work (dark blue) but was interspersed with other activities including primarily post-secondary study, simultaneous full-time study and work. A very small proportion had previously been employed part-time. Patterns C, D, and E portray an abrupt change state in September 2008, coinciding with the global financial crisis. Previously, most men in these groups were employed primarily full-time. In September 2008, 21% were employed part-time, 10% were in “other” activities, and just over 1% were studying while working.

Females

The women in this study were much slower to commence, and remain, in continuous full-time work. In the same time period reported above for men (just over eight years following high school graduation), only 3% of women commenced full-time employment only and remained in that state through to March 2010 (A). Within 10.5 years of high school graduation, only 8% of women were and remained employed full-time (A). The part of the figure labelled B represents those (in addition to those in pattern A) who were in full-time employment only as of March 2010.

FIGURE 2. Life Course Activities in Retrospect by Gender, 2010-1988



The women in this sample were much slower to commence, and remain in continuous full-time work... Just over eight years following high school graduation, only 3% of women, compared with 17% of men, commenced full-time employment and remained in that state through to March 2010.

Similar to men but more than double the proportion at 28%, women entered and remained in full-time employment only in September 2008, suggesting that they moved from other states – primarily part-time work or an “other” activity – into full-time work, either as a response to, or consequence of, the global financial crisis.

The 22 year time span following high school graduation was a highly colourful period – that is, involving many different states, for the women in this study. Full-time work only, as represented by dark blue, was much less evident, whereas part-time work was. Periods of an “other” activity, often extended, was also more prevalent, as was simultaneous post-secondary study and work, and unemployment. Full-time study only is not as prevalent as it was in the male sample. Patterns C, D, and E portray the same abrupt change state in September 2008 seen above for men, but in different proportions. In September 2008, 13% were employed part-time (excluding those already in part-time work), 13% were in “other” activities, and 5% were studying while working. Although some women in pattern C had previously been employed continuously full-time, others had participated in various states during this time. Women in pattern E exhibited a stronger history of full-time employment only before shifting to the “other” state.

For the majority of men and women, the life course entailed many transitions throughout the seven states documented in this analysis. However, even though full-time employment may not be continuous, the life course trajectories of men showed fewer states other than full-time work than did women.

This finding holds even after considering post-secondary completion status, parental educational background, and geographic location of origin (see full report for a detailed account). Whereas the life course trajectories of men tended to be more monochromatic – mainly dark blue representing full-time work – the trajectories of women were more polychromatic. This finding suggests that over the space of 22 years, women in this study, willingly or unwillingly were more adaptable, flexible, and fluid, as evidenced by vastly more time spent in part-time employment and/or in an “other” state.

Conclusion

The data presented in this report are revealing in many ways. First, only a small minority of men and even smaller minority of women participated in post-secondary studies and then entered the full-time labour force and remain employed continuously through to 2010 (when they were around age 40). Men eased into continuous full-time work at a rather steady pace from about five years following high school graduation. For women, entry into the continuous full-time work force was both slower and more gradual.

The employment discrepancies between men and women are stark and startling. A higher proportion of women than men had post-secondary credentials and almost 60% of both women and men had earned baccalaureate level credentials or higher. Yet, this was not translated into sustained full-time employment for women.

The “great recession of 2008” is almost always associated with economic hardship in terms of unemployment or underemployment. This was indeed the case for both men and women in this study. September 2008 marked a shift for 31% of men and 26% of women from other states into either part-time work or an “other” state. However, whereas at the same point in time 6% of men shifted from other states into full-time work, 28% of women did so! This finding begs the following question: What did the 2008 financial crisis mean for women? What compelled, enabled, or required these thirtysomething women to secure full-time employment?

In light of policy discussions surrounding the lack of skilled Canadians and initiatives such as the Temporary Foreign Workers program and the Government of British Columbia’s (2014) B.C.’s Skills for Jobs Blueprint, the loss of human capital to the workforce by educated underemployed women or women who were out of the workforce, as documented in this report, is remarkable. It could be that women “choose” not to work full-time, but “choice” entails multiple considerations such as available and affordable daycare and shared domestic labour, to name two.

In the 1992 Client Survey Report conducted by the BC Ministry of Advanced, Education, Training, and Technology, 84% of women and 83% of men first year post-secondary students expected that post-secondary education would help them “prepare for a job/improve themselves financially” compared to 81% of women and 82% of men who expected that post-secondary participation would “develop potential/ [lead to] more life choices” (p. 35). In 2010, 52% of females, compared to 31% of male Paths respondents agreed or strongly agreed to the statement, “it is still more difficult for women to succeed in the work force.” However, 40% of females and 37% of males reported that it was very important that they “succeed at work or a career.” These contradictory findings require further investigation.

The findings in this report suggest that refocused attention by all levels of government beyond the current skills to work rhetoric is in order. The adult lives lived by British Columbians are complex. Acknowledging, celebrating, and problematizing this complexity may serve to improve both the lives of BC individuals and families. Complexity is not necessarily negative as periods of full-time study or study while working, as evidenced in the analyses, suggest that individuals are engaged in lifelong learning, reskilling, and earning graduate degrees. However, that women are far less likely than men to be employed full-time, regardless of control variable employed, is troubling and requires ongoing rigorous examination.

Reference List

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