

Turning thirty:

Youth transition processes in 21st century Argentina

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This paper contributes to discussion of the concept of youth as a transition process from education to employment through an empirical analysis of material gathered in Argentina during the post-neoliberal period. Based on the argument that youth studies should incorporate the historical context and economic policies of the moment studied, the paper has been developed on the basis of quantitative data from standardised surveys and 30 biographical interviews carried out in 2013 with people who graduated from high school in 1999. The interviews covered the whole process of transition from high school education to the workforce in one cohort of young people at the end of one of Argentina's most important crises (in 2001) and who moved into adulthood within an economic framework very different from the neoliberal model.

At the beginning of the 21st century, different studies noted that youth and, particularly, youth transitions had suffered significant changes, with a move towards diversification, extension and de-standardisation. At the same time, structural economic transformations from Fordism to Post-Fordism (Giddens 1990) and radical changes to job markets caused by globalisation produced instability, greatly reducing the confidence of the new generations. Young people had no choice but to work within this instability, which has also led to new models of reference and identification (Casal 2000). As a point of reference, the world of adults has been shrinking in both symbolic and emotional terms, though it has also become more important in terms of the material support parents increasingly provide owing to the

fact that young people cannot always depend on education or work to organise their transition into adulthood (Bendit 2008).

Youth today involves its own set of substantive elements that allow young people to be, to think and to act as individuals. Nowadays, in accordance with the economic and social characteristics of each country, societies offer young people activities such as internships and work-study programs to ease the passage through high school and higher education and on to their first job market experience. The passage also entails the search for and creation of one's own lifestyle (including life with a partner or in communities) and the consumption of goods produced by the globalised cultural industries. These options, however, are offered in an ever more fragmented and unequal way, which represents a source of bewilderment and concern among broad population groups.

The aim of the paper is to contribute to the theoretical debate on the notion of youth as mainly a transition from education to employment and then on to "adulthood". In this regard, we will consider both the global discussion of these topics as well as an empirical analysis of material gathered in Argentina during the post-neoliberal period between 2001 and 2013. This article presents the results of '*La inserción laboral de los egresados de la escuela media: 10 años después*' ('*Labour Market Integration of High School Graduates: Ten Years Later*'), a research project funded by Argentina's Scientific and Technological Advancement Agency and CONICET. The project was designed and carried out by the Research Program on Youth Studies inside the Latin American School of Social Sciences – FLACSO Argentina – and it replicates a previous study carried out from 1999 to 2003. In both projects, the methodological strategy was based on the follow-up technique in which a sample of high school seniors was defined and then contacted by phone at regular intervals during the first years after graduation. Our discussion here is based on the analysis of quantitative data from both surveys as well as thirty biographical interviews conducted in 2013 with high school graduates from the class of 1999 who were 32 years old at the time. The interviews covered the complete transition process from secondary education to the workforce among one cohort of young people at the end of one of Argentina's most important crises (2001) and who moved into adulthood within an economic framework very different from the neoliberal model.

Theoretical framework for youth as a transition process

According to the perspective of youth as a transition process to adulthood, two key ruptures or critical events in young people's lives must be analysed and interpreted: the passage from education to work and the setting up (foundation) of one's own home, which also entails establishing an independent family. In this interpretation, the setup/acquisition of individual autonomy that later marks adulthood takes place. In other words, at an individual level, the transition represents the ways in which people move from a state of dependence/wardship to one of autonomy/independence. On the other hand, at a social (or macro) level, the theory posits that during the transition, young people settle into a certain social class (classification, to use Bourdieu's term) as a result of their passage and labour market integration (Casal et al. 2006). In this way, over the course of the transition process the general trends towards mobility or towards reproducing social structure become evident, especially in relation to the occupations or jobs that young people get hired for as young adults, placing them in labour segments that determine their future perspectives (Bendit 2007).

This idea of transition has been modified over the years with a range of conceptual frameworks. Furlong (2013) has described the metaphors or emblems that have accompanied research in different decades, listing the transitional metaphors from the first approaches to the psychology of adolescence and on to the structural and post-modern versions. According to the author, the hegemonic metaphors in the 1970s referred to roads or routes, which are used to bring the topic of tracking into the discussion. During the 1980s, the spike in youth unemployment and the diversification of itineraries and choices brought with it the notion of "trajectory" as the predominant term. Within this context, the ideas of "atypical" trajectories became particularly significant in the mid-1990s as a way to describe the increase in youth's vulnerability. Similarly, the EGRIS group did comparative analyses in different countries of Europe (EGRIS 2000; du Bois-Reymond & López Blasco 2004).

In later years, the processes of individualisation, more pluralistic lifestyles and the emergence of new risks and vulnerabilities led to the concept of navigation, the latest theoretical tool used to approach the new transitional youth forms (Roberts 1997; Furlong 2009). In the discussion among European researchers, there was an increased perception that young people should become experts at navigating their own biographical itineraries based on reflexive self-awareness as one of the core elements of

late modernity (Giddens 1990). This can also be seen in discussions on the expansion of individualisation and the new social risks related to the transformation of what some authors referred to as “post-industrial societies” (Beck 1992).

Moreover, the interpretation of economic and social contexts gives more scope and complexity to the analysis of the structure-agency binomial in biographical youth itineraries. By including historic context and/or the concept of social generation (Woodman & Wyn 2006, 2013), the analysis is significantly enriched and gives insight on the effects of public policies and their impact on young life conditions (Walther 2006). Similarly, scholars have verified that periods of high unemployment and neoliberal policies tend to restrict individual agency, limiting people’s options and exacerbating the background reproduction phenomena, just as the periods of economic growth and/or expanded social and welfare policies can enhance individual abilities and exercise of agency (Furlong 2011).

In view of the increased focus on specific contexts and places, Cuervo and Wyn affirm that the conceptualisation of transitions as the main metaphor of youth studies acquires greater precision and depth when the notions of belonging are incorporated. According to the authors, the factors related to space or location (place), personal bonds (relatives, peer groups) and historic context are central to the transitions into adulthood. Notions related to affectivity, peer groups (friendship) and a sense of belonging are central elements in daily life, determining young people’s choices and opportunities (Cuervo & Wyn 2014).

Finally, there is a set of discussions centring on the idea of employment as the biggest factor of youth transition. In this case, the inquiry proposes placing the value on “work” as opposed to employment, especially considering the tenets of gender studies (feminist theory). In contemporary capitalist societies, personal care and reproductive tasks done at home continue to be undervalued and overlooked. This theory acknowledges that most scholars in the field only examine activities that culminate in paid work – work for other people; in contrast, reproductive work has no social or economic value and is thus not addressed in the scholarly examination of youth transition. How do we explain the transitions and classifications among young women of different social classes who dedicate themselves to caring tasks at an early age? The answer is telling; in general, these women are assigned to a group called NEET or “NI-NI” in Spanish (for example, see Simmons, Russel & Thompson 2014), defined negatively by the fact that they don’t

study or have a paid job. The feminist economy largely challenges these affirmations. The refusal to acknowledge the societal value of activities associated with maintaining a family contributes to women's subordinate position, especially low-income women, with broad consequences for young people.

Youth transitions and a historic juncture

The analysis of youth transitions to "adult" life acquires new meaning when such transitions are not understood as an "essential" depiction of what youth will become. Instead, these transitions should be viewed as part of more complex processes in which structural and subjective conditions interact in a very specific way within each society, region and social condition, producing different frameworks of growth and development for young people. Thus, young people are not considered individuals exclusively dependent on macro and micro-social conditions, but as actors who influence or at least manoeuvre the structures influencing their lives based on the opportunities they have access to during their youth.

Numerous studies have indicated that youth transitions have always been marked by continuous change. This can mainly be attributed to accelerated scientific/technological advances, changes to the social structure, increasing economic and cultural globalisation, and the specific characteristics of the job markets for young people in each country. As a result of this, youth and youth transitions in both central and peripheral countries are becoming increasingly complex (pluralisation), creating a greater need for resources from both the family and the State to support them in their transitions. Many researchers point out that transitions to adult life are not only more complicated, but also increasingly more fragmented and differentiated (Casal 2000; Du Bois-Reymond 2003; Machado País 2004). In this sense, some have stated that there are now different "transition regimes" (Walther 2006) as well as new youth regimes.

Along the same line, researchers such as Wyn have proposed the notion of social generation as a new interpretive framework that has become a recent topic of discussion. France and Roberts (2014) take issue with the fact that the defenders of the social generation concept overlook the complex relationships between context (structure), subjectivities and youth practices in the configuration of transitions to adulthood. We acknowledge France and Roberts's argument on the heuristic nature of the social generation concept when it is used to try to explain the complex relationship between social change and continuity and their effects on young people today. However,

here we argue that it is possible and enriching to analyse youth transitions in a broader referential framework like that encompassed by the concept of social generation. To interpret such effects, it could be useful to follow the methodological outline of France and Roberts when studying the connections between social change and continuity and their effects on the life of young people today; to do so, we must explore the connections between the macro and micro processes that are at work in young people's daily practices. In keeping with these authors, the study of these connections could show how certain macro-micro economic and social processes can shape the worlds of young people's lives, limiting what is possible for them. This focus seems very appropriate when interpreting the quantitative and qualitative data of the panel study carried out in Argentina in which the itineraries and trajectories of two cohorts of high school graduates from different historical periods and socioeconomic contexts were studied. The historical context of the first cohort was marked by crisis, and the other by significant and continuing economic growth along with the recovery of social policies aimed at income redistribution. Given this background, we posit that the two cohorts examined in our research probably belong to two different social generations and consequently have developed specific individual and collective identities, as well as different strategies for the move into adult life.

Based on the theoretical positions described here, this work aims to answer some of the questions associated with the processes of transition to adult life in Argentina. These include: what characteristics are typical of the transitions to adulthood among young people from several social groups in the two mentioned historical contexts? How did the socioeconomic status of their family influence their trajectories towards job market integration? How did the post-neoliberal political and social context influence the transitions of young people? However, before trying to respond to these questions, we will briefly describe the research methodology and the type of data that serve as the basis of this text, as well as the macro-socioeconomic contexts in which youth transitions have taken place in Argentina from 2001 to date.

Research strategy

To provide a background on the theoretical aspects of modern youth in Argentina, the following methodological research strategy was designed. The goal was to analyse different types of transitions from education to employment and adult life in different economic and social contexts of Argentina. With this goal in mind, a study conducted

from 1999 to 2002 titled “La inserción ocupacional de los egresados de la escuela media” [“Occupational Integration of High School Graduates”] was replicated from 2009 to 2013 from a longitudinal methodological perspective. Due to the important changes in the economic and social context of Argentina starting in around mid-2000, it was considered useful to re-examine the link between youth, education and work. Among the central hypotheses that guided the 1999 study, one specifically stood out: the idea that the job market does not have a universal or predetermined economic function. Instead, the function of the job market can only be defined by analysing specific socio-historical contexts. Therefore, replicating the study in the new context could represent a significant contribution to the theoretical debate and to the empirical study of these subjects.

Furthermore, the 1999–2002 study clearly showed that the first years of job market integration were not enough to forecast the entire transition trajectory. It was thus considered necessary to take into account a broader period of inquiry with the idea of reconstructing the transitions of the members of the first study through biographical interviews. The fact that we had access to the original database with individualised information segmented according to the first years of job market integration offered a singular opportunity to reconstruct trajectories in a whole itinerary of young people up to age 30.

With this goal in mind, and as a first step, a new study was carried out titled “The occupational integration of high school graduates: Ten years later” (“La inserción ocupacional de los egresados de la escuela media: 10 años después”). The aim of this new study was to compare results with the 1999 study (and its follow-up in 2000 to 2002) in order to analyse transitions from school to work and compare independent life between two groups of young people who had finished or were finishing secondary education in two very different economic and social contexts. As part of the new study, a panel comprised of high schools graduates from 2011 was formed.

The new project was based on an intentional and segmented sample of educational institutions (high schools) with a range of educational orientations in different locations with students from several social classes.¹ The educational establishments were selected

¹ The sample consists mainly of young people living in Greater Buenos Aires, the largest urban area in the country. After the in-school surveys, a successful telephone follow-up was done. For the 1999 group, the first telephone survey reached a total of 570 of the survey takers, representing a loss of only 8% of young people in

according to criteria used for the analysis of educational segmentation in Latin America. Following a tradition in the field of the sociology of education, the segments had to take in account the following indicators: a) school infrastructure; b) teacher certification; and c) the socioeconomic characteristics of students. The sample of educational institutions where the survey was performed was divided into three socioeconomic groups or sectors: upper, middle and low. At the institutions included in the sample, a questionnaire was given to 600 young people in their last year of upper school.²

Initial results of the comparative quantitative analysis of two generations

As mentioned above, for the purpose of comparing the transition between education and employment, in two cohorts of high school students who were part of social generations with distinct life experiences, the project replicated a follow-up procedure of graduates 12 years later.

Different socioeconomic contexts and consequences for young people's transitions

Initial comparisons of continued education versus job market integration showed there was a relationship between different contexts and life experiences and how these affected their personal expectations for educational continuity and job market integration. In the first case, the young people who graduated from high school in 1999 spent their first few years in a context of great economic recession and neoliberal policies. They experienced major difficulties during their first job market integration as social vulnerability was the predominant trend. In the case of the second group, the cohort that graduated from high school in 2011 spent their first years after graduation in a context of economic growth, stricter labour regulations and enhanced social protection through public policies. The quantity of students who opted to continue studying increased notably, with tertiary admission programs offering scholarships to youth with fewer resources who opted to continue in school. The results of this study provided

the sample. In the 2011 group, we reached 385 of the survey takers, with a loss greater than that of the first group (28.4% of young people in the sample were not able to be contacted for the follow-up).

² In both projects, we worked with an intentional and non-probabilistic sample of educational institutions. The definition of the sample corresponded to the amount of financing that was obtained in each case. The non-probabilistic nature added great complexity to the analysis of the information; the values obtained must be read as comparative trends within each of the samples.

vitaly important information for the comparison of youth transitions in the different contexts and were published in several major journals (Bendit & Miranda 2015; Miranda & Corica 2014; Bendit 2015).

Social function of education and expectations

As a result of the initial comparison of the panels, we confirmed that there were real changes not only in relation to the sense of the social function that students attribute to education, but also in relation to young people's future expectations during their last year of high school. Students from several social groups were found to attribute new meaning to secondary education. In the context of changes of the general economic context, youngsters from lower income households expressed that high school, in fact, contributed to educational continuity and job market integration. Among young people belonging to the upper- and middle-income families, more young people offered a positive assessment of secondary education in term of sociability and integration with their peers.

De-standardisation and pluralisation in labour integration

The comparative data referred to job market integration of young people and their future expectations as evidence of greater de-standardisation and pluralisation and less linear youth transitions. Moreover, the greater number of options may complicate the decision of what to do after high school. Likewise, a more intense individualisation process along with a broader selection of new activities create a need for facilitating the transition process through intensified educational and vocational guidance and training for technical/professional careers during high school.

Fewer erratic itineraries?

Based on these results and from a “transitional” perspective, we state that in a context of economic growth, an increased national budget for education and enhanced social policies to support lower income families, it is possible to observe a progressive decrease of the educational/job itineraries defined in the 1999–2001 study as “erratic” or “vulnerable” itineraries, even if such a decrease occurred only gradually.

Some results of the qualitative study

A sub-sample was carried out among the graduates from the first cohort (1999–2003), which allowed for a qualitative study conducted through in-depth interviews. The main purpose of the qualitative strategy was related to the possibility of

retrospectively reconstructing the complete educational, job and family trajectories of a specific segment of young adults today who were about to start in 2000, 2001 or had already initiated their transition from high school to higher education (technical/professional formation) or college or who sought jobs. Likewise, and on the basis of the typology of post-high school itineraries carried out in 2000/2001/2002, 30 of the young adults were interviewed qualitatively (biographical interviews), including 19 men and 11 women.

The change of context and the centrality of employment as a social integration mechanism generated a segmentation with less social polarisation, in a framework where the social promotion of education was clearly visible and contributed to stabilising the job trajectories of the young people interviewed. Most of the stories of the young people interviewed reveal the de-structuring of the transitional itineraries in relation to a search that begins at the age of 20. This is seen, for example, in the following cases:

When I finished high school, I had no idea about what would happen, but I found my path and I am doing what I like. If you ask young people now, they have no idea what they want to do... (E16, male, living with his partner and three children, type of trajectory: Incomplete university studies).

... In fact, I wouldn't call it a decision, it's not that I got up one morning and decided what I would do ... it was a search. I didn't make a decision ... although I am always thinking about what I want to do, I don't necessarily do that. I enrolled in film school but things didn't always go how I hoped (E2, woman, living alone, type of trajectory: Professional).

The decreased importance of the adult world in symbolic terms, and the increasing importance of the economic support of transitions, mostly in terms of access to housing, was a frequent issue. To start their own family, youth face major difficulties caused by the rise in housing costs, part of a general process of Western capitalism. For example:

Now I have to think about money too, because I have my wife, my little girl and my father and we're adding on to the house to have our own place upstairs (E10, male, living with a partner and one daughter, type of trajectory: Incomplete university studies).

When my son was born ... I kept on living with my parents. When he got married my father also lived with his parents in this house. My parents helped me to build my own place ... We lived there while I was pregnant and for several months after my baby was born. It wasn't like we were living with my parents. We come in through the same door but there is a separate apartment upstairs. (E3, woman, living with a partner and one son, type of trajectory: Complete advanced studies).

Affectivity, personal bonds and establishing roots were central elements in the choices of the young people interviewed. Decisions, plans to move to another country and general life choices varied according to the importance attributed to loved ones, family and close friends. Similarly, bonds (Cuervo & Wyn 2014) were decisive in guiding young adult strategies towards job integration and living on their own.

Discussion

The comparative analysis of the data from both studies shows that the socioeconomic and social policy changes in Argentina in two different historical contexts did affect young people's understanding of education as well as their expectations in relation to it. This effect can also be observed in relation to the educational continuity and the types of labour market integration experienced by young people. With reference to these research dimensions of our study, it is important to consider that the two cohorts of young people investigated belong to different social generations, each facing different structural transition conditions and each coping (or not coping) with them in different ways (for example, our two different transition models).

The qualitative analysis completed in 2011 based on biographical interviews with a sub-sample of the first cohort was comprised of interviewees aged in their 30s. This analysis revealed that in a context of economic growth and social and educational redistribution policies, new types of transition from education to employment arise. Thus a new transitional model is created, one that has been the focus of this work in the hope of hearing what experts and youth researchers have to say about this model. It is a model that shows the transition between education and the employment world of a segment of high school graduates.

This first aim of this new transitional model was to provide an updated and a critical analysis of the normative elements that often establish priorities within the transitions to

adulthood or “normalise” them. For example, and as described in the theoretical framework, the new model proposes, first, going beyond those which describe the ideal itineraries and designate those who stray too far from the “normal” itinerary as “problematic”. Second, it proposes combining the trajectories in higher education with its effects on the type of occupation that the young person has at the end of his or her itinerary. Finally, and as can be seen in the results, this model highlights that even though the first years of labour market integration were highly volatile among young people from all social groups, the higher income groups – especially those who had graduated from college – perceived greater opportunities for their future career.

In summary, perhaps one of the most important initial findings of the qualitative study is that the changes to economic and social policy in Argentina after the collapse of the neoliberal model enhanced homogeneity and reduced social polarisation among the young. In this sense, employment, a key element of social integration, was one of the signs of diminished intra-generational inequality as a particular segment of Argentina’s class system, the middle class, was expanded and consolidated.

This sample of young people were high school graduates, often from widely different social origins, revealing the need for an empirical discussion on the policies of redistribution and its positive effects on long-term living conditions.

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