Social Status Attainment during the Transition to Adulthood

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

There has been a burgeoning of research tracking the demographic changes in the transition to adulthood. Much of this research has examined the markers of the transition, such as leaving home, completing school, starting a full-time job, getting married, and becoming a parent, and how they vary over time and by social strata (Furstenberg 2008; Shanahan 2000). Studies have shown an overall delay by some young adults to reach economic and social maturity compared to their counterparts before the 1960s Berlin et al., 2010(Shanahan 2000). Compounded by individual-level factors, structural constraints, and rising inequalities, there have been more hurdles for young adults to become successfully independent (Shanahan 2000).

The transition to adulthood coincides with important social status developments where individuals are accruing education and skills for the work force, as well as accumulating assets or debts. Furthermore, family social status and resources can aid or deter the development of social status. Individuals from disadvantaged families have less resources and capacities to navigate the various transitions of obtaining secondary education, entering the work force, and forming families compared to individuals from advantaged families (Furstenberg, 2008). Within a life course perspective, these experiences of status attainment during the transition to adulthood have lasting effects that shape social status outcomes later in life. The overall goal of this study is to examine the different pathways of social status attainment during the transition to adulthood. A

person-oriented framework is used to define life-course profiles of social status in a nationally representative sample of adolescents followed into adulthood using data from three time points. Through this framework, we can have a better understanding of the status attainment experiences as young adults continue toward successful independence.

This study enhances the literature by examining the status attainment process during the transition to adulthood in two domains, economic capital and human capital. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a person-oriented analytic framework is applied to identify the different life-course profiles of social status from adolescence (ages 12-17) to early adulthood (ages 24-32). This framework provides the opportunity to go beyond traditional variable-oriented frameworks (e.g., path analysis, regression models) of status attainment models which examines single indicators of social status while controlling for other indicators. A person-oriented approach, such as latent class analysis, examines individuals as a whole based on their patterns or observed characteristics of social status (Bergman and Magnusson 1997). This analytic strategy identifies mutually exclusive and exhaustive "classes" or groups of individuals based on their values for a large set of social status indicators captured over three times points during the transition to adulthood.

The study's main hypothesis is that mobility patterns are evident during the transition to adulthood from adolescent status (via parent status) to adult status. Even in this early part of the life-course, there are groups that fall into patterns of vertical intergenerational mobility, such as upward or downward mobility. Other groups fall into patterns that are characterized by horizontal mobility, and thus they remain in the same position during the transition into adulthood. These patterns are evident for both domains of economic and human capital. The second hypothesis is that there is significant demographic variability in these social status groups

by gender, race/ethnicity, and family characteristics. The persistence of social inequalities by gender and race/ethnicity in the U.S. attest to the differential conditions for status attainment (above and beyond the individual and family levels). These variations highlight the inequalities in the status attainment process and provide further evidence of the social class bifurcation during the transition to adulthood.

Methods

This study used restricted data files from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). Add Health is a U.S. nationally representative sample of adolescents who were in grades 7-12 during the 1994-1995 school year and follows them into early adulthood with the most recent wave in 2007-2008. The analytic sample is restricted to individuals who participated in Waves 1 (1994-95), 3 (2001-02), and 4 (2007-08) in-home interviews, and also to those who have data from Wave 1 parent interviews. After limiting the sample to respondents who have valid sample weights, the final analytic sample is 9,093.

Social status is operationalized as a latent construct composed of key measures defined by material/economic capital and human capital (Krieger, Williams and Moss 1997; Oakes and Rossi 2003). Social status measures are used from each life stage: adolescence (Wave 1), young adulthood (Wave 3), and adulthood (Wave 4). For each life stage, comparable measures of income (parent-reported household income and respondent's personal income in young adulthood and adulthood), economic hardship, receipt of public assistance, and lack of health insurance are used to conceptualize material/economic capital. Additional young adult and adult measures of home ownership and receipt of family financial support also are included for economic capital domain. Educational attainment, hours worked per week, and occupation type

capture the human capital domain. Parent's education and occupation also are included as salient measures for the respondent's human capital. The following demographic characteristics are examined in conjunction with each social status domain: race/ethnicity, gender, family structure in adolescence (two-parent household, single-parent, and other), relationship status in adulthood (married, cohabiting, dating, or none), and number of children in adulthood.

Latent class analysis (LCA) is used to identify (1) the optimal number of latent classes or groups of life-course social status, and (2) the size and characteristics of each latent class (Collins and Lanza 2010). LCA is a non-parametric statistical technique that assumes that patterns among a set of observed variables are explained by an unmeasured latent variable with discrete classes (Collins and Lanza 2010; Lazarsfeld and Henry 1968; McCutcheon 1987). Individuals are categorized based on their social status characteristics into different groups of social status (latent classes). Individuals belong to one of a set of mutually exclusive and exhaustive latent classes (Lanza and Collins 2008). A series of LCA models are conducted specifying between one- to six-class solutions. To identify the best fit LCA model, several criteria are used including model fit statistics (log likelihood, BIC, and VLMR likelihood ratio test) and interpretability of model solution parameters via high class homogeneity, high class separation, and low misclassification error. Once the final models are identified, I further examined demographic characteristics for each domain to describe how the classes compare by gender, race/ethnicity, nativity, relationship status in adulthood, and number of children in adulthood. LCA models are conducted using Mplus Version 6.11. Full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation is used to estimate model parameters using all available data points, even for cases with missing responses (Muthen and Muthen 1998-2011).

Results

  Preliminary findings from the latent class analyses identified four latent classes for the domain of economic capital and five latent classes for the domain of human capital. These latent classes captured the ebb and flow of social status advantages and disadvantages across adolescence (ages 12-17 in Wave 1), young adulthood (ages 18-26 in Wave 3), and adulthood (ages 24-32 in Wave 4).

Economic Capital

  Within the economic capital domain, 17% of respondents were classified in the most economically disadvantaged group (Class 1), 28% in the downwardly mobile group (Class 2), 20% in the upwardly mobile group (Class 3), and 35% in the most economically advantaged group (Class 4). Class distinction was most apparent with household income in adolescence (W1), personal income in adulthood (W4), and indicators of economic hardship and public assistance from adolescence into adulthood. These latent classes showed a more fluid pattern of economic capital development over the life course, and there were signs of intergenerational transfers from parent to child and even child to parent. The downwardly mobile and most advantaged groups were similar in adolescence, but by adulthood, there were clear distinctions by income, experiences of hardship and public assistance, and having health insurance. Home ownership as a sign of wealth was also apparent where roughly one-half of respondents in the upwardly mobile and most advantaged groups owned a home, in comparison to less than a quarter of respondents in the most disadvantaged and downwardly mobile groups. Those at the bottom and the upwardly mobile groups received little financial support from their parents in young adulthood when compared to the downwardly mobile and most advantaged groups. Yet by

adulthood, the most disadvantaged and the upwardly mobile were also more likely to provide financial support to their parents.

Human Capital

For the human capital domain, Class 1 was characterized by persistently low human capital (11%); Class 2 as low with early entry into work (42%); Class 3 as upwardly mobile (15%); Class 4 as downwardly mobile with continued adult education (16%); and Class 5 as persistently high human capital (16%). The human capital domain was most differentiated by education and occupation types. Overall, respondents' education levels were similar to that of their parents. Respondents in the group with the persistently low human capital (Class 1) have lower education levels than their parents. Class 2 respondents have higher education levels than their parents, and showed signs of early exit from schooling in young adulthood and early entry into the work force. Characterized by medium education levels of parents, Class 3 showed signs of upward mobility with higher education levels than both their parents by adulthood, and 40% reported having a professional/managerial occupation in adulthood. Class 4 had the second highest parent education levels but adult respondents had lower education levels than their parents. Furthermore, only 40% and less than a quarter were still in school during young adulthood and adulthood, respectively. The persistently high human capital group possessed the highest levels of education and occupation types.

These findings pointed to both static (non-fluid) and non-static characteristics of human capital formation in the life course. For two of the classes (persistently low and persistently high), respondents achieved similar education levels as their parents. The stickiness (where respondents resemble their parents) associated with education may point to parents' transmission of values

toward educational attainment early in the life course or could reflect parents' abilities to help their child achieve educational milestones. However, there were signs of mobility where continued education and postponing work substantially elevated human capital for the upwardly mobile group. Similarly, early entry into the work force combined with vocational training provided a boost in human capital levels for Class 2's low with early entry into work.

Discussion

Overall, patterns of social status (whether high or low) from adolescence into adulthood are stable across each domain. These stable patterns support previous studies of a cumulative build-up of social disadvantages and advantages that start early in the life course (i.e., during adolescence) and continue into adulthood (Dannefer 2003; Palloni 2006). Findings show that social origins matter whereby parents' social status (regardless of domain) provides direct or indirect transmission of capital. Furthermore, compared to their higher social status counterparts, the economically disadvantaged and low human capital groups are more likely to be non-White and have a higher average number of children in adulthood. Although respondents in the economically advantaged group are more likely to be married than respondents in the disadvantaged group, the opposite occurs where the high human capital groups are less likely to be married compared to the lower human capital groups.

Yet, experiences of social mobility from adolescence into adulthood also appeared for each social status domain. The degree of mobility highlighted the opportunities to move up the social status ladder for some, but also move down the social ladder for others. The economic capital domain included groups of downward and upward mobility from parents' status to adult respondents' status. There were two groups that possessed upward movements and one group

that possessed downward movement in human capital domain. These trends represent an anomaly to the "stickiness" in social status attainment.

Downward mobility is evident in both economic and human capital domains. From adolescent background of high economic capital, there was a shift to economic hardships and continued dependence on parents in adulthood. Within the human capital domain, despite having parents with some college or college degree, markers of working more than full-time in young adulthood and receipt of vocational training signaled a downward trend. Although there were some who continued education in adulthood, their education levels and occupation types in adulthood were generally lower than their parents.

On the positive side, upward social mobility is present with individuals accruing more material resources (than their parents) and reducing their experiences of economic hardships. Similarly, in the human capital domain, education remains a key marker for upward mobility. Those who continued schooling in young adulthood and delayed workforce entry showed the highest benefits in adult social status. Those who left school early to enter the work force and received vocational training also showed benefits in later adult social status but not as high as the previous group. These patterns of mobility require a closer examination to pinpoint factors or turning points that trigger the shift in social status during the transition to adulthood period.

The second hypothesis is confirmed with the stable patterns of status attainment. The most disadvantaged groups had earlier onsets of adulthood than the most advantaged groups. In the economic capital domain, most advantaged groups had continued financial dependence on their parents in young adulthood but not in adulthood, and fewer children when compared to the most disadvantaged groups. Lower human capital groups had earlier exits from schooling and entry into the workforce, and reported more children than the higher human capital groups by

adulthood. Although being married is a typical marker of adulthood, the most advantaged groups had higher proportions of being married than the most disadvantaged groups in both economic and human capital domains.

For groups with patterns of mobility, the markers of transition to adulthood had mixed support for the hypothesis. Within the downwardly mobile groups, the mean number of children is lower than the other groups (except for the persistently high group) and proportion of those married by adulthood is low. The pattern for the upwardly mobile groups is dependent on social status domain. Within the economically upward group, the mean number of children and proportion married are closer to the most economically disadvantaged than the advantaged. For human capital, the upwardly mobile group has a mean number of children and proportion married that is similar to the most advantaged group than the least advantaged group.

With any research study, there are both strengths and limitations. Two of the main strengths of this study are the availability of longitudinal data (via Add Health) and application of a person-oriented framework (via latent class analysis (LCA)) to develop a life-course, multidimensional social status construct. Through this conceptualization, this study's findings provide a nuanced understanding of social status during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Previous studies are often limited to cross-sectional data or lack the richness of social status measures.

However, the findings should be couched within several key methodological and theoretical/conceptual limitations. For the methodological limitations, Add Health respondents were selected from a school-based sample and the longitudinal nature of the study includes non-response bias. Although weights were used to adjust for attrition, the findings could be biased with non-response from respondents who are disproportionately male, non-White, older as well

as those with lower social status. With these caveats of non-response bias, these findings are only generalizable to U.S. adolescents enrolled in school during the 1994-95 academic year and further limited by the racial/ethnic groups of Whites, Blacks, Latinos, and Asians. In addition, LCA involves a degree of subjectivity in the interpretation of latent classes and a degree of misclassification error of classes (Collins & Lanza 2010). Furthermore, respondents were between the ages of 24 and 32 at Wave 4, and thus the process of status attainment may not be complete. These latent class profiles depict social status during a transition time and therefore only reflect the process of status attainment and should not be considered final. Future research should apply the same analytical methods to other longitudinal datasets that capture the transition to adulthood period to validate these findings. Finally, although we modeled social status dimensions of economic and human capital separately, these dimensions are highly correlated. Individuals who have higher education and skills (human capital) are likely to have better incomes and lower experiences of economic hardships (economic capital). In additional analyses, the lowest social status groups of economic capital were significantly associated with the lowest groups of human capital. Similar pattern was evident for the highest social status groups. Despite these limitations, the study findings do have important implications for research and practice.

To conclude, the transition to adulthood period marks a time when social status is evolving across each economic capital and human capital domain. These changes indicate that social status trajectories are neither linear nor fixed as evident from the downward and upward shifts. Therefore, it is important to capture this process of accruing (or losing) capital during this transition period of the life course.

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