

## **Life-course transitions, social class, and gender: a 15-year perspective of the lived lives of Canadian young adults**

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In this paper, through the theoretical lens of life-course research and reproduction theory, we employ 15 years of longitudinal data from the British Columbia, Canada *Paths on Life's Way* project to examine the extent to which educational and career pathways of this cohort of 1988 high school graduates are gendered, individualized, prolonged, diversified; to determine marriage and parenthood patterns in relation to educational and occupational participation and outcomes across time; and to assess the extent to which social class still matters. We employ a transition probabilities analysis to follow the journeys of over 730 individuals from high school through the post-secondary system and work by identifying a sequence of significant stages. We then correlate these transition rates with relevant factors that influenced respondents' lives. We demonstrate quantitatively that although the life courses of young women and men are experienced differently, there is an overall regularity in outcomes. Their 'choices' at key transition points are to large extent shaped by external structures and social class and gender differences are evident.

**Keywords:** higher education; work; young adulthood; social class; transition

In North America, participation in post-secondary education is a central activity of the majority of young adults. According to the OECD (2006), in both Canada and the US, today's 17 year old can expect to participate in approximately three years of tertiary level education and 10–20% of all young adults will participate in some form of education until their late 20s. Some researchers point out that the North American system has expanded from K–12 to K–16, hence moving from 'mass' to 'universal' post-secondary participation (Anisef *et al.* 2005, Davies 2005).

The educational systems in various countries and the routes through them may make comparisons between, for instance, Europe and North America difficult – see the debate between Arnett (2006) and Bynner (2005). However, the post-secondary system in British Columbia, Canada is directly comparable with that in the US and should provide insights into the extent to which its structure shapes the lives of North American young adults. There are many entry points into, and paths through, the British Columbian (and North American) post-secondary system. With the appropriate background (required course work and competitive grade point averages), students may enter university directly from high school. Non-university institutions such as community colleges, university colleges, and institutes offer academic programs that are transferable to university after the completion of a

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certain number of credits. Terminal programs at non-university institutions such as community colleges lead to certificates or diplomas. Recently, some non-university institutions offer bachelor's degrees in some applied fields. As such, the post-secondary system in British Columbia provides a broad range of educational offerings available in various institutional environments and arrangements. Also, it is a flexible system in which individuals ostensibly can engage concurrently in post-secondary studies, work, and the demands of family life. In this paper, we use post-secondary participation and completion as a central organizer to trace the paths that individuals follow out of high school. We then examine occupational status, income, and marriage and family patterns, in relation to post-secondary participation and completion.

Through the theoretical lens of life course research, we employ 15 years of longitudinal data from the British Columbia, Canada *Paths on Life's Way* project to focus on certain life events of young adults. We examine the following: the nature of educational and career pathways of this cohort of 1988 high school graduates; the extent to which life paths are gendered, individualized, diversified, and timely, delayed, or prolonged; marriage and parenthood patterns in relation to educational and occupational participation and outcomes across time; and the extent to which social class still matters. We employ a transition probabilities analysis to follow the journeys of 733 individuals from high school through the post-secondary system and work by identifying a sequence of significant stages. We then analyze these transition rates in relation to the relevant factors that influenced respondents' lives and probably determined the paths on which they embarked and followed. In doing so, we demonstrate the extent to which the life courses of young women and men are experienced differently and if and how their 'choices' at key transition points are to large extent gendered and shaped by external structures. We demonstrate that what young people *are* at any given point in time is inextricably related to what they will *become*. Furthermore, we maintain that the nature and timing of combinations of life-course events in which young persons engage – while accounting for gender and social class – not only determine who they are, but when examined early in their adult lives can predict with reasonable reliability who they indeed become. Examining the nature, sequence, and timing of events is central to understanding the nature of 'adulthood' today.

Of late, considerable recent research emphasis has been placed on examining individuals' conceptions and subjective perceptions of the transition to adulthood (Peake and Harris 2002, Reay 2004, Arnett 2005, Wyn and Woodman 2006) As Wyn and Woodman (2006) contend, determining how young people articulate their priorities and subjectivities within their own political and material conditions is important. We agree; however, we maintain that it is equally important to scrutinize the structural patterns of educational participation and occupational status, and marriage and family formation patterns in light of one's gender and social class location. As Bauman points out:

sociologists can offer much help if they acquit themselves as well as they may and should in the job of recording and mapping the crucial parts of the web of interconnections and dependencies which are either kept hidden or stay invisible from the vantage point of individual experience. (2001, p. 13)

By examining the lives that individuals actually live, over the expanse of 15 years, we can examine the extent to which structural factors are important. By focusing on actual participation in various life activities, we can determine what paths individuals actually took, how they proceeded on these paths, and how these paths were related to both social structural factors and other dimensions of adult life. As Bauman asserts, “conditions,” whatever else they may be, are things that happened to one, came uninvited and would not leave if one wished them to go (2001, p. 6); by examining behavioral patterns rather than narratives, we are able to determine what actually has happened rather than one’s perceptions, wishes, desires, or rationalizations. As such, this research can be useful in informing policy, practice, and further research directions.

In this paper we employ a life-course perspective that Hunt (2005) describes as an examination of ‘experiences of human life from beginning to end’ (p. 1). Bynner argues that a life-course perspective in the tradition of Elder (1985) and Heinz (1991) be embraced in order to ‘recognize adequately that the huge diversity of individual experience is constrained by location in the social structure’ (Bynner 2005, p. 378). He points out that the notion of an extended ‘youth phase of the life-course’ (Bynner 2005, p. 368) has been under discussion in Europe since the 1980s. European, Australian, and Canadian researchers (for example, Andres 1998, Dwyer and Wyn 2001, Furlong and Cartmel 1997) have cast their research on young adults within the theoretical framework of changing and evolving social and institutional structures in relation to individuals as agents. Such a perspective allows us to address the impact of specific regional or country-specific institutional arrangements, together with social structures such as social class and gender, which determine the way in which transitions both can and do unfold, and to examine the extent to which the advantaged and disadvantaged gain or fall behind in terms of life chances.

In doing so, we can infer the types of strategies individuals employ to reach a given adult status. We draw on Bourdieu’s (1976) analogy of players in a card game to demonstrate how individuals, as agents, invest various forms of capital in relation to social structures. Although Bourdieu uses this example as an illustration of marriage strategies, it seems even more relevant when used to examine the multiple spheres of the life space in which young adults are located at a certain point in time. Bourdieu argues that social origin, transmitted as capital, does not take the form of mechanical determinism. Rather, family background provides individuals with social, cultural, and economic capital. This capital, however, must be actively invested. In his card game analogy, cards dealt to the players represent the various forms of capital. The outcome of the game depends on the nature of the hand dealt; however, its strength is defined by the rules of the game, and by the degree of skill with which the hand is played. Because capital can be invested and converted into one another to maximize one’s upward mobility, strategy plays an important role in profiting from the various types of resources (Bourdieu 1976, Lamont and Lareau 1988).

### **Purpose of the study**

In this empirical structural study, we aim to reveal post-secondary educational participation and completion, occupational, marriage, and parenthood patterns over

the 15 years following high school graduation. In this paper we will address the following main questions:

- What post-secondary trajectories do British Columbia young women and men follow?
- How diverse are these educational trajectories and which ones are the most probable?
- How do various educational trajectories relate to certain types of occupational status, and do these differ for women and men?
- How do family background and marriage and parenthood characteristics differ for different educational trajectories?

Elsewhere, we have demonstrated the strong relationships among high school grades and course selection (Adamuti-Trache and Andres 2005), and have determined how individuals accumulate and use academic capital to embark on and succeed in their educational and occupational careers. Since we have also demonstrated that high school academic capital is largely associated with parental social class (Andres *et al.* 2007, Adamuti-Trache and Andres 2007), we have limited the current analysis to document the effects of social class and gender on youth trajectories.

### **Research design**

This longitudinal study follows the educational and career paths, and family formation patterns of female and male high school graduates of the British Columbia *Class of '88* who answered four follow-up surveys (Andres 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d). A total of 733 respondents (60% women) answered all four waves of surveys. Since 1989, the sample has been affected by attrition with a slight bias toward women and those continuing post-secondary education, but overall it has remained remarkably representative of the original respondent group<sup>1</sup> (for a detailed description see Andres 2002a). The findings of this study represent the best-case scenario about education and work over the life course for British Columbian young women and men, which suggests that any observed inequities in relation to these trajectories in the general population of this cohort are most probably more pronounced.

### **Variables**

The surveys were designed to explore the educational and career destinations of students over 15 years after high school graduation and contain information about respondents' choices, educational and occupational accomplishments, and family. Because the post-secondary institutions and programs of study that respondents attended, the credentials obtained, and occupations are recorded year by year, we are able to document in detail these educational and career trajectories. For the purpose of this study, only the 1989 post-secondary choices and the highest credentials earned by 1993, 1998 and 2003 are employed. The variables are portrayed in detail in Appendix 1, and are briefly described in this section.

Post-secondary participation one year after high school graduation is an indicator of purposeful planning and availability of resources to continue to post-

secondary education. Respondents are classified into three groups that indicate whether individuals participated in post-secondary education, and, if so, whether they participated at non-university (i.e. community colleges, institutes, university colleges) or university institutions. These groups are as follows: non-participant (NP), non-university (NU) and university (UN). Educational attainment achieved by 1993, 1998 and 2003 refers to the highest credential obtained by respondents at five, 10 or 15 years since high school graduation. We distinguish five categories: non-participants (NP), non-completers (NC) (i.e. those who attended but did not obtain any credential), those who possess non-university credentials (NUC), bachelor's (Bach) and first professional and graduate degrees (PrGrd). Within this final category, professional degrees include credentials that either require longer periods of instruction or are following another bachelor's degree (e.g. bachelor of education, law, and medical degrees).

Occupational status is the current or most recent job held by respondents in 1993, 1998 and 2003. Four categories of occupational prestige have been derived by aggregating the Pineo–Porter–McRoberts socio-economic classification of occupations scale of 16 prestige categories (Pineo 1985). We distinguish the following: unskilled, semi-skilled, technical and skilled, and management and professional occupations. In addition, whether respondents are married and have children (yes/no) is included in the analysis.

The ensuing findings must be considered within the limitations of the analyses. Our analyses are based on data aggregated (or summarized) at five-year intervals. Even though this data-set contains information about month-by-month participation in education and work, among other things, current analytical methods preclude us from portraying, in the space of one paper, the full complexity of simultaneous participation in multiple life-sphere activities. Furthermore, because of sample size constraints, we have not conducted the analyses by geographic region or race/ethnicity.

## **Findings**

Table 1 presents the initial post-secondary participation in 1989 and post-secondary completion status in 2003. However, much of the story is lost as these beginning and ending points do not reflect the complexity of these trajectories over time.

Table 1 does demonstrate that there is a clear trend toward post-secondary attainment by young women and men. Although no more than 30% of women and 39% of men started university studies in 1989, 59% of both women and men obtained university degrees by 2003. The way respondents have participated in post-secondary education over time will become more clear throughout this analysis, in that we employ various descriptive statistics and transition probability techniques to compare the most probable educational trajectories in relation to occupational outcomes and family formation patterns. We determine whether trajectories are diverse, timely, delayed, or prolonged and how best they can be explained by a life-course perspective that brings together aspects of education, work, and family lives exhibited by young adults.

Table 1. Research sample distribution.

Gender	Post-school choices						Educational attainment in 2003											
	Non-participant		Non-university		University		Non-participant		Non-completer		Non-university credentials		Bachelor's degree		Professional and graduate degree		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Female	78	18	228	52	132	30	16	4	37	8	126	29	162	37	97	22	438	60
Male	64	22	117	40	114	39	16	5	30	10	75	25	112	38	62	21	295	40
Total	142	19	345	47	246	34	32	4	67	9	201	27	274	37	159	22	733	100

***Diverse educational trajectories: early, delayed, timely or prolonged***

To quantify the various educational trajectories, we employ a transition probabilities analysis proposed by Pineo and Goyder (1988) – who used this technique to follow the progress of Canadian age cohorts through the educational system. They defined a transition rate as the probability that people who have completed one level of education will enter the next level. The product of transition rates for a given path defines a trajectory probability that describes the likelihood of occurrence of that specific path<sup>2</sup> (Adamuti-Trache and Andres 2005).

For the purpose of this study, transition probabilities are constructed based on the number of respondents who do or do not enter the post-secondary system after high school graduation, as reflected by their 1989 post-high school status recorded in 1989 and their educational attainment over the next 15 years. These measures will be used as contextual characteristics of educational paths to indicate how typical some routes are and for whom. In this section we show the transition probabilities of all educational trajectories encountered by the sample and obtain trajectory probabilities that indicate the likelihood of each path.

Trajectories are initialized by respondents' choices by 1989, during the first year after high school graduation (i.e. non-participant, non-university or university) and are organized by the 1989 starting point (Tables 2–4). Each path leads to the highest educational attainment as of 1993, 1998, and 2003. In total, 55 paths are observed for the research sample. Transition probabilities are calculated based on the pool of female and male respondents reaching certain levels of post-secondary attainment at each five-year interval. For instance, transition rates in 1989 are based on the number of female or male respondents embarking on a specific post-secondary destination compared with the total number of female and male respondents. Transition rates in 1998 are based on the total number of respondents who reached a specific educational status in 1998 as compared with those numbers in 1993 of a lesser or equal status. Since there are no missing data for the research sample, multiplicative rules are exactly verified (i.e. an overall trajectory rate is the product of the transition rates at all stages), so the overall trajectory probability is simply the ratio of the number of respondents in a given educational attainment category by 2003 and the total number of female or male respondents. Separate analyses are performed for women and men, and results are shown comparatively.

Table 2 describes trajectories followed by those who did not participate in post-secondary education in 1989. Eighteen percent of women and 22% of men fall in this category, and they engaged in up to 22 different trajectories that led or did not lead to a post-secondary credential by 2003. Some transitions happened at high rates, for instance NP status seems to change the most by 1993, but if it is maintained over this first five-year period it remains quite unchanged (Path 1). That is, the transition rates into same NP status between 1993 and 1998 or between 1998 and 2003 are very high, showing that if change did not happen during the first five years the respondents were likely to remain non-participants.

Almost 4% of all women and 5% of all men in the sample had not enrolled in any formal post-secondary education by 2003 (Path 1). Some 3% of women and 2% of men attended post-secondary education by 1993 but without having completed any credential by 2003 (Path 7).

Table 2. Educational trajectories for non-participants (1989): transition and trajectory probabilities.

1989 vs all		1993 vs. 1989		1998 vs. 1993		2003 vs. 1998		Trajectory probability	Path number					
<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	%						
NP F	78	18	NP F	23	29	NP F	18	78	NP F	16	89	F	3.7	
NP M	64	22	NP M	25	39	NP M	17	68	NP M	16	94	M	5.4	1
									NUC F	2	11	F	0.5	
									NUCM	1	6	M	0.3	2
						NC F	3	13	NC F	1	33	F	0.2	
						NC M	2	8	NC M	1	50	M	0.3	3
									NUC F	2	67	F	0.5	
									NUC M	1	50	M	0.3	4
						NUC F	2	9	NUC F	2	100	F	0.5	
						NUC M	6	24	NUC M	5	83	M	1.7	5
									Bach F	0	0	F	0	
									Bach M	1	17	M	0.3	6
			NC F	31	40	NC F	12	39	NC F	10	83	F	2.3	
			NC M	24	38	NC M	11	46	NC M	9	82	M	3.1	7
									NUC F	1	8	F	0.2	
									NUC M	1	9	M	0.3	8
									Bach F	1	8	F	0.2	
									Bach M	0	0	M	0	9
									PrGrd F	0	0	F	0	
									PrGrd M	1	9	M	0.3	10
						NUC F	7	23	NUC F	6	86	F	1.4	
						NUC M	2	8	NUC M	2	100	M	0.7	11
									Bach F	1	14	F	0.2	
									Bach M	0	0	M	0	12
						Bach F	11	35	Bach F	6	55	F	1.4	
						Bach M	11	46	Bach M	8	73	M	2.7	13

Table 2 (Continued)

1989 vs all		1993 vs. 1989		1998 vs. 1993		2003 vs. 1998		Trajectory probability	Path number
<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	%	
						PrGrd F	5 45	F 1.1	
						PrGrd M	3 17	M 1.0	14
				PrGrd F	1 3	PrGrd F	1 100	F 0.2	
				PrGrd M	0 0	PrGrd M	0 NA	M 0	15
		NUC F	19 24	NUC F	17 89	NUC F	17 100	F 3.9	
		NUC M	13 20	NUC M	9 69	NUC M	9 100	M 3.1	16
				Bach F	1 11	Bach F	1 100	F 0.2	
				Bach M	3 23	Bach M	2 67	M 0.7	17
						PrGrd F	0 0	F 0	
						PrGrd M	1 33	M 0.3	18
				PrGrd F	1 11	PrGrd F	1 100	F 0.2	
				PrGrd M	1 8	PrGrd M	1 100	M 0.3	19
		Bach F	5 6	Bach F	3 60	Bach F	2 67	F 0.5	
		Bach M	2 3	Bach M	2 100	Bach M	2 100	M 0.7	20
						PrGrd F	1 33	F 0.2	
						PrGrd M	0 0	M 0	21
				PrGrd F	2 40	PrGrd F	2 100	F 0.5	
				PrGrd M	0 0	PrGrd M	0 NA	M 0	22

Note: F, female; M, male.

Table 3. Educational trajectories for non-university participants (1989): transition and trajectory probabilities.

1989 versus all		1993 versus 1989		1998 versus 1993		2003 versus 1998		Trajectory probability		Path number				
<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	%						
NU F	228	52	NC F	72	32	NC F	25	35	NC F	22	88	F	5.0	
NU M	117	40	NC M	48	41	NC M	18	44	NC M	13	72	M	4.4	23
									NUC F	3	12	F	0.7	
									NUC M	4	22	M	1.4	24
									Bach F	0	0	F	0	
									Bach M	1	6	M	0.3	25
						NUC F	14	19	NUC F	12	86	F	2.7	
						NUC M	8	17	NUC M	8	100	M	2.7	26
									Bach F	2	14	F	0.5	
									Bach M	0	0	M	0	27
						Bach F	25	35	Bach F	19	76	F	4.3	
						Bach M	19	40	Bach M	17	89	M	5.8	28
									PrGrd F	6	24	F	1.4	
									PrGrd M	2	11	M	0.7	29
						PrGrd F	8	11	PrGrd F	8	100	F	1.8	
						PrGrd M	3	6	PrGrd M	3	100	M	1.0	30
		NUC F	92	40	NUC F	73	79	NUC F	65	89	F	14.8		
		NUC M	47	40	NUC M	38	81	M	34	89	M	11.5	31	
									Bach F	7	10	F	1.6	
									Bach M	3	8	M	1.0	32
									PrGrd F	1	1	F	0.2	
									PrGrd M	1	3	M	0.3	33
						Bach F	17	18	Bach F	14	82	F	3.2	
						Bach M	6	13	Bach M	6	100	M	2.0	34
									PrGrd F	3	18	F	0.7	
									PrGrd M	0	0	M	0	35

Table 3 (Continued)

1989 versus all		1993 versus 1989		1998 versus 1993		2003 versus 1998		Trajectory probability	Path number				
<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	%					
				PrGrd F	2	3	PrGrd F	2	100	F	0.5		
				PrGrd M	3	6	PrGrd M	3	100	M	1.0	36	
		Bach F	62	27	Bach F	50	81	Bach F	43	86	F	9.8	
		Bach M	22	19	Bach M	13	59	Bach M	13	100	M	4.4	37
								PrGrd F	7	14	F	1.6	
								PrGrd M	0	0	M	0	38
				PrGrd F	12	19	PrGrd F	12	100	F	2.7		
				PrGrd M	9	41	PrGrd M	9	100	M	3.1	39	
		PrGrd F	2	1	PrGrd F	2	100	PrGrd F	2	100	F	0.5	
		PrGrd M	0	0	PrGrd M	0	NA	PrGrd M	0	NA	M	0	40

Note: F, female; M, male.

Table 4. Educational trajectories for university participants (1989): transition and trajectory probabilities.

1989 versus all		1993 versus 1989		1998 versus 1993		2003 versus 1998		Trajectory probability		Path number				
<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%							
UN F	132	30	NC F	35	27	NC F	6	17	NC F	4	67	F	0.9	
UN M	114	39	NC M	51	45	NC M	14	27	M	7	50	M	2.4	41
									NUC F	2	33	F	0.5	
									NUC M	3	21	M	1.0	42
									Bach F	0	0	F	0	
									Bach M	3	21	M	1.0	43
									PrGrd F	0	0	F	0	
									PrGrd M	1	7	M	0.3	44
						NUC F	8	23	NUC F	7	88	F	1.6	
						NUC M	4	8	NUC M	4	100	M	1.4	45
									Bach F	1	12	F	0.2	
									Bach M	0	0	M	0	46
						Bach F	16	46	Bach F	12	75	F	2.7	
						Bach M	25	49	Bach M	20	80	M	6.8	47
									PrGrd F	4	25	F	0.9	
									PrGrd M	5	20	M	1.7	48
						PrGrd F	5	14	PrGrd F	5	100	F	1.1	
						PrGrd M	8	16	PrGrd M	8	100	M	2.7	49
			NUC F	8	6	NUC F	7	88	NUC F	7	100	F	1.6	
			NUC M	3	3	NUC M	3	100	NUC M	3	100	M	1.0	50
						Bach F	1	12	Bach F	1	100	F	0.2	
						Bach M	0	0	Bach M	0	NA	M	0	51
			Bach F	86	65	Bach F	64	74	Bach F	52	81	F	11.9	
			Bach M	57	50	Bach M	42	74	Bach M	36	86	M	12.2	52
									PrGrd F	12	19	F	2.7	
									PrGrd M	6	14	M	2.0	53

Table 4 (Continued)

1989 versus all		1993 versus 1989		1998 versus 1993		2003 versus 1998			Trajectory probability		Path number		
<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	%					
				PrGrd F	22	26	PrGrd F	22	100	F	5.0		
				PrGrd M	15	26	PrGrd M	15	100	M	5.1	54	
		PrGrd F	3	2	PrGrd F	3	100	PrGrd F	3	100	F	0.7	
		PrGrd M	3	3	PrGrd M	3	100	PrGrd M	3	100	M	1.0	55

Note: F, female; M, male.

A variety of paths leading to post-secondary attainment have also been identified, which lends credence to the claim that educational trajectories are individualized. This group of respondents engaged in various sequences of upward attainment involving delayed entry into the post-secondary system, a prolonged journey through the system, or both. Only 5% of women and 6% of men who were non-participants directly out of high school eventually completed bachelor's degrees or greater within 15 years of high school completion.

Table 3 presents a picture of those who attended non-university institutions (e.g. community colleges and institutes) immediately after high school, and displays 18 different trajectories embraced by women, men, or both. The most common path for approximately 15% of women and 12% of men is that of the straight route of obtaining a non-university credential by 1993 (Path 31); this status does not then change over the next 10 years. Another 3–5% of women and 3–4% of men took a prolonged route through the system and obtained non-university credentials by 1998 or 2003 (Paths 23 and 26).

A second track was to commence non-university studies and transfer to university, mainly by using the university transfer option available in British Columbia. Some obtained university degrees by 1993 (Paths 37–40), particularly women (i.e. 15% versus 8% of men). Sometimes the non-university to university path was delayed, as observed for a total of about 8% of women and men who did not complete university degrees by 1993, but did so by 1998 (Paths 28–30). Another 6% of women and 4% of men obtained first a non-university credential, followed by university degree(s) by 1998 or 2003 (Paths 32–36). However, 5% of women and 4% of men who began studying at the non-university level remained non-completers in subsequent years. That is, they failed to earn any credential by 2003 (Path 23).

Table 4 portrays the 15 educational trajectories of those who began university studies immediately after high school graduation. The most common route followed by 20% of the entire sample of women and men was to earn a bachelor's degree by 1993, which may or may not be followed by earning other credentials over the next 10 years (Paths 52–55). Men had a tendency to delay degree attainment; approximately 11% of men who remained non-completers in 1993 obtained degrees by 1998 (Paths 47–49). A very small proportion of those commencing studies in university directly out of high school remained non-completers (Path 41) or had earned non-university credentials only by 2003 (Paths 45 and 50).

In Table 5, by employing a four-category typology, we are able to collapse the 55 paths described above into 21 categories. The paths associated with each category are documented in Appendix 2. This typology was created based on the following groupings: First, we specified the original high school destination by 1989 as non-participants (NP), non-completers (NC), non-university (NU), or university (UN). Second, post-secondary entry was categorized as *early* if respondents commenced post-secondary studies within one year of high school graduation (i.e. by 1989) or *delayed* if they commenced studies after 1989. Third, if the time to completion of a first credential was completed within five years from high school graduation, it was categorized as *timely*; *prolonged* study took more than five years from high school graduation. Finally, the highest credential earned by 2003 was specified as non-participant (NP), non-completer (NC), non-university credentials (NUC), bachelor's degree (Bach), or professional or graduate degree (PrGrd) (see Appendix 2).

Table 5. Probabilities of 2003 destinations by post-high school origin in 1988 and gender.

	Number of paths	Females (%)	Males (%)
Non-participant	1	4	5
Non-completer			
NP_Delayed_Prolonged_NC	2	3	3
NU_Early_Prolonged_NC	1	5	4
UN_Early_Prolonged_NC	1	1	2
Non-university completer			
NP_Delayed_Timely_NUC	1	4	3
NP_Delayed_Prolonged_NUC	5	3	3
NU_Early_Timely_NUC	1	15	12
NU_Early_Prolonged_NUC	2	3	4
UN_Early_Prolonged/Terminal_NUC	3	4	3
Bachelor's degree			
NP_Delayed_Timely_Bach	2	1	1
NP_Delayed_Prolonged_Bach	4	2	3
NU_Early_Timely_Bach	2	13	6
NU_Early_Prolonged_Bach	4	7	7
UN_Early_Timely_Bach	1	12	12
UN_Early_Prolonged_Bach	4	3	8
Professional or graduate degree			
NP_Delayed_Timely_PrGrd	4	1	1
NP_Delayed_Prolonged_PrGrd	3	1	1
NU_Early_Timely_PrGrd	5	6	4
NU_Early_Prolonged_PrGrd	3	3	2
UN_Early_Timely_PrGrd	3	8	8
N_Early_Prolonged_PrGrd	3	2	5

For example, NP\_Delayed\_Prolonged\_NC means that 3% of women and men were non-participants by 1989, their journeys through the post-secondary system were both delayed (later than 1989) and prolonged (more than five years to completion of studies), and in the end they were post-secondary non-completers.

As Table 5 reveals, 54% of women and 42% of men commenced their post-secondary studies within one year of high school graduation and earned their first credential within five years (i.e. early and timely paths). However, almost one-half of the women and more than one-half of the men delayed entry into the system, prolonged their post-secondary studies, or both. A small proportion of individuals delayed entry into either non-university institutions or universities, but completed non-university credentials within five years.

The complexity and length of these trajectories suggests that the traditional model of two to five years required to obtain non-university credentials or bachelor's degrees is no longer valid for most of the respondents. However, by 1998, 85% of women and 79% of men had earned post-secondary credentials; by 2003 this proportion increased to 88% and 87%, respectively.

The number of paths taken is also related to the extent to which entry was early and paths through the system were timely. Early and timely non-university and

bachelor's degree completion involved only one and two paths, respectively. Delayed and prolonged routes were most probably, but not always, associated with more than two paths to credential attainment.

In Table 6, we employ the same typology to examine paths through the post-secondary system by gender and parental educational level.

According to Table 6, both women and men from homes where parents had not attended university were more likely than those with university-educated parents to be persistent non-participants, to have commenced non-university studies early and completed non-university credentials in a timely fashion, and in most instances considerably less likely to have taken any route through to professional or graduate studies. The most common path for respondents with university-educated parents was early entry into university and timely completion of a bachelor's degree, and they were more than twice as likely than those from less educated families to do so (i.e. 20% of women and 17% of men as compared with 8% of women and 9% of men). Respondents from less and more educated homes were approximately equally likely to commence studies early at non-university institutions and complete bachelor's degrees in a timely fashion (i.e. 12% of women and 6% of men compared with 15% of women and 8% of men). Differences by parental background are evident in professional or graduate degree completion rates and patterns, with higher proportions of those from more educated families taking an early and timely route to bachelor degree completion then continuing on to complete advanced degrees (i.e. 11% of women and 12% of men compared with 8% of women and 6% of men).

A few gender differences are noteworthy. Women were twice as likely as men (from all parental educational backgrounds for both groups) to commence studies early at non-university institutions and complete bachelor's degrees within five years. This finding indicates that women are making efficient use of the transfer system in British Columbia. Women from more educated family homes were more likely than men from similar family backgrounds to commence studies at non-university institutions and take a prolonged time to degree completion (i.e. 11% of women versus 6% of men). Conversely, men are much more likely than women to commence university studies early but prolong the time to degree completion (5% of women versus 13% of men).

These different post-secondary journeys may not be important if final goals are achieved in a reasonable amount of time and respondents are capable to translate them into favorable labor market outcomes. In the next section, we examine occupational outcomes and family formation patterns in relation to the 2003 post-secondary completion status of respondents.

### ***Education and work over time***

Rather than following individual trajectories, in this section we present the overall change in participation and educational attainment, as well as occupational status, family socio-economic background, and marriage and family patterns for women and men. We aim to identify how these three dimensions of respondents' lives unfold over time and whether gendered patterns are observed.

In Figures 1 and 2 we compare the change of educational status over time by gender. In 1989, women were less likely than men to be non-participants (18% as compared with 21%) but more likely to be enrolled in non-university institutions

Table 6. Probabilities of 2003 destinations by post-high school origin in 1988, sex, and parental educational level.

	Number of paths	Neither parent with university degree		One or more parents with university degree	
		Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)
Non-participant	1	5	6	1	1
Non-completer					
NP_Delayed_Prolonged_NC	2	3	5	1	1
NU_Early_Prolonged_NC	1	6	6	4	1
UN_Early_Prolonged_NC	1	1	2	1	4
Non-university completer					
NP_Delayed_Timely_NUC	1	5	4	2	1
NP_Delayed_Prolonged_NUC	5	4	4	0	2
NU_Early_Timely_NUC	1	18	15	7	5
NU_Early_Prolonged_NUC	2	5	4	0	4
UN_Early_Prolonged/Terminal_NUC	3	4	3	5	4
Bachelor's degree					
NP_Delayed_Timely_Bach	2	1	2	1	1
NP_Delayed_Prolonged_Bach	4	1	3	2	2
NU_Early_Timely_Bach	2	12	6	15	8
NU_Early_Prolonged_Bach	4	5	8	11	6
UN_Early_Timely_Bach	1	8	9	20	17
UN_Early_Prolonged_Bach	4	3	5	5	13
professional or graduate degree					
NP_Delayed_Timely_PrGrd	4	1	0	2	2
NP_Delayed_Prolonged_PrGrd	3	1	1	3	2
NU_Early_Timely_PrGrd	5	3	3	8	6
NU_Early_Prolonged_PrGrd	3	4	3	2	1
UN_Early_Timely_PrGrd	3	8	6	11	12
UN_Early_Prolonged_PrGrd	3	2	5	2	4

(52% as compared with 41%). The proportion of female non-participants decreased to 5% in 1993 and remained quite stable. Similarly, non-participation by men declined to 8% in 1993. Fifteen years after high school graduation, approximately 4% of women and 5% of men had never participated in post-secondary education.

By 1993, 43% of men, compared with 32% of women, did not complete any program and this proportion remained slightly high over time. In 2003, a total of 88% of women obtained various types of credentials, compared with 85% of men. Over 15 years, it is noteworthy that both women and men had shifted from non-university studies or non-completion to university completion. Although 52% of women enrolled in institutions other than university in 1988, only 29% had only a non-university credential by 2003. Fewer (41%) men commenced their studies at non-university institutions and 25% of them obtained their highest credential from these types of institution by 2003.

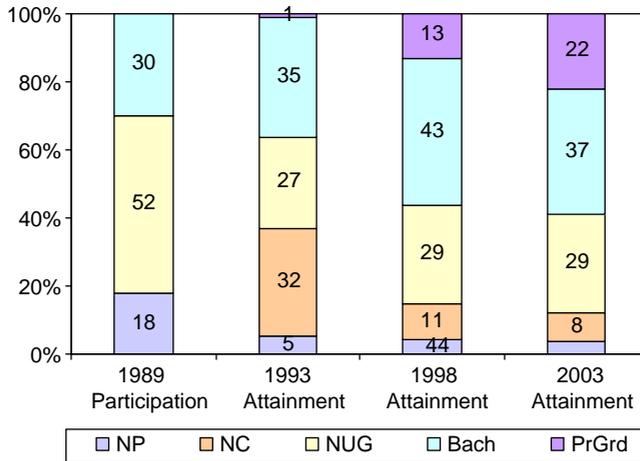


Figure 1. Post-secondary participation and attainment: female.

University participation and attainment is high. Thirty percent of women began their studies at universities; however, 59% earned undergraduate and graduate degrees. Only a 2% increase is evident between 1998 and 2003. Although more men (38%) commenced their studies at universities, fewer (28% compared with 36% of women) completed degrees within the first five years. Rather, men reached parity with women in terms of university attainment by 1998 and this was maintained through 2003. That is, 28% of men and 36% of women obtained degrees by 1993, 55% of men and 57% of women possessed degrees in 1998, and 59% of both men and women had earned degrees by 2003.

Because educational attainment by women and men is very similar, we could expect this to be reflected in an improvement of labor market outcomes for women. In Figures 3 and 4 we compare distributions across the four categories of occupational prestige over time. In 1993, educational attainment by women was clearly higher, which is not reflected in occupational status. Although 43% of women and 52% of men occupied positions in the technical/skilled or management and professional categories, more men (14%) than women (9%) were in high-status occupations. These differences were amplified in 1998 when only 24% of women compared with 32% of men occupied high-status jobs (i.e. management and professional), and in 2003 when these proportions were 30% and 39%, respectively. By 2003, more men (17%) than women (12%) had not participated or did not complete post-secondary education. However, only 16% of men, compared with 20% of women, were working in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs.

Although low-status jobs are to a large extent associated with those respondents with less education, a small proportion of respondents with no post-secondary education were in this category, which suggests that the relationship between work and education is much more complex than we are able to portray in this analysis. In Table 7 a detailed distribution across occupational categories by gender and educational attainment is portrayed for 1993, 1998 and 2003.

A few non-participants or post-secondary non-completers can be found in high-prestige occupations at various points in time (e.g. 38% of male non-participants or

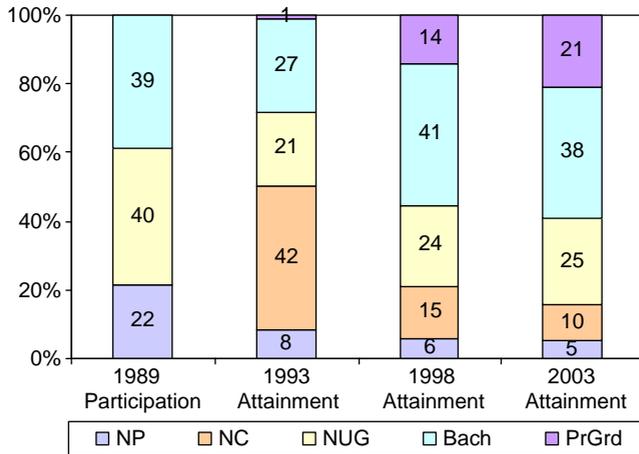


Figure 2. Post-secondary participation and attainment: male.

34% of female non-completers by 2003). However, the vast majority of the less educated remain in low-prestige occupations. In 2003, the highest proportion (69%) of respondents in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs was women who never pursued post-secondary studies after high school graduation. Holders of non-university credentials were also a relatively disadvantaged occupational prestige group. By 2003, 36% of women and 26% of men in this group were in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. For those who had earned university degrees, the relationship between more education and better jobs is clear; there is a continual decrease of those in unskilled or semi-skilled status jobs and an increase in higher status occupations over time. By 2003, about 11–14% of bachelor’s degree graduates and 0–3% of professionals and graduates were in low-prestige occupations. However, systematically, women who completed bachelor’s degrees were less likely than men to occupy the most highly prestigious jobs (i.e. in 1993, 10% of women compared with 25% of men; and in 1998 and 2003, 29% of women compared with 40–42% of men). Of the women who

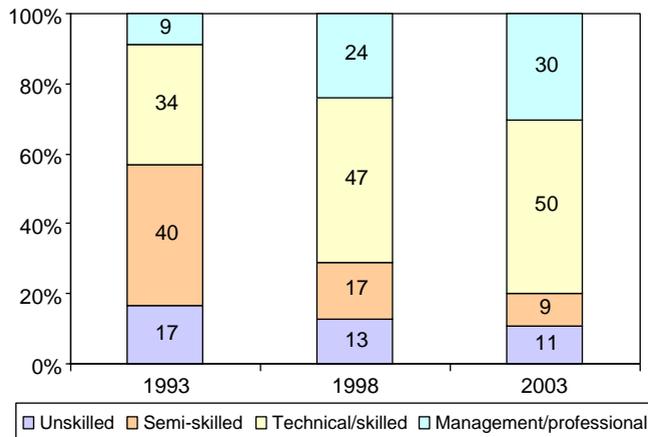


Figure 3. Job status: female.

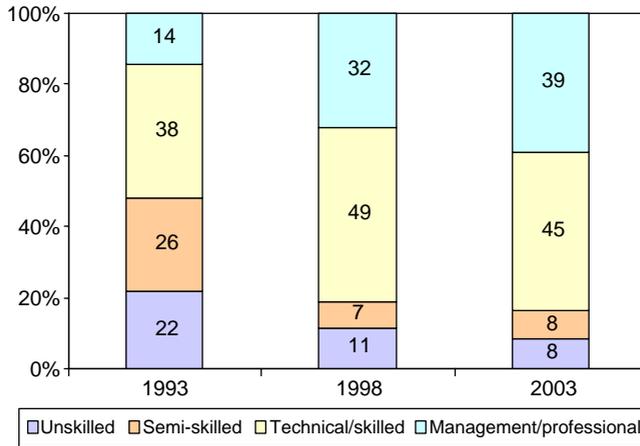


Figure 4. Job status: male.

completed professional and graduate degrees by 2003, 53% compared with 69% of men occupied the highest prestige job category. A limitation of this study is that we have not taken into account the duration of post-secondary education to explore to what extent following straight trajectories and finishing study earlier would increase one's chances to enter into higher status occupations.

Since occupational prestige is not the sole measure of socio-economic status, we explore the salary levels (in Canadian dollars) by educational attainment, job status and gender at each time period (Table 8). Indeed, it is possible that a few non-participants and non-completers, especially when occupying higher prestige jobs, would obtain good hourly salaries (e.g. by 2003, male non-participant or non-completers in skilled or management/professional jobs).

However, by 1993 this pattern is not strong as, in general, these groups obtained lower salaries than the holders of non-university credentials and university degrees. By 2003, a clear upward trend in salaries in relation to educational attainment is evident for both women and men. However, with few exceptions (e.g. non-university female graduates in management jobs, or women with bachelor's degrees in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs), men earned higher salaries than women.

### *Marriage and family patterns*

To understand the multiple life spheres of these young adults more completely, we introduced marriage and family patterns into the analysis. Table 9 portrays the proportions of women and men who were married and had children in relation to their educational attainment in 1993, 1998 and 2003 (the first two rows in each educational attainment category). At least for women, Table 9 shows a clear relationship among early marriage, having children, and having earned no or non-university credentials. As this relationship is more chaotic for men, marriage and family may not be such a barrier to post-secondary participation. Interestingly, 21% of women and 15% of men who completed bachelor's degrees by 1993 were married early. However, compared with those who attained no or less education, those completing bachelor's degrees were considerably less likely to have children. This

Table 7. Educational attainment and occupational status history (1993–2003).

Educational attainment	Occupational sector	1993		1998		2003	
		Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)
Non-participants (NP)	Unskilled	12	33	6	13	25	6
	Semi-skilled	59	38	56	6	44	13
	Technical/skilled	18	29	28	75	25	44
	Management/professional	12	–	11	6	6	38
Non-completers (NC)	Unskilled	16	24	25	14	17	20
	Semi-skilled	48	33	35	14	11	13
	Technical/skilled	27	32	35	50	37	43
	Management/professional	10	11	5	21	34	23
Non-university credentials (NUC)	Unskilled	19	18	17	19	20	11
	Semi-skilled	34	24	19	13	16	15
	Technical/skilled	41	44	54	48	47	58
	Management/professional	6	13	10	21	17	16
Bachelor's degree (Bach)	Unskilled	18	16	11	9	8	8
	Semi-skilled	35	14	11	4	3	6
	Technical/skilled	37	44	49	47	60	44
	Management/professional	10	25	29	40	29	42
Professional and graduate degree (PrGrd)	Unskilled	–	67	4	3	–	–
	Semi-skilled	60	33	2	–	3	–
	Technical/skilled	40	–	40	47	44	31
	Management/professional	–	–	54	50	53	69

Table 8. Hourly salary history (Canadian \$) by educational attainment, occupational status and gender (1993–2003).

Educational attainment	Occupational sector	1993		1998		2003	
		Female (\$)	Male (\$)	Female (\$)	Male (\$)	Female (\$)	Male (\$)
Non-participants (NP)	Unskilled	12*	10	20*	7*	18*	10*
	Semi-skilled	12	10	13	18*	13	18*
	Technical/skilled	10*	18*	13	18	43*	23
	Management/professional	21*	–	12*	21*	12*	24
Non-completers (NC)	Unskilled	8	12	13	13	14	17
	Semi-skilled	9	11	13	16*	17*	17*
	Technical/skilled	11	13	17	18	21	26
	Management/professional	12	13	13*	24	19	33
Non-university credentials (NUC)	Unskilled	10	12	14	14	20	21
	Semi-skilled	10	8	15	14	20	21
	Technical/skilled	16	15	19	18	24	28
	Management/professional	11	15*	16	18	26	23
Bachelor's degree (Bach)	Unskilled	10	11	13	16	31	20
	Semi-skilled	10	15	15	10	27	22
	Technical/skilled	15	16	19	24	26	32
	Management/professional	15	16	19	21	30	34
Professional and graduate degree (PrGrd)	Unskilled	–	6*	12*	15*	–	–
	Semi-skilled	9*	–	22*	–	14*	–
	Technical/skilled	19*	4*	24	18	31	33
	Management/professional	–	–	19	18	35	41

Note: \*Small  $n$  (less than five).

Table 9. Educational attainment and family characteristics over time.

Educational attainment group	Family characteristic	1993		1998		2003	
		Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)
Non-participants (NP)	Married	77	25	89	63	100	63
	Children	26	12	56	24	94	50
	Parents with university education	6	14	6	8	7	8
Non-completers (NC)	Married	34	19	69	60	78	83
	Children	7	2	39	24	65	60
	Parents with university education	32	32	21	22	20	20
Non-university credentials (NUC)	Married	42	21	73	39	81	52
	Children	9	2	39	17	68	45
	Parents with university education	20	25	18	21	16	22
Bachelor's degree (Bach)	Married	21	15	59	42	76	79
	Children	1*	0	14	7	51	49
	Parents with university education	47	48	48	43	46	42
Professional and graduate degree (PrGrd)	Married	0*	33*	55	57	70	73
	Children	0*	0*	16	7	39	40
	Parents with university education	0*	33*	33	46	42	44

Note: \*Small *n* (less than five).

suggests that either having children constitutes a barrier to advanced study or those with the highest levels of education choose to remain childless. For all attainment groups and at all times (except the 2003 non-completers), the proportion of married women and women with children was larger than the corresponding proportion of men. The least gender differences in marital status and family obligations are observed for those who had earned university degrees or greater by 2003.

In the third row of Table 9 for each level of educational attainment, the proportion of respondents with at least one parent having earned a university credential is portrayed. This measure applies to those who, at each time period, were in a specific educational attainment category. Indeed, a very small proportion (7–8%) of the recalcitrant non-participant group had at least one parent with a university degree. This proportion is higher for those who attended post-secondary institutions without completing degrees and for those who obtained non-university credentials (about 20%). It escalates to 42–46% for those who completed bachelor's degrees or higher by 2003.

## **Discussion**

As our analyses so clearly point out, there are numerous routes through the first 15 years of young adulthood that lead to various educational and occupational outcomes and influence the timing and sequencing of marriage and family formation. We begin by discussing individuals' trajectories through the post-secondary system, then we consider these trajectories in relation to the other dimensions analyzed in this paper.

This study provides evidence that a diverse, complex, and ostensibly seamless system offers many opportunities for post-secondary completion – either as an uninterrupted journey or one that is circuitous or prolonged. Also, our findings reveal that most analyses based on short time frames (e.g. analyses employing Statistics Canada Youth in Transition Survey data with time-frames of two to five years) are simply too brief and, at best, can tell only part of the story. A sample of 733 individuals over a 15-year horizon exhibited over 50 different trajectories (primarily) through the post-secondary system, which clearly demonstrates that the commonly held belief that most young people complete their non-university or university studies within a traditional model of two to five years is not valid for almost 50% of this sample. Only by examining post-secondary participation and completion over a longer time-frame are we able to determine that the vast majority of these young adults from the 1970ish age cohort did eventually earn some form of post-secondary credential.

The most direct route through the post-secondary system was taken by the 20% of women and men who completed bachelor's degrees by 1993, and those who came from more educated homes were more than twice as those from less educated family backgrounds were likely to embark on this path. Those in this category were also the most likely to delay marriage and childbearing; however, by 2003 (15 years later) they were as likely as other groups to participate in these adult life-sphere activities. Those holding university credentials were also the most likely to benefit the most in terms of high-prestige careers and related high-income levels.

At the opposite end of the continuum were a small minority of non-participants – that is, those who over the 15 years following high school graduation, who had never

participated in any form of post-secondary studies. Almost all respondents in this category came from homes where neither parent had earned university credentials. However, being a non-participant out of high school did not necessarily mean that routes to post-secondary studies were truncated. Those who engaged in post-secondary studies within five years out of high school had a good chance of earning post-secondary credentials. Of those who did not, they were likely to remain non-participants and were most likely to fare poorly relative to other groups in terms of occupational prestige and income. Also, female non-participants were the most likely to be married and have children early, which may have prevented them from enrolling in post-secondary studies.

Non-completers comprised a small but persistent group in every post-secondary completion category. This group warrants further study. In terms of occupational prestige and income, non-completers look more like non-participants or non-university graduates than those with university degrees. That is, they are more likely than university graduates to hold unskilled or semi-skilled jobs and, except for non-completer men in management positions, their salaries are lower than more highly educated groups.

Those commencing at non-university institutions, and in particular women, had a good probability of completing university studies. Almost 30% of women in this post-high school category (compared with about 20% of men) did so within five years of high school graduation. University completion figures by those who began at community colleges or other non-university institutions suggest that, when compared with British and European systems of higher education where 'social exclusion' disallows certain educational pathways (Bynner 2005), an articulated system such as that existing in British Columbia appears very successful at promoting access and completion of credentials beyond those available from the institutions of origin.<sup>3</sup> In particular, women from non-university educated families benefited from having this option available to them. Also, high proportions of women and men who commenced their studies at this type of institution completed diplomas or certificates. However, when compared with those with a minimum of a university degree, of those with non-university credentials relatively few women were in skilled technical and management positions.

In addition, we were able to demonstrate that the time of entering the post-secondary system and the speed of the journey through to credential completion were both gendered and classed. Elsewhere (Andres and Adamuti-Trache in press), we have demonstrated that those students requiring student financial assistance who complete university degrees within five years of high school graduation incur far less overall debt than those who fall into the 'delayed bachelor's' category – that is, those who complete university degrees 10–15 years following high school graduation. In other words, 'order' or 'disorder' influences outcomes in other life spheres at later points in time (Rindfuss *et al.* 1987). Moreover, a 'disordered' life course does have strong consequences in terms of opportunity structures and life chances (Furlong and Cartmel 1997). These findings highlight the need for policy-makers to examine student financial assistance schemes and the implications of escalating tuition fees in relation to timely completion of post-secondary studies.

Our findings demonstrate that although numerous paths through the post-secondary system were followed, they were shaped by the structure of the system and its related credentialing arrangements. Ultimately respondents were either non-

participants, non-completers, non-university completers, or recipients of undergraduate, professional or graduate degrees. These credentials did translate into occupations of varying levels of prestige. Moreover, parental social class as measured by at least one parent with a university degree was clearly associated with both educational attainment and occupational prestige and with the timing of marriage and parenthood. These relationships were remarkably steady over the 15 years following high school graduation. Unlike Bynner's (2005, p. 372) claim that in Britain, those 'who have most to start with will extend their transition the longest', our findings reveal that there is a strong association between having more highly educated parents and timely university degree completion. This suggests that perhaps the capital to attend university – in the forms of cultural, social, and economic – was in place, which, in turn, allowed respondents to participate fully in their post-secondary studies. These findings are not unlike others that report a persistent relationship among social class, gender, and life chances. However, this study demonstrates in great detail, over one and a half decades, the interplay among these variables. Our findings suggest that if we follow Wyn's (2005, p. 16) advice and study 'a story of change and reproduction within a context of change', we need to conclude that, regardless of the changes to the system, those from advantaged family backgrounds fare best in every way that we have considered in this paper.

If having children may be seen as posing a barrier to post-secondary participation and completion, reproduction theory may also help to illuminate these relationships. Theoretically, cultural capital in the form of parental education shapes individual dispositions toward education. Parents motivate, serve as role models, guide their children throughout life course, and influence their aspirations and expectations for higher achievement (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979, Bourdieu 2000). That a very small proportion (less than 10%) of those who remained post-secondary non-participants over the full 15 years of this study, compared with close to one-half of those with bachelor's degrees or higher had university educated parents, may be interpreted in light of Bourdieu's concept of strategy in that educated parents not only influence their children to complete higher education but also guide them by teaching them how to play the 'cards at hand' to delay marriage and parenthood in order to ensure successful completion of their studies. The transmission of cultural and social capital is not only about values, goals, and dispositions but also about strategies to reach these goals. The result is 'planful competence' that 'is uniquely concerned with the capacity to select social settings that best match an individual's goals, values, and strengths' (Clausen 1991, p. 676).

Our findings demonstrate that there is no one uniform pattern followed by individuals over a 15-year time span following high school graduation. Some routes such as those who embarked and remained on a non-participant trajectory led directly into the traditionally adult roles of marital partner and parent. Our findings coincide with those of Bynner (2005) who, like us, found that for the disadvantaged 'traditional accelerated routes to adult life were still as common as ever' (p. 377). Also, a large proportion of respondents from all post-high school categories completed their non-university and university education within five years and did not return to further studies. In other words, by the age of around 24 they were employed in the labor market in one way or another.

Our findings underscore the danger of downplaying structural factors and buying into an ideology of individualism. We demonstrate clearly that advantage, in terms of

occupational status and income, are both classed and gendered. We maintain that the insights gained by examining how structures provide certain opportunities that lead to 'choices' and the ensuing lives that various groups of young people lead as a result have strong potential in informing policies and practices to enhance individuals' life chances. Focusing on individuals' conceptions and subjectivities while ignoring patterns of actions may reveal only how these individuals 'become, in a sense, accomplices in their own mystification' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 142).

Today's young adults are engaging in a post-secondary system designed to accommodate the baby-boomer generation. Hence, the structure of the system and its related programs, to a large extent, determine certain pathways and dictate certain actions. As we have already pointed out, the highest transition probabilities for both women and men are for the following groups: those who earned bachelor's degrees or non-university credentials within five years, those who began at non-university institutions and graduated from universities within the same time-frame, and those who earned bachelor's degrees within five years, then completed professional or graduate degrees within 10 years. By examining actions over a much longer period of time, we are able to determine the life projects in which today's adults engage. Also, we reinforce the findings of others that adulthood has changed in fundamental ways from previous generations. The role of post-secondary participation for all but a small minority of our respondents now plays a central role in defining the experiences individuals have for many years following high school. The nature, type, and duration of post-secondary study shapes timing and sequencing of other adult life events. Perhaps the best way to understand this stage in the life course is to attempt to analyze the 'adult life project' within a certain epoch, in relation to social structures, from multiple perspectives, and across a broad horizon of time. However, given the relationship between post-secondary attainment, work, and other adult life activities, the ongoing challenge for educators and policy-makers to empower those without the requisite cultural, social, and economic capital to have equitable opportunities to participate in post-secondary studies remains.

## Notes

1. A comparison of the 1989, 1993 and 1998 follow-ups reveals that the sample has remained remarkably stable in terms of gender composition, age, and initial post-secondary participation status. Over time, however, the proportion of those who had completed academic courses in high school and were eligible for university entrance increased slightly. A table of response rates in relation to a question about post-secondary status in 1989 can be found in Andres (2002). This table demonstrates that university participants in 1989 were more likely to stay in the study over time, and non-participants were not. However, the degree of sample bias suggests that the findings in this paper are generalizable to similar populations.
2. The following example illustrates the transition rates and trajectory rate associated with the path NP-NP-NP-NP. There are 438 female respondents in the research sample. Eighteen percent of women ( $n=78$ ) entered the path NP in 1989. Out of these 78 women, 29% continue to be NP in 1993 – namely 23. The next transition rate is calculated as the ratio between 18 and 23 that gives a 78% transition rate into the NP state by 1998. Finally, 16 out of 18 women are still NP in 2003, which produces an 89% transition rate between 1998 and 2003. In the end, the trajectory rate is either the ratio between 16 and 438 or the product

- ( $0.18 \times 0.29 \times 0.78 \times 0.89$ ) of all transition rates along the trajectory – that is, 0.037. The multiplicative rule does not apply if there are missing cases.
- Since 1988, some community colleges in British Columbia became university colleges. University colleges offer both non-university credentials (e.g. diplomas and certificates) and bachelor's and master's degrees.

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## Appendix 1: Study variables

### *Demographics*

- **Gender:** female/male
- **Family background:** two-category variable that describes whether at least one parent had university education: 0 = no; 1 = yes.

### *One year after high school graduation*

- **Post-school enrolment:** three-category variable based on attended institutions as indicated by respondents. 1 = non-participant (NP); 2 = non-university attendance (NU); 3 = university attendance (UN).

*Educational attainment by 1993, 1998 and 2003*

- **Highest credential by the end of each period:** five-category variable based on post-secondary attendance anytime during the specified period, and credential obtained. For 1998 and 2003, the highest credential is recorded across the entire period since 1988: 1 = non-participant (NP); 2 = non-completer (NC); 3 = non-university credentials (NUC); 4 = bachelor degree (Bach); 5 = professional and graduate degree (PrGrd). In addition, a four-category typology was created based on the following: original high school destinations by 1989 – non-participant (NP), non-completer (NC), non-university (NU), or university (UN); post-secondary entry by 1989 – early = entered by 1989, delayed = entered after 1989; time to completion of first credential – timely = within five years from high school graduation; prolonged = more than five years from high school graduation; highest credential earned by 2003 – non-participant (NP); non-completer (NC); non-university credentials (NUC); bachelor's degree (Bach); professional or graduate degree (PrGrd).

*Work-related factors in 1993, 1998 and 2003*

- **Occupational status by the end of each period:** Ordinal variables that correspond to the Pineo–Porter–McRoberts socio-economic classification of occupations scale with 16 prestige categories, ordered from the lowest to the highest status. They are aggregated into four-category variables that describe skill level and occupational prestige:
  - 1 = Unskilled (i.e. farm laborers, unskilled manual, unskilled clerical sales and services).
  - 2 = Semi-skilled (i.e. semi-skilled manual, semi-skilled clerical sales and services, farmers)
  - 3 = technical/skilled (i.e. skilled crafts and trades, skilled clerical sales and services, foremen and forewomen, supervisors, technicians, semi-professional)
  - 4 = management/professional (i.e. middle management, high management, employed professional, self-employed professional).

*Family characteristics*

- **Marital status by 1993, 1998 and 2003:** two-category variables: 0 = not-married (i.e. single, divorced, separated, widow); 1 = married (i.e. married, marriage-like relationship).
- **Dependent children by 1993, 1998 and 2003:** two-category variables that correspond to 0 = no children; 1 = children.

**Appendix 2: Categories formulated from Tables 2–4 and related paths***Path numbers**Non-participants*

1

*Non-completers*

- NP\_Delayed\_Prolonged\_NC 3, 7
- NU\_Early\_Prolonged\_NC 23
- UN\_Early\_Prolonged\_NC 41

*Non-university completers*

- NP\_Delayed\_Timely\_NUC 16
- NP\_Delayed\_Prolonged\_NUC 2, 4, 5, 8, 11
- NU\_Early\_Timely\_NUC 31
- NU\_Early\_Prolonged\_NUC 24, 26
- UN\_Early\_Prolonged/Terminal\_NUC 42, 45, 50

*Bachelor's degrees*

- NP\_Delayed\_Timely\_Bach 17, 20
- NP\_Delayed\_Prolonged\_Bach 6, 9, 12, 13
- NU\_Early\_Timely\_Bach 34, 37
- NU\_Early\_Prolonged\_Bach 25, 27, 28, 32
- UN\_Early\_Timely\_Bach 52
- UN\_Early\_Prolonged\_Bach 43, 46, 47, 51

*Professional or graduate degrees*

- NP\_Delayed\_Timely\_PrGrd 18, 19, 21, 22
- NP\_Delayed\_Prolonged\_PrGrd 10, 14, 15
- NU\_Early\_Timely\_PrGrd 35, 36, 38, 39, 40
- NU\_Early\_Prolonged\_PrGrd 29, 30, 33
- UN\_Early\_Timely\_PrGrd 53, 54, 55
- UN\_Early\_Prolonged\_PrGrd 44, 48, 49