

Research Article

When Do People Become Adults? The Uruguayan Case

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This paper explores the key experiences that Uruguayans consider relevant for becoming an adult in Uruguay. In particular, we assess the linkages between adulthood and income; labor market participation and marital status, among other transitions that have been found to be associated with the attainment of adulthood. With the aim of identifying attitudinal patterns, we use the 2008 International Social Survey Program in Uruguay and estimate ordered probit models to examine the importance individuals assign to a series of hypothetical transitions. We discover that gender, age, and educational level are viewed as critical determinants in the passage to adulthood. Moreover, we find that Uruguay may have a different constellation of beliefs pertaining to adult transitions than has been found in similar studies conducted in the United States.

1. Introduction

Adulthood is a multidimensional construct involving a series of demographic transitions such as completion of education, labor market participation, home leaving, marriage, and parenthood [1]. Clearly, these dimensions are deeply intertwined but at the same time, they involve discrete transitions that may be staged over a period of a decade or more. While some people may feel completely adult others may not, even in their 30s because in some spheres they do and in some spheres they do not. Moreover, as Berlin et al. [2] argue, the age of 18 or 21 has become insignificant as a signal of adult status.

Shanahan et al. [3] and Reitzle [4] show that this is particularly true in the case of young people who tend to indicate feeling like adults when they are at work, with romantic partners or spouses, or with children, but are less likely to feel like adults when they are with their parents or friends.

Hence, our research is not based on a direct question such as “are you an adult?” or “do you think that you are an adult?” Instead, we pose a set of questions about the occurrence of a series of demographic events constituting common transitions associated with becoming an adult. Following previous demographic research on the transition to adulthood, we concentrate on six life experiences: being

economically independent, leaving home, completing formal education, working full time, getting married, and having a child. The 2008 International Social Survey Program in Uruguay (ISSP) includes the set of questions that allow us to do this study. This paper explores the life experiences that Uruguayans consider to be key factors to becoming an adult in contemporary society.

In order to identify the effects of personal attributes on this opinion, we estimate ordered probit models. We hypothesize that an individual’s opinion is shaped by a set of personal attributes such as gender, age, and educational attainment. For example, as gender roles have been changing, we investigate whether there are significant differences between men’s and women’s views in what constitutes adult transitions. Given that a person’s views may change as they navigate the terrain of adult life, we also consider whether age plays a relevant role in explaining differences in opinions. Finally, we expect that in Uruguay the importance of particular transitions differs by social class. We use educational attainment as a proxy for social class and explore whether opinions differ by educational levels.

2. Background

Previous findings show that the transition to adulthood has become more ambiguous and that it happens in a

more gradual fashion due to social changes that pose new opportunities for individuals and their families [5–11]. Specifically, a growing body of research suggests that the transition to adulthood has become more protracted, less orderly, and less standardized in Europe, North American, and more broadly throughout the industrialized world [2].

Educational attainment, always an important feature of the adult transition, has become a more prominent part of the transition than a century ago. The extension of schooling may cause a delay in labor-force participation and a delay in achieving economic independence and hence a postponement of family formation. Hence, we expect that Uruguayans will find school completion very important and consider being married and becoming a parent less immediately relevant to becoming an adult. In a similar study in the United States that examined attitudes about the attainment of adulthood, Furstenberg et al. [12] show that being married and parenthood are largely unrelated to adulthood definitions in American public opinion polls, with financial independence, finishing schooling, and being able to support a family most often mentioned as important indicators of adult status. The same may be true in other national contexts such as Uruguay where marriage and parenthood are increasingly delayed (see also, [13]).

The consequences for families and societies are both remarkable and undeniable. Schoeni and Ross [14] show that American parents provide both material and direct cash assistance during their children's young adult years (between ages 18 and 34), spending on average about one-third of what they spent raising their children to age 18. On the other hand, Goldscheider et al. [15] hold that there is a substantial generation gap because relatively few American mothers indicate willingness to provide financial help relative to the number of children expecting any. There are a range of potential consequences for intergenerational relations as the transition to adulthood becomes less orderly and more protracted [16]. Research on the timing of births has provided clear evidence on its causes and consequences. Couples who have a child earlier have fewer savings and lower income [17]; women with an early first birth achieve a lower educational level and a lower occupational status [18–20] hold that women who delay the first birth have more education and higher occupational status.

Assessing the case of United States, Furstenberg [16] also shows that people have postponed some decisions such as leaving home, marriage, and childbearing. This finding indicates that their natal families should provide economic support. Moreover, this fact may also discourage couples from having a baby because it is more onerous given that they should provide support for longer periods. As Furstenberg [16] highlighted a key policy issue emerges from this result, how to reduce the increasing demands that are placed in parents.

On the other hand, education, working full time, marriage, and parenthood may be related not only to adulthood and personal goals but also with socialization and social control issues within the family. Barber [21] argues that children whose mothers prefer early marriage, large families, and low levels of education enter parenthood earlier and

vice versa; concluding that mothers' preferences have a strong influence on when their children become parents by guiding them on different pathways toward adulthood. In addition, in United States, there appears to be an increasing convergence between males and females in the guidance they receive from the family and their personal ambitions [22].

From these vantage points, we expect that Uruguayan's views change according to their age and educational level. Moreover, adulthood is a complex phenomenon, and people's definition may vary with their age and educational level. Regarding gender, we expect significant differences between men and women in the case of Uruguay. This hypothesis is based on two facts. Firstly, the higher participation rate of men in the labor market may cause that they tend to place a higher value on working full time, being economically independent, or leaving home. Secondly, given the increasing rates of women who finish tertiary studies, women may be more likely to value completing formal education which may imply a delay in marriage and childbearing.

3. Data Source and Methodology

Our analysis is conducted using a nationally representative survey conducted in Uruguay in 2008 by the International Social Survey Program [23]. The ISSP is an annual program of cross-national collaboration on surveys covering topics important for social science research. The 2008 survey asks respondents about their opinions on a great variety of issues, including abortion, trust, and religion, as well as demographic and socioeconomic information, such as age, gender, education, religiosity, and others.

The dependent variable for this analysis is the respondent's ranking of the importance of specific transitions, or "facts", that are needed to consider someone an adult. Specifically, the question is "People have different views about what is needed to become an adult. Please consider the following statements, how important are the following facts for you?" The questionnaire included the following transitions: being economically independent, leaving home, completing formal education, working full time, getting married, and having a child. The available answer choices for each transition were "very important," "fairly important," "somewhat important," "not very important," "not important," and "cannot choose/do not know." Asking the question about transitions to adulthood in this way allows us to derive information about the relative importance of each of these transitions.

We collapsed the five answer categories into three: 0 if respondents indicate "not important" or "not very important"; 1 for "somewhat important"; 2 for "fairly important" or "very important" ("cannot choose/do not know" was coded as missing). Table 1 shows the weighted frequency distribution of the three category responses.

Each of the transitions that are relevant to become an adult is shown in Table 1. The response patterns reveal considerable variability in their perceived salience of each transition to becoming an adult; the percentage of respondents ranking the transition as fairly or very important

TABLE 1: Percentage of responding for each level of importance by transition needed to achieve adulthood.

Importance for becoming adult	Facts					
	Being economically independent	Leaving home	Completing formal education	Working full time	Getting married	Having a child
Not or not very	13.61	27.73	11.71	12.01	44.64	35.74
Somewhat	16.42	17.32	9.81	11.51	15.12	15.22
Fairly or very	69.97	54.95	78.48	76.48	40.24	49.04
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

vary from 40 percent in the case of getting married to 78 percent in the case of completing formal education. In line with previous findings, finishing formal education, working full time, and financial independence are the most relevant facts as indicators of adult status. However, they contrast to results from the United states where financial independence was found to be the primary criterion for becoming an adult [12]. In Uruguay, completion of education is a more prominent marker. In both surveys, marriage and parenthood are regarded as secondary considerations in the road to adulthood or, as Furstenberg et al. [12] speculate, they may represent a second stage of the transition to adulthood after the economic transition.

Leaving home typically follows school completion and full time employment. In Uruguay over half of the respondents (55 percent) believe that leaving home is part of the set of transitions that make up the passage to adulthood.

We find that marriage and having a child are found at the bottom of the ranking. It is not surprising given that in Uruguay these decisions have been delayed; however, it is worth noting that having a child seems to be more relevant than marriage. Interestingly, as found in a United States study that used a similar set of questions, marriage and parenthood are likely to be regarded as less essential transitions to become an adult. Considering the upper class, Furstenberg [1] holds that marriage tends to occur in the late twenties in general after completing the university. As C. Goldscheider and F. Goldscheider [24] state, living alone before marriage is a social phenomenon that is proof of a different pattern of family and demographic change that have characterized modern societies since the 1950s but it is a relatively new phenomenon in the case of developing countries. The authors also showed that young men (more than young women) expect to live away from home before marriage.

Given that our dependent variables have three response categories, we estimated ordered probit models. These models demonstrate how the set of independent variables affects the formation of opinions towards adulthood. After estimating the model, we computed the probability that the dependent variable equals two (the highest level) and we also estimate the marginal effects of the independent variables.

Based on our review of the literature and the availability of a large set of measures in our data on the respondent's attributes, we examine the effects of a number of independent variables on opinions about the importance of each of the transitions. The description of the included variables and their mean value is reported in Table 2.

4. Results

Table 3 presents the marginal effects after ordered probit model estimation. These estimates are the changes in the probability that an individual will assign importance to a particular fact, given the specific characteristic defined by the independent variable, relative to not having that characteristic. For example, the probability that an individual will assign importance to economic independence is .077 higher for men than for women (Table 3).

Considering that gender roles have been changing in Uruguay, we give particular attention to gender differences in opinions. As we hypothesized, there are significant differences in men's and women's views. Men are generally more likely to consider that the set of assessed facts are important to become an adult with the exception of completing formal education that is more important for women. This result reflects a relatively new tendency registered in the Uruguayan educational system that emphasizes greater gender equality. The number of women who start university has been growing; the same is true in the case of the number of women who complete tertiary education. Therefore, it is expected that women who attend university are more likely to postpone other decisions such as getting married, having a child, or being economically independent in order to finish college.

The picture that emerges from this result indicates that completing formal education may be more relevant to women, possibly because it may imply delaying marriage and/or parenthood or because economic independence might be deferred.

The age of respondents is correlated with the perceived importance of economic transitions (economic independence and working full time). By contrast, there are no significant differences among age groups regarding opinions on being married and completing formal education. While some significant differences occur among different age groups, the overall pattern with the single exception of economic independence suggests that no distinctive pattern of differences occurs by age. In other words, there are few meaningful ages, or even generational differences, in the criterion for becoming an adult.

In almost all cases, education is a relevant predictor of people's opinions about transitions to adulthood. A surprising exception, however, is that there were no significant differences in the importance placed on completion of education among respondents with differing levels of educational attainment. Similarly, the respondent's educational

TABLE 2: Description and mean value of independent variables.

Variable	Description	Mean
Man	1 if respondent is a man and 0 in other cases	38%
Age 30–44	1 if respondent is between 30 and 44 years old and 0 in other cases	27%
Age 45–64	1 if respondent is between 45 and 64 years old and 0 in other cases	32%
Age 65	1 if respondent is 65 years old or older and 0 in other cases	20%
Education 6–9	1 if respondent's years of education are between 6 and 9 and 0 in other cases	43%
Education 10–12	1 if respondent's years of education are between 10 and 12 and 0 in other cases	24%
Education 13	1 if respondent's years of education are 13 or more and 0 in other cases	21%
Subjective income	Self-placement in 10-point-income scale	4.58 points
Married	1 if respondent is married or living as married and 0 in other cases	36%
Single	1 if respondent is single and 0 in other cases	22%
Has a child or children	1 if respondent has at least one child and 0 in other cases	75%
Catholic	1 if respondent indicates to be raised in the Catholic religion and 0 in other cases	53%
Evangelist	1 if respondent indicates to be raised in the Evangelist religion and 0 in other cases	9%
Religiosity	1 if respondent attends to religious services at least once a week and 0 in other cases	13%
Employed full time	1 if respondent works full time and 0 in other cases	49%
Employed in public sector	1 if respondent works for the government or in a public owned firm and 0 in other cases	15%
Self-employed	1 if respondent is self-employed and 0 in other cases	27%
Unemployed	1 if respondent is unemployed and 0 in other cases	6%
Resides in Montevideo	1 if respondent lives in Montevideo (the capital city) and 0 in other cases	48%

TABLE 3: Ordered probit models for each transition to adulthood: marginal effects of independent variables (reference cell is all other individuals without the characteristic).

	Being economically independent	Leaving home	Completing formal education	Working full time	Getting married	Having a child
Man	0.077**	0.056*	-0.061*	0.092***	0.143***	0.147***
Age 30–44	-0.087*	-0.042	-0.026	-0.022	0.007	0.010
Age 45–64	-0.137***	-0.110**	-0.017	0.032	0.006	-0.007
Age 65	-0.182***	-0.061	0.005	0.142***	0.056	0.115*
Education 6–9	-0.088	-0.058	0.026	-0.149**	-0.102*	-0.097*
Education 10–12	-0.146**	-0.001	0.004	-0.206***	-0.165***	-0.045
Education 13	-0.080	-0.033	-0.047	-0.312***	-0.253***	-0.205***
Subjective income (1 to 10 scale)	0.018*	-0.013	-0.002	0.007	-0.003	-0.019*
Married	-0.080**	-0.082**	-0.001	-0.049	0.081**	-0.013
Single	-0.036	-0.056	-0.043	0.061	-0.028	-0.058
Has a child or children	0.125***	0.037	-0.029	0.092**	-0.030	0.019
Catholic	0.063*	0.001	0.056*	0.045	0.089**	0.061*
Evangelist	0.079	-0.068	0.057	0.045	-0.039	-0.073
Religiosity	0.021	-0.022	0.055	0.016	0.179***	0.036
Employed full time	-0.055	0.031	0.015	0.016	-0.070*	-0.043
Employed in public sector	-0.073	-0.123**	-0.003	-0.050	-0.048	-0.079
Self-employed	-0.064*	-0.041	-0.016	-0.011	0.004	0.005
Unemployed	-0.072	0.039	-0.126*	0.081	-0.118	-0.001
Resides in Montevideo	0.041	0.080**	0.096***	-0.030	-0.035	-0.036
Observations	990	990	990	990	990	990

Notes: (1) * significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%.

level was not significantly related to his/her opinion on whether leaving home is an important part of becoming adult. In contrast to the other independent variables, of particular interest is our finding of the negative effects of education. This result could be explained by the fact that more educated people are likely to delay decisions such as working full time, marriage, having a child, and/or achieving economic independence.

As Table 3 shows, income matters in two instances. First, the higher people place themselves in the income scale, the less important is having a child to become an adult. The crucial issue that explains this result is that people tend to postpone parenthood in order to achieve personal goals. Second, affluent individuals regard economic independence as more important, perhaps indicating that attainment of economic self-sufficiency has become a more prominent concern.

Regarding marital status, we also find significant differences. Those who are married are more likely to consider that this characteristic is relevant to become an adult (than those who are divorced or widowed). Moreover, married people are less likely to positively value being economically independent and leaving home as high on the list of criteria for becoming an adult. Finally, no significant differences are found among single people and others (those who are divorced or widowed).

Parents link adulthood to being economically independent and working full time (Table 3), although there are no significant differences between those who have had children and those who have not in the probability of ranking parenthood as important for adult transition.

The influence of religion has generally proven to be pervasive on views regarding life goals. In general, Catholics tend to positively value procreation and so it is not surprising that they place a high priority on being married as part of the adult transition. We found no significant differences between Evangelists and all other people for the importance given to any of the transitions. It is also worth noting that religiosity only positively influences people's opinions towards marriage.

Table 3 shows that unemployed people are less likely to consider that completing formal education is relevant for reaching adulthood. This negative effect is likely associated with a characteristic particular to the Uruguayan labor market. First, unemployment rates have been relatively low since 2004 and the low level of unemployment is closely associated with middle-aged unskilled workers. Therefore, many unemployed people have made the transition to adulthood without completing formal studies and therefore do not consider it to be necessary for the transition.

We find significant differences among those working in the public sector and other people. In particular, civil servants do not consider relevant being economically independent and leaving home. Self-employed people more frequently encounter labor market fluctuations and could have experienced more stressed situations in the recent decade. This group of workers is less likely to consider that being economically independent is relevant. Marriage is more relevant for those who work full time; however, there

are no significant differences between this group of workers and the others.

Finally, living in a large city involves significant differences in everyday life, we therefore include a variable that equals one if respondent lives in Montevideo, the capital city where more than 50 percent of the inhabitants live (0 if they live elsewhere). In Uruguay, this characteristic implies very different opportunities and access to the labor market, to the university, and other public services such as primary or secondary schools and the health system. We find that leaving home and completing formal education is considered more relevant for adult transition for those who live in Montevideo than for those who live outside of the city.

5. Conclusions

In this paper we show that the transition to adulthood in Uruguay is not determined by a single event; instead, it is shaped by characteristics of individuals that affect the importance they give to a number of differing transitions marking the beginning of adulthood. What constitutes the attainment of adulthood in Uruguay varies among individuals and is mediated by their personal circumstances, especially their age, gender, and educational status. Our findings are consistent with previous findings from the developed world: simply reaching age 18 or 21 is not sufficient for identifying the transition to adulthood.

Similar to findings from developed countries, we also found that education serves to postpone the transition to adulthood. Students and other people pursuing educational objectives are likely to delay decisions such as working full-time, marriage, having a child, and/or achieving economic independence. This decision is supported by two facts. First, a higher life expectancy among more educated individuals which contributes to a prolongation of all life stages and second, a labor market which demands more complex skills.

Finally, we show that individual's opinions about the importance of transitions are not necessarily influenced by whether the person has experienced a particular status transition themselves. For example, completing formal education is not considered significantly more relevant by highly educated people than by less educated individuals, and having a child is not considered more relevant by those who are parents than by those who are not. Furthermore, individuals who are working full time are no more or less likely to consider full time employment important for the transition to adulthood than are people who are not working full time. However, some personal characteristics are related to the importance individuals give to that characteristic. Married individuals are more likely to view marriage as an important transition to adulthood than those who are not, and income level is positively associated with the probability of giving more importance to economic independence.

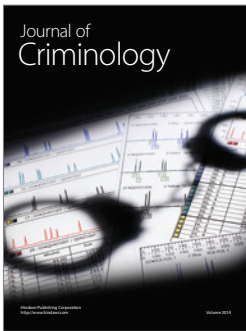
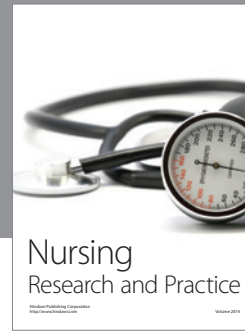
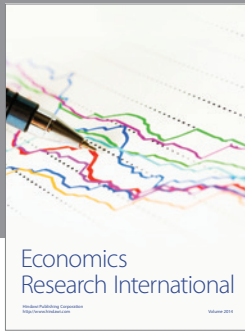
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