# Youth Transitions, Gender and Social Change

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*Sociology* 1993; 27; 259
DOI: 10.1177/0038038593027002006

SOCIOLOGY Vol. 27 No. 2 May 1993
259–279

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*Abstract* European youth studies increasingly use critical modernisation theory to understand the changing social circumstances and cultural context of contemporary youth in advanced western societies. It is generally argued that the social biography of youth is taking a new form and meaning in the light of individualisation and destandardisation/destructuring processes. On the basis of data drawn from two recent studies of British and Dutch teenage girls, this paper argues that the relationships between youth and social change are more complex and fragmented than has been frequently implied. In particular, youth transitions continue to be marked by the effects of systematic social inequalities, such as gender relations, and these imply that gender-specific adult *Normalbiographien* remain of sociological and personal significance.

*Key words*: youth, gender, social change, modernisation theory.

## *Introduction*

Theoretical analyses have predominantly understood 'youth' as a developmental stage, one in which new kinds of roles, relationships and competences must be practised and mastered in order to pass from the social status of childhood to adulthood (for a classic exposition, see Coleman 1990; for a concise overview of the field see Krüger 1988). Youth as a social condition is therefore judged as inherently marked by instabilities, both psychological and sociological. As a stage of life, youth is defined and guided by sets of institutionalised transitions, whose successful negotiation promise the goal of independence and recognition as a full member of the community. These institutionalised transitions are generally ordered and experienced in ways which reproduce existing patterns of social differentiation (and inequality), in particular, by gender, ethnicity and class.

The pace of contemporary social and economic change in advanced industrial societies has engendered a renewed interest in modernisation processes. Until recently, sociological theory has concerned itself primarily with the modernisation processes which accompany industrialisation, initially as these occurred in Euro-America, and increasingly as these are (differently) manifested in today's developing societies. Attention has now turned to the ways in which advanced industrial societies may be once more entering a phase of fundamental social and economic change, variously termed as post-Fordism, post-industrialism, or

disorganised capitalism – and soon, perhaps, 'disintegrated state socialism'? (See here Beck 1986; Lash and Urry 1987; with particular reference to youth, see Chisholm, Büchner, Krüger and Brown 1990; Brown and Chisholm, forthcoming.) European debate currently refers to these concerns under the remit of *critical modernisation theory*, in which *individualisation* and *destructuring/destandardisation* processes play an important role in understanding the nature and meanings of contemporary social and economic change.

These aspects of critical modernisation theory have gained wide currency in the European youth research literature, in that they have been used to understand theoretically the evident changes in the life situations of young people in (at least north-western) Europe, in the first instance since 1945, and then across the last decade and towards 2000 (see Krüger 1990). One immediate consequence has been to question the adequacy of classical developmental approaches, whether psychological or sociological, for analysing contemporary youth. (UK youth researchers have adopted similar positions but from different theoretical starting-points; see here Cohen 1986; Chisholm 1987).

A second consequence, and one of specific interest to us, is the suggestion that youth transitions are certainly changing, and arguably losing, their internally structurally differentiated quality. This means, firstly, that the sequencing and timing of the *rites de passage* between childhood and adulthood are dissolving and fragmenting. Secondly, the separations, and arguably the inequalities, between the situations and orientations of young people according to their class origin, ethnicity and gender are gradually disappearing. Young people today approach and experience their lives, in the present and in planning for their future, essentially as individuals responsible for and with the freedom to make their own decisions, to *construct their own biographies* on their own account. Under these conditions, can it be argued that 'youth', as classically understood, still 'exists? What are the implications of the expansion of individualised options for formulating life plans? To what extent can significant adult others, specifically parents and teachers, continue to guide young people towards a defined 'adulthood'?

In other words, this kind of analysis argues that young people are growing up today in a socially open space, where few things are certain, where many choices are possible, and where it is not clear which options will be possible and impossible – and for whom. Various accounts have thus addressed the risks associated with this tension between a maximalisation of options combined with an uncertainty – and at least partial uncontrollability – of outcome (e.g. Habermas 1981; Fend 1988; Beck *op.cit.*; Baethge 1986; Ziehe 1985, 1988; Zoll, Bents, Brauer, Flieger, Neumann and Oechsle 1989). Others have described processes of partial destandardisation (Buchmann 1989, Held 1986) and fragmentation (Olk 1985) of the life course, under the influence of a strong individualisation (Bolt 1988) and rationalisation of lifestyles (Dreitzel 1984).

In the strongest applications of the argument, social demographic and attitude survey data have been used to suggest that the acquisition of cultural

capital has become both an individualised and a democratised affair, much less so a matter of social origin and group membership. Young people amass resources for transitions through collecting credentials, both in the formal educational system and through the patterns of their wider social participation and life styles. They hence write their own biographies, in both public and private spheres of life. The socially standardised life course (*Normalbiographie*[1]) of the past is gradually changing into a socially individualised life course (Fuchs 1983; Zinneker 1987, 1990; Hoerning 1988). Of particular interest here is the suggestion that individualisation goes hand in hand with a shift in the balance of power between the sexes and the generations. The social relations between women and men, young people and adults, are no longer as strongly characterised by authority and subordination as they used to be. These changes might be described in terms of management through negotiation gradually replacing management through demand (for a variety of standpoints see : De Swaan 1982; du Bois-Reymond 1989; du Bois-Reymond and Jonker 1988; Weeks and Botkin 1987; Büchner 1990; Hood-Williams 1990; Kranichfeld 1987; Steinberg 1987).

In this paper we wish to examine critically some of the assumptions and interpretations of this influential school of thinking in youth research. This does not mean that we set out to demonstrate that the general approach we have outlined above offers few insights. On the contrary, the application of critical modernisation theory to the sociological study of youth prompts a productive rejuvenation in our thinking. Furthermore, the patterns of change in young people's lives that are the empirical basis of its arguments are real enough. Nevertheless, we take the view that these changes are much more fragmented than is frequently suggested. In particular, the relationship between individualisation processes on the one hand and structured social inequalities on the other is both theoretically and empirically unclear at the present time. We cannot pretend to have clarified these problems for ourselves, and certainly will not be able to do so in this discussion. We rather use some data from recent studies of teenage girls in the Netherlands and in the UK to indicate continuities and discontinuities in patterns of gendered life and experience[2] which suggest that we have not yet reached a satisfactory sociological understanding of youth and social change.

## *The YPL and GAOC Studies*

The Young People and Labour (YPL) project has been investigating the experiences and attitudes of Dutch youth across the transitions between education, employment and adult life since 1986 (see Meijers and Peters 1987, 1988; du Bois-Reymond and Peters 1990; for a discussion of the study's findings within a more general framework, see Peters and Chisholm 1991).[3] In

this discussion, we shall refer to some of the findings from a first round of semi-structured interviews with sixty young women and their mothers in late 1988. The girls, who come from all social backgrounds, were then aged between 16 and 18 years of age and had just that summer completed full-time education (in a variety of schools and vocational training institutions). They were born between 1970–72; the young women's mothers had been born between 1930 and 1948, and were thus aged between 40 and 58 at the time of interview.

The Girls and Occupational Choice (GAOC) project was a three-year longitudinal study of inner London comprehensive schoolgirls between 1983–86 (see Chisholm and Holland 1986, 1987; Chisholm 1990). [4] Sociologically, the study was concerned to trace patterns of gendered occupational choice as these are embedded within processes of gender-specific youth transitions. As part of this research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eighty girls aged 12, 14 and 16 (first, third and fifth year pupils) in spring 1984. Further interviews with a sub-sample of thirty girls drawn from the first and third year girls were conducted in spring 1985 and 1986. In this discussion, we shall refer to some of the data collected through these interviews. The girls in the GAOC study come primarily from working class backgrounds, but from differing within-class fractions[5], a few girls, however, came from achieved professional middle class homes. The girls aged 12 and 14 at the outset of the study were also born between 1970–72, as those in the Leiden study were.

The two studies' female samples are generationally parallel, although interviewed at different stages of the youth phase, and the GAOC girls' mothers would have belonged to the same broad parental cohorts as those in the YPL study.[6] Mothers were not interviewed for the GAOC study, but, as a consequence of what the girls told us, we know something about their lives and their hopes for their daughters. The girls in both studies were state schooled[7] and grew up in northwest European metropolitan urban localities. The range of their social backgrounds is not similar, however, since the GAOC sample intentionally included few middle class girls. The data from the two projects were collected and analysed wholly independently; the purposes of the studies were allied, but by no means identical, and both use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. In sum, the findings from both studies complement each other in a number of respects, but also indicate some interesting differences. Some of these differences can be attributed to social background variations between the samples, whilst others arguably reflect socio-cultural differences between the Netherlands and the UK. Of course, some divergences may be an artefact of dissimilarities between methods of data collection and analysis, and therefore we have exercised considerable caution in pointing to differences between the findings at this stage.[8]

In the discussion which follows, we look at the life plans and orientations formulated by the Leiden and London girls with respect to paid work and family life, compared with those lived by their mothers. We then place our findings in the context of gendered youth transitions and social change.

*Life Courses and Life Plans*

Taking 1945 as the starting-point, the patterns of women's education and labour force participation in the Netherlands and in the UK have not been all of a piece. Dutch women have remained more firmly contained within traditional female *Normalbiographien* until more recently than is the case for British women. In other words, rates of female educational participation and married women's labour force participation began to increase significantly in the Netherlands only from the mid-70s, and still remain lower than those in the UK (*cf.* EUROSTAT 1987a; OECD 1988).[9] Dutch women are still more likely than British women to withdraw permanently from the labour market on the birth of their first child, or alternatively to take very extended childbearing breaks (EUROSTAT 1987b). Family-building patterns indicate that whilst rates of both teenage marriage and illegitimate births have been consistently higher in the UK than in the Netherlands, Dutch marriage and fertility rates have dropped more sharply than in the UK (Lüscher, Schulheis and Wehrspann 1987). A crude generalisation here might read that British women moved away from an established *Normalbiographie* earlier than did Dutch women, but that they largely adopted a 'Superwoman' model as the way forward. Dutch women led traditionally family-centred lives for much longer, but have since been more inclined to pursue routes of delay and rejection of marriage and children altogether (see here Beets 1988).

The YPL study found that the course of mothers' employment histories had been similar *regardless* of social class background. The majority had attained modest educational and vocational qualifications, were employed until they married, and became mothers at an early age. Those who had hoped to continue into higher education and professional employment had generally given up under social and Church pressure; not one had been actively supported by her partner to combine employment and family roles. On the contrary, these women spoke of their husbands' explicit opposition to such ideas. Subsequently, the minority of mothers who had taken paid work after marriage and children had done so mainly on the grounds of financial necessity. Otherwise, it was only at the time of the interviews, as their children had reached adolescence, that the Dutch mothers were returning to the labour market, generally part-time. They were typically taking employment which was badly paid and below the level of their qualifications and competences.

Similarly, in the GAOC study, only those (few) middle class mothers who were teachers had not experienced a drop of this kind on their return to the labour market. Otherwise, regardless of the occupations (the working class) mothers had practised before marriage and children, they had returned to the labour market as office/school cleaners, dinnerladies, barmaids, waitresses, and canteen workers (*cf.* Martin and Roberts 1984, whose national survey of women's employment reports parallel findings).[10] In 1984, 16 per cent (N = 9) of the GAOC mothers had full-time jobs, and 38 per cent (N = 21) were

full-time homemakers, but only six of these still had a pre-school child. The remaining fifteen homemakers fell into two clear groups: those whose husbands were long-term unemployed,[11] and those who were married to men in secure and reasonably paid jobs.[12] Almost all the GAOC mothers had taken a childbearing break of some kind, but they had typically returned to employment once their youngest child had begun school at five years old. Although differences in the social class composition of the two samples must be accorded some role here, it remains the case that the differences indicated in the two countries' time-series statistics are replayed through the two studies. Over three-fifths of the GAOC mothers had returned to paid work by 1984, though, if anything, they would have been on average slightly younger than the YPL mothers, who were only just beginning to take employment again in 1988.

But the hopes and expectations the Leiden and London mothers had for their daughters were broadly similar. They were convinced of the importance of a 'decent education' for their daughters, on the grounds that this is the way to secure a firm toehold in the labour market on reasonable conditions. The Dutch mothers, in reflecting upon their own lives, said that it had been a mistake not to acquire more and better formal qualifications, and more employment experience, before having children. In general, they felt that they had not enjoyed their youth as much as they could have done – and this meant that, for them, their youth had ceased abruptly with the onset of motherhood. These mothers were keen to advise their own daughters not to do as they had done, and sometimes expressed concern at the apparent eagerness of their daughters to start a family, especially since they saw their daughters as having the potential for choice that they themselves missed. They expected their daughters to establish themselves, with qualifications, in employment which would continue, with or without interruption, after marriage and children. Working class Dutch mothers viewed their daughters' labour force participation and experience as an insurance policy in case they should 'lose their breadwinner', whereas the middle class mothers thought paid work important for women's self-fulfilment. However, very few of the mothers expected their daughters to become 'career women' to the exclusion of, or in priority over, motherhood and family roles.

The girls in the GAOC study almost universally reported their mothers as holding similar views to those of the Dutch mothers. They said that their mothers advised them to enjoy themselves first before 'settling down' and having children, which they should on no account do 'too early.' Thirteen-year-old Belinda said, for example:

> My Mum says not to have kids until you're thirty, go travelling the world. I've been thinking about it. One part of me wants to have a career, another part wants to get married, have kids and settle down. And I don't know what to choose. . . . I keep thinking of my Mum, she says she's missed so much and I shouldn't. When I see young mums in the street I think how nice, but then I think *twenty years* – once you've got kids you can't get rid of them, you're stuck. I like babies – but when I think of how me and my brother behave, it's a wonder my Mum doesn't go mad.

Settling down too early tended to mean different points in time according, for example, to the girls' own mothers' experiences. For fifteen-year-old Justine 'too early' meant getting married at sixteen, as her own mother had done and came to regret. Now divorced, Justine's mother worked full-time as a supermarket cashier, a job she disliked intensely because it is exhausting, boring, and poorly-paid. She told her two daughters 'to get a good education and enjoy ourselves to the full.' A 'good education' certainly meant continuing beyond the end of compulsory schooling, but not necessarily with the goal of higher education in view. Justine herself wanted to work with computers in the foreign exchange section of a bank. Simplified, those girls who came from unskilled/semi-skilled backgrounds or from traditional solidary entrepreneurial/artisan-type fractions (see footnote 5) saw themselves as marrying and having children by their early twenties – or, alternatively, as not marrying ever. This did not automatically exclude having children, though, as sixteen-year-old Patrice pointed out:

*Q: Would you like to have a life like your mum's?*
No – no way! She works so hard it's untrue. She goes out to work in the morning and then she's at it all day, then working at home until ten at night making dinners and washing and ironing and so on. It's not what I would call a good life.

*Q: How would you make it different for yourself?*
(long pause) well, I'm not getting married, that's for definite! So I won't have to get his dinner ready . . . . (But) I'd like to have kids . . . . 'Cos I've talked to my Mum just like this and she said, yes, 'cos nobody takes any notice anymore (if you're a single mum). So I don't see the point in getting married . . . . (Women used to) for a home, and the children . . . but now if they haven't got a dad, it's no big deal anymore.

Those whose parents belonged to the upwardly-aspiring 'new' working class or the achieved professional middle class thought they would start their families rather later, and this was related to the girls' own educational and occupational aspirations. They expected to be fully occupied with education, training and establishing a career until well into their twenties, some later. Amy's parents, for example, were both primary teachers. Her mother had been a scholarship grammar school girl from a working class home. Her father's family found themselves in relatively impoverished, but genteel, circumstances, and he had attended one of the first comprehensive schools. They met at Goldsmiths whilst studying for their B.Ed. degrees; Amy's father has since become a Head, her mother is a class teacher. Here is an extract from Amy's case study:

Between the ages of 11 and 14 Amy retained her aspiration to become a lawyer, specifically, a barrister, which combines her interest and talents in both language and drama. At 11, she already knew she would need 'tons' of exams and 'years' of university study, but had no qualms about the prospect of the effort and achievement necessary. . . . She was well-informed about the relationship between qualifications, unemployment and credential inflation. . . . These sorts of issues were discussed frequently at home, in the context of Amy's own education and her future. . . . In

> making her option choices (she emphasised that) 'The main thing in my mind was keeping as many doors open as possible and keeping a good balance. . . . And I've wanted to be a lawyer for ages and ages, failing that a drama or English teacher.' . . . There was no doubt in Amy's mind that she would go to university, that education lends access to better employment and career chances, and that it had been her upbringing that had encouraged her to think in this way. . . . She knew that most lawyers are men, but rather liked the idea of being an exception, not expecting any real problems in getting ahead. Amy certainly did not want to be locked into a routine existence – and this included being a teacher, like her mother, who had told her it is a terrible and tiring job she should not consider at all (Chisholm 1990:256–7).

Of particular interest here are working class high achieving schoolgirls, who emerged in the GAOC study as having quite distinctive orientations and plans.[13] Their occupational aspirations were not only high, but also less frequently female-typed than for any other sub-group (including the middle class girls). These girls not only delayed the point at which they might marry and, especially, have children – they were also more inclined to reject having children at all (though hardly any imagined not establishing a stable heterosexual couple partnership, in common with the respondents as a whole). They expected to have a 'career,' by which they meant professional level employment on a continuous basis. They assumed equality of opportunity, but were confident that they would be able to overcome any discrimination they might face through determined effort and achievement. Fourteen-year-old Eleanor offers an example:

> Eleanor's . . . current aspiration is to become a police forensic scientist. She has recently chosen her options with these interests in mind, but also to retain openness in case she changes her mind. . . . Eleanor's mother has acceded to convention both at work and in the family, but is not altogether happy about this. She is keen to guide her (only child) towards ambitious and relatively unusual occupational aspirations. . . . Currently a telephonist at a central wholesale market, Eleanor thinks her mother would prefer a more 'glamorous' job. She experiences a sharp difference between her mother's engagement and her father's distance, remarking, in a tone of puzzled thoughtfulness, that 'I don't think she is that bored, 'cos she goes out to work part-time. (pause) Sometimes she gets a bit (pause) *funny*, where she wants to go out and do something *wild*!' Her mother continually encourages her, emphasising how important it is to get out and see something of the world before marriage ties you down; but Eleanor added dismissively that her father 'don't really care . . . He don't even (8 seconds pause) he just lets me get on with it. (long pause) He just leaves it all to my Mum.'. . . . She and her mother discuss Eleanor's future a great deal. She firmly intends to take A-levels; she would like any sort of scientific job, but it is education and not production that dominates her concerns. . . . She knows her (scientific) interests are seen by her peers as odd but her response is to rate many girls as lacking in ambition and adventurousness rather than intelligence. . . . She added that girls stick to female-typed jobs because they don't want to be seen as different; it is this, and employer prejudice, which account for occupational segregation by sex. (But then she spontaneously remarked that) 'Girls are supposed to stay at home and have babies and boys are supposed to go out and get jobs – as plumbers and that.' This is why girls are less ambitious, because 'they probably know most of them will just settle down in the end with a family, and won't go out to work anyway.' In

> Eleanor's view, it is children who 'tie you down' and not marriage. She sees herself as different from most, and certainly refuses to contemplate being a 'bored slave' at home whilst her husband has a more interesting life. And as long as she tried hard enough, Eleanor can't imagine not achieving her aspirations, whatever these may ultimately be (Portrait extract from Chisholm 1990:142–3).

When closely questioned, they admitted that the equal division of labour they would hope for in the household and in childcare might be difficult to establish, both on account of men's unwillingness to share and because children needed good-quality care which was best provided by parents. This recognition led such girls either to 'hope for the best' regardless, or to reject having children altogether. At this stage (the secondary school years), *this* group of girls were simply not prepared to sacrifice their own self-fulfilment and life goals on the altar of motherhood – although ideally, they would like to be able to have *both* career and family. Two features mark out this sub-group of GAOC girls: firstly, the strength of their orientations to paid work and its role for their sense of self-identity; secondly, their view that formal education is the route to work/career achievement combined with their ability to take advantage of that route, i.e. their educational success. Such high achieving working class girls can be regarded as critical cases in the study of gender divisions and emancipatory change (see note 13). This study suggests that they are particularly likely to be engaged in 'delay and rejection' of the construction of a normative female biography. In the Netherlands, however, the most recent trends (as noted earlier, p. 00) indicate a widespread and *general* emergence of this 'delay and rejection' pattern amongst young women. The possible consequences of these trends for the organisation of employment and family life lend Dutch society itself a 'critical case' quality for the study of gender relations in the coming decade.

Of course, most of the GAOC respondents expected and wanted to establish themselves on the labour market, and few wanted to withdraw from employment for long periods after having children. However, they generally aspired and expected to enter female-typed employment, at whatever level, and they also wanted and expected to take a childrearing break of some kind – most typically, as their mothers did, until their youngest child goes to school. They would *like* their future husbands to share equally in the housework and childcare, but they did *not expect* that this would happen. In principle, they did not uniformly take the view that husbands should be the main breadwinners, but they realised that it could be difficult to arrange things otherwise once children have arrived. On the whole, then, it is the *realism* of the London girls which shapes their orientations and plans, leading them to tailor their expectations and decisions around the 'inevitabilities' of gender in adult life. One interpretation of these patterns is that the London girls are aware (but not always clearly so) that there are alternatives to gender-specific *Normalbiographien*, but that most do not see themselves as having access to those alternatives, whether through educational-occupational achievement or

otherwise. In many cases this is perfectly correct, and certainly they have few sources of family or community support for developing and realising alternative ways of life.

There have, of course, been intergenerational changes in what constitutes 'alternative' ways of life. Living together as an alternative (or prelude) to marriage was rare amongst the girls' parents' generation in both countries. Household composition, marriage and fertility statistics show that cohabitation is now common. In the UK in particular, the numbers of cohabiting couples with children have increased remarkably over the past twenty years (CSO 1990:16). In the Netherlands, cohabitation is increasingly an everyday affair, but marriage is generally seen as an important (social rather than moral) prerequisite for having children. Young people of both sexes in the YPL study said they expect to cohabit in the first instance – but specifically as a 'probationary' period before marriage and starting a family. In other words, both sexes aim ultimately to establish a 'conventional' family structure, and virtually none of these Dutch young people saw themselves as choosing to live otherwise. It would seem that in this respect, in both the Netherlands and the UK, a normative ideal type continues to underlie young people's life plans – one which has particular implications for young women, in so far as it plays a role in the educational, occupational and employment decisions they make.[14]

The majority of the 16–18 year old girls in the YPL study do indeed still propose to subordinate their paid work role to their role as mother (see du Bois-Reymond and Peters 1990b). The data shown in Table 1 (below) show

**Table 1**
**Young Women's Future Plans for Combining Employment and Family: The YPL Study: First Round: 1988**

| Life Plan Model | % Respondents |
|---|---|
| No children, FT job | 9 |
| No children, PT job | 3 |
| First parallel model | 8 |
| Second parallel model | 30 |
| Two stage model | 27 |
| Three stage model | 14 |
| Don't yet know | 9 |
| Total response (N) | 66 |

Chi-square = 69.07 (phi 0.75) (significant)
First parallel model: full-time employment and children
Second parallel model: part-time employment and children
Two-stage model: employment only until marriage or children
Three-stage model: employment until marriage or children; interruption until children are 'old enough'; re-entry to employment.

some remarkable trends. In 1988, 27 per cent of the girls planned to cease paid work altogether once they have children (the two stage model). Almost two-fifths intended to combine motherhood with employment of some kind (first *and* second parallel models), but only 8 per cent anticipated a combination of *full-time* employment with motherhood (the second parallel model).

Interestingly, those young women who envisaged the 'second parallel model' or the 'two stage model' come mainly from working class and lower middle class families. Those who saw themselves as permanent full-time homemakers (the 'two stagers') are *also* characteristically those who had been educationally unsuccessful, so that they were facing unfavourable school-work transition prospects. These girls were notably, and accurately, very pessimistic about their chances of securing the kind of job they wanted. Their orientation towards motherhood is to be understood in this context, and it is notable that for these young women, many of whom already had a steady boyfriend, their prospective partner's views come to take on a legitimating role in their constructions of their future lives. Boyfriends are reported as supporting the traditional breadwinner/homemaker division of labour, and the young women adjust their own life plan accordingly.

In contrast, those girls who wanted to combine part-time or full-time employment with childrearing were not necessarily educationally unsuccessful, but rather supported 'traditional' values with respect to marriage and motherhood. They hoped to establish a career with sufficient flexibility to enable a combination of continuous employment and childrearing. Almost all of these girls viewed their mothers' family lives in a positive light, as examples they would like to follow. Only 14 per cent of the Dutch girls saw themselves as interrupting employment until their children were 'old enough' (a variable age) and then returning to paid work.[15] (This last is, however, the pattern followed by a majority of married women today.)

We can draw out two points from this set of findings. Firstly, it is the recognition of poor labour market chances, especially as these are seen to be shaped by educational achievement, which leads girls to plan for full-time homemaking. Secondly, although almost two-fifths of the Dutch girls support a modified traditional pattern (combining part-time employment and childrearing), it is evident that this option is regarded as more favourable than that of *interrupting* employment altogether. In other words, continuous labour force participation is a central aspect of self-identity and life plans for all girls *except those who face very poor labour market prospects*.

We should bear in mind here that although the 'inevitabilities' of gendered adult lives[16] constrain the nature of women's labour force participation, these 'inevitabilities' are not *per se* undesirable: motherhood, parenting, and working to create rewarding, stable personal relationships are all worthwhile and satisfying goals and experiences. In this sense, it is not surprising that girls see their mothers' lives as positive models for emulation in these respects. Similarly, when they speak of how they wish their lives to be different from those of

their mothers, both the YPL and the GAOC girls referred largely to education and paid work. They wanted better qualifications and better jobs. What teenage girls do not (cannot?) adequately appreciate is just *how* difficult it is for women to maintain continuous and rewarding employment (not to mention a career proper) once they have children.

The optimism of the London girls in this respect was both encouraging *and* disturbing. In particular, they underestimated the negative effects both of transferring to part-time work and of childrearing breaks upon their labour market position and preferment chances. At the same time they assumed they would be able to cope with job demands and with a disproportionate share of the childcare and housework. Nevertheless, only a minority of the GAOC girls were ultimately aiming towards professional level occupations: over time most respondents scaled down their aspirations to fit their educational achievement and labour market opportunities (or rather, the lack of them). Half (N = 31) of the twelve- and fourteen-year-old London girls interviewed for the first time in 1984 (see page X above) *aspired* to occupations at the non-routine manual level or above.[17] These were:

| | |
|---|---|
| Aspirations mentioned thrice: | actress, journalist, nurse, policewoman, vet |
| Aspirations mentioned twice: | dancer, teacher (unspecified level), lawyer |
| Aspirations mentioned once: | archaeologist, coroner, doctor, fashion designer, infant/primary teacher, interpreter, model, pilot/space researcher, police forensic scientist, singer |

These aspirations are all at least at intermediate professional level, i.e., girls did *not* aspire to secretarial work, for example (although many expected to end up in this kind of job).

Of the thirty-six girls in the follow-through study (i.e. interviewed three times between 1984 and 1986), two-thirds changed their minds about what kind of job they wanted, and there was no difference between the older and the younger girls in this respect. There were differences, however, in the *direction* of changes in aspirations over time. As we might expect, there was a general scaling down process. For the younger girls (who became fourteen-year-olds by 1986), aspirations were reduced in qualification and status level. Evidently this was related to a girl's sense of her educational achievement and, in many cases, a decreasing engagement with, or declining attachment to, schooling (the latter was by no means automatically a consequence of the former.) For the older girls (who were aged 16 in 1986), aspirations were prone to be narrowed towards

what was perceived to be realistically available for them on the local labour market. In other words, aspirations increasingly came into line with expectations. The list of 1986 aspirations for the follow-through group thus reads as follows:

| Aspirations | N | Aspirations mentioned once only |
|---|---|---|
| secretary | 8 | baker/cake decorator |
| hairdresser | 4 | barrister |
| nursery nurse | 3 | cook/chef |
| bank work | 3 | running an evening dance school |
| actress | 2 | export administration |
| work with animals | 2 | in a factory |
| policewoman | 2 | nurse |
| sales work | 2 | psychiatrist |
| scientist | 2 | travel agent |
| teacher | 2 | writer |
| Total N aspirations: 40 (multiple mentions possible) | | |

Nevertheless, most girls did not see themselves as future cleaners and dinnerladies on their return to employment after a childrearing break (as had happened to their mothers). In other words, they did not expect to return to low status, insecure, and badly-paid employment – but we could predict that they typically will do so, unless the structure of the gender-specific labour market changes in the foreseeable future.

*Gender, Youth and Social Change*

Changes in patterns of family life, education and labour market opportunity structures have undeniably taken place across recent decades, and these have implications for the timing and sequencing of the transition to adult life. In northwest European countries – notwithstanding important individual configurations – average age at marriage and first childbirth have risen, rates of cohabitation have increased, educational participation rates are higher, the importance of formal qualifications and training for labour market placement has increased, the occupational structure has shifted, and establishing secure employment has become a generally more difficult and protracted affair. Over the same period, married women's labour force participation has risen sharply. Certainly in the UK, and increasingly so in the Netherlands, children customarily grow up in households where both spouses have paid work, if of differing kinds and extents. The cultural context of growing up has doubtless changed,

too, for the majority of young people. Bowie's 'urban spaceman' metaphor caught well the image of the oddly insulated quality of modern life, in which a certain lack of social gravity both lends the possibility of designing one's own lifestyle space as well as removing the ground from under one's feet. In this sense, we have certainly all become rather more individualised creatures.

Trends such as these, and their projections into the future, have been interpreted as leading to shifts in gender and generational power relations, marked by processes of individualisation and destructuring/destandardisation of *Normalbiographien*. Put simply, 'youth' as a social condition and stage of life is losing its coherence, whereas the gender-specificity of the social life course is weakening.

We see contemporary social change as more fragmented and contradictory than this, and we do not as yet see a fundamental shift in the terms of gendered existence. In a nutshell, our data indicate changes in the forms taken by gender-specific *Normalbiographien*, but not in the extent and implications of that gender-specificity itself. The perspectives and plans of the girls we studied do not suggest that youth transitions are losing their gendered quality or their underlying 'logic', either in character or in their implications for the adult life course. It is perhaps more appropriate to speak of a *re*structuring/*re*standardisation of youth transitions and social biography, but one in which structured inequalities continue to play a crucial role.

We would suggest that the *possibilities* for weakening the gender-specificities which are the realisation of such inequalities are considerable. Our respondents would clearly like to balance their commitment between paid work and family responsibilities more equally, but they are prevented from doing so by three factors: the provision of good quality, accessible and affordable childcare; the inflexibility of the social organisation of paid work; and men's intransigence as far as the domestic division of labour is concerned. There is nothing very new about any of this, but it does suggest that girls' perspectives are running way ahead of the objective possibilities they have to construct the kinds of adult lives they would like – and they are taking this into account as they formulate their life plans across youth transitions (see here also du Bois-Reymond and Oechsle 1990).

We can hardly describe this as living in a socially open space, although one might all too easily read the individualisation thesis in these terms. The alacrity with which the continental European youth research community has adopted the idea that individualisation processes lead to a declining gender-specificity of life course patterns seems premature. An individualisation of expectations might well have taken place – in other words, social background and cultural milieu may no longer shape a person's aspirations and expectations, hopes and plans, to the same extent (or perhaps not in the same manner) that they used to do. The 'communications revolution' and increased rates of geographical mobility alone would suggest that possible reference groups and systems have expanded for most people, quite apart from rising educational participation and the changing qualities of family and neighbourhood life.

Notwithstanding all this, a concomitant individualisation of destinations remains an implausible sociological proposition. In the first instance, we may indeed be witnessing a pluralisation of possible and actual routes through life. This may well imply, for example, that some/an increasing number of women's actual social life courses may be similar to some/many men's, as they have always been. The question is rather whether these patterns behave like the well-known example of the distribution of height by sex, in which the zone of overlap is greater than the zone of difference; and whether the zone of overlap is becoming significantly greater than formerly. In the case of the gendered life course, our current guess is that (a) the overlap is probably increasingly, though slowly and unevenly, but that (b) the zone of overlap remains much smaller than the zone of difference.

In the second instance, however, pluralisation of routes does not automatically mean pluralisation of end-points (in occupational, financial, or career terms; in terms of familial and living arrangements, social networks, etc.). It is not a simple matter, of course, to determine what constitute 'end' points in social biographical terms; all points are in principle interim benchmarks. The study of intra- and inter-generational social mobility is only too familiar with this kind of problem. But regardless of what individual girls and women may be able to negotiate and achieve for themselves in work and family life, the collective patterns of girls and women's lives remain sharply different from those of boys and men.

Education plays a double-edged role in this particular dialectic between social reproduction and change. Innumerable studies, including our own, attest to the importance of educational participation and achievement for girls' material opportunities, their orientations towards paid work, and their life plans. Very simply, education, in quantity and quality, both offers a moratorium and lends access to a pomisingly powerful exit route out of the reproduction of gender divisions. It does so, however, on the basis of a competitive individualism which is ideologically legitimated through the concept of meritocracy. Ironically, it is the very democratisation of individualised risks which masks those relations of social inequality of which gender is but one, if important, example.

*Notes*

1. The concept of Normalbiographie (see Levy 1977) refers to the bank of socially legitimated blueprints available to active subjects in constructing their lives. From this perspective, cultural codes are the ideological principles informing the blueprints, i.e. the internal logic of their patterns. Subjects are not obliged to adopt such blueprints as orientational frameworks, but over time institutionalised mechanisms of social reproduction, operating routinely and concretely in educational systems, on the labour market, in the forms of family life, and in the patterns of social policy provision, encroach and channel individuals towards legitimated and liveable niches. Individuals must accommodate the realities of their lives into explanatory frameworks which lend material constraints and possibilities a sense of rationality and personal desirability. As they do so, they generally find

that their lives come to approximate to historically and culturally specific *Normalbiographien*. For an extended theoretical and empirical treatment of this perspective, see Chisholm (1990); for a broad discussion see Heinz (1991).

2. Both studies focussed on gender as the central issue of theoretical and empirical concern. Ideally, one would wish to see gender, ethnicity and class fully integrated on an equal basis into all investigations. In practice it is difficult to do so adequately. The GAOC study explicitly focussed upon working-class girls. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, GAOC was an action research project, which consciously chose to place its resources for anti-sexist curriculum development in inner city comprehensives whose pupils largely come from disadvantaged backgrounds and who typically have poor post-school prospects. Secondly, in studying transition processes in early/mid adolescence, the interest lies less in uncovering between-class differences (which are reasonably well covered in existing literature anyway) than in exploring within-class (commonly termed 'class fraction') differences (and see footnote 5 below). In the YPL study, respondents were divided into three broad social class levels (low, middle, high) and the analysis focussed on between-class differences. Social class membership was determined on the basis of the educational levels and occupational status of both parents. Discrepancies between the parents were resolved by taking the highest-ranking level or status as the guide to placement. In the GAOC study, ethnicity was not included systematically as a sampling variable, but it was taken into account as a critical differentiating factor in the analysis of the interview study (see Chisholm 1990: Chapter 4). Within the scale of the study, it was impossible to make a systematic attempt to ensure adequately sized groups for comparison on the basis of *specific* minority group membership. The schools in fact differed markedly in their pupil profiles by race/ethnic background, as one might expect. Minority group girls were included as they turned up on the basis of random selection, with one exception. Asian girls were not drawn into the interview sample. In the two co-educational schools supplying interview respondents, there were very few Asian girls at all amongst the pupils. At the girls' school, approximately a quarter of the pupils were of Asian, largely Muslim, backgrounds. A significant proportion had a poor command of spoken English, and the project simply did not have the resources to overcome that obstacle, quite apart from lack of research team experience in establishing productive and non-damaging research relations with such girls. Theoretically, the girls from minority backgrounds came to play an important role in the analysis. This aspect of the GAOC study findings will be discussed in future papers. The YPL study found itself in a similar position and pursued a similar sampling strategy. In that the Dutch sample included older adolescents, the additional problem arose that, as elsewhere, young people from ethnic minority backgrounds are strongly underrepresented in many educational institutions and sectors after the end of compulsory schooling. Almost all of the Leiden sample are Dutch indigenous, and the analysis could not therefore take ethnicity into account. In consequence, a comparison between the two studies cannot introduce ethnicity in a serious manner. Under these circumstances, it is better not to pretend otherwise. In reflecting upon these two studies both in themselves and as examples of research activity in general, the ways in which indirect discrimination operates, through what are generally experienced as unavoidable eventualities in sampling designs and fieldwork programmes, become clearer.

3. This longitudinal project is funded jointly by the Dutch Ministry of Social and Labour Affairs, the Ministry of Public Welfare, Public Health and Culture, the NCK, and the University of Leiden. Members of the research team are: Manuela du Bois-Reymond, Harry Guit, Els Peters, Janita Ravesloot and Erwin van Rooijen. Hajee van Houten and Frans Meijers worked on earlier phases of the project.

4. This longitudinal project was funded primarily by the ESRC with subsequent

assistance from the EOC, ILEA Equal Opportunities Unit, and the University of London Institute of Education. Members of the research team were: Lynne Chisholm, Shane Blackman, Tuula Gordon, Janet Holland and Jean McNeil, with assistance from Mary Hickman and Celia Jenkins.

5. In the bulk of standard sociological research literature on social class the focus, both theoretically and empirically, has been placed upon between-class differences in life chances, values and ways of life. The key issues were always, firstly, the respective adequacy of two/three/five/seven fold group divisions as explanatory tools; secondly, on what basis people should be allocated to one group or another; thirdly, where the boundaries between the groups should be placed. In particular, debates over the shift or disappearance of the boundary between 'the working class(es)' and 'the rest' have dominated, together with the implications of the growth of the middle class(es). In the last decade attention has increasingly turned to the analysis of within-class differences, but *not* as part of an argument against real between-class differences (as in the North American 'status group' approach), rather in the attempt to discover and understand more about the *dynamics of class relations* in more detail. In this way, it is hoped, we can arrive at a better understanding of contemporary social class at the macro level. There are no agreed-upon ways of distinguishing between 'class fractions' as yet, still less terminological agreement in this respect. It would be correct to say that all typologies that have emerged so far are inductive in nature and make use of common-sense cultural concepts. They tend to give greater weight to elements of cultural values and ways of life *in relation to* material conditions, and in empirically highly specific applications. Examples in the youth transitions literature include Aggleton (1987) and Brown (1987). The within-class groups identified from the analysis of the GAOC data are an integral part of a model of the modalities of gender relations in which struggles of accommodation and resistance are played out at three levels: cultural semantics, historical contingencies and the dynamics of gendered transitions. The terms used to describe the groups each attempt to define modalities of the gendered habitus, and as such are linked to a Bourdieu-style analysis of cultural grammatics and social space. So, for example, what is called a 'traditional solidary entrepreneurial/artisan-type fraction' (see p.x in the text) relates to the gender location of 'cultural apprenticeship', which is defined in shorthand terms as a critically reflexive but specifically constrained accommodative form of consciousness, encapsulated in the principle of 'separate and equal', in which a positive acceptance of class-based community tradition entails subordination or submerging of gender divisions in favour of class solidarity in production. On the other hand, a positive evaluation of femininity permits critical consciousness of gender divisions in reproduction. The ideological separation of female/male worlds and class solidarity hinders the extension of critical consciousness to production/reproduction relations. In this study, girls from old-established indigenous skilled/entrepreneurial working class communities occupy this gender location, which essentially reproduces a class cultural fraction currently subject to long-term attrition as a consequence of social and economic change. For case studies of this and other gender locations, see Chisholm (1990).
6. We do not know the precise ages of the GAOC sample's mothers, but we expect they would be, on average, a little younger than those in the YPL study, given the association between age at marriage/first childbirth and socio-economic status.
7. In the GAOC study, this means that the respondents attended inner London co-educational or single sex girls' comprehensive schools. In the Netherlands, two-thirds of schools are independent in the sense that they are established by particular interest groups, most particularly the Churches, so that most of these independent schools are, in turn, formally denominational. All these schools are,

however, fully funded by the state, and they must adhere to government regulations on curriculum, etc. It would be quite misleading to characterise Dutch educational provision as primarily independent in the UK sense of this term.

8. The YPL is a longitudinal project. It may be possible for future analysis to draw closer parallels with the GAOC data, much of which is also longitudinal.
9. The statistics for educational participation in particular must be interpreted with caution, since EEC countries do not operate similar educational and vocational training systems. So, for example, UK rates for 16–18-year-olds are very low in comparison with most other EEC countries, including the Netherlands. This results not only from the earlier cessation of compulsory schooling in the UK, but also from the differing statistical categories constructed to describe what 16–18-year-olds are 'doing'.
10. We have no reliable information about GAOC mothers' educational qualifications, but on the basis of the general information we have it is safe to conclude that few continued their schooling beyond the then-compulsory leaving age (14 and 15). Some will have completed an apprenticeship (dressmaking or hairdressing) or taken a secretarial training course. The middle class mothers had attended teacher training college or university.
11. UK social security regulations alone mean that wives' employment in such cases does not improve the family's financial circumstances; additionally, some of these families have a longstanding attentuated relation to gainful employment altogether – part of a mutiple social deprivation complex.
12. This does not mean that husbands of those mothers who did have paid work were themselves in insecure and badly paid employment, although of course some were. It simply implies that only in those families where the husband's income is reliable and relatively adequate can spouses choose to practise a clear breadwinner/homemaker division of labour.
13. This group of girls is analytically important because their positionings in gender discourse underline the importance of identifying within-class fractions for a clearer understanding of the interactions between gender, ethnicity and class in shaping orientations and perspectives in relation to identities and futures. The dynamics of their trajectories across the three year period of the study offer, in particular, a measure of insight into the kinds of cross-pressures that, within the scope of personal biography, favour resistance (however partial, contradictory and ultimately non-realised) over accommodation to the reproduction of gender relations. So, for example, the more complex and the culturally specific ways in which gender, ethnicity and class intersect in the lives of minority group girls give them differently structured options. In many cases the 'double/triple negative' simply intensifies the difficulties girls face in negotiating gendered youth transitions. But specific intersections may mean that structured contradictions are more sharply manifested in girls' experiences. Given favourable circumstances, some may then be able to push harder and longer at resisting immediately accommodative solutions for constructing their lives. In doing so, they contribute disproportionately to shifting the terms of gender relations towards transformation rather than reproduction.
14. What we know, of course, is that at any one point in time, only a minority of the population (in the UK in 1987, 44 per cent) currently live in households which conform to that ideal! (CSO, *op.cit.*:36–7).
15. In the first round of interviews, the 17 per cent who planned for full-time employment either with children or as intentionally childless all came from at least middle class backgrounds. But class background is obviously not the only or even the major determining variable, since data from the second round suggest that this figure has dropped sharply (to about 6 per cent). It looks as if many girls are

modifying their plans in the light of their increasing experience of the gendered labour market. The YPL study did not pick up high achieving working class girls as a distinctive group, who in the GAOC study had similar plans to this sub-group of Dutch girls. The YPL study uses a random sample in which the full range of socio-economic backgrounds are represented, and in which, therefore, the possibilities for finer distinctions are reduced. The GAOC study began with a random sample of girls attending ILEA comprehensive schools with a strongly working-class intake profile, and selected a theoretical sub-sample for the follow-through study. Given the still small numbers of educationally highly successful working class girls, samples such as those used in the YPL study are likely to 'miss' their distinctiveness. In addition, it is important to add that the few middle class girls in the GAOC sample were all educationally successful and also aimed to combine full-time professional level employment with motherhood. The high achieving working class girls differed in two ways: they aspired to a wider range of high level occupations, and they were more inclined to reject motherhood. In the strength of their attachment to paid work (and career) *per se*, the educationally successful girls were similar, regardless of social background.

16. The use of the term 'inevitabilities' does not imply here that there are incontrovertible facts of life about gender relations (although many young women in these studies used the phrase 'it's a fact of life' in this connection, as do many people in everyday conversation). Such 'inevitabilities' that transpire are structured upon real lives and hopes in confrontation with circumstances and eventualities.
17. Aspirations are not necessarily expectations, of course, and the GAOC girls' occupational expectations were in general much less exalted than their aspirations. Studying both concepts in themselves and in relation to each other is a complex task; see here Chisholm (1990: Chapter 5). Of additional interest is the fact that two-thirds of the girls (N = 43) aspired to jobs at a higher (Goldthorpe-Hope) status level than those of at least their mothers and, by and large, their fathers. This was not surprising, since in only nine cases was at least one parent employed in a routine non-manual level job or above. In none of these cases did the daughter aspire to the jobs their parent/s held.

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