

## Keynote II

### **Diversity in the transitions from school to work. The role of structure, agency, and time**

**Ingrid Schoon**, University College London, Institute of Education

To what extent do young people steer their course of their lives despite the constraining forces of social structure. This paper introduces a socio-ecological model of agency, examining the interplay between a developing individual and a changing social context. The socio-ecological approach is embedded within life course theory and enables us to investigate how objective socio-economic conditions affect individual thinking, feeling and behavior, and how different aspects of agency might shape the selection of distinct transition pathways, which can be understood as ecological niches. I will present findings and conceptualizations regarding the interactions between structure and agency during the transition from school to work to illustrate processes of social causation, cumulative risk, selection effects, and compensatory effects. In particular, the paper shows in what circumstances agency can compensate for socio-economic adversity in the transition from school to work.

**Ingrid Schoon** is Professor of Human Development and Social Policy at the Institute of Education, University College London and Research Professor at the Social Science Centre (Wissenschaftszentrum) Berlin. She has lead a great number of large scale and international research projects. Currently she is Principal Co-Investigator in the ESRC Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies (LLakes) and is directing the international post-doctoral Fellowship Program PATHWAYS to Adulthood (<http://www.pathwaystoadulthood.org/>). Her research interests are focused on the study of risk and resilience, especially during the transition from dependent childhood to independent adulthood, and social and gender equalities in attainment, health and well-being. Her research is guided by an ecological-developmental approach, mapping human development over time and in context using longitudinal data, such as the nationally representative British cohort studies. She has served as advisor to government departments, and is member of several national and international review boards, such as the Swiss National Centre of Excellence (NCCR) and the German Youth Institute (DJI). Her publications include over 100 scholarly articles, a monograph on 'Risk and Resilience', and three edited books on 'Transitions from school-to-work' (with Rainer K. Silbereisen), 'Gender differences in aspirations and attainment' (with Jacquelynne Eccles) and 'Young People's Development and the Great Recession: Uncertain Transitions and Precarious Futures' (with John Bynner), all published by Cambridge University Press.

# Diversity in the transition from school to work.

The role of structure, agency, and time

Ingrid Schoon

University College London, Institute of Education  
Wissenschaftszentrum, Berlin (WZB)



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# Outline

- Conceptualising the School-to-Work Transition within a Life Course Framework
- Structure, Agency and Time
- Key Questions
  - How do social conditions, in particular socio-economic adversity, affect individual thinking, feeling and behaviour?
  - To what extent and in what circumstances can individuals steer their own life course given structural constraints?

# The School-to-Work Transition

- Pivotal in setting the scene for adult functioning and adjustment; is both formative and risk laden
- Shaped by previous experiences, current conditions and anticipation of the future
- Interlinkages with multiple social role transitions and path dependency



# Life Course Transitions

- Within a life-course approach **transitions** are conceptualized as changes in status or identity, both personally and socially, that open up opportunities for behavioural change (Elder, 2006).
- Transitions are embedded within **trajectories** that give them a specific form and meaning (MacMillan, 2005).
- **Societal institutions** set up age-graded structures of opportunities and constraints
- **Societal structures** of inequality moderate access to opportunities
- **Individual Agency:** individuals are understood to construct their own life-course through the choices and actions they take within opportunities and constraints, whereby they both reproduce and transform the structures in which they are embedded.

# Current Debates



- Normative approach – emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000)
  - Ideal type of late and protracted transitions (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010)
- Increasing individualisation
  - De-standardisation of transitions (Modell et al., 1976; Beck, 1986; Buchmann, 1989)
  - Entrepreneurs of the self (Foucault, 1979; Ehrenberg, 2009)
- Cumulative (dis)advantages and polarization of experiences
  - fast versus slow transitions (Bynner et al., 2002; Jones, 2002; Ross et al., 2009)
  - optimal versus problematic transitions (Kerckhoff, 1993; McLanahan, 2004, 2014)
- Diverse Pathways View – (Schoon, 2015)
  - Multi-directionality, multi-finality, plasticity -> more than one optimal pathway
  - Interactions between individual and context
  - Person-environment fit (Eccles et al., 1993); ecological niches

**TO WHAT EXTENT ARE INDIVIDUALS  
ABLE TO STEER THEIR LIFE COURSE**

**ROLE OF AGENCY**

# Individual Agency

- An individual level construct highlighting the role of individual planning and choice
- Central term in life course theory (Elder, 1994; Elder & Shanahan, 2006)
  - Yet, has remained an unspecified, ‘slippery’ concept within sociological research (Hitlin & Elder, 2007)
  - As a non-structural factor it is not universally accepted or valued in sociological theory (Fuchs, 2001; Loyal & Barnes, 2001)
  - Or it is assumed that structural factors fundamentally constitute the selves of individual actors (Hitlin & Elder, 2007)
- Theories within psychology (Bandura, 2001, 2006; Eccles et al., 1993)
  - Agency as the capacity to exercise control over one’s life
  - Conceptualised as a multi-dimensional construct
  - Little attention to contextual and structural influences



# Agency – A multidimensional construct

- Multiple Dimensions of agency (Bandura, 2001; see also Eccles & Wigfield, 2003)
  - Intentionality (goals: want to go to university)
  - Forethought (expectations for success/goal certainty)
  - Self-efficacy (mastery, ability concepts)
  - Self-directedness (preferences, values)
- Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000): need for autonomy, belonging and competence

# A Socio-Ecological Model of Agency

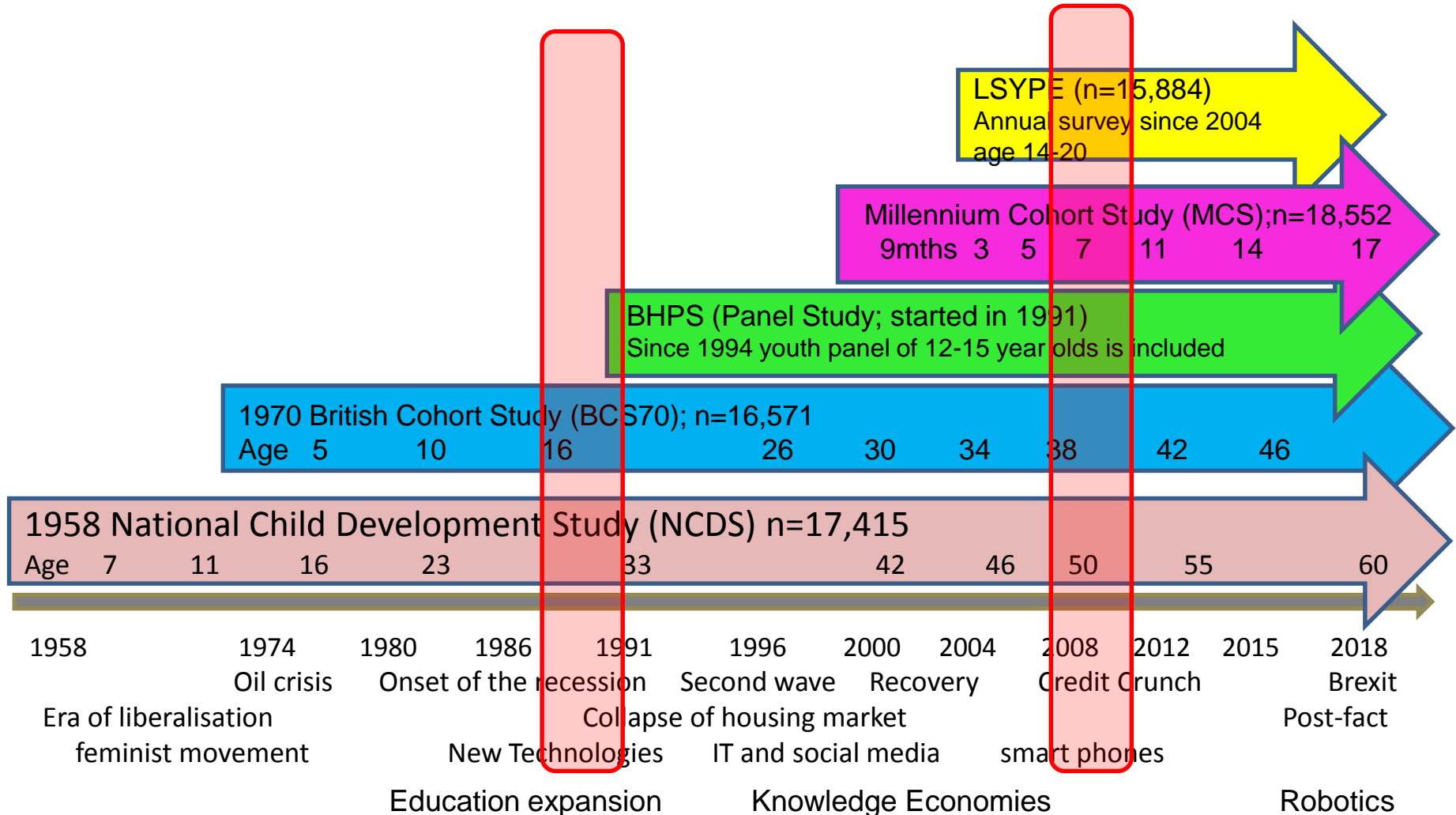
How do individual and social context define each other?

- a) Individual agency identified across multiple dimensions
- b) The role of the wider social context that shapes transition pathways
- c) Social structures as proximal setting that moderate access to opportunities
- d) Processes linking structure and agency:
  - Cumulative effects
  - Independent effects
  - Compensatory effects
- e) Overall subjective evaluation of one's life

# What is a successful transition?

- Doing ok - Adjustment within the average for a normative cohort
- Meeting developmental tasks
  - Objective achievements (income, education, occupational position)
  - Subjective evaluation (life satisfaction, health and wellbeing)
  - Timing and sequencing
    - Normative, or 'on-time transitions' are 'culturally prepared' by socialization and institutional arrangements (Buchman, 1989; Marini, 1984, Model, 1989) and are understood to be psychologically salutary
    - those who are 'off-time': too early or too late are thought to be the target of negative social sanctions and experience psychological strain (Heckhausen, 1999; Rossi, 1980)
- Who decides?
  - Can vary by age, culture and historical context

# UK Cohort and Panel Data: Overview



# CHALLENGES IN THE TRANSITION TO INDEPENDENCE

- Unequal life chances
- Gap between aspirations and reality
- Youth unemployment (even among graduates)
- Precarious employment (short term contracts, low pay, under-employment, insecurity and lack of progression)
- Housing

# Children living in poverty



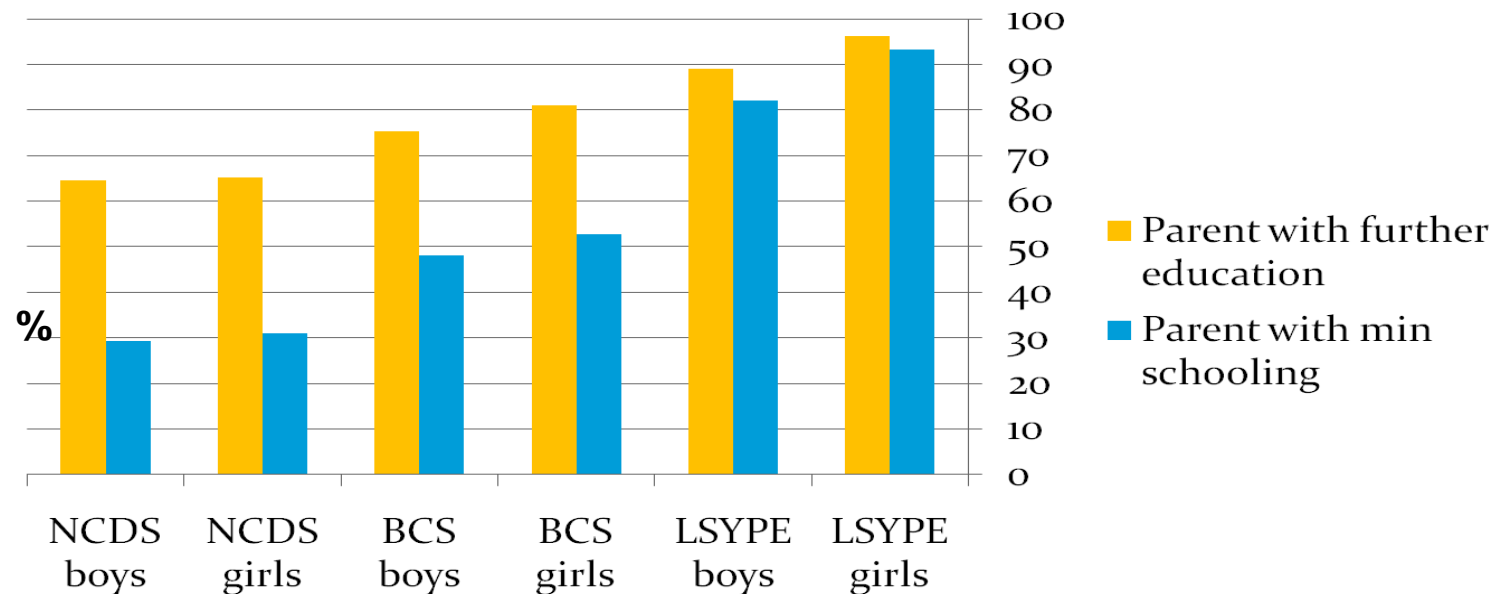
- In 2014-15 there were 3.9 million children living in poverty in the UK. That's 28 per cent of children, or 9 in a classroom of 30.
- Child poverty reduced dramatically between 1998/9-2011/12 when 800,000 children were lifted out of poverty. Since 2010, child poverty figures have flat-lined.

Department for Work and Pensions, 2016.

# Social inequality

- Children and young people growing up in relative disadvantaged families (characterised by low levels of parental education, low income, low social status, family instability) have less resources
  - More stressed parents with less energy for effective parenting
  - Poor housing, disadvantaged area, less resourced schools
  - Lower levels of academic attainment and socio-emotional capabilities
  - School drop-out and early school leaving
- Cumulation of disadvantages and adversity – a vicious cycle

# Teenage expectations for further education by gender and parental education



born: 1958

1970

1989/1990

Age 16 1974

1986

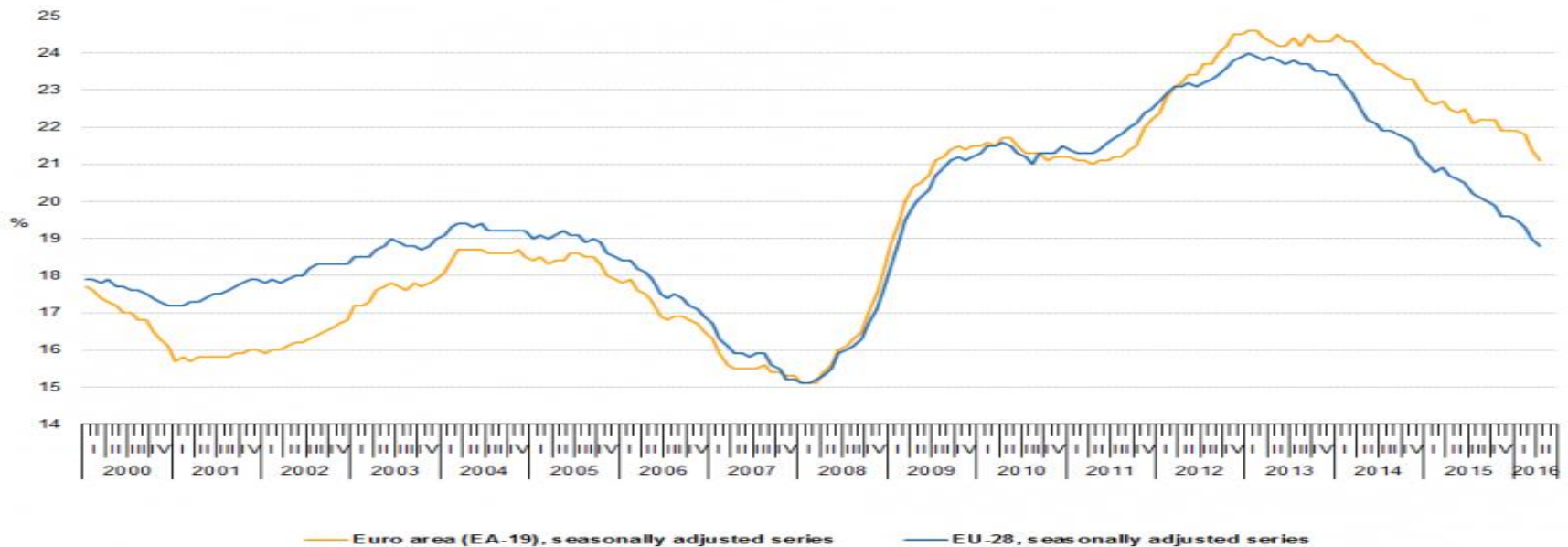
2005/6

Schoon, 2010



# The Great Recession

- Rising youth unemployment
  - especially among less educated young

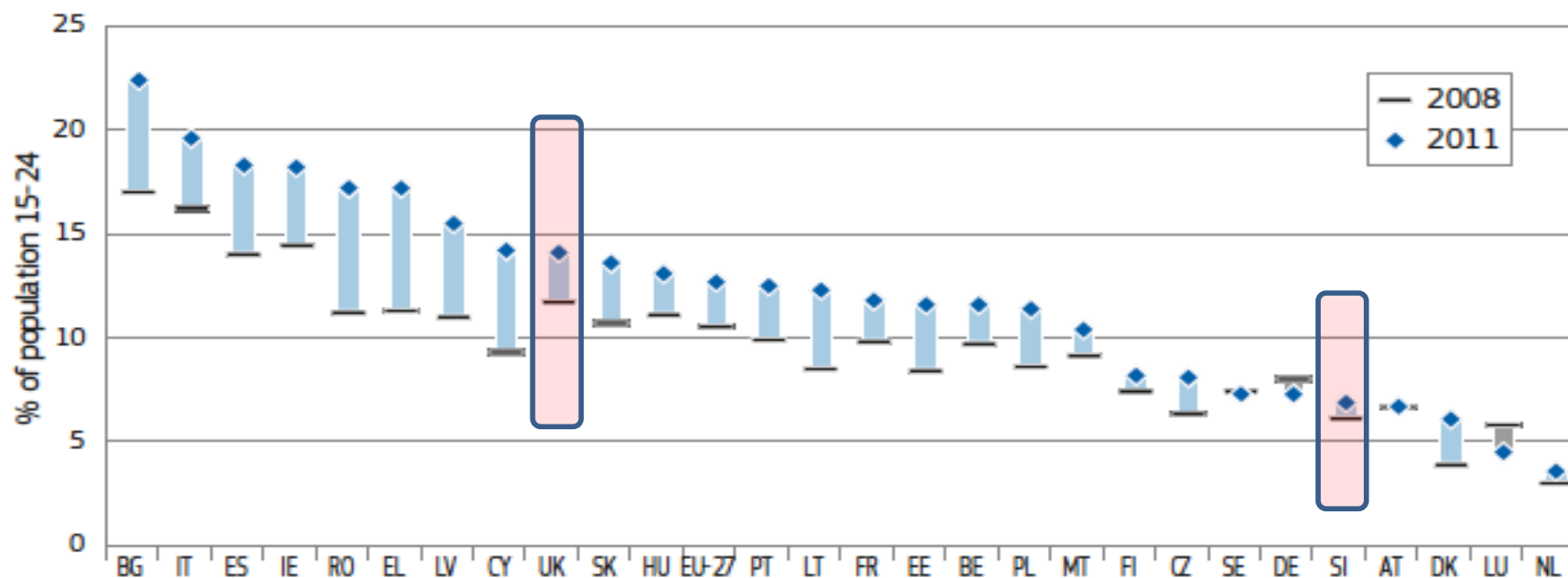


# Increase of the “Gig Economy”



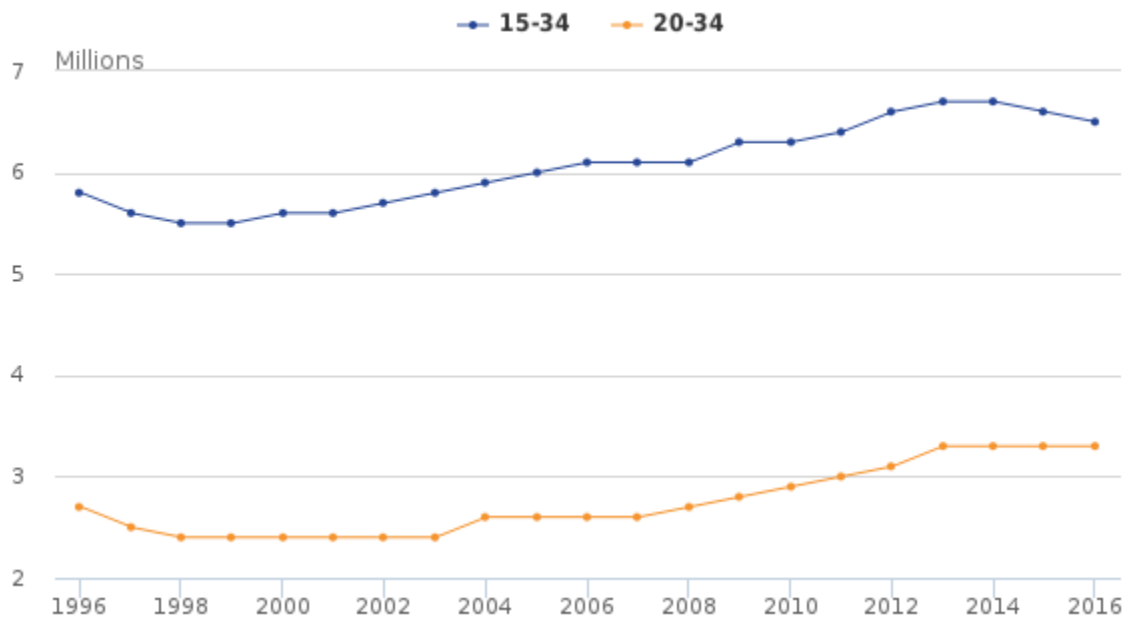
# NEET (age 15-24) across Europe

Chart 12: NEETs in the EU Member States, 2008-2011



Eurostat, EU-LFS.

# Young adults living with their parents



Source: ONS, 2016 based on Labour Force Survey

## Percentages of young adults living with their parents have been growing

- The percentage of 15 to 34 year olds living with their parents has risen from 36% in 1996 to 39% in 2016
- The percentage of 20 to 34 year olds living with their parents has risen from 21% in 1996 to 25% in 2016

Evidence from the British Cohort Studies

# **TRANSITION EXPERIENCES**

# Transitions in historical context

- Comparing experiences in two age cohorts at age 18

	BCS: born 1970, aged 18 in 1988	LSYPE: born 1990, Aged 18 in 2008
FT Education	25%	45%
Employed (with or without training)	68%	40% (33% paid work, 6% apprenticeships)
Out of the labour force (NEET)	7%	16%

# **FOCUS ON THE MOST RECENT COHORT**

Evidence from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE)  
born in 1989/90

Sequence analysis of monthly activity data collected between September  
2006 to May 2010 – 45 months period following the end of compulsory  
schooling: FT education, FT employment, Apprenticeships, NEET

# Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE)

Wave of LSYPE	Survey numbers (young people <sup>1</sup> )	Year	School year	Age of young person	Key Stage
<i>n/a</i>		<i>2001</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>10/11</i>	<i>KS2</i>
1	15,770	2004	9	13	
2	11,952	2005	10	14	KS3
3	12,148	2006	11	15	
4	11,053	2007	12 (p-c +1)	16	KS4 (GCSE)
5	10,430	2008	13 (p-c +2)	17	
6	9,799	2009	First year uni (p-c +3)	18	KS5 (Alevels)
7	8,682	2010	Second year uni (p-c +4)	19	

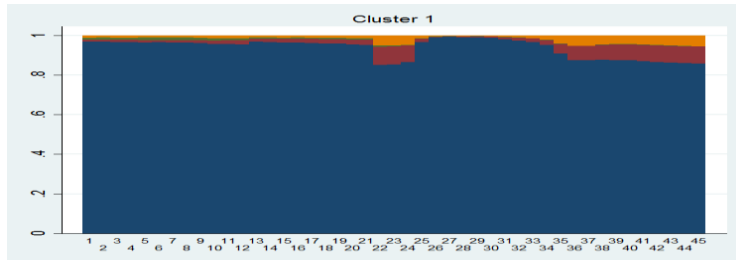
Link to National Pupil Data for exam results

Detailed monthly activity histories from September 2006 to May 2010 – 45 month period following the end of compulsory schooling : FT education; FT employed; Apprenticeship; NEET

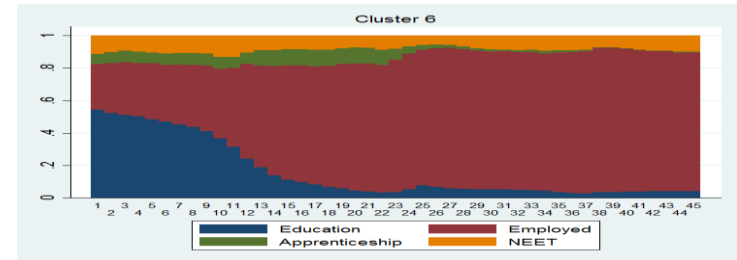


# Transitions between age 16 to 20 (LSYPE)

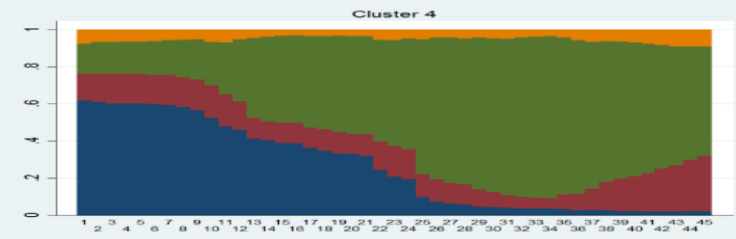
- Mostly education (45.2%)



- Early work orientation (21.1%)



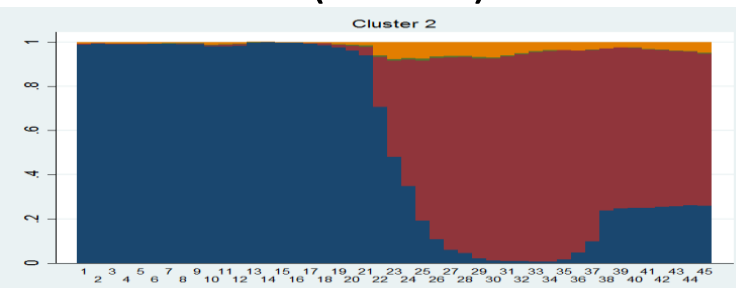
- Apprenticeship (6.5%)



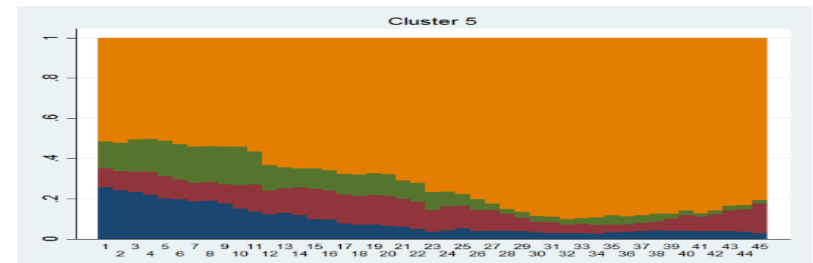
- NEET after further education (7.1%)



- Employment after further education (15.5%)



- NEET (5.6%)



# School-to-work transitions

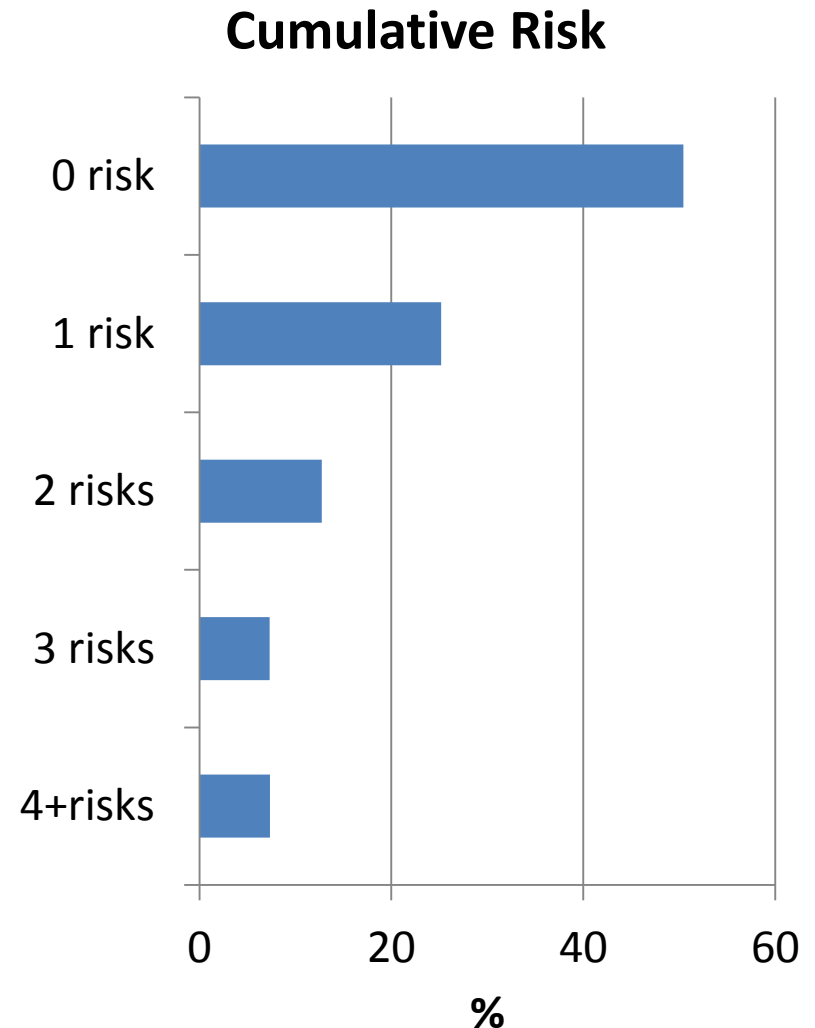
- Transitions are often not discrete, clearly bounded events
- Interlinked transitions and trajectories
- Time and timing of transitions matter
- Reversibility of transitions
- Heterogeneity in life courses
- Turning points

# Agency in Youth Transitions

- To what extent do individuals select into distinct developmental niches that correspond to their intentions, self-perceptions and preferences within given structural constraints?
- Differentiation between 3 distinct processes
  - Cumulative risk
  - Independent effect model
  - Compensatory (or interactive) effect model

# Socio-Economic Family Resources

Indicators	%
Low parental education	25.3
Low income (less than £10,400 per annum)	12.9
Parental worklessness	12.8
Single parent household	21.8
No housing tenure	26.7



# Indicators of Agency

## Domain Specific

Dimensions	Indicator
Intention	Education expectations <i>Likely to apply to University</i>
Forethought	Goal certainty <i>Likely to be accepted if apply</i>
Self-efficacy	Ability concepts <i>Math, English, Science, ICT</i>
Self-directedness	School engagement Happy at school, likes school, etc

# Association between Socio-Economic Resources and Agency

## (Bivariate Correlations)

Indicators	Socio-economic resources
Expectation to go to university	-.08
Goal certainty	-.08
Academic self-concept	-.02
School engagement	-.04
Academic attainment at age 11	-.30

# Predicting Transitions (Relative Risk Ratios)

REF: Mostly Education	Apprenticeship	Employed after some education	Early Work-focus	NEET after some education	NEET
<b>Socio-economic resources</b>					
Low Family resources	.95	1.02	<b>1.12#</b>	<b>1.19**</b>	<b>1.48***</b>
IMD	<b>1.01**</b>	.996	<b>1.01#</b>	<b>1.01*</b>	<b>1.02**</b>
Urban	1.24	.91	1.41	1.37	1.70
<b>Agency</b>					
Likely to apply to Uni	<b>.72***</b>	<b>.83***</b>	<b>.67***</b>	1.03	.87
Expectation of success	<b>.79#</b>	.93	.95	<b>.80#</b>	<b>.69*</b>
Self efficacy	<b>.71***</b>	<b>.84**</b>	<b>.78***</b>	<b>.83#</b>	1.01
School engagement	.94	.95	<b>.86*</b>	.93	<b>.65***</b>

# Predicting Transitions – Controls

## (Relative Risk Ratios)

	Apprentice- ship	Employed after some education	Early Work- focus	NEET after some education	NEET
Female	<b>.35***</b>	.99	<b>.67***</b>	<b>.70**</b>	.96
Non-white	<b>.25***</b>	<b>.46***</b>	<b>.18***</b>	<b>.57**</b>	<b>.23***</b>
Academic attainment at age 11	<b>.68***</b>	.97	<b>.56***</b>	.85	<b>.46***</b>
Life Satisfaction at age 14/15	.88	.95	<b>.86**</b>	.92	.86

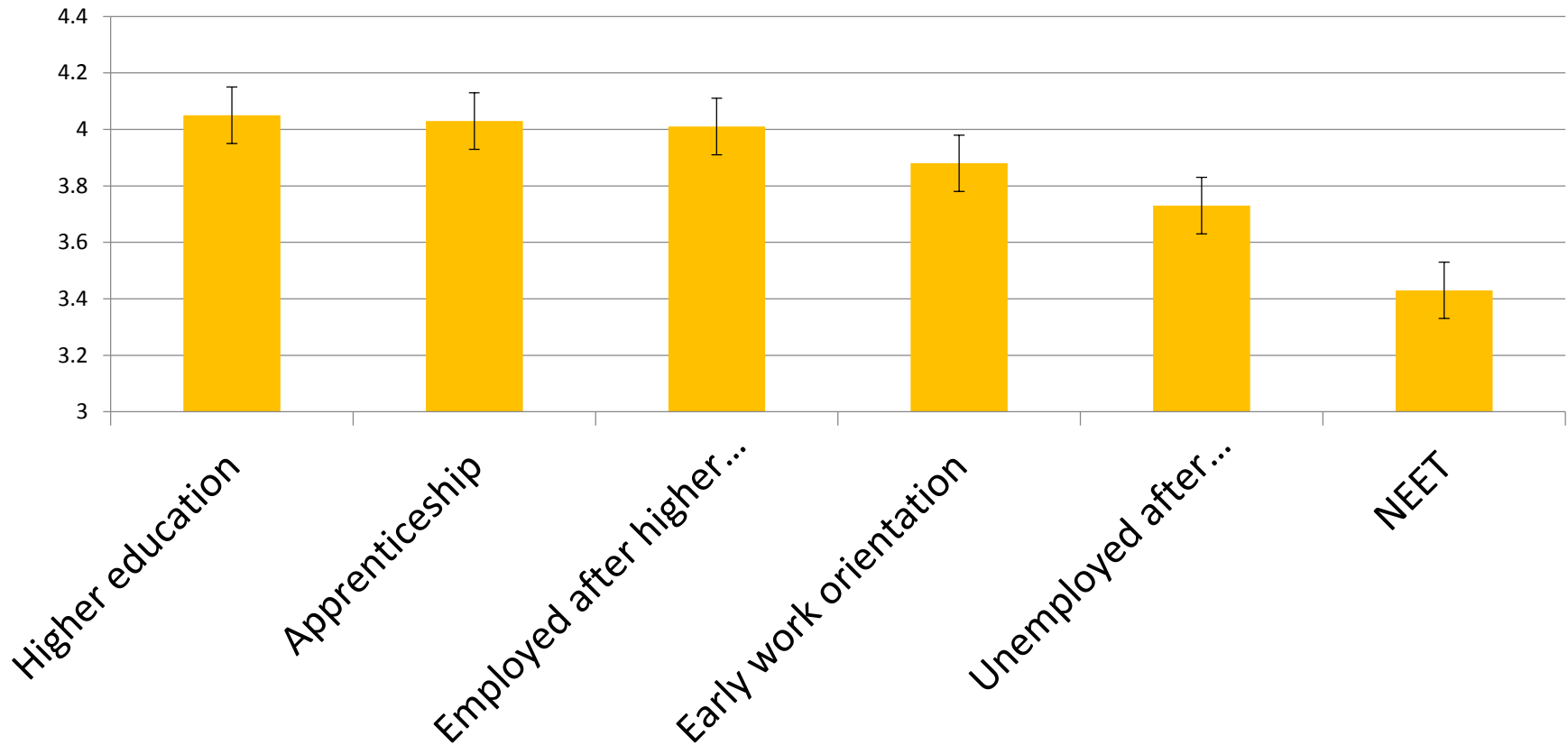


# Interaction Effects

- Does agency play a significant role in high risk conditions?
- We identified 2 significant interaction effects:
  - socio-economic risk by expectation of success: higher likelihood to enter employment after some further education
  - socio-economic risk by self-efficacy: higher likelihood to be unemployed after some further education

# **WHAT IS A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION?**

# Life Satisfaction by Group



Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017

Predictors	Life Satisfaction at 19/20 (OLS regression)		
Family resources	<b>-.03*</b>	-.02	-.02
IMD	<b>-.003**</b>	<b>-.003*</b>	<b>-.003*</b>
Urban	-.05	-.03	-.02
<b>Agency</b>			
Likely to apply to Uni	.02	.01	.01
Expectation of success	<b>.07***</b>	<b>.06*</b>	<b>.05#</b>
Self efficacy	.01	.004	.02
School engagement	<b>.07***</b>	<b>.05**</b>	<b>.05#</b>
<b>Transitions</b>			
Apprenticeship		.09	.11
Employed after some educ		-.05	-.04
Work focus employed at 16		<b>-.15***</b>	<b>-.14**</b>
Unemployed after some educ		<b>-.25***</b>	<b>-.25***</b>
NEET		<b>-.55***</b>	<b>-.63***</b>
<b>Controls</b> Female			<b>.94**</b>
Life satisfaction at 14/15			<b>.10***</b>

# Life Satisfaction

- Associated with structural and individual-level factors
- Transition experiences show independent effect
  - they fully mediate influence of family socio-economic hardship, but not of individual agency factors

# Summary

- We identified 6 distinct transition pathways
- Variations in transitions are associated with structural factors – including influences from the proximal and wider context
- Indicators of agency are associated with transition experiences independent of structural constraints
  - Individuals steer the course of their life independent of structural constraints
  - More than one optimal pathway

# Under which conditions is agency effective?

- Most effective at turning points
  - More prominent if structures are lacking
  - If socio-economic risks are not overpowering
  - If agency is matched to individual competences and capabilities
- 
- Important to consider multiple dimensions of agency – and domain specific effects
  - Important to consider constellations of risk
  - Person x environment fit: niche construction

# Thank you

[I.Schoon@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:I.Schoon@ucl.ac.uk)

