



WP-EC 2012-05

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Versión: julio 2012 / Version: July 2012

Edita / Published by:
Instituto Valenciano de Investigaciones Económicas, S.A.
C/ Guardia Civil, 22 esc. 2 1º - 46020 Valencia (Spain)

When do people become adults? The Uruguayan case

Natalia Melgar and Máximo Rossi*

Abstract

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 skills, income, labor market participation and marital status, among others transitions that have been found to be associated with the attainment of adulthood. With the aim of identifying attitudinal patterns, we estimate ordered probit models examining a series of hypothetical transitions. Our dataset is the 2008 survey carried out by the International Social Survey Program in Uruguay.

We discover that gender, age, and educational level are viewed as critical determinants in the passage to adulthood. Moreover, we discover that Uruguay may have a different constellation of beliefs pertaining to adult transitions than similar studies that have been conducted in the United States.

Keywords: Adulthood, transition, life course, Uruguay.

JEL classification: D01, J19, Z13.

Resumen

Este trabajo explora cuáles son los factores clave que los uruguayos consideran relevantes para calificar a alguien como adulto. En particular, se analiza la relación entre la adultez y la educación, el ingreso personal, la participación en el mercado laboral y el estado civil, entre otras características personales. Con el objetivo de identificar patrones de comportamiento, se estiman modelos probit ordenados. La base de datos es la encuesta de 2008 llevada a cabo por el *International Social Survey Program* en Uruguay.

Este artículo señala que el género, la edad y el nivel educativo son factores críticos para entender cuando se considera que alguien es adulto. Por otra parte, se extienden los resultados de investigaciones anteriores, mostrando que el hecho de vivir ciertas circunstancias como la paternidad, no hace que la opinión pública considere que esas personas son adultas.

Palabras clave: Adultez, transición, ciclo de vida, Uruguay

Clasificación JEL: D01, J19, Z13.

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1. Introduction

Adulthood is a multi-dimensional construct involving both a series of demographic transitions such as completion of education, labor market participation, home leaving, marriage and parenthood (Furstenberg, 2003). Clearly, the 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, Furstenberg and Waters (2010) argue the age of 18 or 21 has become insignificant as a signal of adult status.

Shanahan et al. (2005) and Reitzle (2007) show that this is specially 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 ISSP questionnaire includes the set of questions that allow us to do this study. This article explores what are the relevant facts that Uruguayans consider as 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 this opinion is shaped by a set of personal attributes such as gender, age and the educational level. 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 people’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 education matters, therefore we also explore whether opinions change among educational levels indicating social class differences in the importance of particular transitions. The structure of the paper is as follows. Section two is devoted to the existing and well-developed theory and evidence on the subject. Section three sketches the dataset and the econometric methods applied in this paper. In section four, we present and discuss the results, while we draw conclusions in section five.

2. Theory and evidence on the subject

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 (Billari and Wilson, 2001; Blossfeld et al., 2005; Chisholm and Kovacheva, 2002; Corijn and Klijzing, 2001; Furstenberg et al., 2002; Settersten et al., 2005; Shavit and Mueller, 1998). 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 (Berlin, Furstenberg, and Waters, 2010).

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 are considered less immediate relevant to becoming an adult. In a similar study in the United States that examined attitudes about the attainment of adulthood, Furstenberg et al. (2004) 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 in the developing world where marriage and parenthood have been delayed such as Uruguay (see also, Lloyd et al., 2006).

The consequences for families and societies are both remarkable and undeniable. Schoeni and Ross (2005) show that American parents spend about a third part of the costs of raising a child to the age of 18 again between 18 and 34 (providing both material and direct cash assistance). On the other hand, Goldscheider et al. (2001) 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 (Furstenberg, 2010). 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 (Coombs and Freedman, 1966); women with early first birth achieved a lower educational level and a lower occupational status (Presser, 1971 and Bumpass et al. 1978) and Riblett (1981) hold that women who delay the first birth have more education and higher occupational status.

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. As proof, Barber (2002) argues that children whose mothers prefer early marriage, large families and low levels of education, enter parenthood earlier and *vice versa*. The study concludes that mothers' preferences have a strong influence on when their children become parents by guiding them on different pathways toward adulthood. To a growing extent, there has also been convergence between males and females in the guidance they receive from the family and their personal ambitions (Fussell and Furstenberg, 2005).

From these vantage points, we expect that people's views change according to their gender, age and educational level and gender. In particular, given the higher participation rate of men in the labor market, it is likely that men tend to value more working full-time, being economically independent or leaving home. At the same time, given the increasing rates of women who finished tertiary studies, women are more likely to value more completing formal education which may imply a delay in marriage and childbearing. Moreover, adulthood is a complex phenomena and people's definition may vary with their age and educational level.

3. Data source and methodology

Our dataset is the 2008 survey conducted by the *International Social Survey Program* (ISSP) in Uruguay. The ISSP is an annual program of cross-national collaboration on surveys covering topics important for social science research. The survey asks respondents about their opinions on a great variety of issues, including abortion, trust and religion, as well as demographic and socio-economic information, such as age, gender, education, religiosity and others. The survey is representative in each country where it is carried out.

The dependent variable seeks to grasp respondent's opinions on the relevance of the occurrence of some facts to consider that someone is an adult: "*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 cases: being economically independent, leaving home, completing formal education, working full time, getting married and having a child. The set of answers were: "very important", "fairly important", "somewhat important", "not very important", "not important", "can not choose / do not know".

Answers to this questions allow us to derive information about the relative importance of this set of facts without asking directly whether or not people feel completely adult and why (missing data were not included in the model). Directs questions may cause ambiguous answers (Shanahan et al., 2005 and Reitzle, 2007).

We consider answers to the first five categories and construct new variables that equal: 0 if respondent indicates “not very important” or “not important”, 1 if respondent answers “somewhat important” and 2 if he/ she points out “very important” or “fairly important”. Table 1 shows the weighted frequency distribution of the answers to this question.

Table 1. Distribution of answers

	Being economically independent	Leaving home	Completing formal education	Working full-time	Getting married	Having a child
0	13.61	27.73	11.71	12.01	44.64	35.74
1	16.42	17.32	9.81	11.51	15.12	15.22
2	69.97	54.95	78.48	76.48	40.24	49.04
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Each of the transitions that are relevant to becoming an adult are shown in Table 1. The response patterns reveal considerable variability in their perceived salience to becoming an adult; the percentages vary from 40.24 percent in the case of getting married to 78.48 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 where financial independence was strongly endorsed as the primary criterion for becoming an adult (Furstenberg et al., 2004). 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. (2004) speculate, they may represent a second stage of the transition to adulthood after the economic transition.

Home leaving, which typically lags school completion and full-time employment, but in nations where residential college has become a common part of the adult transition and in Nordic countries where the welfare state promotes early autonomy, home leaving may occur earlier. In Uruguay over half of the respondents (55 percent) believe that home leaving is part of the set of economic transitions that make up the first phase of the passage to adulthood.

Interestingly, as in the United States study that used a similar set of questions, marriage and parenthood are likely to be regarded as less essential transitions to becoming an adult. Considering the upper-class, Furstenberg (2003) holds that marriage tends to occur in the late twenties in general after completing the university. As Goldscheider and Goldscheider (1987) state, living alone before marriage is a new social phenomenon that is proof of a different pattern of family and demographic change that have characterized modern societies since the '50s but it is a relatively new phenomenon in the case of developing countries. The authors also showed that young men (more than young women) expected to live away before

marriage. Marriage and having a child are found at the bottom of the ranking. This finding 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.

To examine the configuration of perceived importance of adult transitions, we ran a correlation matrix of the set of items. The results shown in Table 2 reveals that even though they are always positive, the correlations are not high. The highest figure is registered between getting married and having a child (0.60), suggesting that childbearing within marriage remains important even if it is not always observed in reality.

Table 2. Correlation matrix

	Being economically independent	Leaving home	Completing formal education	Working full-time	Getting married	Having a child
Being economically independent	1.00					
Leaving home	0.37	1.00				
Completing formal education	0.10	0.23	1.00			
Working full time	0.29	0.20	0.25	1.00		
Getting married	0.16	0.15	0.19	0.31	1.00	
Having a child	0.11	0.19	0.19	0.29	0.60	1.00

Given that our dependent variables are multinomial, we estimated ordered probit models. An ordered probit model aims at determining how the set of independent variables affects the formation of opinions towards adulthood. After estimating the model, we computed the probability that the dependant variable equals five (the highest level) and we also estimate the marginal effects of the independent variables.

Following the previous literature review and given that the dataset contains a large set of questions which represents respondent's attributes (gender, age, educational level, number of children, religious affiliation), the models includes these variables as independent variables in order to capture the effect on opinions about each of the transitions. The description of the included variables is reported in table 3.

Table 3. Description of independent variables

Variable	Description	Mean
Age2	1 if respondent is between 30 and 44 years old	0.27
Age3	1 if respondent is between 45 and 64 years old	0.32
Age4	1 if respondent is 65 years old or older	0.20
Catholic	1 if respondent indicates to be raised in the Catholic religion	0.53
Child	1 if respondent have at least one child	0.75
Education2	1 if respondent's years of education are between 6 and 9	0.43
Education3	1 if respondent's years of education are between 10 and 12	0.24
Education4	1 if respondent's years of education are 13 or more	0.21
Evangelist	1 if respondent indicates to be raised in the Evangelist religion	0.09
Full time	1 if respondent works full time	0.49
Man	1 if respondent is a man	0.38
Married	1 if respondent is married or living as married	0.36
Montevideo	1 if respondent lives in Montevideo (the capital city)	0.48
Public sector	1 if respondent works for the government or in a public owned firm	0.15
Religiosity	1 if respondent attends to religious services at least once a week	0.13
Self-employed	1 if respondent is self-employed	0.27
Single	1 if respondent is single	0.22
Subjective income	Self-placement in 10 point income scale	4.58
Unemployed	1 if respondent is unemployed	0.06

4. Results, what characteristics shape people's views?

Findings are reported in Table 4, it presents the marginal effects after ordered probit models estimation. These figures are the changes in the above-mentioned probability given a change in the independent variables.

Considering that gender roles have been changing since last decades (for example, the increasing participation rate of women in the labor market or at the University) , we give particular attention to gender differences in opinions. As we hypothesized, there are significant differences in men' and women' views. Men are generally more likely to consider that the set of assessed facts are important to become an adult with the exemption 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 starts 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 the university are more likely to postpone other decisions such as getting married, having a child or being economically independent in order to finish college.

Table 4. Opinions on adulthood, marginal effects

	Being economically independent	Leaving home	Completing formal education	Working full-time	Getting married	Having a child
Men	0.077** (0.034)	0.056* (0.028)	-0.061* (0.031)	0.092*** (0.031)	0.143*** (0.036)	0.147*** (0.037)
Age2	-0.087* (0.053)	-0.042 (0.052)	-0.026 (0.045)	-0.022 (0.044)	0.007 (0.050)	0.010 (0.053)
Age3	-0.137*** (0.054)	-0.110** (0.055)	-0.017 (0.047)	0.032 (0.045)	0.006 (0.053)	-0.007 (0.057)
Age4	-0.182*** (0.068)	-0.061 (0.065)	0.005 (0.055)	0.142*** (0.042)	0.056 (0.062)	0.115* (0.064)
Education2	-0.088 (0.056)	-0.058 (0.059)	0.026 (0.049)	-0.149** (0.061)	-0.102* (0.055)	-0.097* (0.057)
Education3	-0.146** (0.064)	-0.001 (0.067)	0.004 (0.056)	-0.206*** (0.074)	-0.165*** (0.058)	-0.045 (0.066)
Education4	-0.080 (0.068)	-0.033 (0.073)	-0.047 (0.064)	-0.312*** (0.082)	-0.253*** (0.054)	-0.205*** (0.066)
Subjective income	0.018* (0.011)	-0.013 (0.011)	-0.002 (0.009)	0.007 (0.009)	-0.003 (0.011)	-0.019* (0.011)
Single	-0.036 (0.049)	-0.056 (0.051)	-0.043 (0.047)	0.061 (0.041)	-0.028 (0.050)	-0.058 (0.052)
Married	-0.080** (0.037)	-0.082** (0.039)	-0.001 (0.034)	-0.049 (0.034)	0.081** (0.038)	-0.013 (0.040)
Child	0.125*** (0.045)	0.037 (0.047)	-0.029 (0.041)	0.092** (0.045)	-0.030 (0.047)	0.019 (0.049)
Catholic	0.063* (0.034)	0.001 (0.037)	0.056* (0.031)	0.045 (0.031)	0.089** (0.035)	0.061* (0.037)
Evangelist	0.079 (0.056)	-0.068 (0.067)	0.057 (0.046)	0.045 (0.049)	-0.039 (0.066)	-0.073 (0.065)
Religiosity	0.021 (0.051)	-0.022 (0.055)	0.055 (0.038)	0.016 (0.045)	0.179*** (0.056)	0.036 (0.055)
Unemployed	-0.072 (0.073)	0.039 (0.077)	-0.126* (0.079)	0.081 (0.055)	-0.118 (0.070)	-0.001 (0.088)
Public sector	-0.073 (0.049)	-0.123** (0.050)	-0.003 (0.044)	-0.050 (0.044)	-0.048 (0.046)	-0.079 (0.050)
Self-employed	-0.064* (0.037)	-0.041 (0.040)	-0.016 (0.034)	-0.011 (0.034)	0.004 (0.038)	0.005 (0.039)
Full time	-0.055 (0.038)	0.031 (0.041)	0.015 (0.034)	0.016 (0.034)	-0.070* (0.040)	-0.043 (0.040)
Montevideo	0.041 (0.033)	0.080** (0.035)	0.096*** (0.029)	-0.030 (0.031)	-0.035 (0.034)	-0.036 (0.036)
Observations	990	990	990	990	990	990

Notes: 1) Robust standard errors in parentheses.

2) * significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%

The picture that emerges from this result indicates that as completing formal education is more relevant for women, they understand that it may imply delaying marriage and/ or parenthood, economically independence (while she are studying) generally must be deferred. There are a large set of studies that provide econometric evidence on the fact that having a child earlier reduces income and savings (Coombs and Freedman, 1966) and the chances of achieving a high educational level or occupational status (Presser, 1971, Bumpass et al., 1978 and Riblett, 1981).

Assessing the case of United States, Furstenberg (2010) 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 (2010) highlighted a key policy issue emerges from this result, how to reduce the increasing demands that are placed in parents.

We provide strong evidence that the age of respondents is correlated with the perceived importance of economic transitions, but as in the U.S. economic independence is more regarded as a marker of adulthood among the young. By contrast, there are no significant differences 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 attitudes. An overwhelming result is that one of the exemptions is completing formal education. Hence, there are no significant differences between those people who have completed their studies and other people. Leaving home is the second exemption, while education could be used to hasten progress toward adulthood; the educational level makes non-significant differences of opinions on whether it is an important part of becoming adult. Considering the other cases, of particular interest is our finding of the negative effect 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 4 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 attainment of economic self-sufficiency has become a more

prominent concern. As Hamilton and Hamilton (2009) pointed out the process of family formation today is shaped by education and employment opportunities

Regarding marital status we also find significant differences. Only those who are married consider that this characteristic is relevant to become an adult. Moreover, married people do not 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.

It is worth noting that those who are parents link adulthood to being economically independent and working full-time. Regarding the relevance of parenthood, we highlight that there are non-significant differences between those who have had children and those who have no child.

Although no hypotheses were formulated for religious affiliation, the influence of religion has proved to be pervasive on views regarding life goals. In general, Catholics tend to positively value procreation and therefore it is not surprising that they place a high priority on being married as part of the adult transition. Second, non-significant differences are found in the case of Evangelists and other people. It is also worth noting that religiosity only positively influences people's opinions towards marriage.

Table 4 also shows that unemployed people are less likely to consider that completing formal education is relevant. We argue that this negative effect is associated to a characteristic of the Uruguayan labor market. Firstly, unemployment rates have been relatively low since 2004 and unemployment is specially associated to middle-aged unskilled workers. Therefore, a great part of unemployed people has transited to adulthood without completing formal studies and hence, they do not consider that it is relevant.

We find significant differences among those working in the public sector and those working in the private sector. 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 experience more stressed situations in the recent decade. This group of workers is less likely to considering 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, accepting that living in a large city involves significant differences in everyday life, we include a variable that equals one if respondent lives in Montevideo, the capital city where more than 50 percent of the inhabitants live. 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 more relevant for those who live in Montevideo.

5. Conclusions

The contributions of this paper to the literature on this field are two-fold and show that opinions of people living in developing countries are in line with previous findings in the developed world. We show that the transition to adulthood is not determined by a single event; instead it is shaped by a steps and events that according to the people imply being an adult.

First, it is well-know that some facts are often mentioned when defining adulthood. However, our findings point to the conclusion that views about what constitutes adulthood are mediated by individuals' personal circumstances, especially their age, gender, and educational status. This means that being 18 years old (or 21 years old) is not enough. When giving an opinion people values some experiences but this value depend on personal attributes.

Secondly, in line with the prolongation of the young adulthood, we highlighted the (negative) role of the educational level. It is well-known that more educated people are likely to delay decisions such as working full-time, marriage, having a child and/ or achieving economic independence. This decision is also in line with two facts. Firstly, a higher life-expectancy which determines a prolongation of all life stages and secondly, a labor market which demands more complex skills.

Finally, we show that opinions are not necessarily influenced by whether the person has experienced status transitions themselves. For example, completing formal education is not considered significantly more relevant by high educated people, regarding having a child, regarding the relevance of parenthood, we find non-significant differences between those who have had a child and those who have no children. Working full-time makes no significant differences in opinions towards the relevance of this characteristic. The exceptions are marriage and economic independency because the former is positively associated to adulthood only by married people and the latter is positively associated to the income level.

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