

North and South of the Transition. A Comparison of Subjective Perceptions of Adulthood in Uruguay and the United States.

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Abstract

Although the changes in the Transition to Adulthood (TA) have received significant attention from scholars in both developed and developing countries, comparative studies have not kept pace, due in large part to the scarcity of adequate data especially in the developing world. In this paper we use an identical set of questions applied in Uruguay and the United States to compare people's opinion's about the importance of the traditional markers of the TA and age norms related to these events. Theoretically, we would expect to find pronounced differences in the importance and expected timing of life course events during the transition to adulthood given the differences between the two countries in terms of level of economic development and class structure.

Consistent with our expectations, we found that in Uruguay young people are expected to complete formal schooling, find a full-time job and achieve financial independence earlier than in the United States. We also found that all these events (the events in the public domain) are considered relatively less important in Uruguay, where family transitions (especially childbearing) are still central in the passage to adulthood, perhaps owing to the cultural patterns related to of the largely Italian and Spanish origins of the population.

Home leaving is the only event that is expected to happen earlier in the United States, where the prolongation of adolescence and youth seems to be in a relatively more advanced stage than in Uruguay.

In sum, these two countries present different models of the TA, at least at the level of social perceptions: Protracted transitions with emphasis on the "public" events and early departure from the parental home in the United States, vs. shorter, "family-oriented" transitions in Uruguay, with greater tolerance to inter-generational households.

Keywords: Transition to adulthood, age norms, sequencing, Uruguay.

Introduction

The expansion of higher education, the redefinition of gender roles and the increasing difficulties in the youth labor market have radically altered the way the transition to adulthood (TA) is experienced and conceived in the western world. However, we know significantly more about the former than about the latter.

The trend towards de-standardization and postponement of youth transitions has been well documented in the literature (Furstenberg et al, 2005; Beaujot y Kerr, 2007, Corjin & Klijzin 2001). The institutional and cultural elements that explain persistent differences between countries have also been thoroughly examined (Billari 2004; Billari & Wilson 2001; Cook & Furstenberg 2002). How social and individual perceptions interact with these structural factors in the context of a changing life course is what remains to be explored.

According to Liefbroer and Billari (2010), the assumption that individual decisions are less influenced by social expectations in post-modern societies explains the lack of interest in understanding the role social norms play in explaining demographic behaviors. Using data from the Netherlands they conclude that “norms concerning demographic behavior are [still] relevant, even in a society where the individualization process is fairly advanced”(Liefbroer and Billari, 2010).

When analyzing demographic behavior, at least three types of norms can be distinguished: age norms, sequencing norms and quantum norms. Age norms refer to an age, or a range of ages, within which a particular event should occur; sequencing norms refer to the order of events and quantum norms deal with information about the desired number of events (Liefbroer and Billari, 2010).

Generally, demographers have conceived norms as “structuring”, “shaping” or “regulating” the life course, with many studies focusing on how these norms affect actual behavior (Settersten, 2003; Billari & Liefbroer, 2007). However, sociologists have spent a great deal of time and energy trying to demonstrate that the relationship between norms and behavior is far from unidirectional. Norms stretch, adapt, emerge and disappear in response to institutional and structural changes, but also as new behaviors are adopted by large segments of the population. From this perspective, the analysis of norms can help us understand the institutional arrangements that shape the life course.

Such is the purpose of our study: using an identical set of questions on age norms applied in Uruguay and in the United States, we aim to analyze to what extent do age norms reflect existing differences in the institutional arrangements, class structure and cultural factors between these two countries. We will also compare perceptions of adulthood based on respondent’s evaluations of how important is each of seven selected markers of the TA to be considered an adult (leaving home, finishing school, getting a full-time job, becoming financially independent from one’s parents, being able to support a family, marrying and becoming a parent).

Yet, we will be looking at three dimensions: *Importance*, *age norms*, *sequencing norms*. But before we introduce our hypothesis we want to quickly review how the comparative literature has explained variations in the timing of key events in the TA.

According to Billari (2004), three sets of factors have been proposed to account for these persistent differences: Institutional factors (welfare state regimes, socio-economic policies); Long-term cultural differences (weak vs. strong family ties) and ideational factors (value change).

In a nutshell, where state support is high, family ties weak and gender equity advanced, the transition to adulthood (TA) is relatively compressed. On the other hand, fragile welfare systems, strong family

ties and traditional gender roles are associated with protracted transitions and smaller families (Billari, 2004; Cook & Furstenberg 2002).

In other words, we can identify two ideal types regarding the calendar of the TA: an *early* model (found in Nordic countries) and a *late* model (associated with Mediterranean countries).

Youth in Nordic countries experience a relatively compressed TA, sponsored by the state and motivated by the strong value placed on personal autonomy (weak family ties). Since cohabitation and shared living arrangements are widespread, marriage is not directly linked to home leaving, neither is a prerequisite for childbearing. In the Mediterranean model, on the other hand, marriage is central and cohabitation (or shared living arrangements) rare. In the absence of support from the state, youth in the region rely mostly on their families, which means older ages at home leaving and closer contact with parents, even after setting up a new household (Billari et al, 2000).

The United States does not fit well in any of these models, although it shares characteristics with both of them. Like in Nordic countries, individual autonomy (as opposed to familism) is highly valued and co-residence with parents after the mid-twenties used to be infrequent. However, the family bears most of the responsibility for successful or unsuccessful transitions, since state support directed to youth is much less substantial than in Nordic countries (Cook & Furstenberg, 2002).

The profound changes observed throughout the 20th Century which led to a longer and more complex TA (Furstenberg et al, 2005), affected the idea of adulthood itself. The emerging notion of adulthood is one in which family transitions play a minor role, while the transitions in the public domain (completing school, establishing an independent household and being employed full-time) are the central benchmarks in the TA (Furstenberg et al, 2004).

With a population of mostly Spanish and Italian descent, Uruguay could be placed closer to the familist end of the continuum. Besides its cultural roots, it also shares two important characteristics with Mediterranean countries: the lack of state support and a university system where most young people attend college while leaving at home (with parents). However, there is one relevant aspect, in which Uruguay differs from countries in Europe and North America: the proportion of youth that reaches third-level education. The percentage of people over 25 years old with a college degree is 4 times smaller in the US¹.

At the same time, Uruguay is the most urbanized and the most aged country in the region, and one of only four Latin American nations that have reached below replacement fertility levels (along with Cuba, Costa Rica and Chile), with a Total Fertility Rate of 2.06 children per woman in 2006 (Varela et al, 2008). This is explained, in part, by an earlier demographic transition, that started at the end of the 19th century, 30 years before the rest of the countries in Latin America. At the beginning of the 21st century, it seems clear that Uruguay is experiencing what demographers have called the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) (Lestahaeghe & Van de Kaa 1986), as shown by recent studies on family and marriage trends (Cabella, 2008, Peredes 2003).

As in more economically developed regions, the length and sequence of the TA in Uruguay is changing, although behaviors are still highly differentiated by education level and socio-economic status, with many young people following a traditional, faster, path to adulthood (Ciganda, 2010; Ciganda, 2008).

Hypothesis

¹ <http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/ReportFolders/ReportFolders.aspx>

Importance: Taking into account the continuum individualism-familism, we expect respondents in Uruguay to place more importance on the transitions on the private domain (marriage, childbearing) than respondents in the United States.

Age: We also anticipate an earlier normative timetable for the TA in Uruguay given the challenges that prevent or inhibit a large proportion of young people from reaching the second and third levels of education in the country.

Given the speed of the changes in the TA, we expect respondents from younger cohorts to present a later normative timetable for all the traditional markers.

Sequence: We expect the order of events to be similar in both countries with the exception of home leaving, which should be placed prior to finishing school in the United States and after finishing school in Uruguay.

Data and Methods

The data used in this study come from the 2002 General Social Survey (GSS) and the 2008 round of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). The GSS is an opinion poll administered to a nationally representative sample of Americans every two years by the National Opinion Research Center. The International Social Survey is a continuing opinion poll applied in Uruguay, which is also representative at the country-level.

The GSS sample included nearly 1,400 Americans aged 18 and older, while the ISSP was administered to 1010 Uruguayans in the same age range. Respondents were asked how important (on a scale of 1 to 5²) each of the following traditional benchmarks was to reaching adulthood: leaving home, finishing school, getting a full-time job, becoming financially independent from one's parents, being able to support a family, marrying and becoming a parent.

After each question about the importance of the marker, respondents were asked the ages at which that particular event should normally occur.

After a general comparison of responses from the two countries, we obtained results by education level (according to maximum level reached by the respondent: Elementary; Secondary; Post-secondary) and age.

Although we do not have questions about sequencing, we use the mean ages in order to get an idea of the order in which the 7 transitions are expected to happen throughout the life course.

Results

As expected, the normative timetable of the TA in Uruguay indicates earlier ages for all the events, with the exception of home leaving (Charts 1 and 2). The earlier pattern of home leaving in the United States could also be appreciated on the sequence of the events, where it has the second place, right after achieving financial independence. Uruguayans, on the other hand, consider that people should live on their own only after they have entered the labor force and finished school.

Another relevant difference, in terms of the sequence, is the time lag between getting married and having children observed in the United States, a gap that does not exist in Uruguay given the wider

² 1-Extremely Important, 2- Quite important, 3 Somewhat important, 4 Not too important, 5-Not at all important.

acceptance of informal unions. Even the couples who decide to get married in Uruguay are likely to have lived together for a period of time beforehand, while in the US marriage is still often viewed as the starting point of a new household.

Although average indicators hide differences within the population (specially by different levels of education), everybody seems to share an idea of a two-staged TA. One in which the formation of a family (being able to support a family- getting married-having children) only comes after one has achieved a solid position in life (financial independence, a job, a degree, a household). The longer it takes to achieve that position, the later one is expected to start a new family.

Chart 1 Mean ages and Standard Deviations at Selected Events. Uruguay (2008)

Events	Mean	Std. Dev.
1 ^o Financial Independence	20,2	3,2
2 ^o First full time Job	20,3	3,1
3 ^o Finishing School	21,0	3,6
4 ^o Home leaving	21,4	3,2
5 ^o Support a family	23,7	3,9
6 ^o Having children	25,1	4,1
7 ^o Getting married	25,1	4,6

Source: own elaboration based on ISS data.

Chart 2 Mean ages and Standard Deviations at Selected Events. United States (2002)

Events	Mean	Std. Dev.
1 ^o Financial Independence	20,8	3,1
2 ^o Home leaving	21,0	2,6
3 ^o First full time Job	21,2	2,9
4 ^o Finishing School	22,0	4,9
5 ^o Support a family	24,5	3,6
6 ^o Getting married	25,4	4,3
7 ^o Having children	26,2	3,8

Source: own elaboration based on GSS data.

Age norms in both countries present wider differences by education level than by age of the respondent, as shown in Chart 3. The higher the education level the later transitions are expected. The age of respondents, however, has less of an effect; older interviewees do not always expect earlier transitions as we hypothesized.

Chart 3- Mean Ages at Selected Events by Education Level and Age Uruguay (2008) United States (2002)

UY	Education Level			Age		
	Primary	Secondary	Post-sec	18-34	35-55	>56
Financial Independence	19.7	20.5	22.1	20.2	20.4	20.1
First full time Job	19.7	20.4	22.6	20.3	20.4	20.2
Finishing School	20.6	21.0	22.5	20.7	21.3	21.1
Home leaving	20.9	21.8	22.8	21.3	21.6	21.4
Support a family	23.1	24.1	25.7	24.0	24.0	23.2
Getting married	24.4	25.5	27.3	25.8	25.3	24.3
Having children	24.4	25.5	27.3	25.5	25.3	24.6

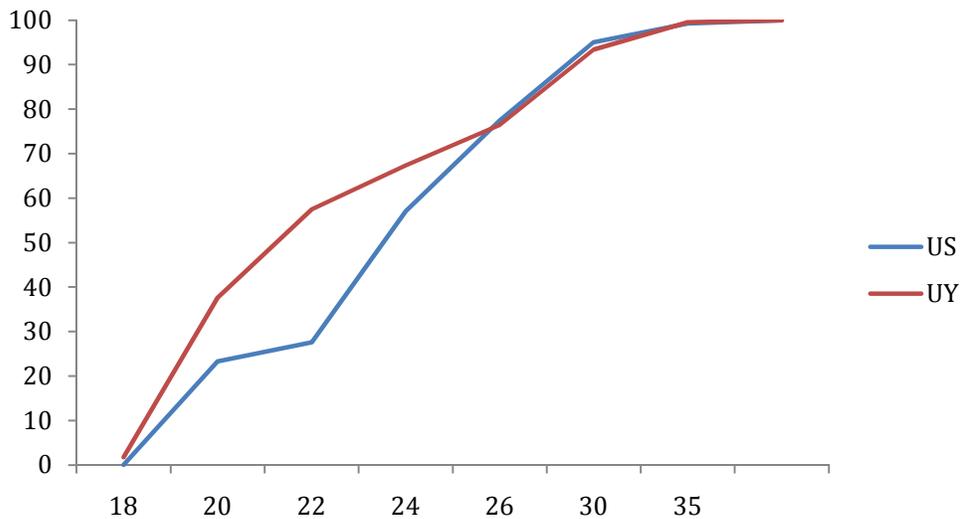
US	Education Level			Age		
	Primary	Secondary	Post-sec	18-34	35-55	>56

<i>Financial Independence</i>	19.8	20.6	21.8	20.1	21.2	21.1
<i>Home leaving</i>	20.2	20.9	21.8	20.5	21.3	21.3
<i>First full time Job</i>	20.1	21.0	22.5	20.9	21.3	21.5
<i>Finishing School</i>	20.9	21.9	23.0	22.2	22.3	22.3
<i>Support a family</i>	23.2	24.4	25.6	24.7	24.8	24.0
<i>Getting married</i>	24.1	25.1	27.0	26.0	26.0	24.7
<i>Having children</i>	25.1	25.7	28.0	26.0	26.6	25.8

Source: own elaboration based on ISS (UY) and GSS (US) data.

As stated before, one of the factors that could explain why Uruguayans expect a faster entry into adulthood is the number of people that reach the third level of education. Although the proportion in Uruguay is among the highest in Latin-America (14.6% in 2005), the figure is still far from the level achieved in some developed countries like Australia or Canada where 4 out of ten and 6 out of ten, respectively, reach the third level of education (Boado & Fernandez 2010). Since finishing high school continues to be the highest aspiration for a majority of people, it is not surprising that young Uruguayans are expected to complete formal schooling earlier than in the US, as shown in graph 1.

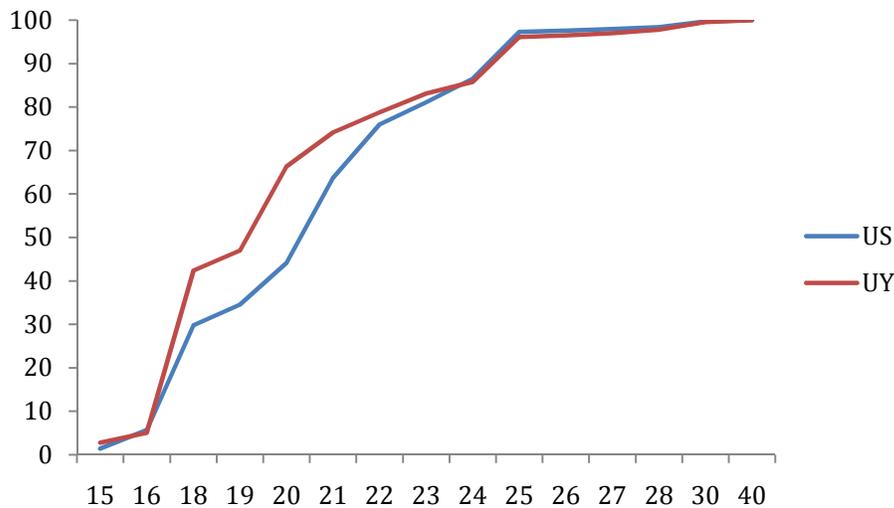
Graph 1- Percentage of young people expected to complete formal schooling by age (18-35). Uruguay, 2008. United States, 2002.



Source: own elaboration based on ISS (UY) and GSS (US) data.

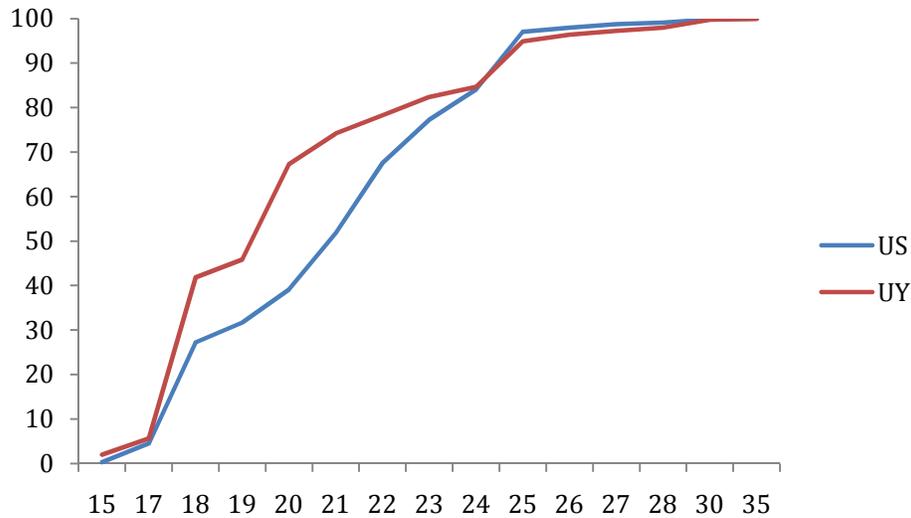
Thus, the transitions that follow the completion of education (having a full-time job and being financially independent) are also expected to be achieved earlier in Uruguay (Graphs 2 and 3).

Graph 2- Percentage of young people expected to achieve financial independence by age (15-40). Uruguay, 2008. United States, 2002.



Source: own elaboration based on ISS (UY) and GSS (US) data.

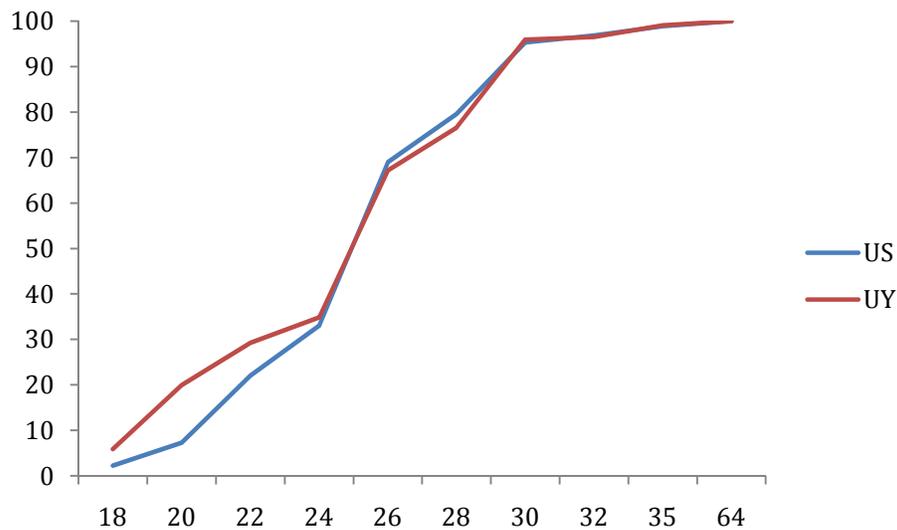
Graph 3- Percentage of young people expected to be employed full-time by age (15-35). Uruguay, 2008. United States, 2002.



Source: own elaboration based on ISS (UY) and GSS (US) data

As shown in Graph 4, the differences are less clear in the case of marriage; however, these results might be affected by the fact that cohabitation is higher in Uruguay (in 2009 30.6%³ of all couples in Uruguay were cohabitating compared to 9.9%⁴ in the United States) making marriage a weak proxy for union formation.

Graph 4- Percentage of young people expected to be married by age (18-35). Uruguay, 2008. United States, 2002.



Source: own elaboration based on ISS (UY) and GSS (US) data.

Home leaving is the only event that is expected to happen earlier in the US, although there aren't significant differences at younger ages. This is in line with what was expected considering that in

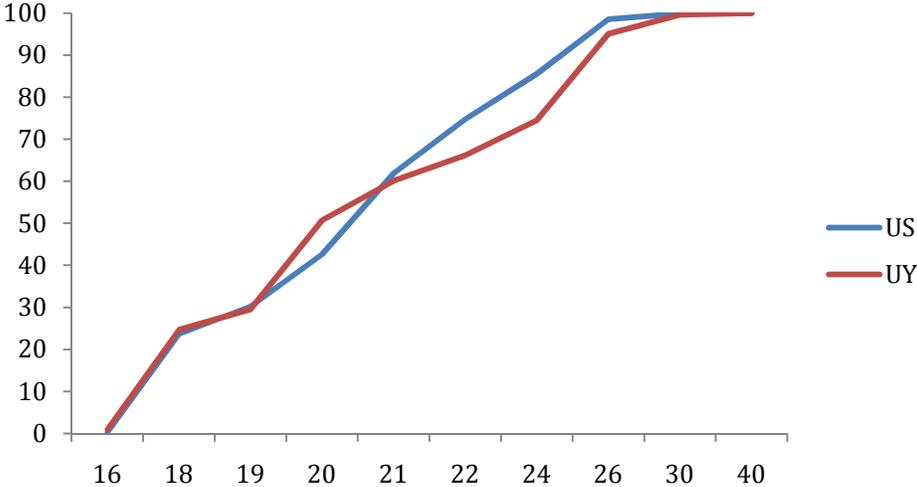
³ Own calculations based on 2009 National Household Surveys data.

⁴ Census Bureau. "America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2009".

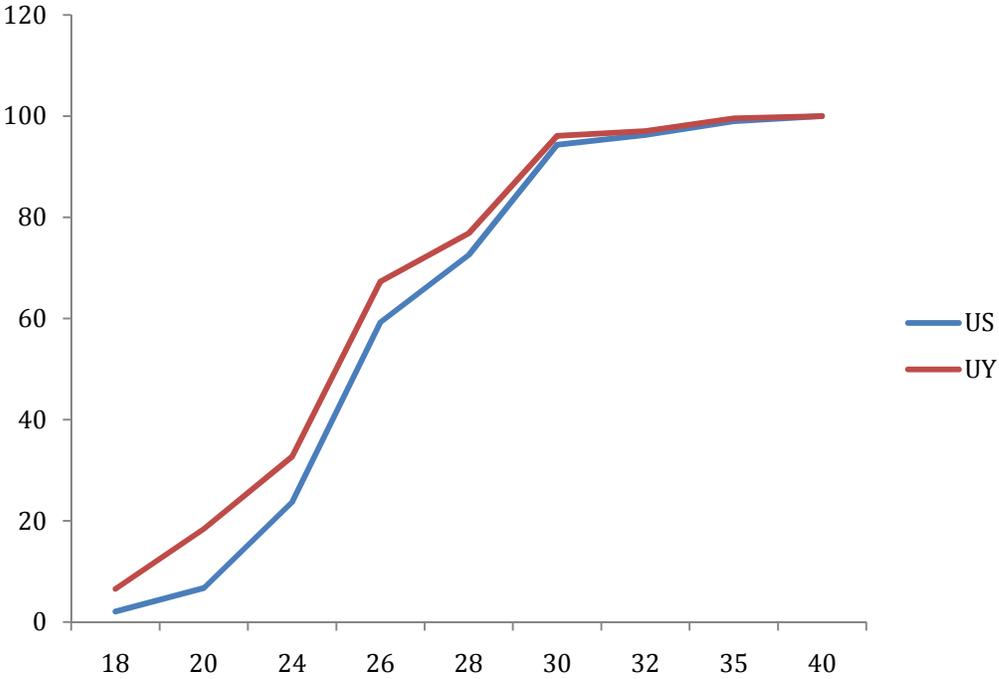
Uruguay living outside the parental home before marriage seems to be an alternative only for those with higher education levels (Ciganda, 2010).

Moving to a different city to attend college is also less frequent among young people in Uruguay, which makes home leaving less standardized by age than in the United States.

**Graph 5- Percentage of young people expected to have left home by age (18-35).
Uruguay, 2008. United States, 2002.**



Source: own elaboration based on ISS (UY) and GSS (US) data.

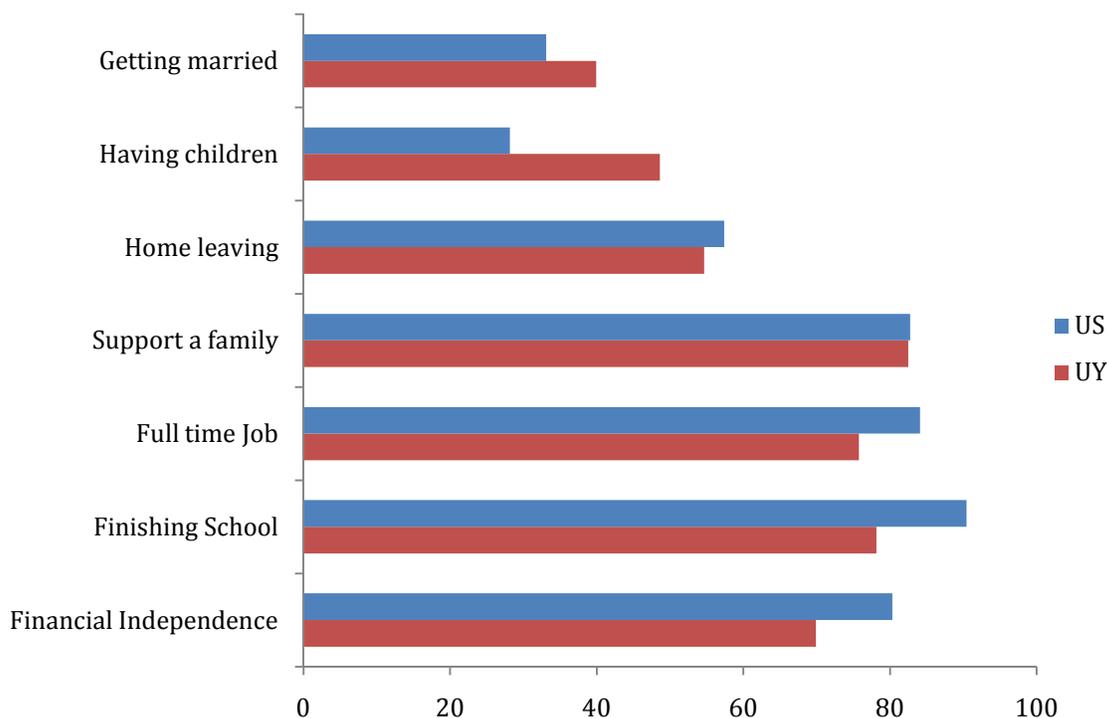


Importance of the traditional markers

Graph 6 shows how school completion, entry into the labor market and financial independence and the ability to support a family are clearly the most important milestones in the road to adulthood in both countries, while marriage and parenthood play a less significant role. As Furstenberg et al (2004) have pointed out, this might be reflecting a redefinition of the idea of adulthood, one in which marriage and parenthood are seen more as *life choices* that as requirements.

The dwindling importance of family-related transitions to the notion of adulthood is particularly noticeable in the US though, while in Uruguay almost 50% of respondents think it's quite important (and extremely important) to have children (against only 28% in the US). The importance given to getting married is also different (40% UY vs 33% US), indicating that, although not as important as other events, family-related transitions continue to be relevant to the prevailing notion of adulthood in Uruguay.

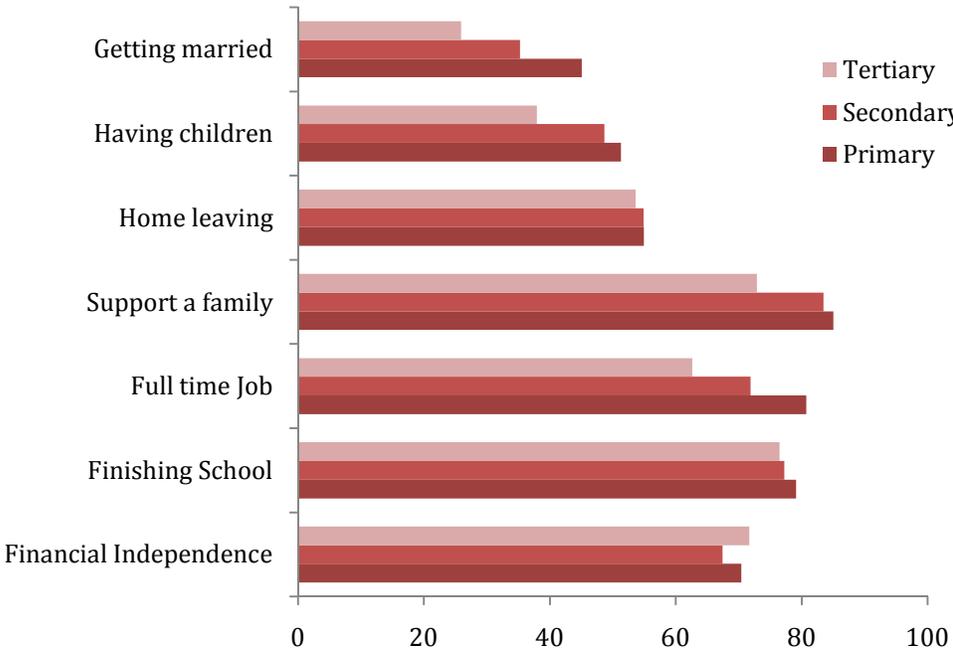
Graph 6- Percentage of people who consider quite important and extremely important each of the traditional markers of the TA, Uruguay (2008), United States (2002)



Source: own elaboration based on ISS (UY) and GSS (US) data.

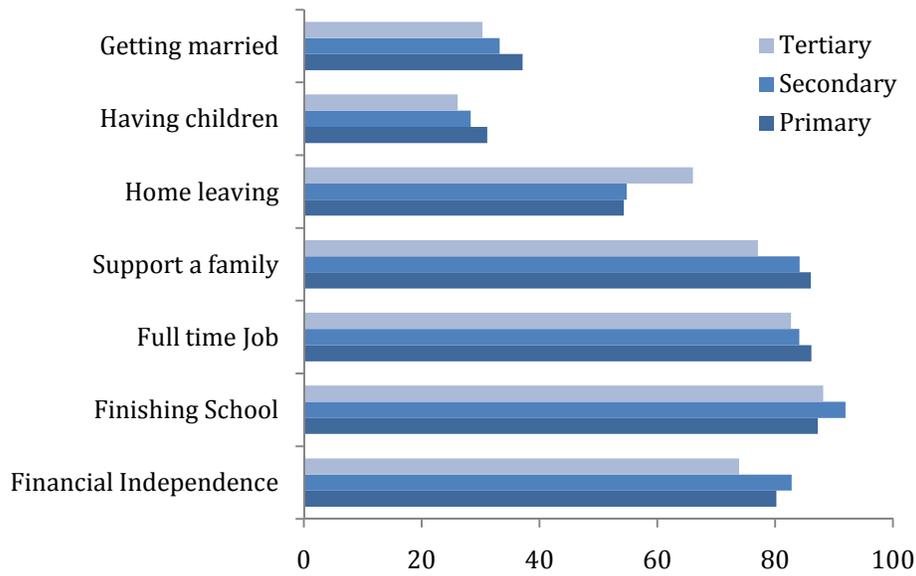
The relative value placed in each of the markers is similar for individuals with different education levels in both countries (graphs 7 & 8). What is interesting, however, is that (with a few exceptions) respondents with higher education levels tend to find the selected markers less important than their less educated counterparts. This is in line with the de-standardization hypothesis of the life course as consequence of the trends towards individualization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Fussel 2007). If we accept there is a correlation between education and autonomy, we should expect people with higher education levels to place less value on external markers and more on subjective perceptions of adulthood.

Graph 7- Percentage of people who consider quite important and extremely important each of the traditional markers of the TA by education level, Uruguay (2008)



Source: own elaboration based on ISS (UY) and GSS (US) data

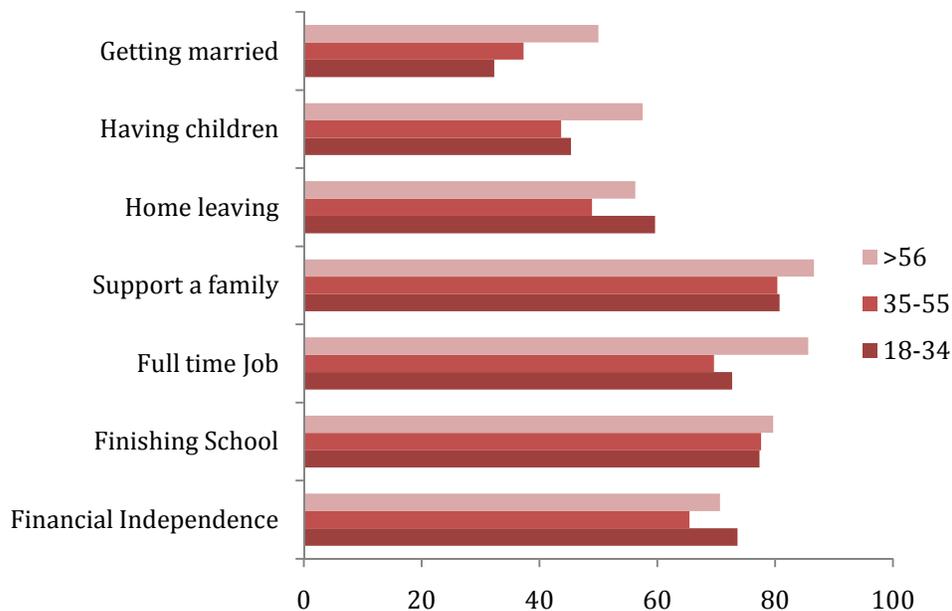
Graph 8- Percentage of people who consider quite important and extremely important each of the traditional markers of the TA by education level, United States (2002)



Source: own elaboration based on ISS (UY) and GSS (US) data

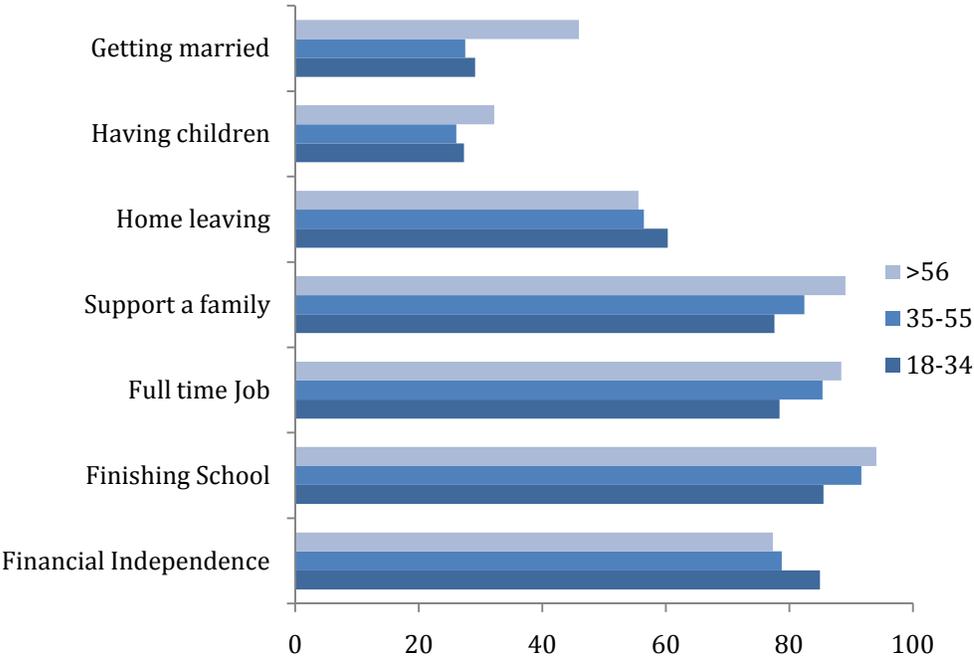
Older respondents also tend to consider more important each of the markers, especially in the case of marriage and parenthood, two events that are less relevant for the definition of adulthood of the younger generations. These results are probably indicating both the effects of changes over time and the effect of one's position on the life course, which might explain the importance given to independence (financial, residential) by the youngest respondents.

Graph 9- Percentage of people who consider quite important and extremely important each of the traditional markers of the TA by age groups, Uruguay (2008)



Source: own elaboration based on ISS (UY) and GSS (US) data

Graph 10- Percentage of people who consider quite important and extremely important each of the traditional markers of the TA by age groups, United States (2002)



Source: own elaboration based on ISS (UY) and GSS (US) data

Conclusions

Consistent with our expectations, we found that young people in Uruguay are expected to achieve the selected markers at an earlier age than in the United States, with the exception of home leaving.

Older respondents do not expect these events to occur at earlier ages than younger ones, which might be indicating an adaptation of the former to the new calendar of the TA.

In terms of the normative sequence, our results revealed a two-staged TA. One in which the formation of a family (being able to support a family- getting married-having children) comes only after one has achieved a solid position in life (financial independence, a job, a degree). This last result explain, in part, the later timetable observed in the United States, as people spend more time to finish the formal schooling period, it takes longer to achieve a position in life in which one is able to provide for a family.

In both countries, the definition of adulthood is more associated to markers of individual success than to the event in the family domain. A For a large number of Uruguayans, however, marriage and parenthood are still central in the passage to adulthood, perhaps owing to the cultural patterns related to of the largely Italian and Spanish origins of the population. The place given to the family formation process is likely to change in the future though, as younger respondents in Uruguay present a set of priorities, which is similar to the United States' model.

As Liefbroer and Billari (2010) have pointed out, socio-demographic transitions are still bound to normative timetables and expectations. What is also apparent is that as more educated and younger respondents place less value on external markers, age and sequencing norms will become less strict and more negotiable.

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