

This project will investigate the role of disability in the transition to adulthood. Specifically, it will involve analysis of longitudinal data from a large national sample of American adolescents. The goal of the research is to model pathways in the transition to adulthood by focusing on similarity and difference in the order and timing of school leaving, entry into and continuity of paid employment and marriage, and the onset of parenthood. Our research addresses two specific issues: the ways in which disability shapes the transition to adulthood and the interaction of disability and transitional experiences in young adult attainment.

Relevance

Our proposed work sits at the intersection of three lines of research. The first is the study of the social dimensions of disability. According to some estimates, approximately 12% to 15% of American children have some disability. As of 2001, this translated into over 6 million children enrolled in federally supported educational programs for those with disabilities. In light of this, it is surprising that there has been limited sociological attention to the social consequences of disability. This is all the more surprising given that disability is clearly linked to stratification in contemporary society.

A second line of research focuses on the transition to adulthood. In short, the transition to adulthood is increasingly viewed as a problematic enterprise. This includes the unclear connections between social institutions, the increased overlap of social roles, and the decoupling of social roles that undermine the effective management of everyday life. Importantly, problematic transitions to adulthood are not experienced equally in society and there is a growing recognition of stratification in the life course. Several features have direct relevance for the incorporation of disability as a structuring entity. First, disability is not randomly distributed in

the population. Thus, we can envision disability as part of a cycle of disadvantage that fosters the perpetuation of inequalities in life chances. Second, the transition to adulthood is traditionally defined by multidimensional movement through social institutions. Although the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) should make institutions more accessible, especially work and education, little empirical work considers broad pathways through school, work, and family for those with disabilities.

Third, the life course in general and the transition to adulthood specifically is a ‘capitalization process,’ involving material, human, cultural and social capital. Here, disability may be uniquely important in its capacity to shape both the initial capitals that are determinants of pathways into adulthood and the degree of further capital acquisition in this process. Again, we know very little about such issues, although they resonate with core questions in both the sociology of disability and stratification.

Data

The data used in this research are from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (hereafter Add Health). The Add Health study is large, nationally representative and longitudinal, with three periods of data collection (1994, 1996, and 2002). Given the extensiveness of the data we are able to measure multiple types of disability, including physical and learning disabilities and mental retardation. Add Health also includes detailed measures of a variety of social roles that are seen as demographic markers in the transition to adulthood. In both conceptualization and measurement, focus on age specific probabilities of given social roles and the dynamics of role trajectories over time. These include educational attainment (highest degree completed), labor force participation (not employed, part-time work, full-time work),

marital status (single, never married versus married), and parenthood (has children versus not having children). Our analytic sample includes the 17 and 18 year old cohorts and measures transitions markers at ages 17/18, 19/20, 21/22, and 23/24. With the large Add Health sample, we are also able to disaggregate by sex and thus examine the interaction of gender and disability in the structuring of the transition to adulthood.

Analytic Strategy

In answering our research questions, we first use a two-stage latent class approach that allows us to formally model heterogeneity in the structure of the transition to adulthood for disabled and non-disabled adolescents. In the first stage, we model age-specific *latent role configurations* that show how the various sub-samples ‘put together’ social roles at given ages. Here traditional latent class analysis is combined with multi-group approaches to formally examine similarity and difference in the latent structure of social roles. It does so by examining variation in goodness of fit and model structure for heterogeneous, partially homogeneous, and fully homogeneous models. In the second stage, we combine information from the first stage in a multi-level latent class model in which a second order latent variable models the transitions between latent role configurations over time. In essence, these *latent pathways* reveal the underlying structure of the dynamics of latent role configurations in the transition to adulthood. Finally, we combine information across stages with simple algebra to generate estimated role probabilities given latent pathways. In either a graph or tabular form, these show the interlocked trajectories of social roles that are the defining feature of the life course.

In the second phase of our work, we examine the conjoint role that sex, disability and pathway into adulthood play in shaping occupational attainments in early adulthood. We do so

by simply adding the latter as covariates in a log-linear ‘path’ model, treating them as developmental outcomes of the latent pathways into adulthood. As labor force participation is a defining aspect of our pathways, these analyses focus on the qualitative dimensions of work including occupational status, work conditions, and income.

Summary

In sum, these analyses will constitute the first comprehensive study of the role of disability in shaping the multidimensional transition to adulthood, as well as cast light on both factors that facilitate or impede efficacious transitions among the disabled and the life course consequences in early adulthood. Moreover, it builds upon recent and important research on the role of disability in the transition to adulthood, extends our understanding of the demographic consequences of disability, and builds upon contemporary work on the transition to adulthood in American society.