

## *Conjuality and transition to adulthood*

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### **Introduction**

A well succeeded transition to adulthood can be understood as culminating in the performance of new family roles such as spouse and/or parent, with authors such as Belhadj arguing that parents often consider that the members of the family only become adults when they get married and form their *own* family (in Peixoto *et al.*, 2000: 73). In this sense, being an adult, more than assuming responsibilities with one self (EGRIS, 2007: 107-108; Biggart and Walther: 2006: 41; Westberg, 2004:36-37, Molgat, 2007: 502-506), means taking responsibilities toward others. Thus, in these cases, the main indicator of a well succeeded transition to adulthood was not the lack of emotional or financial dependence relations, but the shift in the role taken in such relation: from being dependent on others to having others being dependent on him/her. Getting married was the symbol of parental independence because at that moment one was able to become emotionally responsible for others (or other significant) and, simultaneously, residentially autonomous, both as a consequence of financial independence.

But transition to adulthood can be understood not only in what concerns the mentioned shifts in role performances (from student to worker, from son to parent, etc.) but also, and more importantly, the shift from dependence to independence *per se*. In this context, emancipation from family does not equal the constitution of a new one (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1992). Being so, leaving the parental home becomes a much more accurate symbol of transition to adulthood and self-sufficiency, while the financial independence maintains the most important factor in that matter. As Matras argues, "the critical shift associated with the end of co-residence in the parental household is the end, or at least the very substantial cutback, in parental authority over the child. Continued economic support, advice, cooperation, healthcare, and emotional support very frequently take place... [but] departure of children from the parental household introduces and legitimates a new dimension of voluntarism, on the one hand, and diminished accountability, on the other, into the child-parent relationships and interaction." (1990: 233).

Furthermore, the importance attributed, in different generations, to the non-marital residential autonomy is not the same, with young adults attributing much more importance to this life project than their parents, while these attribute more importance to conjuality and parenthood than their sons and daughters (Nico, 2005: 151). This discrepancy in the attribution of importance to non-marital residential autonomy is accompanied by the discrepancy in the expectations parents and young adults have towards this transitional event. Parents tend to expect less than their children this kind of residential autonomy (non-marital) (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1989). Nonetheless, according to

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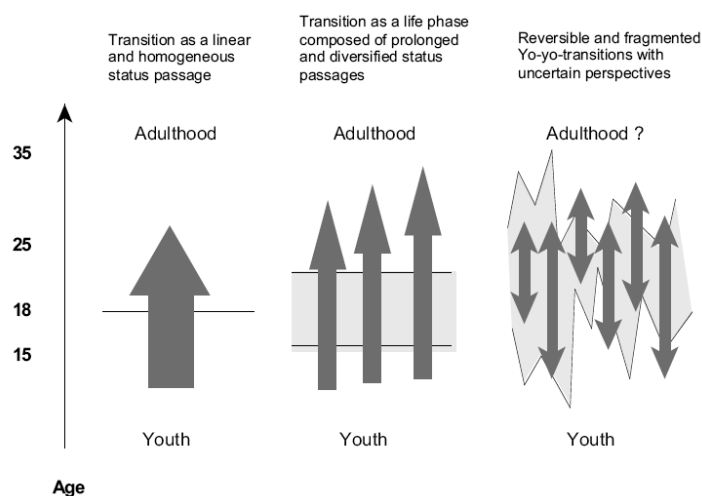
Axinn and Barber (1997: 608), non-conjugal residential autonomy does not have decreasing impacts in people's fertility preferences or their tolerance of divorce (while conjugal cohabitation does).

According to Goldscheider and Goldscheider, marriage is one of the most decisive events not only setting the pace of the *extended* transition to adulthood, but also defining the order and inclusion of several transitional events (1993: 7). It's the urgency, and not the expectations of conjugality (with or without marriage), that has been declining (Nico, 2005: 134-136). The importance of conjugality and the expectations towards marriage and its timing have great influence in the life plans concerning the transition to adulthood (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1993; Oppenheime, 1988). Thus, non-conjugal residential autonomy appears to be a consequence of that intentional delay for marriage, and not the other way around. This is especially true for women, for whom marriage becomes less attractive (Oppenheime, 1988) and conjugal cohabitation (Elizabeth, 2000) and non-marital residential autonomy more attractive.

### **Adulthood *in progress***

The pace and the order of transitions to adulthood have changed, but more importantly, this period of an individual's life has gained a strong character of reversibility. So, the "linear model of juvenile transitions, where the conquest of adulthood was the accumulation of a series of sequential and ritualized stages (school, work, conjugality, parenthood), has been substituted by a fragmented one, characterized by the paradigmatic 'yo-yo transitions'." (Pappámikail, 2004: 92). "The sequential transitions multiply and become reversible, fragmented and concomitant. The multiplicity of transitions to adulthood creates a multiplicity of conceptions, attributed or claimed, about what it is to be an adult" (Pappámikail 2004: 92-93). The next figure represents this de-standardization of the life course in the early adulthood ages.

**Figure 1: "The 'yo-yo-ization' of transitions between youth and adulthood"**



Source: Walther, 2006:125.

There is a diversity of semi-dependence situations that have added complexity the dichotomy "youth dependence/ adult independence". There have been identified three ideal types of *yo-yo* transitions (reversible, fragmented and des-synchronized) that analytically reduce this diversity such as "divided lives"<sup>2</sup>, "pending lives"<sup>3</sup> and "swinging lives"<sup>4</sup> (EGRIS, 2007: 103-104).

Within the various concepts that represent the malleability between what it is to be a youngster and what it is to be an adult, the "contestable adulthood" one, by Horowitz and Bromnick (2007), is suitable for the present analysis. These authors argue that adulthood is an "essentially contested concept" (2007:211) as it was understood and analysed by Gallie (1962). Thus, adulthood is "(I) The concept concerns a valued achievement - it is appraisive; (II) it is comprised of a collection of features or elements - it is internally complex; (III) it is variously describable, in that there are many ways the concept can be defined, each giving primacy to different elements; (IV) changing circumstances elevate changing definitions of the concept to cultural ascendancy (in a way that cannot be predicted in advance) - its depiction is open; and, finally, (V) users of the concept show awareness that their formulations must be contested against those of others, who employ a competing set/ordering of criteria - it is used both aggressively and defensively." (Horowitz and Bromnick, 2007: 211). Therefore, "not only is the category 'adulthood' an essentially contestable concept but also any individual's membership of the category 'adult' is only contestable during a certain period of the life course. Before and after this time, it would be ridiculous to claim (before) or deny (after) membership of the category." (Horowitz and Bromnick 2007: 212).

The negotiation of the adult status occurs between different paces of transitional events and different conceptions (within and between generations) of what it is to be an adult. Transitions, although reversible, represent the objective experiences of advances in professional, familial and residential spheres. It is in the context of such objective experiences and social conditions that young adults identify themselves and others with one of the categories – youngsters or adult- or both. The analytical distinction between transitions and conceptions is, according to Westerberg, a distinction between "levels of transition" (2004:37), and can be understood with others dichotomies such as *independence* and *autonomy* (according to Molgat independence refers to financial aspects and autonomy has a more relational character (Molgat, 2007: 502-506)), *role transitions* and *status transitions* (Westberg, 2004:36-37), *transitional events* and *individual qualities* (Molgat, 2007: 497).

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<sup>2</sup> "Young adults experiencing aspects of youth and adult life simultaneously, e.g. being in training, but at the same time experiencing freedom and responsibility for their own lives; 30-year-old who still live with their parents because of unemployment, relationship break-up or other changes in their lives" (EGRIS, 2007: 103-104, see also Horowitz and Bromnick, 2007: 210).

<sup>3</sup> "Those who do not perceive themselves as youth or adults; as the youth status of transition has lost its clear and attainable destination of a completely integrated adult (e.g because qualifications do not guarantee stable employment), they have a feeling of being 'nowhere'" (EGRIS, 2007: 103-104, see also Horowitz and Bromnick, 2007: 210 and Bynner et al, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> "Those consciously alternating between the 'classic' biographical phases: young parents who cling to their youth culture, established professionals who dance through rave-nights at weekends; and those who try to create alternative trajectories by making their careers in youth-cultural contexts or the hidden economy" (EGRIS, 2007: 103-104, see also Horowitz and Bromnick, 2007: 210 and Westerberg, 2004: 41).

But there is not a linear relation between transitions *to* adulthood and conceptions *of* adulthood. Instead, a space for identity negotiations is created, especially in the intergenerational and familial relations. There is a dispersed adulthood moment that is characterized basically by being the moment “in between” (role or status) transitions<sup>5</sup>. This non-static and “in-between” age represents the ultimate relation between *individualization* of the life course (and the construction of the *choice biography*) and the institutionalization of the life course and the its *misleading trajectories* (EGRIS, 2001). Adulthood, as a concept and as a trajectory, is an extended “work in progress”, constantly moving forward and backwards in life options and social possibilities.

The available data is not at a household level nor does it provide longitudinal or biographical information and for that reason, the reversible and bipolar features of transitions to adulthood, although taken into account in more qualitative research being developed on the residential autonomy of young adults<sup>6</sup>, is not analysed in the present paper. However, the data available allows us to analyse the heterogeneity of the timing of *transitions to* adulthood and of the *conceptions of* adulthood. The European Social Survey 2006 data provides evidence of the importance of conjugal cohabitation and marriage in distinguishing countries in what concerns the importance of conjugality to the adult status; distinguishing generations in what concerns the timings of transitions to adulthood and the importance attributed to those events in the recognition of the adult status, distinguishing gendered trajectories and conceptions of adulthood.

### **Relative importance of conjugality in the transition to adulthood**

Taking into account the whole sample, it is noticeable that having a full time job is in fact the most important marker of adulthood, as it is the event that is more frequently considered important or very important for an individual to be recognized as an adult. Leaving the parental home is also considered important or very important on 37,8% of the cases and this percentage is identical to the one attributed to parenthood. Moreover, parenthood presents the lowest percentage of individuals considering that being a parent is nor important neither not important for an individual to become an adult (while conjugality presents the highest percentage in this category).

The most striking conclusion of this data is that having lived with a partner or spouse is the least important indicator of adulthood, as it is the event that only in 29% of the cases is considered important or very important to reach the adult status, and the only event that is considered not important (not at all important and not important) by more than half of the sample.

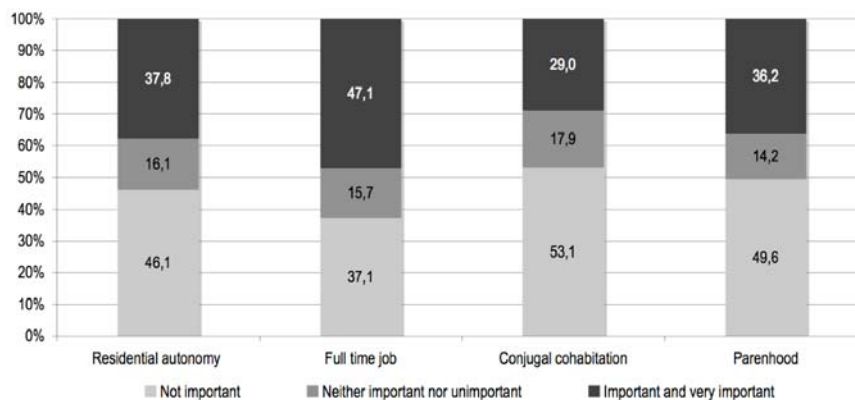
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<sup>5</sup> In some academic studies, this intermediate status has been called “Twenhood”. See Mary, Aurélie (2005) Not teenagers any more, but not yet adults: ‘Twenagers’. A sociological enquiry of an emerging status, University of Kent at Canterbury, England.

<sup>6</sup> PhD project intituled “Youth policies and family negotiations towards the non-marital residential autonomy of young adults: the Portuguese case in a European context”.

We could conclude that conjugality as an indicator of adulthood has been substituted by residential autonomy (since the full time job is the most important), a more suitable symbol of independence (from parents and from partner or spouse). Parenthood hasn't lost its important role in the transition to adulthood, being the ultimate symbol of taking responsibilities for others and the only transitional event that didn't gain the reversible character. This hierarchy of importance of different markers of adulthood is not immune to gender stereotypes, nor to different national contexts of transition to adulthood, as the analysis bellow will confirm.

**Figure 2: Importance of transition to adulthood events**

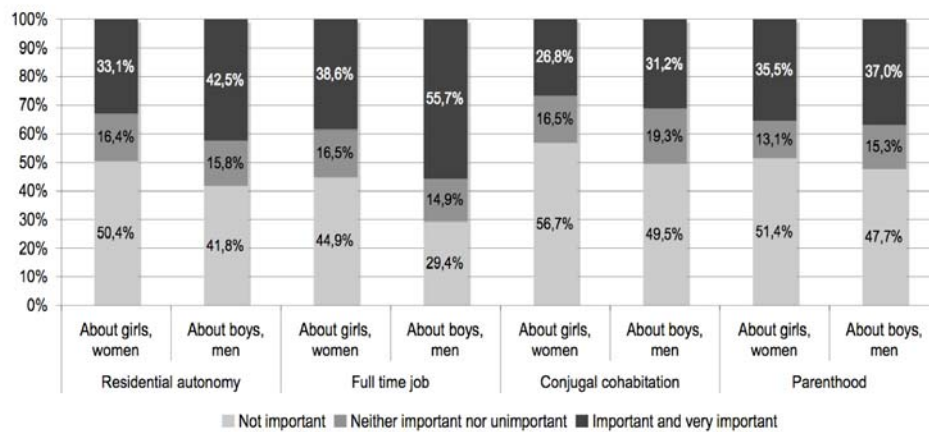


Source: European Social Survey 2006

Observing the data bellow, we can see that the importance attributed to different markers of adulthood is gendered. Women's maturity seems to be more taken for granted, as all the markers of adulthood are less important for the recognition of a female adult status than for the recognition of a male adult status. The tendency to argue that an individual reaches adulthood whether or not experiencing these transitional events is, thus, more frequent for women than for men. Having a full time job is the more striking example of that, since 55,7% of individuals consider that having a full time job is important or very important for a boy to be considered an adult, but only 38,6% have that opinion when it comes to women.

On one hand, the most important markers of adulthood, referred previously, are the ones that reveal more gender stereotypes, and on the other hand, it is the familial markers of adulthood that become more equalitarian between the sexes (particularly parenthood). Thus, the most individualistic markers of adulthood are less immune to gender stereotypes. Thus, it is assumed that emotional and developmental meanings of conjugality and parenthood transcend the sex of the individuals, while the individualistic transitional events are socially interpreted in a gender perspective.

**Figure 3: Importance of transitional events to adulthood, according to sex**



Source: European Social Survey 2006

The hierarchy of relative importance of each one of the transitional events presents national trends. As the next graph<sup>7</sup> illustrates, the valorisation of conjugality as an important marker of adulthood is accompanied, in all countries, by the valorisation of parenthood (with the exception of Denmark, which is also one of the few countries, together with Finland, Norway and Sweden where residential autonomy is considered the most important event in the attainment of an adult status). As Iacouvou argues through the analysis of the European Community Household Panel data, “in countries where young people typically leave home late, they are much more likely to leave home with a partner, while in countries where home-leaving typically occurs earlier, it is much less common to leave home as part of a couple. (...) A good deal of the inter-country variation in the age at leaving home may be accounted for by the greater propensity in Southern countries to leave home to live with a partner” (2001: 8-9). In fact, the age at which departure from the parental home occurs is strongly associated with the destination, that is, if it is a partnership related departure or not (Iacouvou, 2001: 5).

On one hand, the countries that tend to value conjugality as an important or very important event for an individual to become an adult tend to value parenthood as well. The countries, predominantly located in Southern or Eastern Europe (like Bulgaria, Russia, Portugal, Poland and Cyprus), that give more importance to these two transitions tend to devalue residential autonomy *per se*, considering it the least important event for the attainment of the adult status<sup>8</sup>. These countries, with the exception of Cyprus, are the only ones to consider parenthood the most important marker of adulthood. With the exception of these countries where parenthood is considered the most important marker to adulthood, and of Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark where residential autonomy is considered the most

<sup>7</sup> The data is sorted by conjugality.

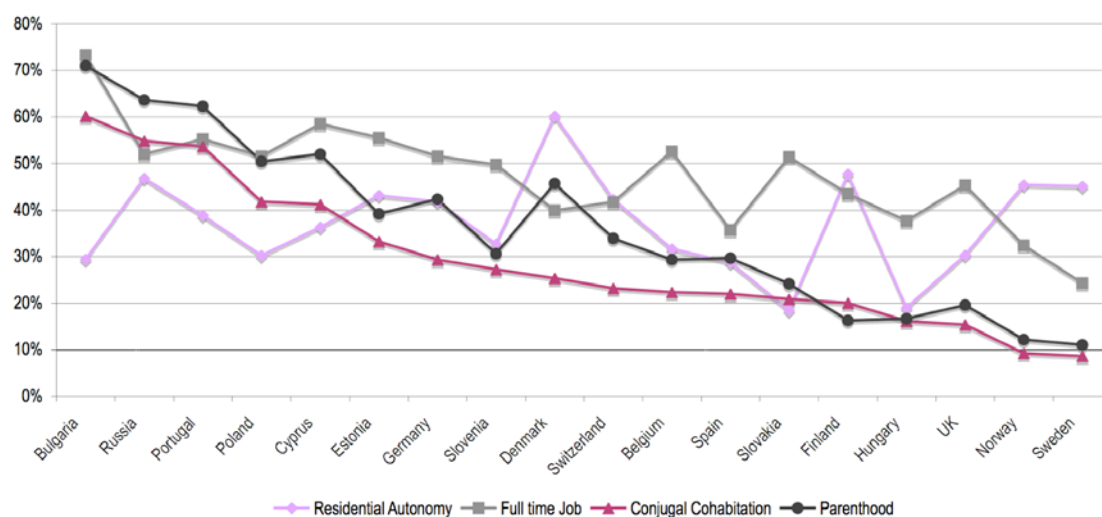
<sup>8</sup> It has been noted that in “Northern Europe there is a pattern of leaving home early but with return home more likely; and that in the south, leaving is later, is more linked to marriage, and return home is less likely.”(Iacouvou, 2001: 1).

important one, all countries consider having a full time job the most important event in the transition to adulthood and the attainment of an adult status.

On the other hand, the countries that devalue, almost at the same level, conjugality and parenthood as important or very important markers of adulthood, are more heterogeneous. Countries like Norway, Sweden and Finland where the tendency is to value residential autonomy more than full time job (nonetheless, in Finland these percentages are identical), unlike the UK, Hungary and Slovakia where the tendency is, like in the most part of the participating countries, to consider the full time job a better indicator of transition to adulthood than residential autonomy.

Denmark is the only country than doesn't consider the full time job the best or second best indicator or transition to adulthood, being conjugality the only transitional event to adulthood less important.

**Figure 4: Importance and high importance of transitional events to adulthood, by country**



Source: European Social Survey 2006

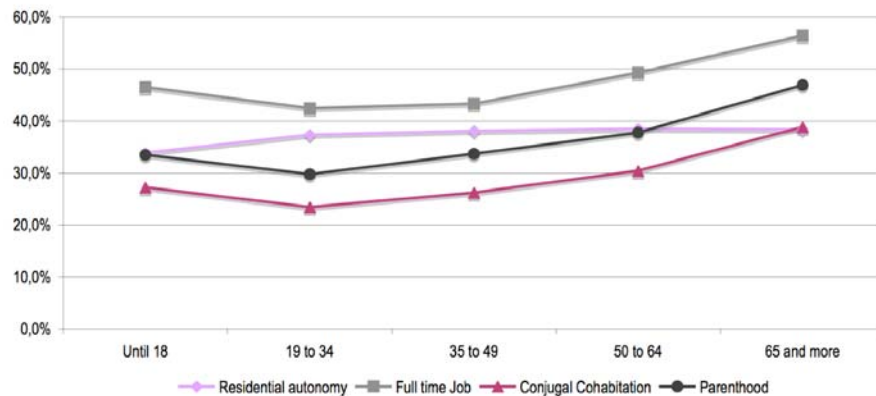
The attribution of importance to each one of the transitional events to adulthood presents variations through the age groups. It must however be taken into account that these questions were not biographical and that for that reason, it is not possible to directly compare different conceptions of adulthood throughout time/generations. Nonetheless, these conceptions have the potential to indicate inter-generational divergences concerning the recognition of what it is to be, nowadays, an adult.

In the following graph it's visible that as the age increases, so does the importance attributed to all the markers of adulthood considered in this analysis, with the exception of residential autonomy. The apparent stagnation of the importance attributed to residential autonomy throughout the generations is responsible for hierarchical differences concerning the importance of these four markers to adulthood between generations. Residential autonomy is a marker of adulthood that only assumes significant importance in the age group that best represents the *contestable adulthood* and in the next one. Older

generations tend to associate conjugality and residential autonomy, as these were two inseparable transitions of adulthood.

It can also be noticed that there is an increase of importance in each one of the traditional transitions as the age of the individuals also increases. That is to say that the assumption that adulthood can be measured by three or four criteria is more present among senior individuals than by more recent generations, that tend to evaluate adulthood in a more de-standardized approach.

**Figure 5: Importance and high importance of transitional events to adulthood, by age groups**



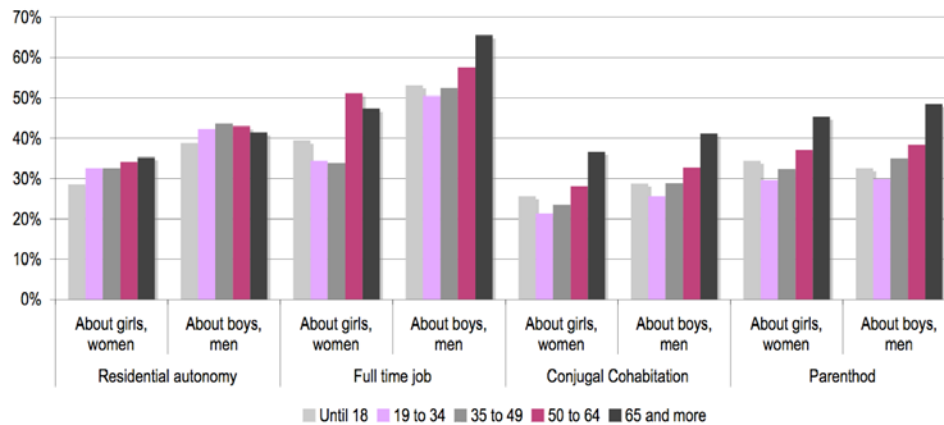
Source: European Social Survey 2006

As we can see in the next graph and have argued previously, the familial transitions are the more immune to gender stereotypes, and that is transversal to age groups. Even so, the age of the individuals introduces some variability in the importance of the four markers of adulthood considered for the present analysis.

With the exception of parenthood in the age group that comprehends all ages until 18 (under represented in this analysis), the importance of each one of the transitional events to adulthood are more important for boys to reach adulthood, than for girls, as was referred previously. These two events of transition to adulthood are also the ones in which the variation of gender stereotypes by age groups is more intense. Thus, the difference between the importance attributed to residential autonomy as a marker of adulthood in women and men's lives tends to decrease with age. On the other hand, the difference of importance attributed to full time job as a marker of adulthood between women and men's lives reaches the highest level exactly in the age group of *contestable adulthood*, suffering a decrease in the next age group.



**Figure 6: Importance and high importance of transitional events to adulthood, by age groups, according to sex**



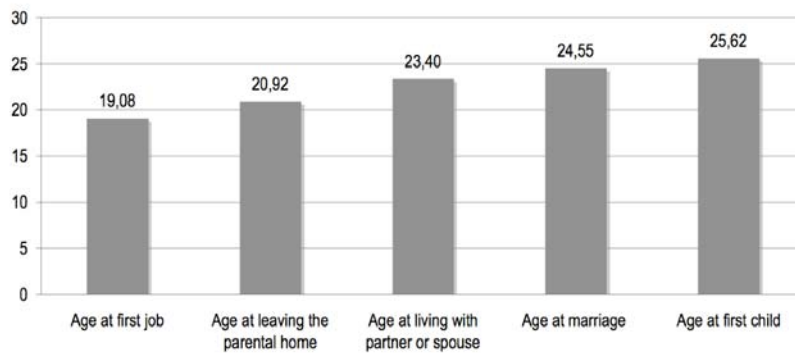
Source: European Social Survey 2006

### Evolving conjugalities

Objective experiences considered in literature and in statistical data as important markers of adulthood are usually: “be financially independent, having complete school, having a full time job, have the capacity to support a family, having left the parental home, getting married and having children” (Billari, 2005; see also Molgat, 2007: 498). Galland (1984, 1991) argues that the three most important transitional events are from the residential sphere (from parental home to a home of it’s own), professional (finishing school and entering the working market) and relational one (from single to couple and family) (*in* Molgat, 2007: 495, see also Zittoun, 2002: 193, Oinonen, 2004: 286 and Iacouvou, 2001:1). This selection of transitional events is identical to the one suggested by Pais that argues that as young adults begin to take responsibilities of “occupational (stable and paid job), conjugal or familial (expenses with children, for instants) or residential type (expenses with habitation and supporting the maintenance of the house)” they then acquire the adult status (1990: 141).

Although transitional events to adulthood have become more reversible and extended in time, we can still see a linear order within transitions. Thus, work experience is the first “adult experience”, and leaving the parental home seems to be a more immediate consequence of that. Conjuality (with and without marriage) and parenthood occur later in life, after a period of at least three years of residential independence.

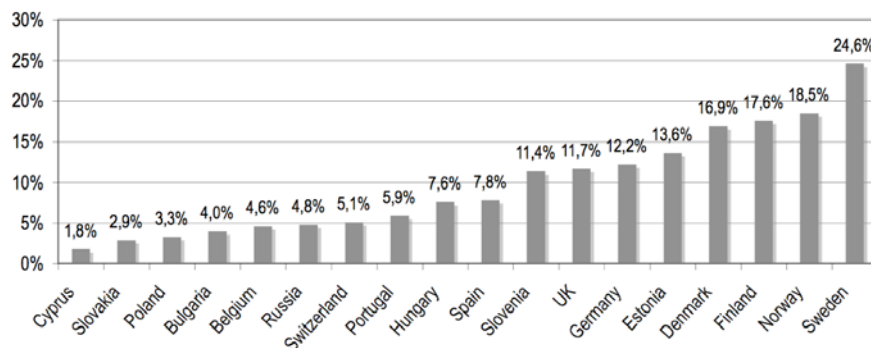
**Figure 7: Average age at first transitional events to adulthood**



Source: European Social Survey 2006

The previous figure, by representing average ages of those who experienced certain transitions hides, however, the omission of some of those transitional events in the life course. The two major omissions in Europe are non-conjugal residential autonomy and non-marital conjugal cohabitation. As can be seen in the next graph, non-marital conjugal cohabitation is a much more frequent transition in Scandinavian countries (such as Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark) than in Southern, Eastern and Central European countries. In these countries, conjugal cohabitation is typically experienced in the context of marriage.

**Figure 8: Percentage difference between conjugality without marriage and marriage**



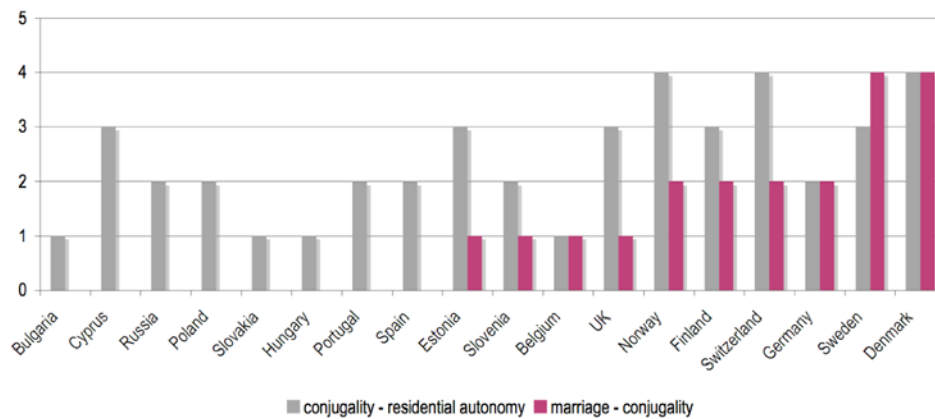
Source: European Social Survey 2006

Furthermore, we can see that there is no difference, in years, between conjugal cohabitation and marriage in countries like Bulgaria, Cyprus, Russia, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Portugal, Spain and Estonia. These are the countries where skipping non-marital conjugal cohabitation is more common and where marriage is the predominant form of (first) conjugal cohabitation.

On the other hand, the countries where individuals tend to live more years outside the parental home but without a partner or spouse are Denmark, Switzerland and Norway, and also Finland, Sweden, UK and Estonia. Some of these countries are exactly the ones that attribute the highest importance to residential autonomy as an important marker of adulthood (the Scandinavian ones). The

countries that reveal less time spent in non-conjugal residential autonomy are Bulgaria, Slovakia, Hungary, followed by Portugal, Spain, Russia, Poland Estonia and Germany (some of those are exactly the ones that attribute less importance to residential autonomy as a marker of adulthood). In these countries, responsibilities with one self are, therefore, taken simultaneously with an institutionalised conjugal union, rather than, like in Scandinavian countries, taken as an important and extended process in one's life.

**Figure 9: Difference in years between conjugality and residential autonomy, and between marriage and conjugal cohabitation**



Source: European Social Survey 2006

Figure 7 obviously hides the heterogeneity in the temporal order of the transitional events to adulthood and in the discrepancy or overlapping of those events in time, throughout the countries. The next graph completes the previous analysis by illustrating that there are only two exceptions to the temporal order previously described for the total of countries. The only two countries that don't follow the temporal order (first job experience, first residential autonomy from parental home, first conjugal cohabitation experience, first marriage and first child) are Estonia and Sweden. Estonia presents the first experience of residential autonomy former to the first job experience. This trend tends to be explained by the attendance to higher education Institutions outside the residential area of the parents, to than be followed, within a few years, by the insertion in the work market.

On the other hand, Sweden is the only country to present the occurrence of marriage slightly after the birth of the first child (see Oinonen, 2004, that describes a similar tendency in Finland). This country presents a strong tendency for non-marital conjugal cohabitation, thus there is a tendency to associate marriage not to the couple but to the birth of a child. It's due to the birth of the first child that marriage gains importance to the couple.

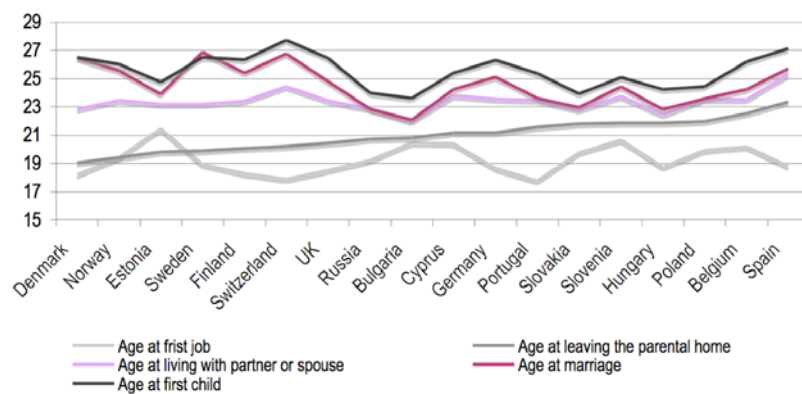
In what concerns the overlapping of the transitions, we can see that the two pairs of transitional events that overlap the most (independently of the average age in which that happens) are: the first experience of conjugality with marriage, and marriage with the birth of the first child. The first overlap is more common in Central, Eastern and Southern countries like Russia, Bulgaria, Cyprus,

Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Portugal and also Spain. These are, therefore, the countries that tend to exclude the conjugal cohabitation of their life course, making it coincide with the one that is a mere consequence of marriage.

The second overlap referred is more frequent in Scandinavian countries like Denmark, Norway and Sweden, where is it after or due to the birth of the first child that the conjugal cohabitation ceases and updates to a more institutionalized union: marriage.

In what concerns residential autonomy, even if temporary and/or reversible, we can see that in Central and Southern countries it occurs later. Spain is the country in which the average age for leaving the parental home is later, at 23,4 years old. The following countries are Belgium, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia and also Portugal. In these countries, the average age in which individuals leave for the first time the parental home is close to the average age of first experience of cohabitation (with or without marriage), thus, even when this autonomy occurs it is very quickly experienced, being almost immediately substituted by conjugality.

**Figure 10: Average ages at first transitional events to adulthood, by country<sup>9</sup>**

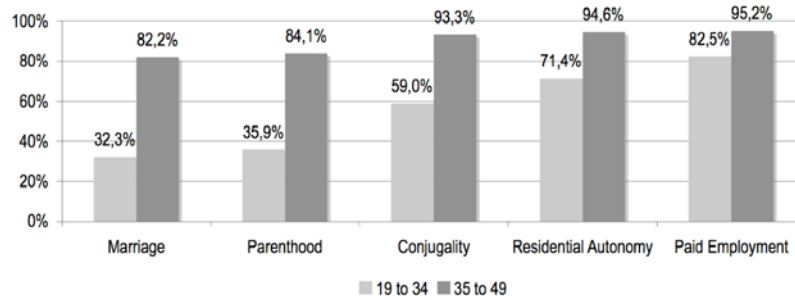


Source: European Social Survey 2006

The next figure demonstrates how most transitional events occur after the *contestable adulthood* or *adulthood in progress* age. The experiences of the first job and of first residential autonomy are the ones that take place earlier in life, for they occur in 71% and 83% of the cases, respectively, between 19 and 34 ages. On the other hand, only one third of the individuals of these ages already got married or had children, situation that changes dramatically in the next age group (from 35 to 49 years old). In the age group from 35 to 49 years old, most of the individuals already passed by the different transitions, but it is in the previous age groups that we can see the disparity between the responsibilities taken for one self, and the responsibilities taken with and for others. This age group is the one where the temporal hierarchy and inclusion of life projects takes place and is negotiated in an inter-generational basis.

<sup>9</sup> Sorted by age at leaving the parental home.

**Figure 11: Transitional events to adulthood by age groups**

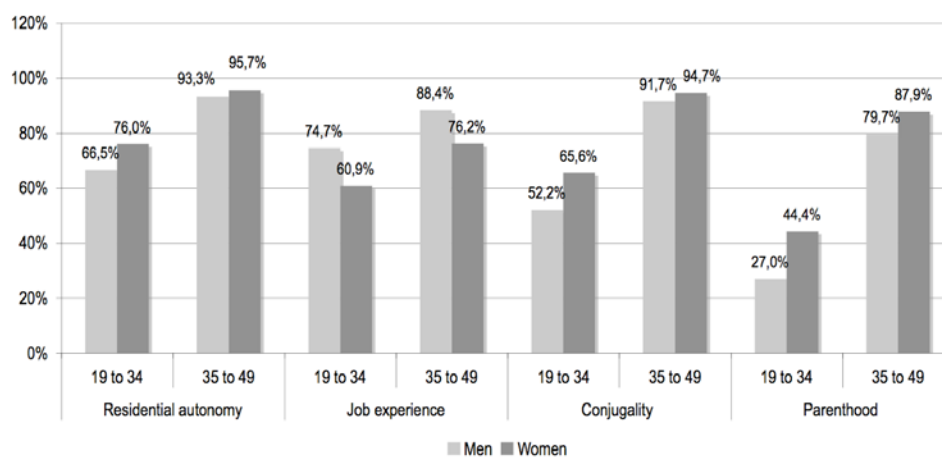


Source: European Social Survey 2006

As we can see in the next figure, with the exception of paid employment experience, women tend to pass through transitional events to adulthood sooner than men. Nonetheless, by the age of 35 to 49, the percentages of women and men's transitions are very similar, especially in what concerns residential autonomy and conjuality.

Parenthood is the transitional event with the greater discrepancy between men and women, experienced sooner by women than by men. This is especially relevant in ages between 19 to 34 years old: while 44% of women already had the first child, only 27% of the men had it.

**Figure 12: Transitional events to adulthood by age groups and sex**



Source: European Social Survey 2006

Next data provides an analysis closer to the biographical one, with different generations specifying the ages in which they experienced transitional events of adulthood, making possible the analysis of the changes of timings and paces of transition to adulthood. However, we must underline that some of the transitions analysed were experienced by only one third of the individuals, as is the case for young adults between 19 and 34 years old and the experience of marriage or parenthood. For that reason, the next analysis provides some clues about the evolution of transitional events timings, but does not allow a rigorous and complete longitudinal analysis.

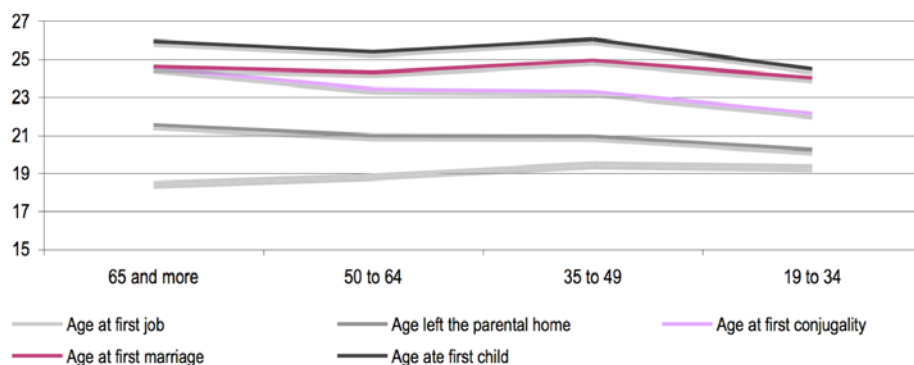
Conjugality has been, over generations, dissociating it self from marriage. This dissociation is accompanied by an increase in the average age in which marriage occurs, and simultaneously, by a decrease in the average age in non-institutionalized conjugal cohabitation.

It must be underlined that residential autonomy has always been dissociated from conjugality (with or without marriage). The average age at the first residential autonomy have been decreasing throughout generations. The causal differences behind this decrease can be illustrated by the dichotomy between "leaving home" and "living away from home".

Thus, while the major motive for leaving the parental home in previous generations was the national migration motivated by the pursuit of job opportunities (which presents an increase in the average age of the first job throughout generations) and had an irreversible feature because it implied the duality of income and consumption units between parents and young adults; the earlier and more reversible process of leaving the parental home is less associated to financial independence and more associated to the attendance of higher education institutions in different residential areas than the parental one.

Taking the age group of 35 to 49 years old as an example, it is visible that the average age at the first job, more than the average age at the first marriage or at the birth of the first child, has increased from generation to generation. This is very relevant because having a full time job is considered the first transition, the one that sets the pace for others, thus is necessary but not sufficient for the conquest of the adult status.

**Figure 13: Average ages at first transitional events to adulthood, by age groups**

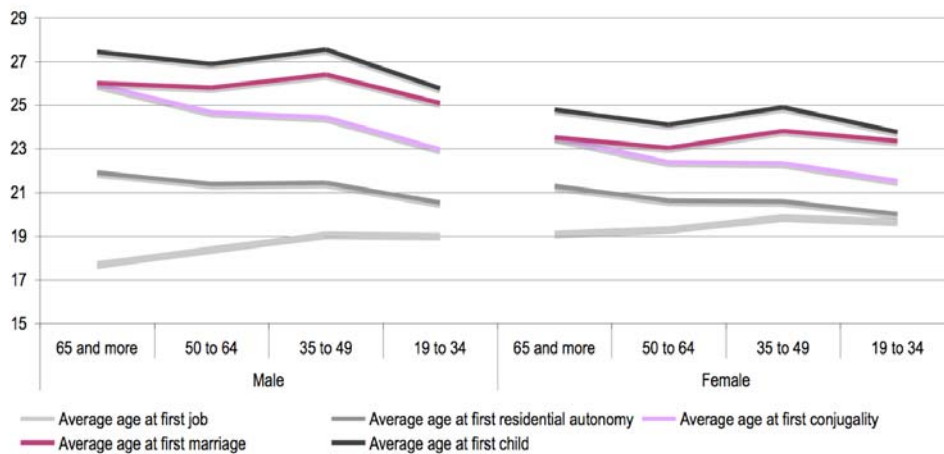


Source: European Social Survey 2006

As noticeable in the next graph, the differences between generations are transversal to both sexes, but transition to adulthood has always been more extend in men's life course than in women's. This extended transition to adulthood in men's life course is due not only to an earlier entry in the labour market, but also to a delay in conjugality and, consequently, marriage and parenthood. First residential

autonomy is the transitional event less likely to be influenced by gender, and for that reason the evolution of the average age in which it occurs, from generation to generation, is very identical in both sexes. We could argue then that residential autonomy is more likely to be a consequence of women's financial autonomy than men's.

**Figure 14: Average ages at first transitional events to adulthood, by age groups and sex**



Source: European Social Survey 2006

### Timing conceptions for first experiences of conjugal cohabitation and marriage

The average ages presented in the following table concern only the individuals that think that there is an ideal, early or late age to the transitional events to adulthood. Individuals were given the chance to disagree with social "age norms", answering that "it depends", "there is no ideal age", "it is never too late", "it is never too soon" or "one shouldn't pass through that transition" in what concerns various transitional events to adulthood. This kind of answers is, in all these questions, fewer than the ones that present an appropriate or inappropriate age to transitional events. Thus, the presentation of an age varies between 78% and 100% of the answers.

The larger proportion of responses disagreeing with "age norms" concerns the residential autonomy from the parental home. Thus, 21% of the individuals argue that "it is never too late" to be living in the parental home. This seems to be the transitional event that is less influenced by "age appropriate" values.

Concerning the presentation of ideal ages, as we can see in the next table, the average age on which an individual is considered an adult is lower (20,48 years old) than the ideal average ages given for transitional events (such as conjugality and parenthood). It must be underlined that only 8,3% of the respondents argued that the age in which an individual becomes an adult "depends" on other circumstances rather than age. Moreover, we must conclude that adulthood is a status that is

considered a condition for, and not a consequence of, conjugality and parenthood (thus the fact that these two transitional events are the less important for the recognition of an adult status).

The average ideal age for conjugality without marriage is 22,34 years old, while for marriage is 24,72 and the average age considered too old to be living in the parental home is 28,06 years old. Thus, it can be concluded that for an individual that doesn't leave the parental home to get married or live with a partner not married to, the permanence in the parental home is considered legitimate for more 6 years. On the other hand, if an individual becomes an adult at age 20, 48, it is socially given him a period of 8 years to leave the parental home and become residential autonomous.

**Table 1: Timing conceptions of transitional events to adulthood (with percentage of age answers)**

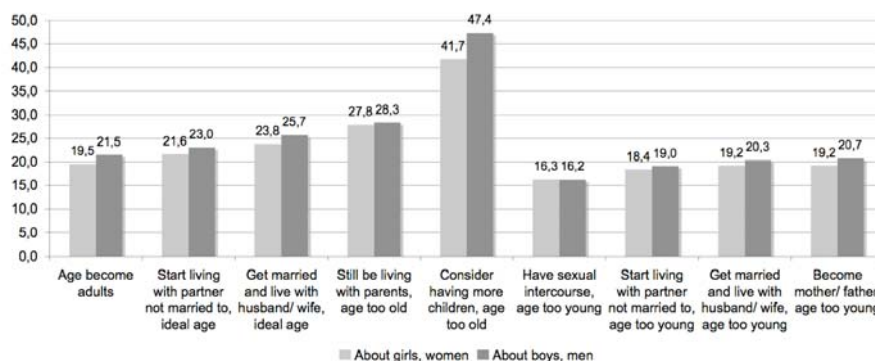
	N	Mean
Have sexual intercourse, age too young (100%)	31 357	16,27
Leave full-time education, age too young (91,7%)	28 765	18,05
Start living with partner not married to, age too young (93,2%)	30 151	18,71
Get married and live with husband/ wife, age too young (98,1%)	32 258	19,75
Become mother/ father, age too young (99,8%)	32 989	19,93
Age become adults (91,4%)	30 697	20,48
Start living with partner not married to, ideal age (83,5%)	27 438	22,34
Get married and live with husband/ wife, ideal age (88,8%)	29 777	24,72
Become mother/ father, ideal age (92,3%)	31 045	25,86
Still be living with parents, age too old (78,4%)	24 530	28,06
Consider having more children, age too old (94,1%)	30 602	44,45

Source: European Social Survey 2006

As we can see from the following graph, male young adults are always expected to experience transitional events to adulthood later than female young adults. This is particularly true in the case of the dead-line timing to have more children, where men and women present a difference of 6 years, socially allowing men to have children at much more advanced age than women. Nonetheless, the described tendency is also notable in the case of reaching adulthood, where men are considered to reach at age 21,5, while women are considered, averaging speaking, to reach two years earlier.

That two years discrepancy is also present in the gendered conceptions of ideal age to start living with not married partner, and to get married and live with spouse.

**Figure 15: Timing conceptions of transitional events to adulthood, according to sex**

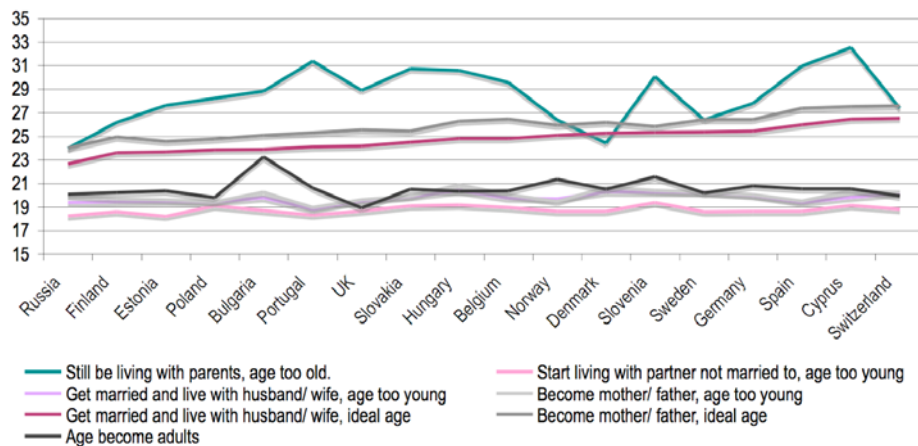


Source: European Social Survey 2006



The next graph<sup>10</sup> also refers only to the individuals who presented an ideal, early or advanced age for transitional events to adulthood. Portugal, Switzerland, Slovakia and Russia are the countries that tend to suggest that the age at which an individual becomes an adult “depends” on the circumstances. With the exception of a few countries, it is possible to identify the tendency of the Scandinavian countries to identify earlier ages for inappropriate age to still be living with the parents. On the other hand, the countries of the Southern and Eastern Europe suggest later ages in that matter.

**Figure 16: Timing conceptions of transitional events to adulthood, by country**

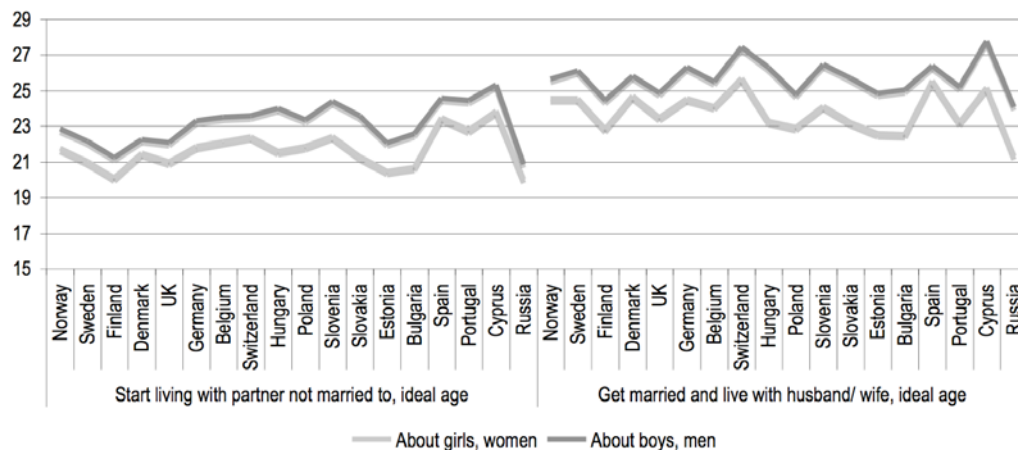


Source: European Social Survey 2006

The next graph illustrates how conceptions of conjugal transitional events to adulthood differ depending on the sex of the young adult and how that difference is distributed through the participating countries. First of all, we can see that marriage timings present a bigger difference between sexes than conjugal cohabitation timings does, throughout the countries. Furthermore, we can also see that is mainly the Scandinavian countries that have the smaller difference between timing conceptions for women and for men, followed by countries Spain and Russia in the case of conjugal cohabitation, and Spain in the case of marriage. The countries that present a more evident discrepancy between timing of transitional events for men and for women are the Central European ones.

<sup>10</sup> The data is sorted by ideal age to get married.

**Figure 17: Timing conceptions of transitional events to adulthood, by countries and according to sex**



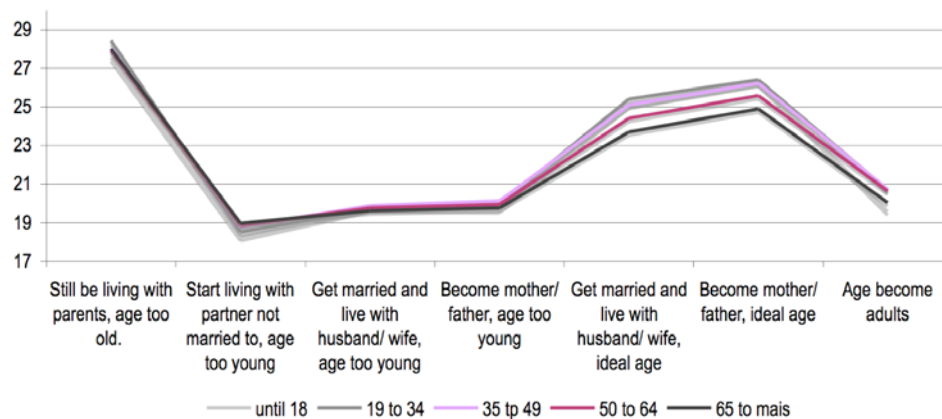
Source: European Social Survey 2006

A descriptive analysis of the next graph allows us to perceive that:

- The older the individual, the greater the tendency to not identify an age in which an individual becomes an adult, arguing that that moment “depends” of other circumstances;
- This tendency is similar to the one relating conjugal cohabitation without marriage,
- The older the individual, the greater the tendency to reject conjugal cohabitation without marriage (11% of the individuals with 65 or more years old argue that an individual shouldn’t live with a partner without being married);
- The older generations have the greater tendency to suggest an ideal age for all the transitional events;
- Regarding parenthood, the *contestable adulthood* generation has the greater tendency to argue that there is “no ideal age”;
- It is toward the question of the age in which it is too late to be living with the parents that the generational effect is more visible. Thus, the older the generation, the greater the tendency to argue that “it is never too late to be living with the parents”. 28% of the individuals with 65 or more years old hold this opinion, while only 17% of the young adults of 19 to 34 years old do.

However, we can state that there isn’t a great discrepancy between the ages/generations. Even so, the answers differ more in what concerns marriage and parenthood, because as the age of the individuals increases, the suggested ages for theses transitional events decrease. Thus, the suggested ages tends to reflect the lived life course of the individuals of the different ages. Conjuality and parenthood are the transitional events that reveal more generational discrepancies.

**Figure 18: Average ages of timing conceptions of transitional events to adulthood, by age groups**

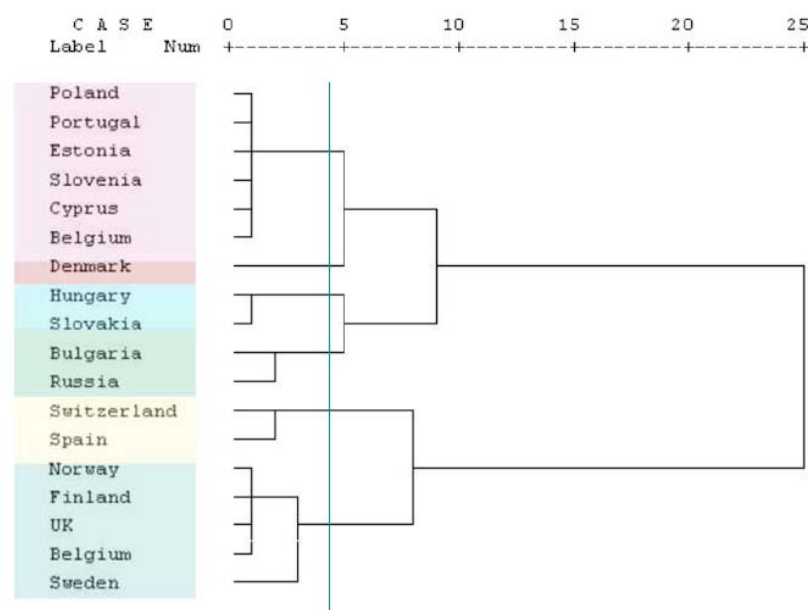


Source: European Social Survey 2006

### European patterns towards conjugality

Through a cluster analysis, countries were hierarchically agglomerated in European patterns towards conjugality, with the contribution of the variables of average age of first conjugal cohabitation, average age of the first marriage and importance attributed to conjugality as an indicator of adulthood. The next table and figure resume that information and to some extent, the descriptive data exposed previously.

**Figure 19: Hierarchical Clusters Analysis on conjugality timings and importance of conjugality on adult status**



Patterns	Countries	Characteristics
<i><b><u>Conjugality as an extended process</u></b></i>	Denmark	Conjugality is experienced for the first time relatively soon in the life course and without marriage. The period between the first experience of conjugal cohabitation and marriage is long, but the experience of conjugality is considered a good indicator of adulthood.
<i><b><u>Conjugality as a process</u></b></i>	Norway Sweden Finland UK Belgium	In these countries, conjugality is experienced without marriage for a few years, and only after that period occurs marriage (specially true for Scandinavian countries). The importance attributed to conjugality as an important event in the transition to adulthood is relatively low.
<i><b><u>Conjugality as a long term event</u></b></i>	Switzerland Spain	The importance attributed to conjugality as an important event in the transition to adulthood is also low, but conjugality and marriage are part of the same and very delayed event.
<i><b><u>Conjugality as an anticipated event</u></b></i>	Hungary Slovakia	Although conjugality is not considered an important indicator of adulthood is not very high, it is almost exclusively experienced in the marriage context. This single event of conjugality is experienced very soon in these countries.
<i><b><u>Conjugality as an anticipated transition to adulthood</u></b></i>	Bulgaria Russia	Conjugality and marriage are one single event that is also experienced very soon in these countries (the sooner within the participating countries), but conjugality is considered a relatively important indicator of transition to adulthood.
<i><b><u>Conjugality as an delayed transition to adulthood</u></b></i>	Germany Poland Slovenia Estonia Portugal Cyprus	The first experience of conjugality and marriage is also one single event, but unlike Bulgaria or Russia, this event is delayed to 23/24 years old. Conjugality is considered a reasonable indicator of transition to adulthood.

### Concluding notes

Transitions to adulthood have become more reversible, de-standardized, individualized and fragmented. An excellent example of that is the fact that what was once a relatively single event - leaving the parental home, conjugal cohabitation and marriage - has been divided not only into three different or sequential destinations, but also into different *courses of life*. In fact, as we can see in the presented data, elderly generations tend to jointly evaluate the importance of conjugal cohabitation and residential autonomy, as these were one single event, while more recent generations tend to not only evaluate the importance of these three transitional events separately, but also to undervalue parenthood and especially conjugality as important events in the construction of an adult status. Having a full time job is, in all the generations considered, the most important event in that

construction, but residential autonomy has gained importance throughout generations, as a new symbol of taking responsibilities for one self and of an adult status.

That mentioned division made the evaluation of conjugality as an important marker of adulthood, *per se*, possible. Although conjugality and parenthood are considered the least important transitional events as indicators of an adult status, the difference of attributed importance to these two events are the ones that differentiate the countries the most. Being so, the countries that tend to value the transitional events as best indicators of the adult status, are precisely the ones that value conjugality and parenthood the most and residential autonomy the least. On the other hand, the only countries that tend to argue that residential autonomy is important or very important to obtain the adult status are Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark.

In a gender perspective, we can see that women's maturity is more taken for granted, as transitional events seem to be less important for the recognition of a female adult status than of a males' one. This tendency is more present in more individualistic transitional events, such as having a full time job and residential autonomy, than in the familial ones (conjugality and parenthood). Thus, concerning the importance of transitional events to the recognition of an adult status, there are more gender differences within working young adults and within residentially autonomous young adults, than within young adults as members of a couple or as parents.

Although there is a "yo-yo-ization" of transitions between youth and adulthood" (Walther, 2006:125), it is still possible to identify a sequence in the average ages at which transitional events such as first job, first residential autonomy, first conjugal cohabitation and first marriage. More important than the average age, at which these transitional events take place, and the temporal order established by them, is the fact that not all of these transitions are experienced in the life course, some of them are omitted. The most important omissions are non-conjugal residential autonomy (more prolonged in Denmark, Switzerland, Norway and also Finland, Sweden UK and Estonia); and non-marital conjugal cohabitation, more frequent in the Scandinavian countries (especially Sweden) than in Southern and Eastern European countries.

The distinction between conceptions *of* adulthood and transitions *to* adulthood is only analytical. Furthermore, between these two "levels of transition" (Westerberg, 2004: 37) there isn't a linear relation. Nonetheless, when combining these two levels of transition, we can conclude that conjugality can be experienced as a process, as an event or as a transition. As a process, conjugality is experienced and relatively soon and without marriage, and only after a few years (sometimes only after or due to the birth of the first child) does marriage take place. As an *event*, conjugality is experienced through the overlap of conjugal cohabitation with marriage (being a delayed or anticipated event). Finally, as a *transition* (where is included the majority of the countries), conjugality is considered a relatively good indicator of the transition to adulthood, and is concentrated in one single event that represents the most immediate recognition of adult status.

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