

## **Individualization and family: let me become an adult first, afterwards I'll be a family woman/man. But, what about the Mediterranean youth?**

**Joana Nogueira Santos**

Transition to adulthood has changed a lot since new values, industrialization and urbanization started to transform Europe. Diversity of transition events and their timing were deeply reduced when compared with historical patterns. Economic, demographic and social modernization made it possible for youngsters to study, work, support an independent home, marry and have their own children. This tendency towards more standardization of life course has prevailed during decades. An enlarging proportion of each cohort passed through the main vital events roughly at the same age, entering adulthood earlier than before, forming nuclear families, and having no more than two or three babies. Different calendars of structural change along European countries did not prevent similar trends to emerge. Convergence and similarity in demographic, social and economic structures, along with sociocultural change, seemed to be a fundamental trait of modernization and development, despite historical heterogeneities.

But around 1970, when youth started diverging from conventional ways of becoming adults, this standardization tendency has been interrupted. Along with a delayed family formation, young people started to experiment new life arrangements, including living alone or with other youngsters. Family formation became less traditional, through informal cohabitation as a prelude to marriage and, after that, as an alternative to it. New impulses in individualization and in gender equalization appear to be key features of these new trends. Nordic and northwest European countries were well ahead in this process. In the South, few youngsters left their family homes to live independently alone, together with friends or living unmarried with a partner. The common trends were the delay of family formation and the fall of fertility to even lower levels. As a matter of fact, the Mediterranean countries young men and women expanded so much the duration of their social status as family dependents that became known as latest-late emancipation generations. Along with this, fertility achieved new minimums, and southern countries such as Spain and Italy became notorious by their lowest-low fertility levels.

These European heterogeneities in the pathways to adulthood have received a lot of attention amongst demographers and sociologists. It seemed that European countries had not become so identical after all. Comparative studies have showed that it is necessary to consider several factors in order to explain such heterogeneities, including different historical cultures. Development lags do not explain it all. Different historical cultures still influence current behaviors, including the north and south European divide between strong family's societies versus autonomous individual-based societies (cf. David S. Reher). Subnational cultural heterogeneity has been rediscovered too, in order to explain longstanding regional continuities (cf. Ronald Lesthaegue). These sociocultural factors are needed to explain decades of delay and originalities of Mediterranean contemporary pathways to adulthood, including latest-late emancipation and lowest-low fertility. Nevertheless, it is necessary not to go on the opposite direction, forgetting the influence of structural factors such as socioeconomic development and urbanization. This seems to be particularly true for the Portuguese reality.

Not always included in comparative studies, Portugal belongs to the Mediterranean countries, but shows some specificities of its own. Portuguese youngster's generations have followed the Mediterranean model of late leaving home and family formation with some delay compared to Spain and Italy. Nevertheless, when compared to these countries, Portugal has rapidly attained high levels of unmarried couples and out-of-wedlock fertility. More surprisingly, Portugal is amongst the European countries that more rapidly achieved higher women's rate of labor force participation. A very large proportion of Portuguese women work full-time, during their lifetime, even if they marry and have children. Compared

to its position in development rankings, and to its general structural modernization – including a low level of urbanization, a low level of higher qualification attainments and a low level of good quality employments – the mentioned demographic behaviors can be seen as a puzzle.

We have centered our attention in this puzzle, benefiting from the rich literature and data sets available about this theme. As a matter of fact, we have adopted a multilayered approach that begins with national level comparisons, passes through a regional level analysis of Portuguese transition to adulthood pathways, to end in a micro level analysis in the northwestern region of Portugal – the *Minho* region. This *zoom* has provided some insights into the Portuguese realities, consistent with long standing cultural influences at a regional level, but also with a complex interdependency between cultural, economic, demographic and social dimensions. In order to deal with such complexity we have centered our attention in understanding family and individual strategies behind life course events and organization. Constrained by a particular set of opportunities and obstacles, families and individuals seek their way in society and in economy, in a way that is rational but also socially conditioned. We have also chosen to reduce our empiric investigation to one region, including different points of the urban-rural *continuum*. This choice is based on the idea that cities are important social innovation cores, and so we will be able to go deeper in the understanding of innovation diffusion patterns through the social and spatial regional system.

In the present paper we will present our results, based on 217 young adults retrospective biographic data obtained through an original survey conducted in 2008/2009. The questionnaire included demographic, socioeconomic and attitudinal data at the individual level, and selected information on family background, new family formation process and spatial contexts of life. Although more analysis is still needed, it is already possible to confirm the coexistence of very traditional biographies, along with the Mediterranean model of late emancipation followed by conventional marriage, and also another group of youngsters that show more proximity to the individualized forms of living and innovative ways of forming family and organizing adult life. High feminine labor force participation goes along with traditional forms of gender segregation during childhood and youth, as well as unequal unpaid work division at home. The persistence of an historical pattern of female work in rural activities, as well as in proto industrial ones, helps to understand this apparent inconsistency. Nevertheless, global influences interact with this regional reality. We believe that this generation is promoting efforts to make it better for future generations, mainly by postponing and reducing fertility. Or by emigration strategies, as did happen to several precedent generations of *Minho* inhabitants.

Our results seem to support other author's thesis that the late and intense modernization of southern countries, compressing structural change in a shorter period, resulted in an original combination of traditional, modern and postmodern attributes in present days. As such, and perhaps even more than in other national contexts, regional subsystems function as a relevant unit of analysis in order to understand family and individual strategies. Historical regional traits, as well as variants in the modernization model, were taken into account. It is our intent to present further statistical analysis of our data. We expect to obtain pertinent information relating to the mechanisms behind inertias, as well as changes, in the processes that allow young generations to become adults and to start new families in this region. In doing so, we hope to add some evidence to current investigation on this theme, fuelling a bit more the efforts that are being made to anticipate more accurately social and demographic trends.

Note: The investigation that supports the present paper proposal has been conducted during a doctoral program at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, financed by Fundação Para a Ciência e Tecnologia de Portugal (FCT).