A common claim among social scientists and commenters is that today's young adults do not follow the “traditional,” direct road to adulthood and instead follow meandering, individualized paths. Increased and prolonged attachment to higher education, an increasingly mobile labor force, rising home prices, and changing norms around marriage and parenthood all contribute to this view of contemporary young adults as unmoored from traditional markers of adulthood. However, this characterization may overestimate differences between generations and underemphasize the substantial gender, racial, and class variations that occur within a generation. In this dissertation, I link the new employment narrative to the life course perspective to examine young adults’ career and life trajectories at different moments in the labor market to empirically test claims about individualization and variation.

Using a mixed-method approach and data from two cohorts of young adults, I investigate how employment structures and economic contexts influence individuals’ movement through the labor market and how their labor market experiences are linked to other spheres of life, chiefly marriage and parenthood. In Chapter 2, I evaluate how employment transitions affect wage level and wage growth. Contrary to expectations, I find that voluntary mobility in the early career period has not increased and, in fact, workers in the 1980s have more employers in their early careers than workers in the 2000s. While moving from job-to-job increases wages for workers in both the 1980s and 2000s, both the prevalence and negative consequences of involuntary mobility is lower for workers in the 2000s. These findings suggest that there is less scarring from non-voluntary mobility for contemporary young adults and that voluntary, strategic mobility can be used to build financially rewarding careers. In Chapter 3, I compare sequences of employment, school, marriage and parenthood for two cohorts of young adults. I find that there has been a substantial increase in the concentration of young adults in trajectories defined by education and employment suggesting that contemporary young adults are prioritizing attending college and establishing their careers over starting a family in their 20s. This finding is especially pronounced for women. In Chapter 4, I use data from 19 interviews with young professionals living in Seattle to explore how they make sense of their employment and life experiences in the context of a fast-paced, changing economy. I find that these young professionals use narratives of decision making and personal responsibility to make sense of their own life paths and to define adulthood, ultimately reinforcing and reproducing their own privileges. Lastly, in Chapter 5, I compare the results of the sequence analysis conducted in Chapter 4 to the themes that emerged from the interviews in Chapter 4 to underscore the need for mixed-methods research to understand the both the empirical patterns and meaning making of the transition to adulthood.

Overall, this dissertation contributes to our understanding of coming of age in the 21st century by explicitly comparing employment and family formation patterns for two distinct cohorts, exploring variations along gender lines, and delving into the ways these patterns reproduce social privilege and inequality. Broadly
speaking, I find that life course for contemporary young adults is primarily organized around the labor market, and that for professional Millennials this orientation is reflected in narratives of personal and financial responsibility. This dissertation also advocates using both quantitative and qualitative research to fully understand the complexities of coming to age under evolving social structures and norms.

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Status of Research: Completed/published
Research Type: Graduate Dissertations
Related Fields: Economic Sociology, Life Course, Social Demography, Work and Occupations

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