
LGB Employment Trajectories: Sexual Identity, the School-to-Work Transition and Early Employment

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Sexual identity is being increasingly recognised as an important dimension shaping opportunities in life and influencing key life domains. Across the life-course, sexual identity may affect decisions, turning points, and how you experience events—as well as what type of events you experience. For instance, in the labour market, lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) persons are known to be distributed differently with distinct experiences and outcomes (Badgett et al., 2024; Valfort, 2017). It is well established that non-heterosexual workers experience discrimination and earn structurally less than heterosexual workers (Drydakis, 2009, 2022; Valfort, 2017). Conversely, LGB individuals are often found to have higher levels of education (Badgett et al., 2024). The observation that LGBs have higher education but lower earnings raises questions about how and when earnings penalties emerge in their employment trajectories. In this article, I seek to gain a better understanding of the formation of labour market inconsistencies for LGB persons. To this end, I will examine their school-to-work transition and early employment and ask the research question: What are the early employment trajectories of LGB individuals and how do these compare with those of heterosexuals?

Sexual Identity, Transition to Adulthood and Employment Trajectories

Existing research on LGBs lives relate to theories of minority stress (Meyer, 2003) and structural stigma (Hatzenbuehler, 2016) or specific mechanisms like task specialisation between residing couples (which may differ by gender composition; Jaspers & Verbakel, 2013), discrimination, stigmatisation and stereotyping of sexual identities (Drydakis, 2009; Mize & Manago, 2018). However, while specific outcomes are increasingly well-documented across time and context, very little research has considered longitudinal processes and LGB-specific life trajectories. So far, only a handful of studies have looked at trajectories, and mostly related to partnering and cohabitation dynamics (Bohr & Lengerer, 2024; Ophir et al., 2023) or identity milestones (Caprinali & Vitali, 2025). No study has looked at LGB employment trajectories from a life course perspective. However, the existing studies do describe distinct LGB trajectories and highlight how differences can already manifest earlier in the life-course—the so-called transition to adulthood. As the entry to the labour market generally takes place during the transition to adulthood, unequal outcomes may also start to manifest in this life stage.

Yet, this places the question about employment trajectories within a more general question: Is there a more challenging transition to adulthood for LGB persons?

The transition to adulthood marks a change of status in the institutionalised life-course (Buchmann, 1989) and may be critical for the accumulation of advantages or disadvantages (Krahn et al., 2015). During this period there are crucial explorations of identity, lifestyle and career possibilities (Bynner, 2005). These processes, and their outcomes, are already known to be distinct—and more challenging—for LGB individuals (Badgett et al., 2024; Frost & Meyer, 2023; Ueno et al., 2023). Non-heterosexuals are known to be at risk of lower well-being and receiving less family support (Frost & Meyer, 2023). They are also discriminated against during hiring processes (Drydakis, 2009) and perceive lesser career opportunities (Ueno et al., 2023). If indeed LGB individuals face distinct challenges during the transition to adulthood, their employment trajectories are also likely different than those of heterosexuals.

On one hand, a standardized timing and ordering of events during the transition to adulthood is continuously debated by researchers (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011). Yet, on the other hand, it can be argued that the assumption of which events are significant (e.g., school-to-work transition, forming a first union and entry to parenthood) and why, is prevailing and intrinsically heteronormative. It is therefore increasingly likely that the unique challenges of coming-of-age LGB persons shape different trajectories. Bohr and Lengerer (2024) have already described how lesbian and gay individuals are less likely than heterosexuals to enter a first partnership or first cohabitation during the transition to adulthood, while bisexuals fall in-between these groups. However, comparable evidence regarding their early labour market trajectories remains absent.

To address this gap in literature, and answer my research question, I investigate the trajectories of LGB persons surrounding the school-to-work transition and their early careers. By conducting a sequence analysis, I will describe the order and timing of events, like finishing schooling, entry to the labour market (first job) and the duration of jobs or joblessness. Moreover, it will be of particular interest to see if LGB trajectories are different than those of heterosexuals. By studying group differences, I am able to explore possible variances in the transition to adulthood and contribute to testing the assumption of normative trajectories (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011).

Data and Methods

I use the Understanding Society survey, Waves 1-14 (collected 2009-2024), containing longitudinal data and a representative sample of individuals in UK households (University of Essex, 2024). Economic activity information is collected every wave for the past year, as well as full retrospective histories in waves 1 and 6. Sexual identity questions were included in waves 3, 5, 7 and 9. My analytical sample includes individuals from all waves who have reported a sexual identity and for whom complete economic activity histories from age 18 to 35 can be constructed. Resulting in a final sample of 51,299 respondents, of which 1,604 are non-heterosexual.

Economic activity is captured retrospectively in the survey and measures the respondents participation in employment or education and working hours. When constructing categories I use the employment states as defined by Pelikh and Henderson (2025, p. 5) and Pelikh and Rowe (2024, p. 5), who used the Understanding Society survey to investigate employment trajectories during the transition to adulthood in the UK. They define seven economic activity states: employed full-time (≥ 30 hours), employed part-time (< 30 hours), full-time student (including those in governmental training or apprenticeships), unemployed, economically inactive (involved in family care or sick or disabled), taking parental leave and self-employed.

Sexual identity is measured with the question “Which of the following options best describes how you think of yourself?”, with options heterosexual or straight, gay or lesbian, bisexual, other, prefer not to say, and don’t know. While the final three options possibly hold respondents with other sexual identities the majority is likely to be heterosexuals not understanding the question (Elliott et al., 2019). Since I cannot distinguish these, I am limited to include heterosexual and LGB identities. Respondents are categorized by gender, yet this is only measured through binary sex categories: male or female.

I will use sequence analysis to describe the school-to-work transition and early employment trajectories by sexual identity. Respondents’ trajectories are defined by the sequencing of economic activity states. The general type and frequency of states experienced, and their ordering and duration may establish (dis)similarities among identity groups.

Preliminary Results

At this moment, my preliminary results contain a description of the sample distribution across selected characteristics, found in table 1. First of all, the vast majority of respondents identify as heterosexual (96%) compared to lesbian/gay (1.4%) and bisexual (1.6%). The lesbian/gay identity is generally more popular among men than women, while more women identify as bisexual. The overall sample is skewed towards younger cohorts; however, it can be clearly noted that LGB identities are particularly more prevalent among these groups. The bisexual identity stands out as the only groups with the highest share being born most recently, in the 1980s. This is all not unexpected as younger generations are increasingly identifying as LGBTQ*, and particularly embracing bisexuality (Russell et al., 2023). Bisexual men are however proportionally more often born outside of the UK, while the remaining groups are more similar. Substantial differences emerge in partnering and parenting aspects, in line with previous research (Bohr & Lengerer, 2024; Ophir et al., 2023). Marriage or cohabitation is indeed substantially less prevalent among LGB identities. Same for having children, where lesbian/gay men are particularly low represented at around 11%.

Consistent with previous findings, LGB groups hold a greater share of higher educated individuals (around 60%) than heterosexuals (51%). However, differences between graduation ages, either for further education or general schooling, are not substantial. Finally, depending on identity, there are considerable different shares of ever unemployed individuals. The lowest shares are found for

heterosexual men (22%) and women (20%). The share of Lesbian/gay men is 8% higher than heterosexual men, whereas bisexual men have an even larger gap of 17%. While bisexual men also represent the overall highest share (39%), the gap between heterosexual and LGB women is generally larger than among men (11% gap for lesbian/gay and 16% for bisexual). These preliminary results indicate that experiences of unemployment during the school-to-work transition could be an important reason why LGBs, although higher educated, earn less than heterosexuals.

Next Steps

The main next step to be taken is completing the sequence analysis. The currently described characteristics are in line with outcomes of previous research. The higher share of further educated LGBs yet similar completing ages support the suspicion that inconsistencies might emerge during the school-to-work transition and early employment. The particular higher shares of ever unemployed LGB workers further underline their less favourable employment outcomes and already suggests more disruptive trajectories than those of heterosexuals. Emphasises that sequence analysis is likely a useful tool to explore these expectations.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Heterosexual		Lesbian/Gay		Bisexual	
	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
% birth year: <i>1930s</i>	8.52	7.90	2.95	0.90	2.52	3.11
<i>1940s</i>	15.98	14.98	7.21	2.69	10.69	4.44
<i>1950s</i>	17.86	17.48	15.41	17.49	17.61	5.33
<i>1960s</i>	21.67	21.73	25.57	28.70	18.24	15.11
<i>1970s</i>	19.75	20.70	24.92	24.66	22.64	29.33
<i>1980s</i>	16.22	17.21	23.93	25.56	28.30	42.67
% not born in UK	13.16	13.52	11.86	11.22	16.49	12.84
% ever had resident partner	80.59	84.59	63.53	74.35	58.82	60.00
% ever had a child	66.34	73.59	10.51	25.97	33.56	32.32
% completed further education	51.53	51.22	60.63	62.66	61.59	59.82
Age completed further education (mean)	21.69	21.91	22.18	22.37	21.46	21.00
Age completed schooling (those not further educated, mean)	15.90	15.87	16.29	16.21	16.41	16.09
% ever unemployed	22.44	19.71	29.98	30.52	38.75	35.58
<i>n</i>	22377	27318	447	308	289	560

Note: Includes all cases regardless of availability in other variables. Source: UKHLS Wave 1-14, own calculations.

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