

Rethinking the Quarterlife Crisis:
Expected Geographic Mobility among Young Adults
in Flanders, Belgium and Upstate New York.

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Abstract

Rethinking the Quarterlife Crisis: Expected Geographic Mobility among Young Adults in Flanders, Belgium and Upstate New York.

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In the United States, the concept of *quarterlife crisis* is an increasingly recognized social phenomenon. However, much about this dynamic period in the life course, and its impact on individuals remains undocumented. For example, how does the quarterlife transition inform individuals' expectations about their future geographic mobility? It is important to ascertain whether the quarterlife experience is salient across national boundaries, and whether it has a similar impact on the expectations of young adults in various cultural contexts. Cross-cultural findings could yield valuable data for policy-makers or employers aiming to attract or retain young adults within a specific region. To explore the universality of quarterlife transition, I compare the expected geographic mobility of college students preparing to graduate in two different regions: Flanders, Belgium, which is characterized by retention of young adults, and upstate New York, which has seen immense out-migration of young adults in recent decades. Interviews conducted with graduating college students in both locales provide a foundation of qualitative data. To understand the personal allegories and stories that individuals shared with me, I apply an analytical thematic framework rooted in sociological life-course theory. *Life-Span Development, Agency, Time and Place, Timing, Linked Lives* comprise the five paradigmatic principles used to create a comparison of young adults in Flanders and upstate New York. This rubric sheds lights on similarities as well as several important differences in how individuals experience the quarterlife transition in different regions and which factors inform their expectations about future geographic mobility.

Key words:

Quarterlife Crisis, Life Course, Expected Geographic Mobility, Upstate New York, Flanders, Graduation, Young Adults

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INTRODUCTION: WELCOME TO THE QUARTERLIFE CRISIS!

For many years, Americans have joked about, discussed at length and struggled with the concept of the mid-life crisis, a concept that has become deeply entrenched in collective American consciousness and has found a prominent place in popular culture. The dynamic process surrounding personal identity as a 40- or 50-something in America enjoys a high level of currency in contemporary American Society, a fact demonstrated by the adoption of the term mid-life crisis into the national lexicon in surprising ways. The idea is so popular in fact, that its use has been expanded beyond sociological discussion of the life course and topics related to personal well-being. It is now employed to discuss subjects ranging from the course of federal programs (*Medicare's Midlife Crisis*) to astrophysics (*The Midlife Crisis of the Cosmos*) and economics (*Europe's Midlife Crisis*). Its widespread use supports the idea that a midlife crisis is an accepted social phenomenon, one which carries with it very real and interesting expectations (Clausen 1986: 24).

However, in the past five years or so, an entirely separate body of literature has arisen that discusses another less familiar but highly challenging period related to the life course. Increasingly, journalists, writers and popular media are discussing the *quarterlife crisis*, a process undergone by many young adults in the transitional stage of life immediately following college. There is no doubt that graduating from institutions of higher education – a transition experienced by a significant group of Americans, roughly 1/4 of the population aged 25 and older – represents a large and ambiguous step out of a scholastic environment and into a new phase of life (US Census).

This transition carries with it new personal, familial or social expectations. Young adults are expected to act more mature or take on greater amounts of personal responsibility

after graduation. They may become increasingly aware of the indicators of personal success (financial attainment, career direction, finding a life-partner, etc.). While they are facing new expectations, individuals in this phase of life also find their social support networks changing. The social bonds they have forged over the undergraduate career are harder to maintain when friends are geographically spread out. This is especially difficult for young individuals who develop much of their own identity around friends (Hunt 2005: 127). In addition, the parameters for success that individuals rely upon during college (academic writing skills, extra credit assignments, etc.) may not serve them as well in a post-college setting. In many ways, the world of young adulthood following college, which might seem the epitome of personal choice and opportunity to outsiders, actually can be exceptionally lonely, stressful and confusing for many of the individuals experiencing it firsthand (Hunt 2005: 119; Malernee 2006).

Purpose of the Research

In my study, I explore how expectations about the transition from college to post-college (including personal expectations, goals or anticipated challenges) are embedded in ideas about personal geographic mobility (Öberg 1997: 23) and whether these expectations are relevant or salient across cultural boundaries. More specifically, I examine young adults' perceptions and expectations about personal geographic mobility by comparing attitudes in two different (sub-national) regional contexts. One region has seen large-scale out-migration of its young, college-educated students in recent decades, and the other is characterized by retention of young, college-educated individuals. I compare and contrast various factors that might affect how young people in these two regions (upstate New York and Flemish Belgium) conceptualize, or plan for their place of residence after college. To do this, I apply

a thematic framework of analysis related to the sociological concept of the life course.

Background: Goodbye College, Hello Adulthood.

My interest in the concept of quarter-life crisis, and the unique stresses experienced upon leaving college and entering the workforce was originally piqued by discussions with friends and peers from my own high school and college, both of which are located in upstate New York. Many of them preceded me by a year or two and were relaying stories characterized by unexpected difficulty transitioning into the workforce. Many of my friends who had been geographically rooted in the upstate New York region left immediately after their formal education to resettle in other parts of the country. Some moved to New York City or Washington, DC. Others headed to the South or Southwest United States. The recurring theme among recently graduated peers was a strong desire to leave the upstate New York region, and a sense that they would only be satisfied or successful upon arrival in another locale.

This experiential perspective, that young people wanted to disperse from upstate New York, was solidified by a series of papers published by the Brookings Institution. In these demographic reports entitled *The State of Upstate*, two Cornell professors in City and Regional Planning, Rolf Pendall and Susan Christopherson, portrayed upstate New York in decline. They observed strikingly negative directionality in economic and population growth patterns throughout much of the region. Their reports highlighted trends toward lower income, increasing poverty and net-out migration of population. A June 2006 New York Times article by Sam Roberts further validated the reality of this process. The article, *Flight of Young Adults is Causing Alarm Upstate*, explained that upstate New York's population of 25-34-years-olds declined by more than 25% from 1990 to 2004. Interviews in the article

with large regional employers, such as M&T Bank and Kodak (which is based in Rochester, NY) as well as individuals provided a variety of speculations as to why young adults were leaving the area.

I began to appreciate that the urgency to relocate was in fact one manifestation of quarterlife anxiety. The idea of leaving a geographic area and establishing a life somewhere else often became a type of barometer for success for young upstaters, and illustrated how expectations about personal mobility after college could be seen as an element of the quarterlife; an expected change or transition. I also started wondering about the causality of this movement. Were young adults truly “fleeing” upstate New York? If so, what were the push factors driving them out of the region? Were they instead actually being affected by pull factors in other regions of the United States, which offered attractive opportunities absent in the setting of upstate New York?

An expectation of high geographic mobility is by no means a new concept in the USA. Generations of young Americans have moved in search of success or opportunity. Take for example cities such as Los Angeles and New York, which have long been magnets for young people. However, the urgency surrounding outward migration is intriguing in the context of upstate New York, which was for many decades a national leader in standards of social and economic wellbeing (Pendall & Christopherson 2003, 2004). It is also important to consider how the ideal of mobility and the assumption that young graduates have relatively little tying them to a specific place might affect those individuals who do not share the same desire or ability to move after college. Their peers’ drive to leave the region could have significant impacts on the self-perception of individuals who choose to stay in the area or live at home following college.

I also began to wonder whether the anticipated changes in residence felt during quarterlife were unique to the geographic and socioeconomic context of upstate New York or whether they transcended cultural boundaries. More specifically, I reflected on my experience in parts of Northern Europe, where it seems that youths typically follow a different trajectory of residential mobility. After completing college, many return to their hometown to take over family businesses or live with their parents. I wondered if they too faced such powerful expectations upon graduating from college. Did quarter life expectations influence young Europeans in similar ways during the transition from college to young adulthood and into the next phase of their lives (work, unemployment, volunteerism, travel, etc.)?

To explore whether, and to what extent, *the quarterlife crisis* is internationally salient, I decided to study the factors that affect expectations of residential mobility among young upstate New Yorkers as well as young Flemish Belgians, using documentary sources and interviews. I chose these two regions based on clear differences I observed in the range of personal mobility exercised by young adults in each setting. The idea of spatial mobility as an indicator of personal success in upstate New York is very different from ideas about mobility and success in Belgium. Despite great theoretical mobility for residents of the 21st century European Union, which is increasingly politically and economically consolidated and highly trans-national, young Flemings generally remain in a very narrowly defined geographic region upon their exit from college. In short, it seems that young Flemings are more highly place-based in terms of their expectations and actual movement, while young upstate New Yorkers generally develop an expectation and desire to leave the region after graduation.

Region and Mobility Defined

I should, at this point, define the geographic limits of each region and clarify what I mean when I say young adults stay or leave. Flanders as a region is clearly defined. It is a political and cultural district comprising the five northernmost Belgian provinces where Dutch is spoken. The definition of upstate New York is somewhat more ambiguous since it exists in public consciousness but is not an official geopolitical area. While its limits are highly disputed, I decided to follow Pendall and Christopherson's lead and limit upstate New York to the fifty-two Counties north of the New York City metropolitan Region. Throughout my study, when I differentiate between young people staying in a region or leaving a region, I am referring literally to the boundaries of upstate New York or Flanders as defined above¹.

¹ For further disambiguation of places, see Appendix A – Glossary of Terms. For geographic reference, see Appendix B – Maps.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In carrying out my study, I chose to integrate several types of data sources. First, I refer to popular media accounts of the *quarterlife crisis*. Many newspapers and magazines have published articles chronicling the experiences of individuals facing profound psychological or personal difficulties in their post-college lives. In addition, popular novels detail personal experiences encountered as a 20-something from a biographical perspective. These sources provide a basic jumping off point for studying the quarterlife period. Also, based on their widespread origination (articles describing *quarterlife crisis* can be found in US, English, Dutch, Belgian and German newspapers), these sources represent an increasing acceptance of the *quarterlife crisis* as a real process.

I also turn to more theoretical or academic texts to ground my study in preexisting sociological concepts about transition in the life course. Specifically, I explore the applicability of several models for understanding the life course, and choose to employ a thematic approach in my study. I use five principles, developed by Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe as a framework with which to analyze and illustrate how individuals in Flanders and upstate New York respond to dynamics within this one period of their life course. I do this by applying the thematic framework to interviews I carried out with twenty-nine young Belgians and nineteen Young upstate New Yorkers as they were finishing college and preparing to move into the post-college phase of their lives. These interviews provided me with qualitative data and allegories, which play a central role in humanizing an otherwise highly theoretical topic.

Interview Procedures in Flanders

Carrying out the interviews proved to be one of the most challenging facets of my

study. I spent the summer of 2006 in Gent, Belgium, which is a Flemish college town with roughly 230,000 residents. Gent seemed a logical place to carry out my study because it is home to the University of Gent, which attracts approximately 28,000 students from all over the region. I was interested in finding young adults who had grown up in the Flemish region and were getting ready to engage in the next phase of their life after college.

I decided not to limit my study based on gender, ethnicity or field of study since I was interested in gathering qualitative data as opposed to quantitative data. I chose this method because I was interested in understanding how young adults formed their expectations about future geographic mobility. It seemed to me that personal allegories derived from individual experiences during the quarterlife period would be the most useful resource for understanding this process. The only two criteria for participating were that individuals had grown up in Flanders, and were graduating from college and preparing for the post-undergraduate phase of their life.

Initially I planned to interview students from the University, but I almost immediately expanded my study population in a critical way. I realized that the Belgian educational system differs significantly from the American education system in terms of its structure.² While American colleges and universities represent the entire range of national tertiary education, the Belgian system splits higher education into two separate tracks. More theoretical fields, such as philosophy, economics and linguistics, are encompassed by the university system while applied fields (education, business, translation) are found within the *Hogeschool*, another educational institution leading to a Bachelor's degree. In the United States, this distinction is not made; institutions of higher education usually include a mix of

² I describe educational structure in greater detail in the Data Analysis sub-section, *The Principle of Timing*.

theoretical and applied fields. In order to provide a more accurate comparison – one better paralleling the American college graduate population – I decided to interview students from both the University as well as the *Hogeschool* systems by expanding my interviews to include students from the *Hogeschool Gent* and *Arteveldehogeschool*, which are also located in Gent.

I tried to recruit interviewees by passing out quartercards, which contained my contact information, explained that I was in Gent doing research for my thesis, and was interested in speaking to Flemish students. I passed out hundreds of these cards all around the University and Hogeschool campuses. Unfortunately, this method yielded practically no responses. As the summer approached and students started to move out the city, I decided to take a more strategic approach by talking to students on the street and recruiting them for on-the-spot interviews. This proved much more productive and eventually led to a convenience sample of twenty-nine young Flemings from a variety of academic and personal backgrounds.

To make participation easier for Flemish students, I carried out all interviews in Dutch. In addition, I followed the same general procedure in each interview³:

- 1) I told participants to imagine an ideal scenario where they could live anywhere they desired after college without any type of constraints. I asked them to describe their ideal place of residence, both in the short term as well as long term, and to explain why they chose those particular places.
- 2) I then gave interviewees an evaluation form, and asked that they rank numerous factors (climate, friends, social life, etc.) based on how much the factor influenced their idea

³ For copies of the forms used in the interviews, please see Appendix C - Interview Tools.

of the perfect place of residence immediately following college.

3) Following this, participants were asked to tell me about their actual post-college plans and then to discuss a variety of potentially influential factors that could influence where they expected to live in the future. For example, I inquired about the impact of parental expectations, economic situations, career goals, job availability, romantic relationships, expectations about starting a family, close friendships, desire to travel, gender, possible further education, and short-term versus long-term goals.

4) I had interviewees fill out a second form, evaluating the same set of potentially influential factors they had seen in step 2. However, this time I asked them to relate the evaluation to the place where they would *actually* be residing after graduation.

5) Finally, I asked participants to answer a more abstract set of questions regarding perceptions of personal geographic mobility. Included among these questions were: whether they felt they had strong personal agency in choosing their post-graduation plans; whether they were pleased with the options they had; whether they felt forced in a particular direction; and whether they had real alternatives. I also asked them to share with me anything they were anticipating, excited about, or scared of in the months following graduation.

Interview Procedures in Upstate New York

My recruitment methods were different in upstate New York than in Flanders. I got lists of graduating seniors from Cornell's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Registrar's Office and sent them e-mails. In addition, I used the social networking website, Facebook, to contact graduating seniors. However, my criteria for participation were the same as in Belgium – participants had to be from the region (upstate New York) and

preparing to move into the post-graduation phase of their lives. Just like in Flanders, I was looking for a variety of personal stories that would help me understand the different ways upstate New Yorkers perceived their personal spatial mobility after college.

I used the same set of interview questions and evaluation forms (translated into English) as well as the same interview procedure to gather data from upstate New Yorkers attending Cornell University in the fall of 2006 and spring of 2007. I saw several important aspects in which upstate New Yorkers at Cornell paralleled the Flemish student population I had interviewed in Gent (figure 1). Students I interviewed at Cornell represented an assortment of personal and socioeconomic backgrounds and were studying in a variety of fields; some students were in highly theoretical fields and some were in more applied majors. In addition, Cornell is an institution with instant recognition across most of the region and exerts a significant pull on young upstate New Yorker students. Gent, similarly, acts as a magnet for young Flemish scholars and is a popular place for tertiary education.

Some major differences exist in my comparison as well (figure 1). For example, compared to the student body in Gent, a disproportionate segment of Cornell's student body represents exceptionally wealthy individuals. In addition, many Cornell students are international students. The unique expectations and geographic mobility of Cornell sub-populations such as these could certainly have an impact on upstate New Yorkers expectations or opportunities surrounding mobility. The same dynamic is not found at any institution in Gent, or perhaps at any institution in Belgium. In this regard, an important difference separates the quarterlife populations I chose in upstate New York and Flanders.

Figure 1. Interview Similarities and Differences Between Flanders and Upstate New York	Flanders	Upstate New York
Participants are native to the region.	X	X
Participants plan to graduate from undergraduate program within a few months.	X	X
Participants represent a range of academic fields.	X	X
Face-to-face, on-street recruitment.	X	
E-mails and website recruitment.		X
Fellow students represent homogenous local group.	X	
Fellow students include many international and exceptionally wealthy individuals.		X

Potential Limitations, Applications and Benefits

Naturally, by focusing my study on such a narrowly defined population (graduating college students), certain limitations in the research are bound to arise. For one, such a study neglects the reality of life for the majority of modern Americans and Belgians, who do *not* finish degrees in higher education and whose transition into adulthood might be markedly different than that of their collegiate counterparts. It is often assumed that strikingly different familial expectations, fiscal responsibilities, and occupational opportunities correspond to whether individuals have been able to attend college. However, the expectation that college-educated students enjoy greater flexibility and opportunity than their non-college-educated peers can be problematic too, in its creation of assumptions about life after college (Hunt 2005: 119; Malernee 2006; Sandles 2002). Assuming that college graduates represent a homogenous population of erudite elite neglects the fact that former class structures and relations are not necessarily still as applicable for analyzing the life course in contemporary western societies (Clausen 1986: 104-105; Hunt 2005: 5, 119). Retaining outdated ideas

about the life-course invariably ignores the array of class backgrounds and resources available to college-educated individuals, and presumes that their collective experience as graduates increases their personal options and range of mobility after college. While higher education may provide an important opportunity for many individuals to augment their own human capital or to expand their social resource-base and networks, it is important to note the great discrepancy of available support surrounding graduates today. This inconsistency is obscured by broad social expectations that pressure graduates to project an image of high performance and personal success. Graduates may feel that they must justify the large temporal and financial investments they have made in personal education by achieving high levels of personal success, thereby validating their self-worth (Hunt 2005: 51).

Analysis of the quarter-life period could also prove important when considering that a higher percentage of Americans are completing bachelors and advanced degrees today than ever before. The 2005 US census found that 27.2% of all Americans age 25 or older held bachelors degrees or higher. Compare this to 2000 when the same age group had a 24.4 % attainment rate or 1990 when 20.5% of this group held at least a bachelor's degree. In fact, the percentage of Americans receiving college degrees has risen almost every year since 1965, when roughly 9% of the American population finished at least 4 years of college. The US Census Bureau has predicted a general increase in the percentage of Americans receiving college degrees at least until 2028. While the experience of attending college will increase in mainstream America, I must point out that further research needs to be conducted to explore the imbalance in college graduates based on gender or ethnicity. For example, while the percentage of college graduates is expected to increase in most groups irrespective of ethnicity or gender, the US Census Bureau predicts that the percentage of young Black men

and young Latino men earning a degree is expected to stagnate or decrease in coming years. These anomalous trends require further study, especially considering that immigration and generational differences might strongly affect statistics pertaining to college-education among Latinos.

The Belgian population has experienced a similar trend of rising percentages of degree-holders (Verstraeten 1995: 17). According to the *Nationaal Instituut voor de Statistiek* (Belgium's equivalent of the Census Bureau) the percentage of those individuals completing higher education rose from 9.5% in 1981 to 15.6% in 1991 and to 23.6% in 2005 (NIS; Verstraeten 1995: 18). It is clear that if educational attainment in Western Nations such as Belgium and the USA continues in this pattern, that the process of attending college and the resulting challenges faced when leaving a college environment will only become a more prominent experience in these societies.

Comparing perceptions about post-college mobility in two different social contexts might also reveal much about whether the process of transition out of higher education is experienced similarly around the world. Is the *quarterlife crisis* a social phenomenon in many countries, or is it the unique product of life in 21st Century America? In addition, if it does exist in many places, is it experienced in similar ways or do the challenges of the quarterlife manifest themselves differently depending on cultural context?

Significant variation between the two settings might be useful in understanding *why* young upstate New Yorkers develop a unique sense of urgency about leaving the area and might provide insight into how the changing socioeconomic environment in upstate New York affects population retention. Such a study could illuminate specific transition-related pressures that influence young upstaters during the quarter life period and underscore what

might be done to alleviate these pressures or ease the transition into post-collegiate society. On the other hand, if a sense of confusion or urgency is in fact a trans-national characteristic of graduating college, it could lend academic validity to what is currently treated casually, a concept limited primarily to the sphere of popular media. Greater attention to the difficulties of this transition could also help reshape assumptions about the “optimistic world of opportunity” currently associated with life after college (Hunt 2005: 119).

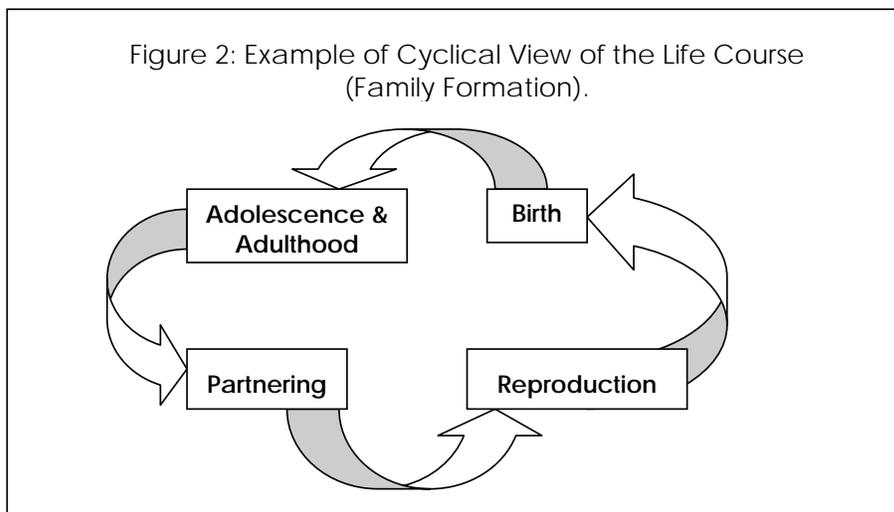
Finally, ascertaining whether significant differences exist based on socio-geographic regions could yield important data for social scientists examining the broader social difficulties confronting individuals at this stage in the life course. It might also prove useful for local municipalities, businesses and organizations hoping to retain young people with high levels of human capital or highly developed personal skills (Öberg 1997: 25-26).

Naturally, a study limited to young, college-educated adults will be influenced in certain ways by its population specificity. Despite a limited scope, it is important to carry out studies that could shed light on the reality of personal and social challenges during a particular transitional period in the life course.

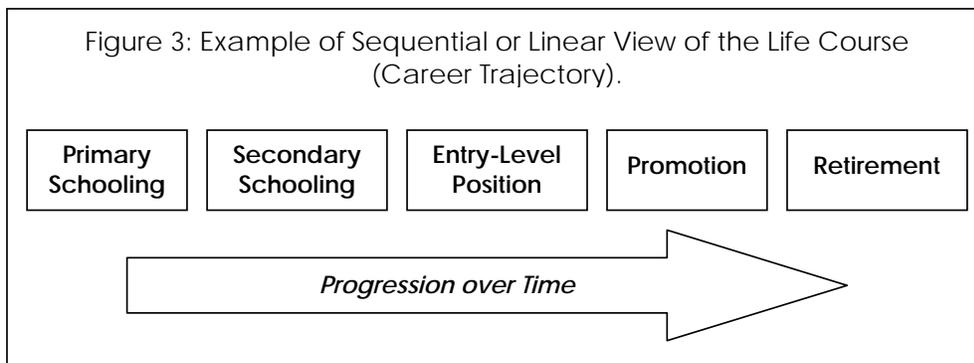
SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY: THE LIFE COURSE

During the past half century, sociology has seen the maturation of a new and popular concept for analysis of human lives; namely the life course. Originally described as the “study of biography, history and the problems of their intersection within social structure” (Elder et al. 2003: 4), the life course has been used to imagine how individuals move through life, what they expect to experience at specific junctures, and how the process varies for different people based on social factors (Elder et al. 2003: 5, 14).

Traditionally, many proposals for understanding the life course have relied on paradigmatic cycles, sequences or stages (Clausen 1986: 17-26; Elder et al. 2003: 7). For example, some of the earliest models are rooted in cyclical ideas of familial-formation (figure 2). Put very simply, this method observes how individuals are born, grow up, get married and have their own children who then repeat the process (Elder et al. 2003: 7; Tallman 2003: 107-110) and clearly does not apply to anyone who does not have children. Another common method for understanding the life course has focused on career paths and assumes



that individuals follow a trajectory with a starting point, such as primary education and progress through various stages of education and employment, climaxing at retirement (figure 3). Of course, this view of the life course, which relies on one facet of individual identity, can oversimplify the various interactive roles actually played by an individual throughout his or her life (Elder et al. 2003: 7; Moen 2003: 269-270). Phyllis Moen brings into focus the limited applicability of such traditional categorical views and suggests an alternative perspective on the life course by saying, “A life-course perspective promotes a holistic, rather than age-segmented approach to lives, focusing on pathways and transitions, rather than differences across or within certain age categories” (1996: 180)



Many of the tropes for understanding the life course (including the timing-of-events model, the normative-crisis model, the stage theory, etc.) have been informed by some combination of age-related principles. First, they are based on the idea that an individual’s chronological age is correlated to biological and psychological developments and second, that social time (social expectations about transitions or rites of passage) influences movement through the life course (Clausen 1986: 3, 19; Settersten 2003: 81-83, 85-88).

While such perspectives are helpful for understanding how social norms and

mainstream assumptions are embedded in the life course, it seems they might be confounded with what is normal in the life course. In other words, themes relying on a normative cycle or trajectory are highly problematic in their tendency to standardize processes, which are actually incredibly complex and represent great variation. For example, in his 1986 publication, *The Life Course*, Clausen states that, "Being 'on time' counts for something. Except for those who have decided that marriage and a family are not for them, the man or woman who reaches 30 without having married (or having established a close intimate relationship with a member of the opposite sex) is likely to feel that s/he is behind schedule. The man who has not found his occupational niche by age 40 is even more likely to feel that something is amiss in his life" (3).

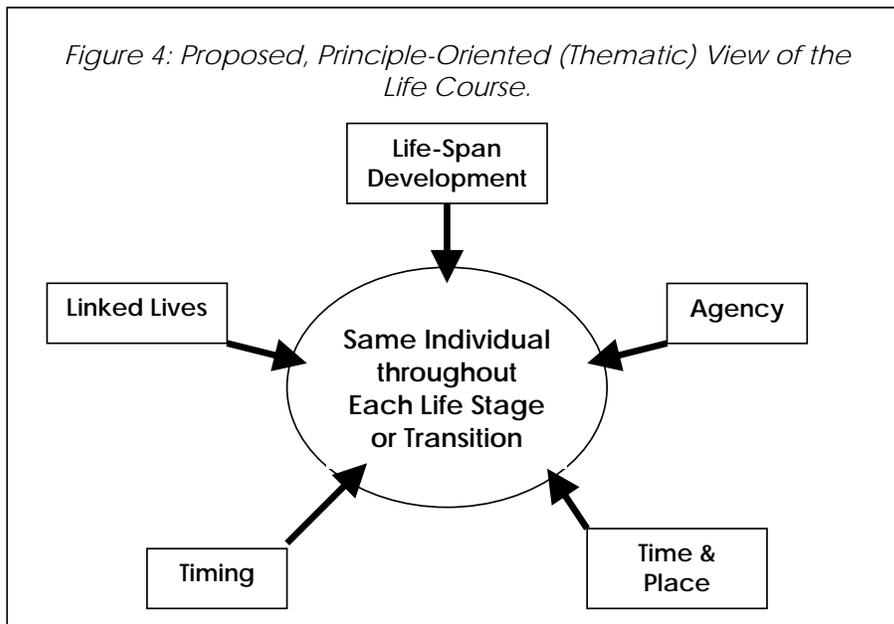
Conclusions such as Clausen's, which are premised on expectations, do not accurately depict the life course for many individuals who follow alternate paths. This perspective is especially problematic given the modern context of greater flexibility in the life course for residents of western industrialized nations. For example, Clausen's assumption that men or women generally look for a partner of the opposite sex by age 30 is highly heteronormative, illustrating how assumptions about the life course can fail to account for large portions of the population. This statement is also outmoded considering the declining number of households representing married couples and the profusion of divorce and children born out of wedlock (Harden 2007.) Similarly, his statement about 40-year-old men feeling amiss without an occupational niche is outdated in a modern context where many 40-year-old women rely just as heavily on careers as an important part of their personal identity or where many men focus on non-career-related roles, such as primary caregiver to children.

Sequential models informed by chronological or social age have been employed in the past to analyze the life course, and social norms and expectations about the timing of events do place pressure on individuals as they move through the life course. However, I believe that it will be more productive to follow the example of Elder et al. and apply a thematic framework of analysis in my study (2003: 15-16). This seems a more realistic approach to understanding the quarterlife period of the life course considering that I am not examining longitudinal data, but am focusing on the experiences of individuals at a specific juncture within the life course. Finally, I have chosen this framework because I feel it better accounts for the intrinsic dissimilarities of individual movement through the life course. Rather than dichotomizing people into “normal” or “abnormal” tracks, it respects the wide range of variability experienced in the life course and works to understand the influences that affect individual lives in different ways.

Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe identify five major principles that affect individuals throughout the entirety of their life course (2003). This approach does not neglect that the life course may include stages or cycles. However, it does rethink the supremacy of age-derived trajectories and cycles as a means for describing individual experiences through the life course (figure 4). The five principles as identified by Elder et al. are as follows (2003: 10-14):

- 1) *The Principle of Life-Span Development*: Human development and aging are lifelong processes.
- 2) *The Principle of Agency*: Individuals construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances.

- 3) *The Principle of Time and Place*: The life course of individuals is embedded and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetime.
- 4) *The Principle of Timing*: The developmental antecedents and consequences of life transitions, events, and behavioral patterns vary according to their timing in a person's life.
- 5) *The Principle of Linked Lives*: Lives are lived interdependently and socio-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships.

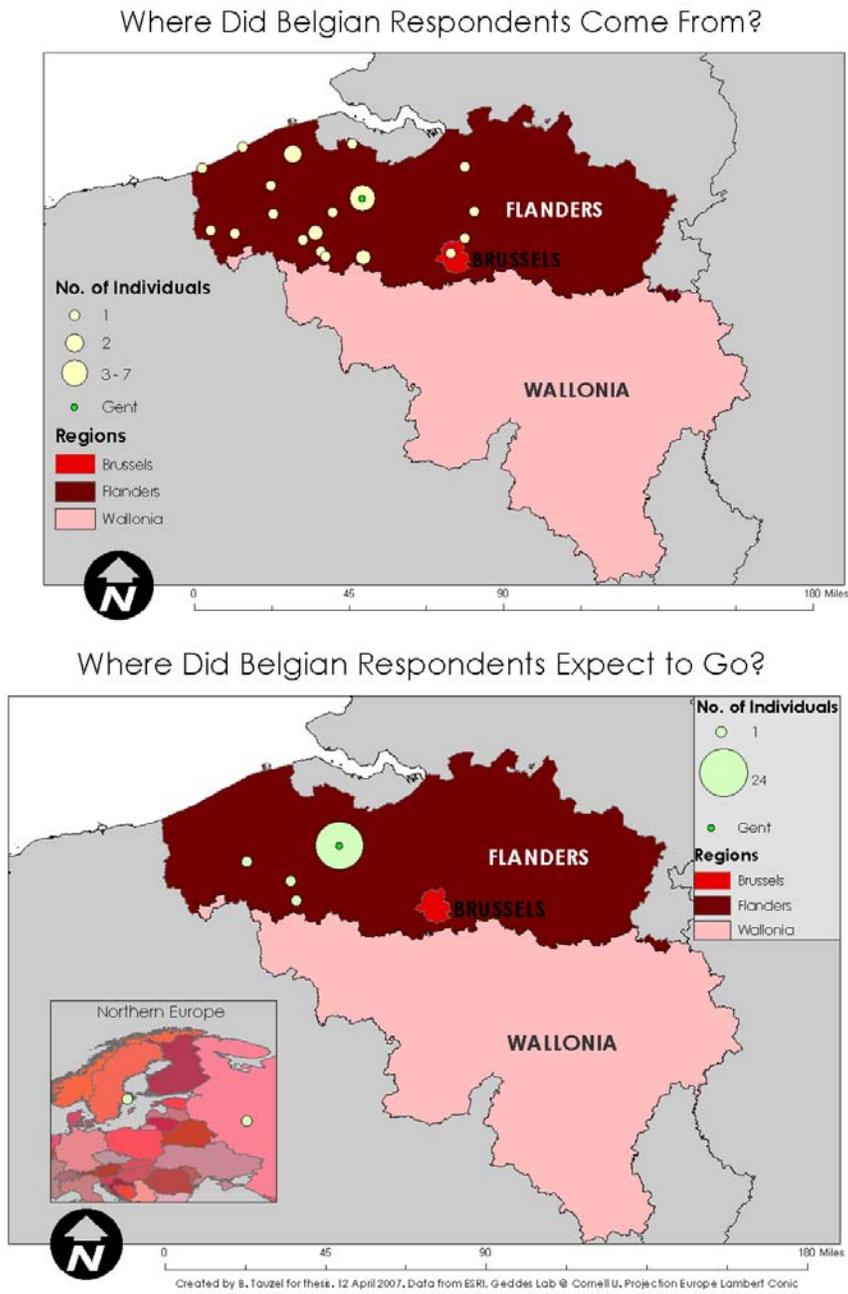


DATA ANALYSIS

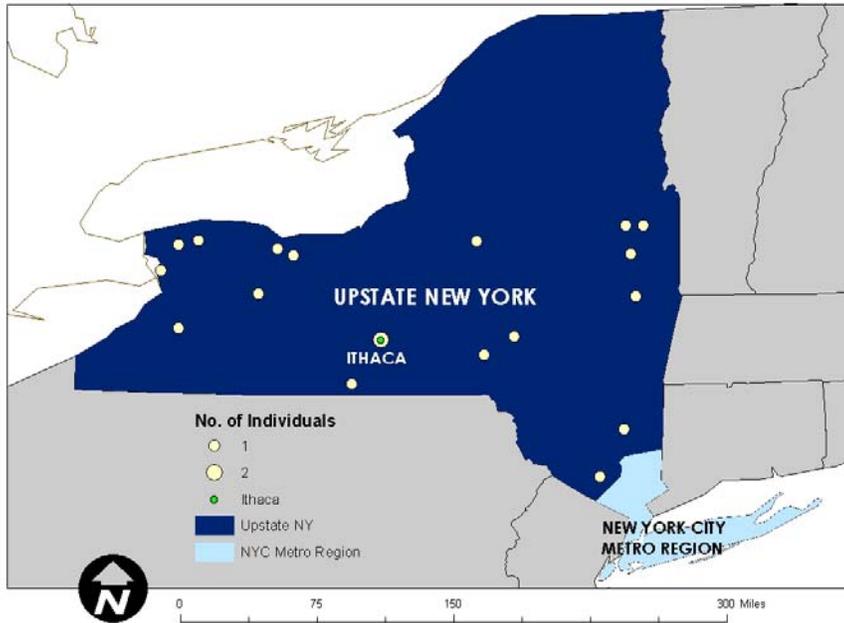
In the following sections, I will use Elder et al.'s life course framework to examine systematically the interviews I carried out in Flanders and Upstate New York about expected quarterlife geographic mobility (2003). I will define each life course principle and apply it as a tool for understanding the situations and stories that young adults shared with me while they were forming their plans about a post-college place of residence.

However, before I delve into the thematic analysis of interviews, I have included a brief spatial analysis representing the hometowns of interviewees as well as their expected places of residence for after college (figure 5). These maps confirm that many Flemings expect to stay within the region after graduating from college. Some of them will return to their parents' homes, two said they would be abroad and the majority planned to stay in Gent. The contrary was true among upstate New Yorkers. Only five planned to stay within the region, four in Ithaca and one returning home. Two were planning travel abroad after graduation and four were planning to move to New York City. The rest were planning on moving to other states. Bearing in mind these general expectations and referring to the maps in figure five should provide a useful reference point for the thematic analyses in the following sections.

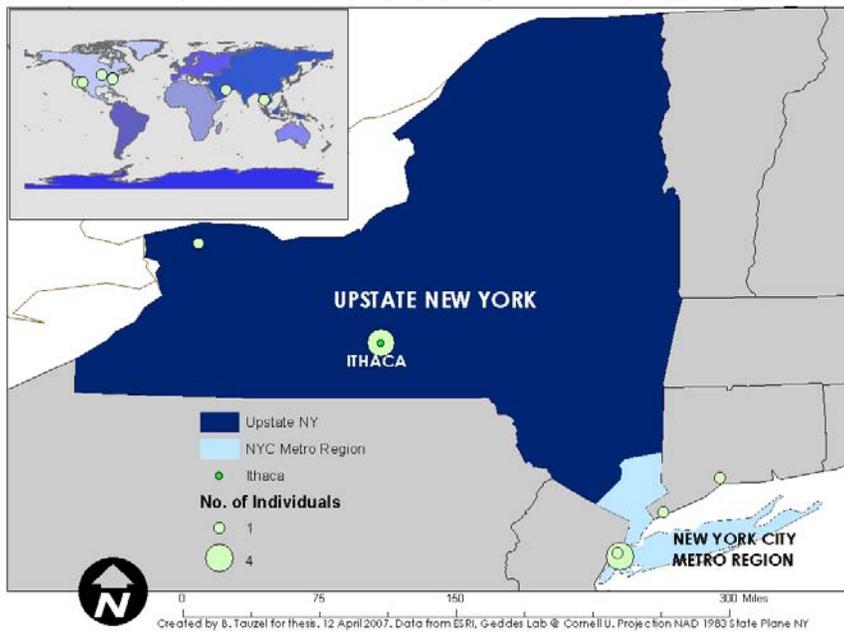
Figure 5) Spatial Analysis of Expected Post-Graduation Place of Residence for Flemings and Upstate New Yorkers



Where Did Upstate New York Respondents Come From?



Where Did Upstate New York Respondents Expect to Go?



The Principle of Life-Span Development

Because the nature of my study was to focus on the experience of individuals at a specific point within the life course, it was at first a daunting task to consider how *the principle of life-span development*, which is more obviously applicable to longitudinal research, might apply to my study. However, two rather anomalous interviews, one from Flanders and one from upstate New York helped me understand how *life-span development* can be used to analyze the experiences of people in the quarterlife period. This principle, that individuals are constantly aging and developing, also means that events from the past are constantly projecting themselves onto an individual's present and future. Past experiences remain with individuals throughout their entire life, affecting the way they understand their place within society, and their location within the life course.

I spoke with one 22-year-old Flemish man who had graduated with a degree in comparative cultural studies. He said he would like to spend time traveling and living outside of Belgium. He saw himself trekking around Scandinavia or Asia, which was a surprising answer in comparison to that of most other Flemings. While his peers tended to stay around Gent or live near their hometowns, this individual told me that he and his girlfriend were planning to travel abroad for several months. He would look for work in organic agriculture and his girlfriend would work as a midwife. Both would use networks of non-for-profit organizations to find jobs that would cover living costs wherever they ended up. I finally gained some insight into his sense of quarterlife flexibility by asking about his parents; both of whom were avid world-travelers and had encouraged him to travel when he was younger by taking the family on vacation to Asia, or by financing his trip to South America. The goals and norms instilled by this Fleming's family while their son was young

affected how he developed a sense of personal geographic mobility in the quarterlife period. *The principle of life-span development* can be used to understand how this individual learned to value travel and hands-on experience rather than remaining in Flanders such as many of his peers.

An interview with a horticulture student from New York provided another, different kind of example of how past events influence current life choices. When asked where she would ideally live, she responded,

I'm an upstate New York Girl... that's the place I came from. I lived in the same house my entire life. And, I feel a sense of obligation to the community that actually raised me. I was a product of the foster care system, so, feeling obligated to give back the community was something that was instilled in me from very little, from a very young age, so, somewhere in upstate New York.

This woman's statement provided insight into how the previous events in ones' life can affect his or her sense of geographic mobility at a later point. By discussing her move into foster care as a 12-year-old and the strong impact her foster family had on her, she was telling me about an important event from her past that had implications for her expected mobility as a quarterlifer. By sharing her feeling of responsibility to give back to her community, she was also revealing how *the principle of life-span development* applied to her life and how events in the past projected themselves into the plans she was making in her quarterlife period as well. Unlike many of her peers who were attracted to the bright lights of an urban setting and were eager to move (even if for only a short time), this upstater was focused on returning to her small hometown. She even explained how some of her career choices were based on the opportunities that would await her at home. She could get involved in education and was planning to become a teacher rather than work in horticulture, which was her academic background. This woman's drive to return home shows how

personal geographic mobility in various phases of life (including the quarterlife) can be understood using *the principle of life-span development*.

The two examples I highlight above illustrate how knowledge of life-span can be a helpful tool for understanding how individuals make choices regarding their personal mobility. Since my interviews focused on a relatively narrowly defined period within the life course (the quarterlife transition), I was initially concerned that it would be difficult to apply this principle, which lends itself more readily to longitudinal analysis. However, in the cases of the Flemish world traveler or the upstate New York woman who wanted to give back to her community, *the principle of life-span development* elucidates how individuals in both Flanders and upstate New York rely on their own past experiences to create very personal attitudes about geographic mobility during the quarterlife period.

The Principle of Agency

It is important to incorporate *the principle of agency* when considering personal geographic mobility but problematic in that agency can be difficult to recognize. Elder et al. explain agency as “individuals making choices and compromises based on the alternatives that they perceive before them” (2003: 11; Elder 1995: 110). They cite the following examples of agency: how workers’ values influence their work decisions; how families in dangerous locations minimize risks by manipulating their home environment; and how parents choose to get involved in their children’s education. Obviously, agency can be hard to discern and many examples are up for debate.

Within my study, I adapt the definition originally put forth by Elder and his colleagues. I limit my analysis to include one of the most easily recognized examples of agency; cases of personal decision-making where an individual pursues a specific path

despite other parties (parents, teachers or friends) preferring that they follow a different avenue. Naturally, this approach provides only a partial view of agency since there are infinite ways one could express self-determination or empowerment. However, exploring even this most basic expression of agency provides an interesting picture of the various ways young adults handle the quarterlife transition in both upstate New York and Flanders.

In my interviews with upstate New Yorkers, I saw huge variability in young adults' personal agency. Some defied and some conceded to the expectations of parents and friends. For example, one young woman who was planning to become a teacher told me about feeling responsible to her mother and father since they had financed her college. Later she explained that her mother pressured her in certain ways or made her feel guilty much of the time for not being at home more often. She described herself as a reductionist who chose what she saw as the safest path, and explained that she had decided to become a teacher at the encouragement of her mother and boyfriend even though she would have liked to pursue a career in agriculture or to travel abroad. When asked if she was happy with her situation she said,

Not exactly, not exactly. I'm not jumping up and down about becoming a teacher. Part of it is because I'm not sure how capable I am in doing that. Part of it is, all my friends are going for careers in the industry and I'm not, and I'm kind of jealous of that a little bit. But like I said, I'm playing it safe.

Because of social relationships with her mother and boyfriend, she was opting to stay in the Northeast, rather than travel to the West Coast, Midwest or Europe, as she would have liked. She also talked about the role gender played in her residential mobility. Even though she and her boyfriend were looking for opportunities in agriculture, and she was eager to return to her family's farm, he was unwilling to go there. She told me that if she had been a man in a similar relationship, returning to her family's farm would have probably been a

given.

On the other hand, some young adults contested familial expectations. One young woman told me she was planning to travel abroad in the fall but needed to save up money beforehand. When asked if she thought about going home in the interim to save on rent she answered,

Could I be at home? Yes, yep, mm hmm...okay actually, well you know, that's funny because I have until September to do whatever I want. All I have to do is make money but I'm choosing not to live at home. Because you know, a really big obstacle for me with my family is that I'm the only Democrat in my family and everybody else is Republican... My mom was a big supporter of Bush and my brother was a big supporter of Bush...the people that have a lot to say about politics are two Republicans in my house and I am like die-hard Democrat - die-hard. And so that has caused friction in the past with my mom and I, and my brother and I. But it's not really a problem anymore because I learned to not bring it up. But It's really hard for me in that way to live there, to live at home for a long period of time because of that, just, differences of opinions... just differences in ideology I guess.

This interview showed me how this upstate New Yorker was planning to use geographic mobility to negotiate both national politics as well as familial politics. While she spoke very affectionately about her family, she was also wary about living with them for an entire summer based on strong ideological differences. It was interesting to see how she was planning to use personal mobility as a tool of agency. Her mobility became a mechanism to define her independence from her family as well as the parameters or boundaries of what she was and was not willing to tolerate at home.

I uncovered a wide discrepancy in agency among my Flemish interviews as well. One 22-year-old told me she was planning to work as a researcher at the university and had taken the position primarily because she did not know what other job she was interested in

doing. She was confident that her degree in civil engineering ensured her a secure position in the Belgian job market. However, later in the interview she told me

I'm actually not so satisfied with the major that I chose. I didn't actually choose it. When I began, there was an entrance exam, and I thought, I'll take the test and see how it goes. If I pass it, then I can choose, and if I don't pass it, yeah, then I'll have to do something else. But I got a really good score on that test so I thought, this is for me! And I actually didn't think about it any further or what I actually wanted to do later. I just jumped in and now I think... sometimes I would start to think about it, and the more I thought about what I wanted to do, the less I wanted to finish my degree. So I preferred not to think about what I preferred to do. But now that I've finished college it's on my mind again. Yeah, they tell me that you can do a lot with the diploma I have, not only in electro-technical [engineering], which I've studied... I would really like to take evening classes in photography... to do it as a part-time job or something... I don't know what I'm looking for...

...searching for what I actually want to do, as a job, that's the biggest. I've actually been trying to work it out for almost year, the question of what I actually want to do. That's a big challenge.

Exogenous expectations could have been one reason she chose to stay in civil engineering rather than switching into a more personally fulfilling program. She explained that her parents were both engineers. She also told me that her field was dominated by men and that

because women are a minority, I get the feeling... that they want more women in the program so that we can be an example. Some firms even search for women because they want more women engineers... most of the time it's not openly stated but sometimes I get the impression that we have an advantage.

It was interesting to see how the concessions this quarterlifer had made in professional development were affecting her idea of post-graduate life. Hypothetically, she would have no problem finding a job and had a great deal of geographic mobility based on her employment qualifications. Nevertheless, she was dissatisfied with the career options

available to her. Rather than take a job that she would offer her great spatial mobility, she decided to take a less prestigious, short-term research position and to stay in Gent.

By comparison, a great deal of personal agency was expressed by a 26-year-old Flemish man who was staying in Gent for a year after graduation to work and save up money before moving to the Netherlands. In contrast to many of his peers, who visited home every weekend, he told me he only went home every few months. What developed thereafter was an interesting story about how he had used personal mobility to follow a path in life, of which his parents disapproved.

I don't have a lot of contact with my parents... I see them every three months; an afternoon on the coast but not too long...I moved out when I was 18. I moved out because they had problems with a number of issues. I had fallen in love with a boy and my parents had a problem with that so I said, I'll move out. My dad had a lot of trouble with it and then they had a lot of arguments, my mom and my dad...My dad fought with me some, and then my mom and dad with each other. There were always fights, so when I was eighteen, I came to Gent to live and to work.

Coming from a traditional or conservative family that disapproved of his sexual orientation, this Fleming had already expressed agency through his mobility by moving away from his parents' home. After finishing college and saving money, his next step was to begin a master's program in esotericism and mysticism at the University of Amsterdam, which his parents did not consider a good idea. It seemed he was preparing to employ geographic mobility again as a means of expressing personal agency and autonomy from his parents in the period after his undergraduate education.

The four interviews I used as examples above helped me realize that quarterlifers in both Flanders and upstate New York express a wide range of agency. In that respect, *the principle of agency* shows how both regions are actually somewhat analogous. Although I

looked at only one, easily identifiable type of agency – comparing whether individuals were choosing their own paths during the quarterlife transition or were following paths based on the guidance of others – I still saw a huge range of responses; from highly independent individuals to people who were working to please parents and everything in between. In short, the *principle of agency*, applied to my interviews, demonstrates how Flemings and upstate New Yorkers both embody a wide range of personal agency, which affects their ideas about personal mobility during the quarterlife period.

The Principle of Time and Place

Sociological processes must be analyzed within their specific geographic, cultural and economic contexts (Elder et al. 2003: 12; Elder 1995: 107). It is obvious that opportunities and expectations differ greatly based on the era and location of an individual's life. For example, someone born during the Great Depression would experience strikingly different forces if born in economically prosperous post-war America. For this reason, I felt it was important to provide a brief historical grounding of my two regions of study, and to explore some of the cultural and political forces that may have shaped how participants in each region approach the concept of personal post-collegiate spatial mobility.

As previously mentioned, I originally chose these two regions for their seemingly contrasting residential patterns of young adults after college. In Belgium, after graduating from college, many young adults return to a town or municipality near their hometown and most stay within the region. Interestingly, in my interactions with Flemish people, a discussion topic that constantly resurfaced was the enduring oppression of Flemish language and culture by neighboring Walloons (Southern Belgians), French and Dutch. Perhaps Flemings felt that, due to my status as a foreigner (and particularly a young American), I

must have little knowledge of Belgian history. Maybe they assumed that I was simply a non-partisan outsider who would empathize with their account of the past. Irrespective of their motivations, it was clear that individuals were eager to present me with a Flemish version of Belgian history, one that was characterized by a perceived oppression and a desire to defend Flemish cultural heritage. Histories were composed of up-hill battles to have the Flemish language recognized as an official form of communication in Belgium or sentiments of long-term cultural repression by neighboring Walloons, French, Dutch or Germans. At times, the accounts emphasized social stratification in Flanders; highly educated, upper-class families traditionally spoke French at home and in elite circles, while Flemish was used by the majority of working class people. A strong sense of geographically bounded cultural identity and symbolic boundaries between neighboring groups were major facets of “being Flemish” (Lamont & Molnár 2002:168-171)

While I was surprised to find such a strong feeling of cultural oppression, I also saw that French language maintains a certain privilege in Belgium in very subtle ways. The summer I was in Gent, radio programs and newspapers were reporting on the linguistic imbalance in Flanders. A recent report had shown that only 19% of Walloons spoke Flemish, while 59% of Flemings spoke French (Ginsburgh & Weber 2006). These percentages are especially striking because the Flemish represent the majority population in Belgium; at approximately 6 million, they outnumber the 3.5 million Walloons and 1 million residents of bi-lingual Brussels. It seems counterintuitive that the favored language would be that of a minority population. Spending a year in the Netherlands after high school, I heard Dutch youth commonly tell “Belgian jokes” in which the Flemish protagonist always makes some exceedingly comedic faux pas. My Parisian host sister also poked fun at me by

repeatedly saying I spoke French “like a Belgian.” One Flemish woman I interviewed said she would like to live in France but would find it difficult because “the mentality in France is a little nationalistic, especially in relationship to Belgians. <<*Grumbles*>>.” The inter-cultural hostility, however mild or subverted, might play a role in young Flemings choosing to stay in a relatively small geographic area after graduation.

In addition, many Flemings still imagine Flanders as an historical underdog, which has been fighting to gain legitimacy in the eyes of more powerful nations since the eighteenth century (Brockmans 1993). The turning point in most stories is the Second World War, after which international recognition came in the form of economic development and empowerment. In the decades preceding World War II, Flanders was one of the poorest regions in Europe. After the war, foreign corporations were drawn to the region for its cheap labor, central location within Europe, and access to large ports at Antwerp and Gent. Foreign investment promoted regional industrial development, which led to an economic boom. While much of Europe was struggling to reconstruct itself, Flanders was enjoying widespread economic success for the first time since the middle ages. The creation of highly localized regional wealth over a relatively short period led to modern and paradoxical Flanders. The standard of living was improved, public infrastructure, housing, and communication networks received massive upgrades, and life was generally modernized. However, many Flemings maintained the day-to-day traditions of their parents and grandparents, including customs, language and attitudes associated with a period when Flemings were poor, agrarian and highly localized. One manifestation of this can be found in political action movements that rally for a sovereign Flemish state, most noticeably, *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Importance) which enjoys tremendous political support, especially in

Flanders' largest city, Antwerp. Also, keep in mind that Belgium is the only federal country in the world that has a system of "exclusive responsibilities," meaning that there is no hierarchy (and therefore no accountability) between the federal and the highly autonomous regional governments (Verstraeten 1995). This structure demonstrates the regional separatism that exists in contemporary Belgium and how Belgium's geopolitical boundaries reinforce symbolic boundaries, reproduce ideas of otherness, and encourage residents to stay within specific regions (Lamont & Molnár 2002: 183-184).

Understanding that many Flemings have a strong and collective sense of historical oppression may help to explain, to some extent, the expected migration patterns of Flemish youth. The region's diversity of local dialects, festivals, and attitudes has persisted into the present, and strong support of regional literature and music (pop songs sung in dialect) maintains Flemish cultural identity. It is logical that this historical and cultural dynamic, coupled with a high standard of living, has had a significant impact on the way young Flemings view their future, and why they would decide to stay in Flanders after graduating. It also helps explain why young Flemings, despite their great linguistic range, might feel out of place in other parts of Europe, even in France and the Netherlands, where language barriers are minimal. Dutch is the official first language of both Flanders and the Netherlands and 59% of Flemings speak French. Interestingly, 53% of Flemings also speak English, which is often considered the *Lingua Franca* in continental Europe, and would serve to expand their range of mobility even further beyond the Flemish borders (Ginsburgh & Weber 2006). Theoretically, the increasing unification of nations within the European Union is expanding the mobility of EU citizens. However, in the case of Flanders, residents tend to stay within regional boundaries.

In contrast to Flanders, upstate New York is a region that, until very recently, was characterized by relative economic comfort and well-being. In the last decades of the twentieth century, however, upstate New York faced serious economic and population decline in comparison to the rest of the United States. This decline is a crucial point to consider when studying the predicted spatial mobility of young people in the region.

Throughout the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, upstate New York was an economic powerhouse (Roberts 2006). Consider that in 1901 Buffalo was the world's eighth largest city (Bell 2002: 4). By the end of the twentieth century, however, the socioeconomic characteristics of upstate New York were considerably less favorable. In 2003 and 2004 the Brookings Institution, (a non-profit independent research organization), published a series of reports entitled *The State of Upstate*, which chronicled economic and population trends in the region through the 1980's and 1990's. To illustrate the changing conditions of life in upstate New York, the researchers highlighted discrepancies in wages, population growth, and poverty in upstate as compared to national trends. For example, upstate New York experienced more out-migration than in-migration between 1990 and 2002. Compared to a national average of 13 percent population growth during the 1990's, upstate New York's population grew by a mere 1.1 percent. If upstate New York were to be considered its own state, it would have had lower population growth than every state except for West Virginia and North Dakota (Pendall & Christopherson 2003).

Upstate's economic profile is also telling. In 1990, and again in 2000, residents in the region were earning lower hourly wages than people of similar age, race, sex and educational backgrounds nationwide. Furthermore, the upstate region, traditionally an economically advantaged region, saw increasing poverty rates among families, individuals and children

during the 1990s, while the national average for the same demographic groups dropped (Pendall & Christopherson 2004). In terms of youth mobility, one of the most relevant comparisons is that of post-college employment. In 2000 college graduates in upstate were earning substantially lower wages than the national average (Pendall & Christopherson 2004). In light of the region's recent socioeconomic trends, it seems logical that many young people would leave in search of better economic or social opportunities. As an upstater deciding where to settle after graduation, such stark economic and population stagnation would be hard to ignore. Other regions with better economic or career opportunities, or a higher concentration of young people would certainly exert a strong pull on graduating upstate New Yorkers planning for the next phase of their lives.

This basic grounding in economic and historical processes is central to understanding why young people in Flanders and upstate New York might make certain decisions regarding personal mobility. Centuries of poverty in Flanders, followed by rapid economic growth, and the corresponding sense of local pride might explain why some young Flemings feel bound to places. In contrast, upstate New York's decline from once-successful region to stagnant region might account for the exodus of young people from the area. *The principle of time and place* brings the impact of local history into focus. It helps clarify why young residents would be pulled out of upstate New York and why young adults in Flanders would choose to stay within that region.

The Principle of Timing

Elder et al. argue that "The same events or experience may affect individuals in different ways depending on when they occur in the life course (2003: 12; Elder 1995: 114)." This idea revealed itself in a surprising way as I interviewed New Yorkers and Flemings. As

previously mentioned, I asked both sets of interviewees very similar questions. One important question was whether respondents ever felt overwhelmed by the multitude of choices available to them at any point in their lives. I chose this question based on its recurring presence in literature about the *quarterlife crisis*. Many novels and biographical accounts of young adulthood detail the overwhelming choices one is faced with after college (Robbins & Wilner 2001) and how individuals are sometimes paralyzed by the fear of choosing the “wrong” option. Applying *the principle of timing* to my interviews, I found that many upstate New Yorkers were aware of overwhelming choices they would face in the years following college, especially in terms of career choices. By contrast, many Flemings had already wrestled with serious career choices while they were transitioning from high school to college. At least part of this difference can be explained by the structure of the Belgian and American Educational Systems. *The principle of timing* also helps frame the experiences of individuals when facing a similar experience (establishing a career-related identity) at different times in life.

In interviews, several of my upstate New York respondents agreed that they had experienced feelings of overwhelming choice. However, it should be noted that this response was most often characterized by a mild anticipation of something they would face in the future, rather than something they had actually experienced firsthand. When asked if he ever felt he had too many options, one 21-year-old told me,

I think of that all the time actually. Just hearing about different jobs, I could be really interested in doing that, but I'd probably get bored of it after three years.

A government major responded,

Because I can be happy doing a lot of things, for sure, it's hard to focus on

one thing... A lot of my friends wanted to be at home, especially wanted to be teachers, and so I feel like their experience has been completely different. They know what they're doing, they're taking their things, they're student teaching, and then they're gonna get a job and they're gonna have that job for 40 years and I have nothing - no idea that close. That's been a little stressful at times. [I asked him how that anxiety manifested itself in his life, to which he responded.] oh, just thoughts. I don't, you know, break pens or anything. And not a big deal, you know, it's like a few nervous breaths and then you move on, but not a huge thing.

Uncertainty about their future career paths greatly broadened the potential places upstate New Yorkers felt they could live. Because they could be happy or interested in such a variety of positions, they often faced a multiplicity of potential locations where they might end up in the future.

In contrast to the upstate interviewees, several Flemings already seemed intimately familiar with feeling overwhelmed by possibilities. While many were worried about the choices they would make after graduation, many also surprised me by recounting stories of stress after high school. When asked whether she ever felt overwhelmed by choices, one 22-year-old psychology student said

Sometimes, for sure, sometimes, and definitely in the transition from high school to the university. At that point, you have so many different directions you can take.

I had not expected to hear about the anxiety of graduating from high school. A philosophy major echoed this sentiment, remembering how he felt the stress of life choices while in high school.

Earlier, when I was around 16 or 17 or 18 years old I felt that there were so many choices in life, and that I didn't know which one I should choose to be happy in the long-run. I thought, yeah, maybe I'm making a decision out of

naïveté that I'll regret later on.

It seems that, while the upstate New Yorkers I interviewed were getting ready to deal with the pressure of major life choices after college, their Flemish counterparts had already wrestled with serious decisions about their life direction. Many Flemings had tried to reconcile personal identity and career paths in high school. In comparison, some of my New York respondents were preparing to undergo the process of establishing a career-related identity after graduation or were not thinking about it at all. The fact that Flemings had already chosen a professional path greatly decreased the number of choices they were trying to make while graduating. In many cases, their training dictated where they could find work, and reduced their geographic options, greatly simplifying the decision making process.

These different trends – which originally struck me as unexpected – are not as surprising after considering how differently the Belgian and American educational systems are structured. In his study *From Student to Worker*, Alan Kerckhoff compares how structural and normative features of three Western education systems – those of Germany, Great Britain and the United States – affect young people's transitional patterns (2003: 251). His study is especially valuable in this case, since the German education system is highly analogous to that of Belgium. Therefore, much of Kerckhoff's insight about differences between German and American education sheds light on the experiences of Flemish and upstate New York students.

For example, Kerckhoff discusses *the highly structured German pattern*, whereby academic programs of all levels are greatly standardized and stratified, and most educational programs are defined in occupational terms. He indicates that the German system has the capacity to structure the flow of young adults into the labor force because education provides

them with a clearly defined place within the labor force. This is similar to the Belgian system and explains why young Flemings commonly said they had felt significant stress at the point of transition between secondary and tertiary education. They are assigned or choose a niche within the labor force at a much earlier age than Americans (Kerckhoff, 2003: 263). Unlike the commonly accepted American practice of pursuing a liberal arts education, Flemings are expected to start specializing in the later years of high school or the first year of college. This choice means that they are struggling with ideas of personal identity as it relates to occupation at a much earlier age than their American counterparts.

American students, by contrast, take part in what Kerckhoff calls an *unstructured pattern*, where schools are not nearly as stratified or standardized, and where job preparedness or skill certification is more ambiguous. Rather than filling a highly specified role in the labor market, students generally leave the American education system with one of two academic credentials: a high school diploma or a bachelor's degree. Kerckhoff points out that American students obtain more university degrees than students in any other Western country, resulting in a university degree with diluted relevance in the labor force: "American students face a very ill-defined interface between school and the world of work" (2003: 264). In addition, by the time they are making this uncertain transition and trying to find a place (or identity) within the workforce, they are often already expected to stand on their own as financially and emotionally independent adults.

Another critical variation in terms of educational opportunities appears to be the cost of schooling. Some upstate New Yorkers told me about the debts they needed to pay off after attending college, in some cases tens of thousands of dollars, and how that instilled a sense of urgency to find jobs as soon as possible. Flemings were also eager to start earning

money but explained that the Belgian government's subsidization of education was enormous compared to the United States. When asked about their backup plans for life after graduation, many Flemings said that they could always fall back on more education. If they could not find a job, they would start on a new degree because the financial investment was minimal. This was a major difference from the upstate New Yorkers I interviewed. Those planning to pursue masters' degrees or professional degrees indicated that it was their optimal choice for life after graduation and seemed more certain that they wanted to pursue further education immediately following graduation.

The principle of timing, coupled with Kerckhoff's work on educational systems, helps us understand why young people can face similar experiences at different points in the life course. It also shows us why they might react in different ways. Flemish quarterlifers recall uncertainty and confusion when transitioning from high school to college. They must start establishing their career identities at a younger age because they are part of a system where educational training casts them into a specific societal role. As a result, they face more clearly defined job options (and therefore more clearly delineated residential options) in the period after college. If they failed to find work, they faced a relatively easy (albeit time-intensive) retraining process, since further education was, for many Flemings, an affordable and viable option. While deciding on a career-choice at a relatively young age may seem difficult, it could also carry with it some important social benefits. For example, Flemings choose a path while still under parental guidance, they benefit from a (theoretically) stable home environment while they work out future plans, and can look forward to continuing high school friendships into college, since they will attend the same institution as many of their high school peers.

In upstate New York, many college students have not yet faced the process of reconciling personal identity and occupational identity. Quarterlifers in upstate New York make career decisions at a time when they may also be making housing arrangements, leaving friends, taking on personal finance, and tackling other challenges for the first time. In addition, the fiscal realities of education change the way upstate New Yorkers think about continuing education, and the financial obligations following college may increase the urgency of entering the workforce at precisely the moment when young adults in upstate New York are trying to establish their career path. This variability affects the range of mobility for upstate New Yorkers. Their educational backgrounds have prepared them to fill a number of positions in the workforce. Simultaneously, many are eager to start working to reduce personal debt incurred in college. This combination means they are more willing to take advantage of any number of occupational opportunities following college, even when those opportunities require them to relocate outside the upstate New York region.

The Principle of Linked Lives

For their fifth and final principle, Elder et al. emphasize the fact that individuals exist within networks of shared relationships (2003: 13; Elder 1995: 112). Using this idea to analyze interview data yielded some striking differences between quarterlifers in upstate New York and Flanders. While every individual has complex and varied social relationships, I detected some general differences in the way Flemings and upstate New Yorkers conceptualize and rely on social relationships to inform their post-graduation spatial mobility. All of my interviews revealed the complexity and depth of social relationships, but also turned up subtle differences. However, even subtle differences can provide valuable insight into the experience of individuals in two separate settings during the quarterlife

period.

Many of the Flemings I spoke with described strong “friends and family” connections, prompting them to stay near their parents or peers and thus within the region. One student told me about remaining in Gent after graduation because she was planning to live with her boyfriend in an apartment owned by her father. A graduate in engineering was renting an apartment with his girlfriend and a mutual friend in the city following graduation. Another graduate who had majored in English and Dutch told me about being excited that he had been elected as the leader of a social organization. That role had encouraged him to stay in Gent following graduation. I also found it interesting that many Flemings maintained close contact with friends from high school and saw them regularly – at least once a week in many cases – usually when returning home to their parents’ house on the weekends. All of these individuals were relying on friends or significant others to inform their plans for post-college residence.

Other Flemish students were planning to return home after graduation, and some had never moved out of their parents’ homes during their college careers. A 22-year-old theater major told me “I live at home with my parents. It’s a 15-minute bike ride from here.” She enjoyed living with her mother and visited her father every couple of weeks and was planning to commute from home until she could earn enough money to move into her own separate apartment. A recent graduate in Slavic studies was planning to travel to Moscow for volunteer work but had lived at home with her parents and five siblings, including two older brothers in their mid-twenties, throughout college. Her only surviving grandparent also lived next door to her family. Another student, a 21-year-majoring in Comparative Culture Studies, talked about living at home. She lived with her parents, made the 20-minute train

ride to Gent each day, and was planning to continue commuting while starting a one-year graduate program.

Although these examples are simple, they make it clear that the Flemings I interviewed were strongly linked to their families. The prevalence of family-centered residential patterns (living in the parents' home or traveling home each weekend) reflect the fact that young Flemings' lives are highly intertwined with the lives of other family members during the quarterlife period. Considering that close familial relationships and friendships are maintained by Flemings through the quarterlife period, and that they affect where these quarterlifers plan to live after graduation, it becomes apparent that *the principle of linked lives* affects how many Flemings think about post-college spatial mobility. It also could explain part of the reason they expect to stay in the region following graduation.

In upstate New York, some interviewees were also drawn to a specific place by friends, family or a significant other following graduation. However, many interviewees also placed a premium on potential career-related amenities. A sociology graduate told me

I'm moving to Hoboken 'cause my fiancé is – well we're getting married in June, like a week after graduation here – and then we just signed a lease in Hoboken for an apartment 'cause he's in medical school in Newark.

She explained that they had been dating for two and a half years and her parents were excited and supportive of her marriage. However, an interesting sub-theme came up in our conversation. She told me about overcoming the feeling that she was sacrificing her own independence in order to be with him.

...that was like, harsh for me. I felt that way about it for a long time, until we decided on the Hoboken apartment, 'cause I hate Newark, I didn't want to live in the suburbs, I don't like New Jersey in general, the driving there is terrible, the public transportation is less than par. You know, I don't particularly like it

but access to New York City for job availability was a plus...we have always left this option open, that if I find a job in DC or abroad that I would just take it, you know, even if we'd be married... Once we found Hoboken and our apartment's access to New York City, that was like, changed my mind completely, so now I'm happy.

It is telling that this upstater originally considered living in Washington, DC or abroad and only felt positive about moving to New Jersey with her fiancé after she realized that Hoboken would put her in close proximity to the New York City job market. She was finding a way to negotiate a living arrangement that would allow her to be with her significant other and would simultaneously increase her access to job opportunities (she had been offered a position to work in major gifts management for a social club in Manhattan).

Another example of a career-focused upstate New Yorker was the 21-year old graduate who said his ideal place to live after college was a

large city in the Northeast. Narrow it down more: New York, Boston. Just because if I have a job there and I hate it, there's probably a good job across the street, where if I move back home for a job there's very few...

...I'm interviewing all the time, so we'll see what comes up. I'm interviewing for other places outside the northeast because if I get a job and I don't have one in the Northeast, I have a job there. And I can always come back after a couple years.

Throughout the interview, the idea of finding a job remained a prevalent topic of discussion. He also talked about the interpersonal networks, consisting of classmates, professors and alumni of his program, that could help him find employment. He also told me that his parents sent him job notices and clippings from the local newspaper's classified section, encouraging him to move home after college. He saw moving home only as a last resort or back-up plan. Using linked lives as a lens, we see that this individual was relying primarily

on professional relationships rather than familial relationships to create a plan for post-college residence.

An upstater planning to work for a major international corporation after college shared her perspective on linked lives, and how her relationships shaped her expected geographic mobility during the quarterlife period.

I'm going to start over July 4th weekend and they're right now, over the next four weeks, probably going to decide where I'm going to move, and that won't even be finalized until late April or early May and it could even change before I go out there [Denver, Dallas, Phoenix, Tulsa or Omaha] just based on the company's need, which I'm open to, and luckily my boyfriend's willing to... <<Laughs>>...

...with my salary, I'm really thinking that a big portion of it is going to be flying people out, or going to see people. I kind of budgeted for that...I would say there are two really good friends that I have that I'll stay in touch with and the rest of them, you know, probably shoot them an e-mail now and then or a random phone call. So I'm not one who really thinks it's that important to stay in touch with people."

When asked if she was satisfied with her post-graduation residential options she said told me,

I don't feel forced but I certainly don't think that I had options. But that's my own fault. This was my only offer and I didn't seek out anything else, I didn't interview anywhere else. But I also know that I've made a lot of connections here that if I ever needed a job there are companies that I could go to...

This individual's account emphasizes professional connections and the importance of balancing a romantic relationship and job opportunities (her boyfriend's willingness to follow her to any number of cities greatly facilitated this process). Her attitude about maintaining friendships helps understand why she was willing to move far away from the region. Interestingly, this woman predicted relationships with her family exerting a stronger influence on her later in life. She wondered about

returning to upstate New York to be near her parents after she had her own children or as her parents aged and needed assistance. However, for the period of her life immediately following college, this upstater was relying more on professional connections that she had established in college instead of family or friends when planning where to live.

Applying *the principle of linked lives* illustrates how Flemings tended to place greater importance on the connections between themselves and their friends and families during the quarterlife period. In contrast, many upstate New Yorkers expected that professional relationships or career opportunities would be of greater importance than links to family and friends after college. This subtle difference in the value placed on social relationships helps explain why upstate New Yorkers would be more willing to move to a new region, which might have better economic or job opportunities. It also might explain why Flemings would be encouraged to stay in the same region as many of their friends and family members.

CONCLUSIONS

For individuals graduating from college, preparing for the post-baccalaureate phase of their life presents a host of unique challenges and expectations. The dynamism of this period manifests itself in an individual's life in diverse and unexpected ways, and influences expectations about future geographic mobility. Therefore, examining the topic of expected geographic mobility in different regions could highlight the similarities as well as the differences experienced by quarterlifers in different cultural contexts. Exploring how young adults form expectations about post-collegiate geographic mobility could also illuminate whether the difficulties associated with *quarterlife crisis* are a shared experience for college graduates in different nations, or whether they represent a highly localized phenomenon.

Using a thematic framework drawn from Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe's sociological life-course theory (2003), I have analyzed interviews with Flemings and upstate New Yorkers who were preparing to graduate from undergraduate programs and move into the next phase of their life. I chose this thematic approach because I felt it reflected the variation and flexibility inherent to the lives of contemporary western individuals. In addition, I saw it as a more suitable means of analysis than earlier models, which tended to rely on generalizations about individual movement through the life course. These earlier models cast individuals into oversimplified categories and create expectations about what is normal or abnormal based on whether an individual is "on-time" or not. I opted to use the following principles, proposed by Elder et al. (2003) to explore how expectations about quarterlife geographic mobility are formed in the cultural context of upstate New York and Flanders, Belgium:

The principle of life-span development explains that change is a life-long process, and

that adaptations in life are connected to experiences accumulated earlier in life. Data from interviews in Flanders and upstate New York show that, in both settings, life-span development plays a similarly important role, affecting the expected geographic mobility of quarterlifers as they prepare to finish college. Events from the past project themselves into the current phase of an individual's life and affect how individuals form their plans for post-college residence.

The principle of agency describes the way individuals construct their own life course through choices and actions. Young adults in Flanders and upstate New York are similar in terms of how they practice agency. By looking for one type of agency (cases where individuals chose either to follow a prescribed path or to follow a self-defined path), I discovered a great range of agency in both settings; while some quarterlifers used personal spatial mobility as a tool of agency, others felt less empowered and imagined that their spatial mobility was more limited. Similar cases revealed themselves in upstate New York interviews as well as Flemish interviews

The principle of time and place asserts that individuals are influenced by their historical and geographic settings. Exploring the historical and cultural backgrounds of each region clarifies why graduating Flemings and graduating upstaters would have different expectations surrounding geographic mobility. Cultural and linguistic oppression, symbolic boundaries, strong collective identity, and recent regional economic prosperity provide reasons for graduating Flemings to consider staying in Flanders. In contrast, the economic and population declines faced in upstate New York over the past few decades, paired with attractive personal and career opportunities in other parts of the United States help explain why graduating New Yorkers would be pulled out of the region during their quarterlife

transition.

The principle of timing says that the same events can have different effects on individuals depending on when they occur in the life course. When applying this principle to interview data and bearing in mind the differing educational structures of Belgium and the United States, it becomes clear that Flemings and upstate New Yorkers experience the quarterlife transition differently. By the time they are graduating from college, many Flemings have already struggled with choosing a career path and enter an environment where their work roles are well defined, greatly simplifying their post-college options. Many upstate New Yorkers have yet to mold their own career-identities and see a great deal of occupational and residential options open to them. In addition, the discrepancy in educational costs in the two regions means that many Flemings can fall back on more, relatively inexpensive training while many upstaters face the urgency of paying back financial debts incurred for education. This increases their willingness to relocate to far-removed places, which could offer better economic opportunities than upstate New York.

The principle of linked lives states that lives are lived interdependently and that individuals are connected to networks of shared relationships. Although each individual expressed a multitude of social connections, subtle difference arose based on how Flemings and upstate New Yorkers expected the links between themselves and others to influence their post-college geographic mobility. Almost all of the Flemings I spoke with expressed a strong connection to families and friends, which informed their plans for post-college residence. In contrast, upstate New Yorkers tended to rely more on career connections and professional networking when planning for their post-college place of residence and were prepared to move far away from family and friends following graduation.

Applying these five principles to interviews with quarterlifers illustrates the similarities and differences in how this transitional period is experienced in Flanders, Belgium and upstate New York. By interviewing quarterlifers about their expected geographic mobility and then analyzing the data with a thematic life-course framework, it becomes clear that quarterlife dynamism is by no means unique to upstate new Yorkers. However, it also becomes clear that the process of transition surrounding graduation from college is experienced differently based on variations inherent to an individual's cultural context. Local histories, cultural identities, economic profiles, educational structures, and patterns of social bonding all have an impact on quarterlifers planning to leave college and greatly shape the way individuals conceptualize their personal geographic mobility during this period of the life course.

Questions for Further Investigation

Naturally, there is a great deal about the quarterlife transition and personal geographic mobility which begs further research. One of the most obvious questions in my mind is how *non-college* graduates understand their range of spatial mobility during life in their twenties. Another major question for investigation is whether quarterlife expectations are similar to Flanders or Upstate New York in non-western regions. In addition, to what degree is the Flemish experience representative of other European nations? It would be worthwhile to determine whether other young adults in the European Union face similar expectations about geographic mobility – particularly interesting would be a comparative study of Western European graduates and Eastern European graduates, who seem to follow different trajectories in terms of residential mobility in their twenties. Continuing in the channel of cross-cultural life course study could eventually yield useful data for policy decisions. More

effective social, economic or educational policies could be informed by observations about the expectations and planned geographic mobility of quarterlifers in differing cultural contexts. Understanding the reality of this dynamic period and how individuals react in different scenarios could ultimately contribute to the implementation of effective policies for regional residential retention or for providing young adults with targeted resources during the process of transition.

I have started to question broad assumptions about the quarterlife transition by employing a thematic framework, which respects the variability of individual experiences. However, further studies could explore how the confluence of other unique factors (gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc.) along with larger thematic forces affect individuals' perspective on the life course and shape their view of personal opportunities such as expected geographic mobility.

Finally, it would be valuable to study the strength and relation *between* the thematic principles put forth by Elder et al. and used in this study. In most cases, these factors seem to be interrelated and have an impact on one another. For example, how do linked lives affect an individual's idea of agency? To what extent do time and place (historic and geographic context) influence other variables, such as the timing of events? Is any single factor more influential than the others? Do certain themes exert more power over certain individuals' lives? These topics and many more require further inquiry and could yield valuable insight into how individuals understand culturally specific transitions in the life course.

APPENDIX A – GLOSSARY OF TERMS

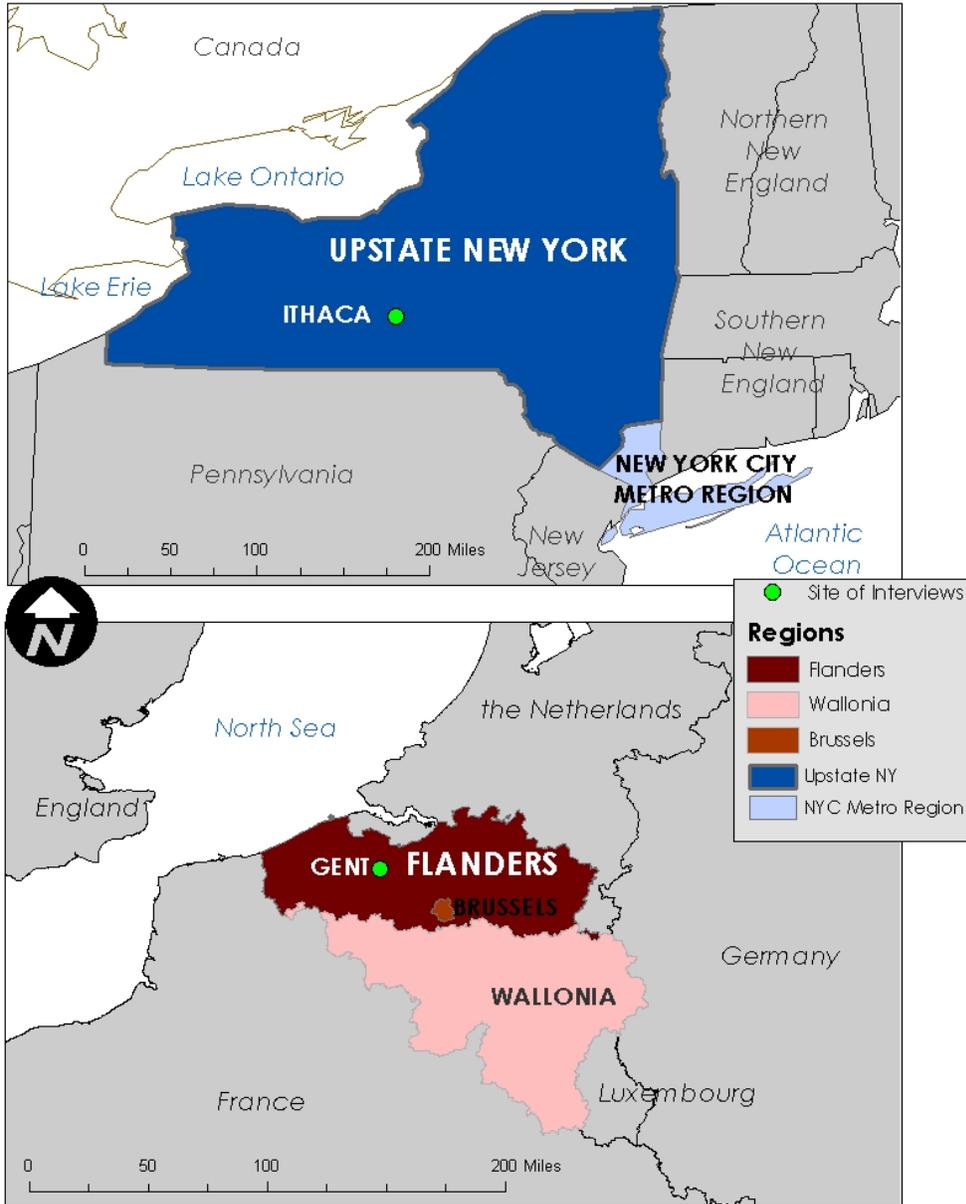
In order to clarify terms or to navigate uncertain geopolitical regions, I have included this glossary to explain how I use the following terms within my study.

- Brussels:** Administrative center, national capital and Flemish region capital. Located within the boundaries of Flanders and officially designated as a bi-lingual zone, although French is the most common language in this district.
- Flanders:** Northern region of Belgium, representing roughly 45% of the country's area, 60% of the population and 5 provinces: Antwerpen, Limburg, Oost-Vlaanderen, Vlaams-Brabant, and West-Vlaanderen.
- Fleming:** Person native to Flanders, the northern region of Belgium bordering the Netherlands. Most often Dutch is his or her first language.
- Flemish:** Used by outsiders in reference to the Dutch language, which is spoken in northern Belgium. Sometimes also used to describe dialects spoken in Flanders, distinguishing them from standard Dutch.
- Upstate New York:** The 52 counties of New York State lying to the north of the New York City Metropolitan Statistical Area, (New York Metropolitan region) and long island.
- Walloon:** Person native to Wallonia, the southern region of Belgium bordering France. Most often French is his or her first language.
- Wallonia:** Southern region of Belgium, comprising roughly 55% of the country's landmass, one-third of its citizens, and 5 provinces: Hainaut, Liège, Luxembourg, Namur, and Walloon Brabant.

Deleted: The 52 counties of New York State lying to the north of the New York City Metropolitan Statistical Area, (New York Metropolitan region) and long island. .

APPENDIX B – MAPS

Regions of Study: Upstate New York and Flanders



Created by B. Tauzel for thesis. 12 April 2007. Data from ESRI, Geddes Lab @ Cornell U. Projection NAD 1983 State Plane NY

APPENDIX C – INTERVIEW TOOLS

The following forms were used during interviews in upstate New York. The exact same format was used in the Flemish interviews but all text was translated into Dutch.

Please fill in the following information.

First and Last Names:

Age:

College where you study:

Major (and Minors):

Phone Number:

Address at School:

Home Address

E-mail:

Do you have brother or sisters? If so, how old are they?

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Please evaluate the following factors.
 Rank them between 1 (totally unimportant) and 5 (very important).
 Which have influenced your choices about where you'll actually live?

FACTOR	Totally	Not very	Little bit	Reasonably	Very	EXTRA NOTES
Your Family	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Your Friends	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Boy/Girlfriend	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Available housing	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
A Job	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Familial Expectations	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Public Transportation	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Social Life	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Cultural Amenities	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Living Costs	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
The Climate	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Economic Opportunities	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Quality of Life	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Academic Opportunities	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Outdoor Activities	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Attractiveness of Place	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Language and/or Culture	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Other						
_____	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
_____	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
_____	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

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Please evaluate the following factors.

Rank them between 1 (totally unimportant) and 5(very important).

Which would be important in choosing your ideal place to live?

FACTOR	Totally	Not very	Little bit	Reasonably	Very	EXTRA NOTES
Your Family	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Your Friends	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Boy/Girlfriend	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Available housing	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
A Job	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Familial Expectations	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Public Transportation	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Social Life	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Cultural Amenities	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Living Costs	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
The Climate	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Economic Opportunities	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Quality of Life	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Academic Opportunities	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Outdoor Activities	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Attractiveness of Place	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Language and/or Culture	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Other						
_____	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
_____	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
_____	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

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