
Editorial: Gender Aspects of the Life Course

The current changes to work and private-life arrangements, social and cross-border mobility, and the organisation of social life are often explained by emphasising cultural or structural factors. Such 'variable-oriented' research deflects attention away from the dynamics of the complex processes that constitute these changes and from personal experience of these changes [Laub and Sampson 2003; Reiter 2009].

The life-course perspective offers an alternative approach to studying social change. Examining social reality from this perspective makes it possible to avoid some of these problems and to deploy the potential it brings for the study of social change. It relates institutional changes to the life trajectories of individuals [Heinz and Krüger 2001; Giele and Elder 1998] and is therefore an ideal approach for conceptualising the changing lives of people in transforming societies. Moreover, the life-course concept offers a unique tool for studying gender structures as reflected in the different experiences of women and men [Hagestad 2009]. In brief, it makes it possible to observe structural and cultural influences without overlooking the significance of individual action.

Life trajectories are influenced by the connectedness of lives, historical events, social institutions, and the values and notions pertaining to what the life course should be like [Liefbroer and Billari 2010]. The life trajectories of women are shaped under the influence of the life trajectories of others more than the life trajectories of men [Hagestad 2009]. In particular, social policies, the culture of care, and gender regimes strengthen or weaken the interconnectedness of lives and influence what the 'expected' pattern of 'his' and 'her' life course is.

Life-course research focuses on a person's transitions between different statuses. It examines when and why transitions occur, what their consequences are for the subsequent course of a person's life, and how the different statuses and transitions are experienced and interpreted [Brückner and Mayer 2005]. The quantitative approach to life-course research uses statistical life history data to reveal the patterns of the occurrence, timing, and sequencing of life-course events and to explore their causal links and their consequences for the subsequent course of a person's life. The qualitative approach uses mainly biographical narrative methods with the aim of exploring how people experience and attach meanings to transitions and statuses in their life.

This special issue focuses on new research on the gender aspects of the life course. It presents an up-to-date collection of articles that explore how contemporary changes to the life course and the risks and needs these changes give rise to are gendered in late-modern post-socialist European societies. Instead of empha-

sising either qualitative or quantitative perspectives, as is often the practice, this issue opens up space for showing the strengths of both approaches and combinations of them.

The first four articles draw attention to the importance of 'linked lives' and gendered notions of care for structuring the life course of women and men in post-socialist European countries. Within the region the life courses of men and women are strongly marked by the processes of post-1989 gendered re-familialisation, which implies a turn away from incentives for women to combine paid work with caregiving, towards discourses, institutions, and policies that undermine women's breadwinning and employment.

Radka Dudová critically examines the concept of the 'third age' by analysing biographical interviews with women who provide everyday care to their parents. This concept was traditionally defined in terms of the absence (or reaching the end) of work and childcare commitments when people ought to be able to focus more on their own interests before deteriorating health prevents them from doing so. Her analysis not only casts doubt on the overly romantic visions of the 'third age' by pointing to the gender aspects of the new commitments of care for the elderly, which predominantly involves women. It also calls into question conventional, linear, masculine models of employment and retirement by showing that, in the lives of these women, the transition from employment to retirement was not a straightforward and irreversible life transition. Instead, the period of providing care to the elderly represented a more significant transition in life, which took them directly from 'middle age' into 'old age'.

Jaroslava Hasmanová Marhánková and Martina Štípková employ a mixed-method research design to explore the mediating role of grandmothers in the involvement of men in the care of grandchildren. Their findings, based on statistical analysis, suggest that grandmothers are more able to include their partners in caring for grandchildren who are theirs through a step-relationship, while grandfathers do not have a similar effect on their partners. The mixed-method research design enabled them to understand the mechanisms that may mediate this effect. Interviews with mothers and grandmothers show that the involvement of grandparents is shaped by gender-specific notions of the care competence and kin-keeping activities of women. Gender-specific expectations at the same time serve to disadvantage grandfathers who do not live with a partner, who often lose contact with their grandchildren as they are not viewed as sufficiently competent caregivers.

Based on an analysis of interviews with Czech nannies in Vietnamese immigrant families, Adéla Souralová sheds light on the meanings of caregiving during the nannies' life course. She explores how paid caregiving provides them with a source of gender identity and the means to relate to ruptures and transitions in their biographies and to other people, re/producing interpersonal, interethnic, and intergenerational ties. Paid caregiving figures in their lives as a gendered response to the biographical ruptures they experience. That response occurs as a result of the culturally and institutionally embedded scenario of the 'normal fe-

male biography' with particular stages devoted to caregiving. Paid caregiving is always explained by the nannies' current or past unpaid caregiving responsibilities, and their position in relation to the labour market: paid caregiving enables them to be gainfully active in the periods of retirement, parental leave, or of difficulty re-entering the regular labour market as it emerges out of the life-course stage dedicated to unpaid caregiving.

Lenka Formánková and Alena Křížková analyse biographical interviews with partners living in separate households in order to shed light on the role of gendered life-course norms for the experience of living apart together (LAT). Their findings suggest that only those partners who were not (or were no longer) expected to procreate proved to be able to free themselves from the norm of co-residential cohabitation and its gender role implications, while others perceived this type of partnership as only a temporary life-course stage before co-residence (as a precondition to having children) or partnership break up.

The following two articles demonstrate how quantitative life-course data from the international Generations and Gender Survey might be used in order to test the influence of the theoretically-driven selection of life events on the occurrence, absence, and timing of other life events, which have gained particular importance in late modern societies.

Aušra Maslauskaitė and Marė Baublytė show how the re-partnering chances of divorced men and women are shaped by gender, parenthood, age, and education. They compare four Baltic and Central European countries (namely Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, and Hungary), which represent different gender cultures, poverty risks, and divorce trends. They conclude that among contextual factors, gender culture is the most important macro-level factor influencing the processes of re-partnering in terms of defining a link between gender and parenthood, providing gendered notions of attractiveness, and producing gendered divisions in re-partnering. Although their research confirms that women re-partner less often than men across all countries, in more traditional contexts, parenthood decreases women's re-partnering but not men's, while education does not affect women's re-partnering, but does play a significant role for men.

Ivett Szalma and Judit Takács analyse three waves of a panel survey in order to show the rapidly growing number of childless men and women in Hungary, which represents fertility behaviour typical for many post-socialist Central European countries. They ask what percentage of childbearing postponers and child-free articulators from 2001 became parents within the next seven years and what factors played a role in their transition, or not, to parenthood. They show that a large portion of Hungarian postponers do not become parents even at a very late reproductive age. Moreover, their findings suggest that in societies with a strong and gendered social expectation an adult's (and especially a woman's) biography includes parenthood, which is typical for post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, the main factors contributing to perpetual postponement are neither economic nor ideational. The key factor proves to be the increasing share of people who are not forming a stable partnership.

The last article, by Martin Hájek and Barbara Vann, approaches life-course research using oral-history data. They use a mixed-methods research design to examine the life stories of Czech men and women, narrated in the period since the change in political regime in 1989, of four socio-political groups that existed in the state-socialist era: workers, intelligentsia, dissidents, and communist functionaries. They aim to understand what the narratives can tell us about the state-socialist gender order and provide empirical evidence of the heterogeneity of its narrated experience among men and women who belonged to different social groups in pre-1989 socialist Czechoslovakia.

The authors of the papers included in this special issue study various aspects of social reality and social change. The issue brings together a variety of methodological approaches in the life-course research and draws attention to its explorative and explanatory power and flexibility. The articles offer valuable contributions to current debates on demographic and societal trends, such as the increase of romantic partners living apart together, childlessness, divorce, and repartnering. Moreover, they provide new knowledge on the gender aspects of paid and unpaid caregiving and their influence on the life-course structure of men and women. Special attention is paid to gender inequalities. Although empirically set in the context of the post-socialist European region, we believe these articles contribute to sociological debates on the gender aspects of the life course in late-modern societies beyond the scope of this one region.

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