1. Analysis of life courses - a theoretical sketch[1]

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The life course in disciplinary perspectives

The life course as a scientific object has multiple facets. Life courses therefore appeal to various disciplines: sociology, social and cultural anthropology, social psychology, developmental psychology, demography, social history, biological anthropology and the neurosciences. This multiplicity is already highlighted by the various terms for the subject matter itself, terms that often indicate differing affinities towards more outwardly or more inwardly determined perspectives, e.g., "life course", "life span", "development" or "growth". The approach presented here will be mainly sociological, although, like most scholars in the field, we have no doubt about the fruitfulness of interdisciplinarity (Mayer 2003; Levy et al. 2005; Marshall and Bengtson 2011). Recent insistence on differences, notably between sociological approaches to the life course and biography, on the one hand, and social-psychological or developmental psychological approaches to life span and development (Diewald and Mayer 2009; Settersten 2009) on the other, should certainly not discourage attempts aiming in an interdisciplinary direction. They are useful because only clarity about such differences will allow us to construct solid bridges between the various approaches.

This theoretical sketch does not aim at giving an adequate overview - and even less a theoretical integration of existing perspectives on the life course – for the literature on this topic has become so rich that thick volumes would be needed to tackle this kind of task (e.g., Mortimer and Shanahan 2003; Heinz et al. 2009). Therefore, we shall avoid any attempt to hold an all-encompassing discussion and head straight towards a sociological framework that will hopefully support explicit bridge-building between the fundamental disciplines.

Ever since Thomas and Znaniecki (1918), sociological approaches have been oriented towards biographical reconstruction, mostly on a collective scale. This tradition has been taken up especially by the recent European tradition of qualitative biographical studies (especially Schütze, 1983, in Germany with his model of the "narrative interview" and many others, including more recently Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann,

[1] Original contribution to this volume.

2004; Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame, 1981, in France with a more structure-oriented perspective, but nevertheless on the basis of qualitative methodology; Ferrarrotti, 1981, in Italy for the study of militant trajectories). In the process, and in Europe more than in the Anglo-Saxon realm, a division between the more factual and often structure-oriented analysis of life histories and the more "subjectivist", account- and perception-oriented analysis of biographical stories has developed in correlation with a preference for quantitative as opposed to qualitative methods. A corollary of this sometimes radical divide has been the parallel insistence on individual and interindividual aspects, on the one hand, and more structural and institutional aspects on the other. One healthy reaction to this divide is the more recent trend towards combining quantitative and qualitative approaches and their corresponding theoretical orientations. Methodological innovations in longitudinal analysis have reinforced interest in collecting longitudinal data on a large scale, be it by panel surveys or through retrospective information gathering. The more structure-oriented approaches have also converged with other research interests, for example in welfare-state analysis (Mayer and Schoepflin 1989; Leisering and Leibfried 1999; Dannefer and Daub 2009), and more generally in the institutional framing of social rhythms (already thematized by Hughes, 1950, and taken up systematically by the Bremen Group mentioned in the preface: Weymann and Heinz 1996; Leisering et al. 2001; Krüger 2001). This growing interest in the institutional background of life courses is often related to the more critical observation of the institutional outfit of contemporary societies; what Dannefer and Daub (2009: 19) criticize as a somewhat naive "reliance ... on a functionalist assumption of benign and naturalized social institutions" is no longer accepted as an implicit presupposition of sociological analysis. Another research strand naturally converging with sociological life-course analysis is professional career analysis, carried out mostly as the deepening of more traditional interests in mobility research (Haller 1985; Rosenfeld 1992).

For many sociologists, however, the life course is hardly more than an idea about the chronological location of significant events in individual or group lives. The temporal dimension forcibly implied in this perspective has rarely been thematized, other than as a kind of natural variable, measurable mainly with the help of chronological age, as illustrated by the many demographical analyses undertaken since Glick's (1947) and Lansing and Kish's (1957) works (see, for a more circumspect perspective, Settersten and Mayer 1997). The idea of the social regulation of the timing of events long received little attention, with the exception of the postulate about social norms that

relates, with varying binding force, specific life events or transitions to the age of the individuals who experience them (Neugarten et al. 1965; Settersten and Hågestad 1996a, 1996b).[2] Thus, without triggering much debate, life-course institutionalization was long considered as a mainly cultural phenomenon (and mostly no more than implicitly as underlined by the above citation of Dannefer and Daub [2009]), enacted by individual actors interacting with a given life-course passenger. Therefore, the concept of institutionalization alluded to normative, but not to structural, constraints. Kohli (1985, 1986b) was one of the first proponents of a more macroscopic and structural view, insisting, in a Weberian vein, on the bureaucratic bases of the more efficacious norms.

Over time, something like a life-course perspective with its own vocabulary has taken shape. If it cannot be called a common theoretical paradigm, it is at any rate a heuristic framework, flexible enough to accommodate differing theoretical perspectives oriented towards a common subject matter. Studying the life course means investigating pathways, connections between different phases in life or transitions and their circumstances over time (Moen et al. 1995; Moen et al. 1992), with the goal of "explaining how dynamic worlds change people and how people select and construct their environments" (Elder 1995: 102). This life-course perspective is marked by careful consideration of at least five aspects: life as a long-term process, human agency, linked lives, historical place and time, and timing (Giele and Elder 1998). Each human being has certain abilities, goals, interests and skills that often crystallize into life projects, as well as a set of resources on which human agency aiming to realize such projects can build. Each individual's life is linked to others through networks of relationships that have developed over time. At every moment in time, each person is situated in a particular context: *this* place at *this* time. Each person ages, in tandem with historical time, and has accumulated specific and unique past experiences. A relatively holistic vision (Settersten and Gannon 2005; Dannefer and Daub 2009) is developing with many connection points for interdisciplinary bridges.

If sociology is relatively poor in concepts allowing the capture of individual development, growth, or ageing in a differentiated way (the major exception is Meadian interactionism), psychology and social psychology, in turn, largely lack the theoreti-

[2] An interesting exception is Zerubavel (1981) who proposes a sociology of the social organization of time as such, distinguishing as basic aspects: 1. rigid sequential structures, 2. fixed durations, 3. standard temporal locations, and 4. uniform rates of recurrence. He is interested in the temporal functioning of social entities, not in the socially controlled timing of individual lives (tellingly, the notion of the life course and its synonyms is absent from his book's index).

cal tools to conceptualize more finely the contextual factors they declare a priori to be important for development. A sociological view of the kind proposed below may offer complementary concepts that help thematize contextual factors in more concrete and operational terms. Moreover, it promises to give a more explicit base to a series of often disparate desiderata by:

1) Integrating history, especially by way of looking at period effects - especially important for understanding macrosocial effects on life courses in times of rapid social change.

2) Helping us to understand causal chains better, by studying processes in their chronology.

3) Revealing the effects of and in time, like maturation, growth, decline and, more generally, cumulative effects in life courses.

4) Studying the longitudinal perspective to deal with micro-macro relationships.

5) Making interconnections between fields generally studied separately by specialized subdisciplines of sociology, avoiding their fragmenting effect on a holistic phenomenon.

6) Including the relationships that bring societal, meso- and macro-level change to bear on individual life courses.

It will, of course, not be possible to fully develop all these promises in an introductory chapter; we shall concentrate on those aspects that are directly relevant to the present volume.

A recent empirical debate: life-course standardization or de-standardization?

A distinctively sociological debate has developed over the last 20 years, mainly in European sociology, with interesting contributions from social history and social demography, especially in Germany. One of its major dimensions concerns the opposition of social standardization and individualization (Kohli and Meyer 1986; Mayer and Schoepflin 1989; Berger and Hradil 1990). The thesis of standardization purports that life courses have historically become homogenized under the normalizing influence of a series of social regulations. These regulations not only have the character of norms, but of institutional constraints - belonging to the long-range trend of bureaucratization already analysed by Weber, whose work should therefore be prominently

included in the subject of life-course sociology (Kohli 1985, 1986a; Heinz 1992). This thesis is backed by quantitative analyses showing relatively strong regularities concerning, for example, the concentration of specific biographical transitions around particular individual ages, or the existence of mandatory age norms that have acquired legal status. Minimal, and sometimes also maximal, age thresholds regulate entry to and exit from particular social fields and the activities pertaining to them, e.g., the marriage market (civic and marital majority) or the labour market (prohibition of children's work, compulsory schooling).[3]

In contrast, the opposed thesis postulates that there is a strong tendency towards de-standardization of life courses as a consequence of the - equally postulated - general trend towards post-modern individualization in contemporary societies. It is based on the - often assumed and sometimes observed - disaggregation of sequence patterns in everyday life that have been predominant up to now (Beck 1986; Giddens 1990; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1994; Beck et al. 1994; Bauman 2000). This view leads to a hypothesis of generalized diversification and the dissolution of all kinds of social entrenchment.

At first sight, these two theses seem contradictory, but they are not, at least not necessarily. First, they concern different historical periods. The process of societal standardization identified by Kohli (1985) and characterized, according to this author, by life-course chronologization and sequentialization, especially concerning occupational and familial trajectories, unfolded over two or three centuries to attain its climax in the middle of the 20th century. The process of de-standardization more recently put forward by various authors appears, then, to be a rather recent inversion after a historical maximum. Both theses are likely to be correct, but for consecutive, and not identical, historical periods.

There is a complementary argument based on the complexity of modern life courses. First, life courses are multidimensional in the sense that the complete biographical path of an individual is composed of a series of "parallel" trajectories: familial, relational, occupational, residential, etc. Second, each of these trajectories is, in itself, composed of longer and shorter events that are often rather heterogeneous: phases linked by transitions, some of which may constitute real turning points with a view to later phases. There is no particular reason to think that all the elements that are

[3] We use the concept of social field in order to designate more or less stable (sub-) systems that structure regular interactions between their participating members, somewhat in the vein of Bourdieu (1980; see also, more generally, Martin 2003).

part of an actual life course are submitted to identical processes of standardization or de-standardization. Therefore, both types of development may very well coexist, but with respect to different aspects of the life course. This is not a theoretical contradiction, but it may very well constitute situations of tension that can be difficult to cope with for the individual or group concerned.

The debate about life-course de-standardization - and more generally the demise of social normativity and structuration - is strongly supported by post-modern theory (Lyotard 1988; Giddens 1990, 1991; Beck 1992; Bauman 2000). But the highly individualized vision of social life is not only a philosophical or theoretical stance in the social sciences, it is also a social ideology. It corresponds to the third long-term development identified by Kohli (1985, 1986b), who names it "biographization", i.e., the growing tendency to attribute responsibility for conducting his or her own life to the individual. This topic is ambiguous. On the one hand, it underlines the undoubtedly important theme of agency, of the elaboration and enactment of biographical projects by individual actors. On the other hand, it pinpoints a problem of ideology that is close to what has long been criticized as the American Dream or, as Mills (1951) dubs it more accurately, the American gospel of success: the principled attribution to individuals of almost exclusive responsibility for decisions and events, or more specifically for upward or downward mobility, which are in fact conditioned to varying degrees by social position, available resources, privilege and discrimination based on categorical (ethnical, sexual, cultural, etc.) membership, and by the biographical intervention of other, more powerful actors. The resulting discrepancies between factual social mechanisms at work in peoples' life courses and their subjective accounting, if it is informed by a highly "biographized" worldview, is an extremely interesting field of research that is still largely waiting to be discovered.

A related, and even older, debate than the one on general standardization concerns the existence of a unique life-course model, globally predominant in contemporary societies and organized around paid work in three major periods, lined up in a sequence: education - paid work - retirement, from which individual trajectories may deviate to some extent without escaping from the basic model (Cain 1964; Kohli et al. 1991).[4] It has been contradicted by the assertion that two gendered life-course models exist, a male and a female one, that are clearly different and interdependent, especial-

[4] In a more recent publication, Kohli (2003) has recognized the sexual differentiation of actual life courses.

ly with respect to the impact of the presence of small children on parents' employment (Levy 1977).

Taking these two debates together, we have three opposing theses about the typification of actual life courses: a unique standard model (Kohli), two gendered standard models (Levy), or no clearly profiled models at all (Beck). The empirical analyses in this volume will provide evidence for the testing of these three visions, mainly in the case of Switzerland, but also in a comparative perspective.

Back to theory

Since the beginning of sociology's interest in life courses, several conceptual and theoretical attempts have been undertaken. These can be divided into two groups: one is more structure-oriented and the other more culture-oriented. There is no room here to review and discuss in detail the large spectrum of theoretical hypotheses from which life-course research currently profits; a sketchy and incomplete recollection must suffice, with the aim of highlighting the variety, but also the complementarity of diverse approaches. In the more *structure-oriented* group, one should perhaps first mention the proposal to analyse life courses as a form of mobility in a system of age stratification (Riley et al. 1972). This has the merit of attempting to build a sociological perspective on a macrostructural level and of using standard sociological concepts to analyse the unfolding of individual life courses in a social system. However, it is not very convincing because the age stratification or age structure it postulates remains separate, unrelated to social stratification as a key feature of modern societies, and its notion of age mobility is hardly more than a new name for growing up or growing older, without bringing into focus the relationship between the two kinds of "stratification" (and more specifically the social use - often abuse - of age in processes of job promotion or hiring and firing).[5] There are several authors who systematically use the concept of the career as part of a more or less socially organized and controlled life course (e.g., Kerckhoff 1993; White 1970); these stress a less macrosocial, but equally structural, point of view, bringing in the highly relevant mesosocial or institutional level of work-place organizations. In the same vein, but with a more comprehensive perspective on social organization, Bertaux' research about intergen-

[5] Let us recall that age stratification proper is a characteristic of the rather specific category of age-graded societies (Bernardi 1985) that have little in common with present-day industrialized societies. In the latter, inequalities related to age concern the positioning in social stratification and not in some other type of social hierarchy.

erational occupational biographies (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1981) should be mentioned as he uses qualitatively collected biographical accounts, e.g., from artisan bakers, to elucidate the workings of institutional settings in contemporary (French) society with respect to their shaping of occupational trajectories. Systematic integration of the institutional context has also been the hallmark of the Bremen Special Collaborative Centre 186 with its research programme "Status Passages and Risks in the Life Course" (publication series "Status Passages and the Life Course" totalling 11 volumes and four concluding volumes collectively entitled "Statuspassagen und Lebenslauf"; see especially the concluding volumes: Sackmann and Wingens 2001; Leisering et al. 2001; Born and Krüger 2001; Kluge and Kelle 2001). The same holds for another German research programme entitled "The German Life History Study", realized between 1980 and 2004 at the Max-Planck-Institute for Human Development in Berlin (Diewald et al. 2006). Both research programmes have notably contributed to what is beginning to be called the European approach to life-course analysis, directly combining the microsocial level of individual life courses and the meso- and macrosocial levels of institutional framing.

Besides profiting from new methods of quantitative longitudinal analysis, the revival of interest in life courses since the 1980s also contains a strong element of the qualitative outlook. This can be traced back as far as Thomas and Znaniencki (1918), although their intention prefigures that of Bertaux in that their biographical material about the emigration of Polish peasants to the United States serves not only to present individual life histories, but also as a basis to study the effects of societal forces on the reasons and consequences of such geographical and social mobility.

In European sociology especially, a more substantively qualitative sociology of the life course has arisen that is mainly interested in individuals' accounts of their lives and in investigating the structuring principles of such accounts (Schütze, 1983; Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann 2004), with theoretical elements often going back (and fruitfully) to the writings of Schütz (1974) and Berger and Luckmann (1966). In one sense or another, this stream of research is more *culture-oriented* (mainly in the sense of self-presentation) and can be seen as a complement to earlier focuses on normative representations of the life course. For example, age norms - legal or more informal ones - concerning the proper age at which certain transitions should take place and also in which order were put forward by Neugarten and many others after her (Neugarten et al. 1965; Marini 1984; Mortimer et al. 2005). The opposition of these two tendencies has sometimes erupted into a rather fundamentalist debate of struc-

tural determinism vs. actorial agency, especially in German sociology. Such a confrontation is of ideological more than of scientific interest, because it opposes elements that usually work jointly and should therefore be studied together, as postulated by the different variants of the actor-in-structure perspective we assume. In the present chapter, cultural aspects will be much less developed than their structural counterparts, but only for reasons of space and because these fit the specific content of this volume, and not for programmatic reasons.

The life course as a sequence of status profiles

A decidedly sociological approach to the life course can be content neither with the sole idea of the timing of life events, prominent in the Anglo-Saxon literature (but see, for instance, Mortimer and Shanahan, 2003, for a much broader view), nor with the analogical thinking implied in the earlier notion of age stratification when applied to contemporary societies (Riley et al. 1972). A plausible point of departure, allowing us to focus directly on the relationship between individual actors and their social environment, might be individuals' social participation and the principle of seeing life courses in terms of movement through social space.[6] To build on this, we need to develop the conceptualization of individuals' integration into social space, as well as that of social space itself, without necessarily deciding between classical macrosociological models.

Taking up ideas developed by Simmel, Merton (1957) emphasized that social participation can generally be defined by status and role sets rather than by single statuses and roles (see also Andres 1999). A companion basic idea to be included here is expressed by the concept of social fields, an idea proposed early on by social psychologist Lewin (1951, see also Martin 2003) and developed systematically in a sociological perspective by Bourdieu (1980). We take part in society mainly by participating in more or less organized and delimited fields of social interaction. Such fields are typically characterized by specific issues or central goods and by an internal structure largely built around the respective social good, its production and distribution.[7] The-

[6] Dannefer is one author who thinks on roughly the same lines, e.g., when he writes of a "system of roles that characterize any large and complex system (that) is constantly entered and exited by discrete actors who are moving through their individual life course transitions" (Dannefer and Daub 2009: 197). The present attempt aims at formulating even more explicitly the conceptual interface between individual actors and the social structure through which they move.

[7] Bourdieu, for instance, postulates that every social field is principally structured by the power relations that develop around its major good or "issue". To assign only one social good to any differentiat-

se fields are differentiated from each other and interrelated at the same time. The more consequential of these fields are socially institutionalized, often in the shape of formal organizations, but informal fields, such as networks of kin or of friends, cannot be neglected, especially with a view to the much-cited strength of weak ties (Granovetter 1973). One of the various relations existing between fields is precisely that of individual actors' multiple participation, another one is the instrumentality which a position acquired in one field can have for attaining a position in another one (most notable example in today's societies: the instrumentality that education has for occupational attainment). This kind of participation is one of the most basic and far-reaching links relating individuals to society. Mostly, at least during our adult life, we participate in several such fields at one time. Statuses and roles are related to participation, each field - seen at the level of individual members - fundamentally combines the following three aspects with their various correlates:

1. *Participation* in a field implies being concerned with the field's culture, normative expectancies, rules of functioning, and its inherent opportunities, constraints, and tensions, as well as with the more general social representations concerning this type of participation (or absence thereof).

2. Holding a *position* means occupying a place in the field's internal structure with its multiple implications, especially hierarchical ones (such as power, prestige, available resources and awards or sanctions), and bearing the prestige or social evaluation related to it inside and outside the field.

3. Enacting the corresponding *role* means having to handle the rights and duties, the social expectancies and interactions, and the possible conflicts related to one's position.

We mostly participate in several social fields at one time, so our total social participation must be conceptualized as a status profile. As we progress through our lives, we move from one status profile to the next.[8] This conception leads directly to analysing

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ed field of social interaction is, of course, an oversimplification, but need not concern us here, because this aspect will not be of particular importance for the following argumentation.

[8] It may be useful to state that "progress" is used here in a strictly temporal sense without implying anything like "moving towards a better situation". One interesting reminder of the fact that, depending on how one looks at life courses, they may appear as decidedly non-linear are the pictorial representations of human-life phases as "life stairs" so popular in the European 18th and 19th centuries. These have typically an ascending first part, reaching a summit in mid-life, and a descending second part down to death (Joerissen and Will 1983; Sears 1986). It is historically interesting to note that already at that time, the idealized summit of a complete life is located around age 50 whereas its end is at 100. This does not reflect the mean life expectancies of those times, but corresponds quite well to what historical demographers call the rectangularization of the survival curves (Imhof 1988).

the life course as a sequence of status profiles, an idea that shows up in the reasoning of various authors (Merton 1957; Rosow 1976; Kerckhoff 1993), but has rarely been spelled out on an abstract level (see Levy 1977; Buchmann 1989; Levy et al. 2005). A status profile can be more or less coherent, i.e., its components may or may not be easily combined with each other, depending on time constraints, but also on other types of possible incompatibilities, such as contradictory role expectations or divergent social evaluations. Parental difficulties in combining family and occupational roles are but one particularly sensitive case in point. Transitions in life courses can increase or decrease incoherences in status profiles, or may, in turn, be motivated by them, for instance in order to avoid excessive incoherence and the resulting tensions. By hypothesis, life-course phases correspond to specific status profiles, whereas transitions imply the passing from one such profile to another. A direct corollary of this structure-oriented perspective on life courses is the hypothesis that a long series of phenomena, including aspects of well-being and psychical functioning, are more directly related to changes in peoples' status profiles than to their chronological age (Drentea, 2005, presents an empirical exploration that confirms this hypothesis to a considerable extent).

The linking of specific features of status sequences to age, especially certain transitions between consecutive participation profiles on the basis of informal age norms as put forward by Neugarten et al. (1965; Settersten 1997), as well as of legal norms, is but one of the multiple ways of life-course standardization or, in Kohli's (1985, 1986b) terms, chronologization. The administrated ordering of various institutional participations into a sequence, such as family of origin - school - labour market (Krüger 2001), is another one and highlights the fact that normative fixation is not the only - and probably not the most effective - mechanism of life-course standardization. Life-course standardization on the basis of age appears to be a historical corollary of the bureaucratic rationalization of modern societies as analysed by Weber (1921) and others since; age is easy to assess and to handle in a "universalistic" way as illustrated by the various legal age thresholds known in contemporary societies (ability to inherit, to sign contracts, to get married, to be entitled to work gainfully, etc.). It is, however, important to underline that life-course standardization is not a necessary ingredient of this analytical vision, it is one of its variable dimensions. In other words, individual trajectories can be fruitfully analysed in terms of sequential status profiles even if there is no resemblance between them. Moreover, no specific model of successive life phases is supposed; on the contrary, the proposed way of redefin-

ing the life course makes it easier to question established sequence models like the tripartite model of a generalized life course or the family life-cycle model, and to refine or replace them in a coherent way.[9]

This frame of reference helps to theoretically integrate aspects usually considered apart, such as entry to and exit from specific social fields, and mobility within them. It can stimulate investigations rarely undertaken in such a perspective, such as looking at the consequences of enlargement or restriction of the scope of participation profiles when combining different social roles (one case in point is earlier research by Thoits, 1986, who shows the beneficial effects of multiple roles on women's distress, and by Moen, 1989, and Moen et al., 1992, who find that women's multiple role occupancy increases their health and longevity, or Clarke and Wheaton, 2005, who attest the strong mental health effects of life-course stages characterized by gains and losses of statuses and roles).

Analysing life courses in terms of status sequences gives equal weight to the three components of status profiles that have been distinguished, i.e., participation, position and role. This implies, among others, the hypothesis that life-course transitions can be particularly sensitive and stressful; they are emotional moments in people's lives, implying bursts of hope or anxiety, at the same time stimulating intensified learning processes, or socialization and identity changes (George 1993; Emler 2005). This aspect of life courses must, of course, be treated with as much circumspection as the others - keeping in mind Strauss' (1959) principle that statuses are not static, but have their time structure, be it socially scheduled (according to age norms or fixed procedures) or not (for instance, unanticipated, non-normative life-course events). Transitions that may appear at first sight to be rather sudden ruptures can turn out to be finely graded on closer inspection, and phases between transitions can also be more dynamic than one might think. It is also quite obvious that not all transitions weigh equally heavily, for various reasons, because not all participations in an actor's status profile bear equal social weight - some are more central and decisive for a person's standing and outlook on life and society, others are more peripheral and less consequential. We shall come back to this question with respect to gender.

[9] One may consider, for instance, that the presence of grandchildren or great-grandchildren marks later life-course transitions, as has been proposed by Nave-Herz (1999), and that these later life transitions and the ensuing phases are of higher subjective and behavioural relevance than may have been supposed up to now by the sociology of old age.

Another implication of this status-centred approach is the conceptually clear distinction between the social form of the life course and its timing, more specifically its relation to age. This should not be understood as conferring a secondary role to age itself, quite on the contrary. It helps to conceptually distinguish chronological age from its social use instead of confusing them. This use may vary historically, not only in the particular sense of concrete age thresholds, but also concerning the weight attributed to age. As Kohli (1985) has shown nicely, the increasing bureaucratic use of age during the last two to three centuries of modernization has given a formerly unknown importance to this "universalistic" characteristic.[10] It may well be that present-day societies and their life courses are more directly and universally built on chronological age than any other in the anthropological score - but because of their specific social construction and not because of any obscure functional necessity.

Master statuses and life-course gendering

As just stated, on a purely theoretical level, there is reason to think that not all fields in which a person participates at a given time have the same importance, be it in terms of «structuring power» on the person's everyday life and social relations, of time and subjective energy invested, of the field's contribution to the person's prestige, or of identity formation. Some fields are more important than others, weighing more heavily in a person's self-perception or the perception of others, mobilizing more of his or her personal commitment, and forming a more consequential frame for a person's behaviour. Some fields may even be dominant, others «dominated» in the sense that the dominant field defines the space or leeway that remains for participation in non-dominant fields.

This simple idea becomes especially important when it comes to studying the gender differentiation of life courses with regard to family and employment. Following Hughes (1945) and many authors after him, we can assume that in contemporary societies (and most, but not all, others), gender is a far-reaching dominant or master

[10] As social anthropology shows, in the very age-graded societies, which are those supposedly most principally organized around age, the moment for promoting a person from one age grade to the next is not determined by his/her chronological age, but by a social definition decided by the elders that aims at constituting socially "reasonable" age groups (Bernardi 1985). This promotion takes the form of particularly elaborate rites of passage. Moreover, individual age, or more exactly age-group membership, can be socially redefined in order to assure the coherence of the formal with more informal status criteria. Parin et al. (1963) describe cases among the Dogon, whose age-group membership was upgraded in order to take into account the incumbents' greater experience in the world outside the village due to a period of work there.

status, shaping almost all social relationships and fields of interaction. Notably, it implies the dominant assignation of women to the family and of men to paid work. This means that women may participate in non-family fields to the extent that their family work is not hindered, and men may participate in non-employment fields - including the family - to the extent that their engagement in paid work is not restricted. Task segregation in the sense of the Parsonian family model, with the man being active in the public space outside the family and the wife being restricted to internal activities or the private sphere, is but an extreme case of this model of gender as a master status (Krüger and Levy 2001). More generally, it allows for a large variability of the concrete division of labour between individual couples. The implications of this model can be extended. Among others, it stimulates questions about its *institutionalization* on various levels. Such institutionalization exists on the cultural level in the form of sex-stereotypes, but also as explicit or implicit normality assumptions in social policy and, more generally, in institutions framing everyday life. This more hidden kind of institutionalization takes the form of implicit models underlying the practical functioning of a series of institutions and organizations that create very practical constraints on everyday life. In the case of gender typing, these take mostly the form of the male-breadwinner model. But institutionalization exists also on the structural level through constraining institutional arrangements, especially those concerning the accessibility of extrafamilial childcare.[11] Finally, a factor often neglected in recent sociological writing is a direct corollary of privilege and hence of a basic feature of social structure: the usual - and sociologically trivial - unwillingness of the privileged, in the present context the males, to renounce their advantages,[12] or in Connell's term (2002) the patriarchal dividend. To speak of this aspect as naked privilege sounds rather awkward, even impolite, nowadays, but it should not be forgotten as it is bound to be a particularly potent determinant of social interests vested in the reproduction of gender inequalities.

As a marker for social discrimination and life-course differentiation, is gender fundamentally different from other ascribed characteristics, such as ethnicity, nationality

[11] Some sexual differentiations cannot easily be attributed to only one of those two levels. For instance, the sex-typing of occupational fields and labour markets (and in some countries also of occupational training), or more generally of social "territories", is at a time a cultural and a structural phenomenon and plays an often neglected role in what may be called structural doing gender.

[12] The work-life balances, or more exactly paid-work/family-work balances of men are typically much more unbalanced than women's (see chapter 4); to concentrate on postulating the same "right" for men as for women regarding parental leave and other measures facilitating family work can be a somewhat formalistic way of glossing over the multifaceted discrimination of women in employment and the weak prestige attached to housework (but rendering family-supporting measures gender neutral may be politically important for other reasons).

or other communitarian tags ("race")?[13] It is at least in one respect, and a very consequential one as this volume attests: unlike other candidates for categorical labelling, gender defines social characteristics the bearers of which are regularly tied together by living in couples or families. Couples, and even more so families, constitute probably *the* major life-linking institution in terms of both frequency in the population and of the strength of the social ties it entails. This institution, unlike most others that contribute to framing our everyday world, does not work on the meso- or macrosocial level but on the microsocial level of social order; it is therefore lacking power to effectively counter pressures coming from this larger institutional context - it is ill-armed to become a counter-culture; one might say, it can only become a tiny, personalized sub-culture, permitting its members to partially escape from the tensions they may experience in other social fields. In other words, it is bound to import external pressures that burden its members rather than project internal pressures onto the surrounding world. That is probably the main structural reason why the family plays a particularly important, but not autonomous, role in life-course gendering, as most of the following analyses will show.

Digression: Everett Hughes and the idea of master status

The term of master status has its own history that would merit being retraced in more detail than is possible in a short digression. Sometimes it is used in a rather wide sense, sometimes it is more specific. One example of a very general definition is Allison's (no year): "A socially defined position occupied by a person in society that is very important in shaping his or her self-concept and life choices"; a more strongly focused one is, for example, Gerson's (1993: 127), illustrated by gender: "What distinguishes a master status from other positions is that it contradicts or counteracts any status characteristic that is inconsistent with it. For instance, gender operates as a master status when the negative status correlates of femininity override the positive status attributes of research scientists." The term is mainly used in social psychology and in sociology to designate specific characteristics of a person that are socially important enough to weigh more heavily, and to be more consequential, than other sta-

[13] Given the often deviated use of the notion of ascription in part of the sociological literature (in extreme cases it is practically used as a synonym for "biologically determined", which is sociological nonsense), it may be in order to underline that it is taken here in its strict sense of membership in a category whose socially constructed profile (or rather stereotyped image) is attached to a characteristic that can not be freely chosen by individual members. It is this feature that makes it particularly "attractive" for discrimination.

tus aspects. In that sense, homosexuality has been considered a master status (Risman and Schwartz 1988; Mooney et al. 2009), physical impairment (Morrison 2010), even overweight (Hiller 1982), and deviant behaviour or stigma more generally (Becker 1963, 1998; Ferree and Smith 1979), but also - and more prominently in recent times - gender (Laws 1979; Komarovsky 1991; Chafetz 1997; Reskin 2000; Krüger and Levy 2001).[14]

The origin of the term is usually traced back to an article by Hughes (1945). In fact, he uses a more complex phrase that later writers have condensed into "master status" (probably Becker, 1963, who speaks, for example, of Hughes having distinguished "master and auxiliary status traits"). Hughes' original illustration concerns being black in the United States: "The most striking illustration in our society is offered by the Negro who qualifies for one of the traditional professions. Membership in the Negro race [Hughes' original term. RL], as defined in American mores and/or law, may be called a *master status-determining trait* [RL's italics]. It tends to overpower, in most crucial situations, any other characteristics which might run counter to it" (Hughes 1945: 357). He also applies the idea to gender in a way that is elegant enough to be cited integrally. He writes about the "dilemma of a young woman who became a member of that virile profession, engineering. The designer of an airplane is expected to go up on the maiden flight of the first plane built according to the design. He [sic - RL] then gives a dinner to the engineers and workmen who worked on the new plane. The dinner is naturally a stag party. The young woman in question designed a plane. Her co-workers urged her not to take the risk – for which, presumably, men only are fit – of the maiden voyage. They were, in effect, asking her to be a lady rather than an engineer. She chose to be an engineer. She then gave the party and paid for it like a man. After food and the first round of toasts, she left like a lady" (Hughes 1945: 356). In a systematic perspective, one could discuss whether the term of master status should be reserved for gender as such, or used to designate the gendered dominance of paid work for men and family work for women as two sex-specified master statuses, as some of the contributions to the present volume do. Considerung gender itself as a master status may be closer to an interactionist perspective whereas the gender-typed master statuses of paid work vs. family refer more easily to an institutional background. Both uses can be justified and their coexistence does not seem to lead to serious misunderstandings.

[14] A similar idea, but restricted to a specific (although crucial) situation, has been called sex role spillover by Gutek (e.g., Gutek and Cohen, 1987: 97: "Sex role spillover is the carryover of gender-based roles into the work setting").

Life-course institutionalization

Cain (1964) already investigated the various institutional areas (family, religion, law, the labour market, etc.) as to their relevance for organizing individual life courses, and this aspect of the social construction of life courses merits some development in the present context.

First, we should clarify what we mean by institutionalization, although this cannot be the place for an extensive treatise on that topic. The most adequate abstract conception in the context of life-course research seems to be Berger and Luckmann's (1966) "triangle" of social construction that brings together three complementary processes: externalization, objectivation and internalization. With the implied two levels of social reality, the individual and the collective, and its basically processual view, it is more balanced than either structurally determinist views or recent "constructivist" or performativist ones, where agency (or "doing" something, be it gender, inequality, other kinds of discrimination, etc.) is so predominant that structure virtually disappears. In this perspective, institutions are certainly social constructions, but during a certain period they can become "objective", i.e., they acquire an existence of their own, based on power among other things, an existence that does not simply depend on individuals enacting their rules; furthermore, changing these rules takes more than just wanting to do so, at least for most individual actors who have to do with them.

Since Cain's exploratory probing, the institutional aspect has been taken up with differing meanings of the term, where two main families can be identified as the polarity of cultural vs. structural institutionalization.[15] The first means institutionalization by the establishment of more or less binding norms and values, the second means institutionalization through the creation and working of organizations controlling the processes that they are intended to stabilize. Both aspects need to be considered; they can appear together or separately, and we may hypothesize that there is a gradient of efficacy (i.e., structuring power on peoples' behaviour), with 'cultural without structural' institutionalization having the lowest degree and 'cultural with struc-

[15] A minor question is: what should be considered an institution with regard to the life course? Are life courses institutionalized (Heinz 1992; Weymann and Heinz 1996), i.e., organized by social institutions that frame individual choices and behaviour, or are they an institution in themselves (Kohli 1986b)? To look at various institutions in present-day societies in order to identify the ways they contribute to life-course institutionalization seems a priori of greater heuristic usefulness than simply to label the results of their action "institutions"; this is the option chosen in the present volume.

tural' institutionalization the highest degree of efficacy. In contemporary societies, where many of the big institutions were created in the 19th century (maybe more so in Europe than in North America, but this needs empirical inquiry), the constellation of 'structural without cultural' institutionalization may be of particular interest, because existing organizations constitute "frozen answers to societal questions" that may outlive the cultural consensus on the basis of which they were created.

We should add that if institutions can be attributed to a collective level of social organization with respect to individual life courses, it is important to note that in the analysis of concrete societies this dichotomy is usually insufficient, because there are several socially relevant levels of administrative and political organization on the subnational level. A finer analysis may be less important in highly centralized countries such as France, but it cannot be ignored with regard to more federalist countries like the USA or Switzerland, as differences on subnational levels (states, cantons, but sometimes even lower levels like districts or cities) can be considerable.

How do institutions interfere with life courses? Krüger (2001) proposes an interesting distinction of three principal ways in which institutions influence life courses; she speaks of phasing, relating and supporting institutions. One major influence lies in the more or less compulsory participation in an institutional field during specific periods of life; this is the product of *phasing* institutions. The main example is what has already been cited as the tripartite sequencing of contemporary life courses, with three institutional areas directly referring to each other and, so to speak, handing over individuals from one to the next: education, labour market and retirement system. The generalized, if variable, hold of education on life courses in a mainly preadult phase of life is based on legal rules, such as the prohibition of children's work and compulsory schooling, on social norms that generally coincide with these rules, but also on the instrumentality of acquired knowledge and skills for entering the labour market and possibly experiencing an ascending trajectory within it. Conversely, the labour market, mainly through the hiring and promoting practices of employers, refers back to the educational system, with interesting institutional differences between countries (e.g., some Western societies have developed an important sector of occupational training coupled with formative integration into the labour market, i.e., the "Germanic" dual apprenticeship system; others have similar institutions but only on the schooling side, and others still reserve officially credentialled occupational training for higher education). The structuring hold of the labour market on adults' life courses is mainly based on the pervasive market economy characterizing con-

temporary societies, with most people having to earn money in order to survive with sufficient purchasing power. In turn, the retirement system refers back to the labour market in having pensions depend on the individuals' accumulated contributions and on the overall duration of their labour market participation, but also on the age norm for labour market exit that in many countries is fixed by law. However, actual practice makes it increasingly difficult for older employees to stay in a job, or to find a new one in the case of job loss, after a certain age threshold that is considerably lower than the official one for retirement. The phasing function of institutions for individual life courses is probably the most obvious one, but it would be short-sighted to restrict institutional analysis of life-course structuration to this aspect. The two other types are all the more interesting and merit increased attention in research.

The most important case of *relating* institutions is certainly the family. It links the lives of the partners forming a couple, and the lives of parents (grandparents and possibly others) with those of their children, if there are any, and of course the lives of the children with each other if there are more than one. Furthermore, it also forces the partners to decide how the various family tasks, requiring participation in several institutional fields, should be distributed among the adult members (in monoparental families there is obviously much less choice - and consequently a greater burden - in this respect than in biparental families). Families are not only places of intimate everyday interaction, emotional exchange, solidarity and social control, they are also centres of coordination in terms of time, resources and planning concerning the various expectations and imperatives emanating from the multiple social fields in which their members (mother, father, children, maybe others - possibly in need of care) participate or may be prevented from participating. In this respect, again with important differences between countries, the tendency is often for families to fall back on the gender-specific task distribution that has been discussed above in terms of gendered master statuses (see chapter 11 for an empirical exploration of international variations). Whereas the family may seem a rather weak institution with little power in its relations with higher-level institutions, it is in fact much stronger, and often quite constraining, as a proximate institutional environment for its individual members. Its institutional character (as opposed to its informal-group-like one) should therefore not be neglected.

Finally, *supporting* institutions are those that take over some part of a person's regular tasks, especially parents' family work, and most notably part of childcare. These institutions may be public or private, formal (like day nurseries) or informal (like

grandparents), and for payment or not. Their availability and accessibility plays an important role in the task-distribution decision of couples. In present-day societies where women's automatic relegation to intra-familial roles is no longer accepted, not only the presence, but also the absence, of such institutions is a highly relevant factor in the overall institutional structuration of life courses.

For the picture to be complete, even these three types of life-course-regulating institutions are insufficient, because a series of other institutions or institutional domains influence peoples' everyday lives and decisions. These constitute a fourth type relevant to the life-course that we may call, again with a view to individual trajectories, *background* institutions. These are public and private services and shops, the health system, public infrastructures, such as transportation, etc. All these institutions have their proper rules, their proper rhythms, their proper spatial locations that count for users who need to directly interact with them. Individuals and families need to be organized and cope with often conflicting imperatives, and the demand for support of the kind provided by the third type is strongly influenced by the efficiency of these background institutions.

One might even add a fifth function to the list. Since there are socially recognized models of the "proper" life course that select specific sequences and timings as normal, life courses can deviate from these models. This may be by "accident" (we might think of physical accidents that are sufficiently severe to affect the life course, but also of social accidents, such as sudden unemployment, or some forms of deviant behaviour), or because of unsuccessful attempts to pass important passages or turning points, or other influences. Such cases of "life-course deviance" are considered problematic and specific institutions work on renormalizing critical aspects of them, especially in the areas of deviant behaviour, its social treatment (prisons, probation institutions) and of health (e.g., rehabilitation clinics, addiction treatment). With respect to life-course normalization, these institutions have the function of *reparation or rectification*.

A full account of the institutional framing of life courses can only be achieved by taking into consideration all four, or even five, kinds of influence - a conceptual model very different indeed from a purely individualistic model, as implied, for example, by rational action or human capital theories. It is the specific configuration of these various types of institution that constitute a country's particular institutional profile and this can be hypothesized to be at the basis of its life-course regime.

An important part of the institutional interventions in peoples' life courses is realized through more or less abstract mechanisms, but in many cases there are *biographical agents* (Stone 1991), whose role - professional or informal - it is to counsel and channel certain life-passengers on their journey. Most of these agents intervene as members of one of the life-course-relevant institutional types mentioned above, they work at the interface between the institutions and their clients. We shall refrain from developing hypotheses about this aspect of life-course institutionalization because it is not directly addressed by the following analyses, but it seems important to point out the specific function of these biographical agents, despite the great variety as to institutional basis, type of relationship with the individual whose trajectory they affect, and also their qualification and professional profile.

Biographical cumulation: stratifying life courses

Analysing life courses as movement through social structure requires, among other things, a strongly elaborated link to the hierarchical dimension of social order, i.e., social stratification. One of the strong links that have been developed in this respect is the thesis of cumulative advantages and disadvantages (Dannefer 1987, 2003, 2009; Sampson and Laub 1997), or, we might also say, of biographical cumulativity of resources, or their default. Merton's formulation is still valid enough to be cited here: "The ways in which initial comparative advantage of trained capacity, structural location, and available resources make for successive increments of advantage such that the gaps between the haves and the have-nots ... widen" (Merton 1988: 606).

The basic concept of cumulative advantages and disadvantages is sufficiently well-known not to need detailed presentation here. Let us just mention some of its basic characteristics. One is that it is primarily formulated on the systemic, or supra-individual, level of social organization, leaving certain leeway for individual variation. This does, of course, not exclude its relevance for individual life courses, especially if we place it directly in the context of the existing system of social stratification, exactly in the sense of Merton. A second is its symmetric character: positive assets tend to induce further increases, lacking or weak assets tend to engender further weakening. Another important aspect is that despite the various applications of the concept, it basically refers to peoples' positioning in the system of social inequalities and thus focuses on the crucial link between life courses and social stratification. Alt-

hough this aspect is not always underscored in such terms, the very terminology of advantages and disadvantages makes it clear enough.

It may be useful to pinpoint some of the mechanisms implied in producing biographical divergence in social resources and positions, even if no claim to completeness is made. Most classical mechanisms of inequality production are in some way or another relevant to inequality development during peoples' life courses, be it for the initiation of inequalities or the reproduction of already existing ones:

1. Power and various forms of capital (cultural, relational, symbolic, financial or other) are intrinsically akin to cumulativity, because instead of being consumed, parts of them can be used to increase the existing stock and thus increase already existing inequalities (therefore, O'Rand, 2006, speaks of life-course capital).

2. For much of cultural capital (including various forms of qualification and, more generally, mental abilities), there is a reinforcing interaction between acquired capacities and their exercise (as shown, for instance, by Schooler et al., 2004, for cognitive complexity). The more regularly they are effectively used during a person's life course, either in occupational activity or otherwise, the more they are enhanced, and conversely, the less they are exercised, the more they shrink or get outdated in the face of change.

3. Another family of relevant mechanisms is found in the classical factors of status attainment implied in inter- or intragenerational mobility. In most contemporary societies, especially in highly industrialized ones, one particularly basic mechanism of intergenerational mobility or, more realistically, status inheritance, is educational status reproduction and education's instrumental function for job attainment, as described by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977, 1979), Müller and Shavit (1997) and many others. Often, educational attainment is more or less equalized with meritocracy, but in fact it is of mixed composition in that respect because it contains an important part of status inheritance due to various mechanisms. Another mechanism of intergenerational status (and hence inequality) reproduction is, of course, the inheritance of economic capital; in Switzerland, like in some other countries, the latter mechanism works largely for men only (Levy et al. 1997). Compared with these two mechanisms, intragenerational occupational mobility is probably more clearly meritocratic, be it on the general labour market or, mostly in larger firms, on the internal labour market.

4. A more specific, mainly reinforcing, mechanism that is important in couple formation and intergenerational transmission of status positions is homogamy with its structural supports that channel private interactions, whether it is the result of deliberate choice or not. It is very illuminating in this respect to think about what parts of the institutionalized fields in which we regularly participate are not class- or stratum-specific. One may think of public transportation, or the pavements - but most social spaces and fields of interaction tend to segregate along the lines of their internal hierarchy. This is true for schools, churches and hospitals because they are often socially differentiated, at least through the class specificity of the neighbourhoods where they are located (spatial segregation); this is even more true for work organizations. Moreover, normative interventions like those of close biographical agents (parents, grandparents, friends, teachers, gang members…) also tend to favour interactions with status peers.

5. The same case can be made for homosociality or homophily (same social class, same social category - Weber's mechanism of social closure), because the tendency to prefer status peers in private interactions, and hence in networks, is by no means restricted to intimate relationships and couple formation. On the contrary, in the present perspective, homogamy appears rather as a special case of homophily.

6. Within some of these more institution-related mechanisms, but also in other contexts, labelling and its functioning as a self-fulfilling prophecy in both directions, that is, towards privilege and discrimination, plays a crucial role in biographical cumulativity, especially if it is institutionalized instead of depending only on informal perception. Gender inequalities are not often discussed with respect to cumulative advantage and disadvantage, but they clearly qualify for this kind of life-course functioning. It may well be that they are particularly dependent on the labelling mechanism, as highlighted, for instance, by the observation that the occupation of gender-typical jobs tends to increase across the life course, although asymmetrically (men converge towards male-typed occupations, whereas women tend to get stuck in female-typed ones; interestingly, the "sex" of a person's initial occupation has more lasting biographical effects than his or her personal sex; for Switzerland: see Charles and Buchmann 1994).

Overall, and for good reasons, the argumentation about growing inequalities during the course of life bears a close connection with social competition. Markets, that is, institutions that privilege competitive behaviour, tend to reinforce inequalities, but

so do organizations, due to their own mechanisms of selective allocation. However, other social mechanisms exist that may counter the growth of inequalities based on solidarity and compensation, for instance, in the form of redistributive measures of the welfare state,[16] but also in more informal forms, such as support from kinship or friendship networks. Redistributive measures of the welfare state do not usually offset the rise in inequalities, but at best only limit them, with large differences between various models of welfare states (see more on this in chapter 11); thus mechanisms of cumulation tend to prevail.

There are also individual resources that can be used against the negative side of mechanisms of cumulativity, as emphasized, for instance, in Schafer et al.'s work about resilience (2009), even if these resources do themselves tend to correlate with social position. This means that their compensatory effect may work mainly in the case of life-course accidents that threaten rather privileged positions and that their successful working in underprivileged positions is rather rare.

Biographical cumulation can be directly operationalized as growing intracohort inequalities in terms of any socially valued "good", and more generally as the positive correlation between the available stock of a social good (income, fortune, education, etc.) and its increase. In fact, the degree to which this correlation - for instance, the correlation between the attained level of education and participation in further education - is positive shows how strongly the social good or status criterion in question is submitted to the dynamics of competition and power or, on the contrary, to that of compensation (negative correlation).

[16] Rowntree's (1901) model of a poverty-cycle among urban workers may be interpreted as a life-course cycle related to a precarious social situation around the poverty line in the absence of compensatory welfare-state mechanisms.