

15. Life course analysis - a field of intersections¹

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Where do we stand after the analytical ventures documented in this volume? Rather than repeat the results of the individual contributions, this final chapter tries to sketch the overall picture that emerges and place it within a larger perspective. First, we organize the major results along five principal axes: 1) life-course patterning and gendering, 2) social stratification and mobility, 3) family development, 4) life-course institutionalization, life course normalization and its price, 5) methodological conclusions. In the second section, we enumerate a series of theoretical impulses that can be derived from the work presented here and the book ends with one such topic, the manifold intersections on which life-course research focuses attention.

Main results

1) *Gendered patterning of life courses*: Probably the most impressive findings of this volume can be summarized as an overall picture of strong, if varied, life-course patterning in which gendering plays a major role. Let us first concentrate on the latter; we shall take up general life-course patterning in the theoretical section under the heading of pluralization. The more closely one focuses on the child-caring period of family life, the stronger task differentiation between the parents appears, as described by the model of gendered, bipolar master statuses with "family first" for women and "job first" for men. The main trigger of the rise in couple and family organization according to this principle turns out to be the birth of the first child. Additional children consolidate and radicalize this tendency towards intra-couple task differentiation, including the reinforcement of outspoken segregation with respect to paid work, as well as the ensuing inequality between the partners. This result is not only intriguing in itself, it is strongly at odds with other studies showing widespread values of gender equality in the general population,² as well as in partners before their transition to parenthood. An exploratory panel study in French-speaking Switzerland of how couples reorganize their structure in the transition to parenthood (Le

¹ Original contribution to this volume.

² According to Lück, 2006, this is especially true for Western countries, less clearly for post-transitional countries of Eastern Europe.

Goff and Levy 2012), as well as a large-scale analysis of European data (Elchereth et al. 2011), have shown indeed that young couples becoming parents mostly declare egalitarian values and also practice them to a large extent before the actual transition. Then, after the birth of their child, they first change their practice regarding task distribution in the sense of gendered master statuses, and only afterwards adapt or re-traditionalize their values to match their changed practice. So in this crucial respect, couples do not act according to their values - as rational-choice theories like Hakim's preference theory (1998, 2000) postulate - but according to other incentives.³ Among these, the institutional makeup of their social environment with its specific structure of opportunities and constraints is likely to play a major role (chapter 11).

In the face of this fact, we must not forget, however, that life-course gendering varies between trajectories, as our results have shown: it is very strong for the two main status dimensions related by the master status concept, occupation and family division of labour, but clearly weaker - though still existent - for cohabitational and residential trajectories, where other factors are more important for understanding the existing variability. With respect to gendering, then, the two master status dimensions appear as particularly central. This also justifies the heightened analytical attention this volume attributes to them by including no less than four contributions that study the combined family-cum-employment trajectories (chapters 4, 5, 6 and 8) and three that study occupational mobility (chapters 5, 6 and 9). While life courses can certainly not be reduced to mobility, social stratification plays a crucial role for their dynamics in several respects, be it in the positional aspect of people's own location or their social origin, or in the mechanisms reproducing existing inequalities, and it is closely intertwined with the gendering of life courses as well.

The trajectory types we found, especially for women and for the combination of familial and occupational participation, appear with considerable consistency and robustness. This consistency shows up in the strong correspondence between the results of chapters 4, 5, 8 and, to a considerable extent, also 6 (Table 15.1) which analyze similar aspects (family and employment together), but for groups of men and women with different age ranges and marital statuses. Chapters 4 and 5 both look at women's simple or double participation, the first for all women between 16 and 64 (respondents of 30 and older), the second only for mothers during the most intensive period of mothering (one year before to ten years after childbirth). Both chapters find

³ For similar results, see for instance Born et al. (1996) or Moen (2003).

the same female trajectory types (*Full-time*, *Part-time*, *Return* and *Housewife*) with additional subdivisions of *Housewife* and *Part-time* trajectories in chapter 5. Chapter 8 produces largely the same occupational trajectory types although it analyzes men's and women's together; this explains, however, the appearance of a *Mixed* category. The same holds, with less differentiation, for chapter 12 which uses the topic as an exercise ground for its methodological development. Chapter 6 has a different focus: it studies partners' trajectories - thus excluding singles - for demographic segments similar to those in chapter 4 (observed age range between 20 and 64, respondents of 30 years of age and more), but with a view to occupational upward mobility. Since occupational mobility concerns and differentiates only women who remain in employment, it finds, again, two of the typically female types, i.e., *Return* and *Housewife*, for those who do not return, along with three novel types that are defined not by rates of employment, but by different occupational mobility patterns; these group differently those women's trajectories that are captured in the *Full-time* and *Part-time* types in the three other chapters. What differs between these results is mainly the proportion of the types; this varies, quite logically, with the kind of population segment analyzed.

Table 15.1 Comparative view of women's trajectory types, chapters 4, 5, 8 and 6

Chapter, observed age span, gender, age bracket in sample			
4. Family + Empl. 16-64, all women, ≥ 30	5. Occupation childbirth -1 to +10, new mothers, 18-62	8. Destandardization 20-45, all adults, ≥ 45	6. Partners' trajectories 20-64, fem. partners, ≥ 30
Full-time 34%	Full-time 7%	Full-time 52%	Slow career 11%
			High career 7%
Part-time 23%	Part-time 28% *)	Part-time 6%	Non-mobile 29%
Return 30%	Return 17%	Return 11%	Return 23%
Housewife 13%	Housewife 47% **)	Housewife 10%	Housewife 31%
-	-	Mixed 22%	-

*) Of which 13% high, 15% low

**) Of which 38% exclusive, 10% mostly

The conditions favouring or disfavouring a type's appearance in a person's biography are also similar as far as can be inferred from the chapters studying the impact of different sets of variables on women entering one trajectory type or another (Table 15.2). Besides cohort membership and age, the relevant indicators mainly concern two dimensions, location in social stratification (education, social origin, household income) and family participation (marital status, children), to some extent also the

person's work history.

Table 15.2 Principal reinforcing factors for women's familial-occupational trajectory types from chapters 4 and 5

Trajectory type	Reinforcing* factors chap. 4	Reinforcing* factors chap. 5
Full-time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - no children (or only one) - middle or high education - higher social origin - unmarried or divorced - higher household income - young age 	-
Part-time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - unmarried or divorced - high education - young age - one child or none 	-
Return	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - unmarried or divorced - young age - (middle education) - (one child) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - higher education - longer previous work - less than full time - few previous employers - feminized occupation - younger cohort
Housewife	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - two or more children - low education - modest social origin - low household income 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - partner's previous full-time employment - partner's high occupation - own low / middle occupation

* Unfavourable factors have been semantically inverted for this summary; e.g., if a trajectory type is particularly rare among women with low education, this has been transformed into "reinforced by middle and high education".

In comparison, men's trajectories show not only a simpler typology, but also a simpler structure of conditioning factors, as Table 15.3 reminds us.

Table 15.3 Principal factors relevant for men's Full-time familial-occupational trajectory type⁴ from chapters 4 and 5

Trajectory type	Reinforcing factors chap. 4	Reinforcing factors chap. 5
Full-time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - intermediate and high household income - intermediate education - married - two or more children (- intermediate and high age) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - longer previous work - previous full-time work - previous male-typed occupation - young age at childbirth

A final word on this topic is in order concerning the interpretation of gendering more

⁴ Since there are only two male trajectory types, *Full-time* and *Erratic*, only one of them is shown, the other figuring as an implicit reference category, as in tables 4.1 and 5.1.

generally. The strong gendering of family-work trajectories must be taken seriously not only for the female, but also for the male side, despite the inequality in favour of men, and without relativizing it. According to chapter 5, horizontal segregation by sex is to some extent also a factor of discrimination for men, because it makes exclusive full-time trajectories more likely or even inevitable; the same can be said of the birth of children, i.e., the transition to parenthood. This corresponds to a finding from chapter 10 according to which trajectory variability increases with age for women, whereas it decreases for men. Gender-typed life chances and their biographical unfolding are no less constraining on men than on women, although they include a strong patriarchal dividend (Connell 2002) privileging men, even if they do not actively discriminate women. Men might, according to their values, be inclined to realize non-normative designs (more intensive fathering, egalitarian share of paid and family work, less than full-time employment without necessarily renouncing an upward career) for which they, too, would have to pay a relatively high - often too high - price under the prevailing societal gender regime, especially in the world of paid work (in terms of diminished career prospects, lesser pay, sometimes also reduced self-esteem). Let us briefly sketch a bit more concretely what is meant by this remark. The current organization of capitalism tends towards polarization between two types of work. On the one hand, highly qualified, well-paid positions with interesting benefits, which require a total personal investment and, on the other hand, poorly paid jobs with few career prospects, often part-time and precarious. It is hard for both men and women not to fall within one of these two categories of employment. Moreover, around age 30, when the decision to become parents or not is "due", the required investment in work as a condition for making a career is particularly high. It is obviously hard for men to step back from the career model without this model being taken over by their female partner. Facing uncertainty about their future in a strongly competitive society with much normative pressure to insure their own living (and the living of their children), individuals in a liberal welfare state such as Switzerland have to decide who in their couple will invest primarily in paid work, and who will take care of the household and the children. Women are in a comparatively less advantageous position than men, at around 30, to fulfil the expectations associated with career orientation, as they are held responsible by social norms and institutional arrangements (e.g., maternity leave) to uphold the interests of their children. Therefore most men are "doomed" to professional success and concomitant under-investment in their children's lives, as women are doomed to focus on the family,

which often turns out to have strongly negative consequences for their life courses, in particular due to the risk of divorce later in life. (As we shall see below, this description is nothing more than a partial concretization of the principle of sex-specific master statuses which are particularly strong in liberal welfare states.)

2) *Social stratification and mobility in a life-course perspective*: Chapters 5, 6 and 9 specifically focus on social mobility. They shed some new light on its dynamics in Switzerland while confirming results of other studies that have been produced with less extensively longitudinal data. Let us cite among the more fundamental results that upward mobility is rare, occurs mostly among people starting from already privileged positions, varies strongly in extent, even among those professionals whose specialties " earmark " them for upward careers - chapter 9 shows a large span between the least and the most successful upward career types (*Technical-industrial vs. Financial*). Upward mobility is strongly gendered, with men being upwardly mobile more often and differently from women. Two basic mechanisms drive mobility, educational meritocracy and patrimonial, quasi-feudal inheritance (Szydlik 2004), and the latter is largely limited to men for the part concerning not fortune in general, but the propriety of family firms. Education is the most important system that distributes people over the ranks of social stratification by way of sorting them into the different layers of occupational hierarchy (Pollak et al. 2007); the individual level of education is highly important not only for hierarchical placement, but also regarding the ease or difficulty of first job entry, unemployment risk, re-entry chances, etc. It is, of course, also one important element of social prestige. Education can, however, not be interpreted as a purely meritocratic resource because in Switzerland, as in most other countries for which relevant studies exist, the proportion of intergenerational reproduction of inequalities is high (for a comparative analysis see Shavit and Müller 2000, for Switzerland Levy et al. 1997, for France Chauvel 1998); chapter 6 shows, among other things, that men's lower social origin is an important condition for the absence of occupational upward mobility later in their lives, and almost excludes the emergence of *Dual career* couples. As the alternative, the patrimonial mechanism of mobility rarely works for women, education plays an even more decisive role for their occupational placement than for men. Moreover, unlike men, women lose the resource aspect of education for upward occupational mobility after childbirth (chapter 6), and the later they become a mother, the less they attain upward mobility afterwards; other factors hindering their later upward mobility are a high occupational level at-

tained before childbirth, and a male partner working in a "male" occupation.

Along with social inheritance and meritocracy, the life-long cumulation of initial advantages or disadvantages proves to be a third major mechanism relating social inequalities to the life course. This holds even for relatively short periods and in cases that would hardly be the first to come to mind when thinking of applications of the cumulative advantage/disadvantage hypothesis, such as early geographical mobility that predicts, to some extent, later mobility and creates capacities to do so, i.e., motility in chapter 7.

3) *Family development*: The analysis of cohabitational trajectories in chapter 3 supports two major conclusions: trajectories on this dimension are not homogenous, but they, too, fall into a limited number of trajectory types, one of which is clearly dominating (*Parental* with 54% of all trajectories; the second type, *Solo*, accounting for only 18%, and the three major types totalling 84%). Moreover, the predominant type corresponds to the standard model postulated by the Family developmental (FLC) research tradition and the authors of chapter 3 warn us that the typology they produce should not lead us to underestimate the overall family-proneness, since only about 15% of all individuals remain unmarried and childless; family or parental periods even show up on the margins of *Solo* trajectories. All this indicates that the FLC model has not become invalid, but that it can no longer be considered to cover the whole reality of cohabitational histories in contemporary societies, even less so with a view to the cohort differences that indicate a progressive decrease in the frequency of *Parental* trajectories and a concomitant increase in *Solo* trajectories.

The findings of various chapters attest to the central role of the family (in the narrow sense of parents with children) for the gendering of life courses and hence of men's and women's diverging paths of integration in society. No, or hardly any, gendering (within the limits of the operationalization used here, of course) is found for women or men who do not become parents, and only limited gendering for trajectories with only a limited connection to the family, as epitomized by residential trajectories. This conclusion strengthens the perspective of the family as the locus of individuals' manifold coordination management of their partially divergent activity profiles and life courses and as a major ground for sex-specific dissymmetry: under the conditions of the Swiss institutional context, life-linking occurs in a way that has a smoothing and strengthening effect on male occupation-only trajectories and a derailing effect on

female family-cum-occupation trajectories, which appears as one of the most consequential and resilient facts in women's life courses (to cite a passage from chapter 5: "for the women, neither education nor the cohort they belong to, nor the birth year of their child, has an influence on their occupational mobility after the transition to parenthood").

From an interactionist and linked-lives point of view, individuals pass through a socially programmed sequence of stages in their family relations, which they cannot fully control, as this sequence not only depends on their own decisions, but also on those of their parents, partners and children. If we take a more institutional view of the family seriously, the family developmental model (Aldous 1996) acquires a specific touch: each family constitutes a social system with its structure and its network relations, a system that typically changes as its members go through their life courses (including the children who not only "grow up", but participate in other systems or fields outside the family of origin). Therefore, family configurations evolve throughout individual life courses following social scripts as well as interpersonal opportunities and logics.

4) *Life-course institutionalization and normalization - at what price?* This book's contributions have repeatedly insisted on the fact that life courses in contemporary societies are not just individually produced, highly diverse meanderings that do not follow an identifiable model, but that they are, on the contrary, strongly patterned and that a whole gamut of institutions are involved in the social construction of this patterning. There is indeed an intriguing contrast between the strong indications of the structuring power of a country's institutional context on life courses, on the one hand, and the rather limited number of institutions directly controlling transitions, stages and other components of life courses. This points to the importance of indirect forms of institutionalization, especially the constraining power of institutions' regular functioning on the basis of implicit models of normalcy; it seems that indirect institutionalization is of particular importance for the stabilization of processes of gendering. Hence the necessity to take into account a vast array of institutions that may be involved in such processes.⁵ Chapter 1 developed some theoretical notions adept at capturing conceptually the diversity of such institutions on the basis of the specific way they contribute to the social fashioning of life courses. This very diversity makes

⁵ For a similar argument see Gerschuny (2000, also Gerschuny and Sullivan 2003), and in relation with the "lockstep social organization of careers and the life course" Moen (2003b: 336).

it difficult to capture such influences by simple methodological designs and constitutes a serious challenge to further investigation (chapter 11 proposes two complementary analytical movements in that respect).

Instead of developing this line of thought further at this point, let us rather turn our attention back to this: if we take seriously the importance of not only inter-individual, but also institutional (i.e., structural) doing gender and, more generally, of doing life-course patterning, the study of life courses becomes in turn an interesting "analyzer" of a society's institutional setup. This has been highlighted in this volume particularly in chapter 9. By venturing into specific patterns of upward mobility, it functions like a searchlight in the little-studied area of the social construction of upward careers. The results of other chapters can also lead to novel questioning of the extant social order and its influence on individual biographical dynamics. One particularly important hint about institutional doing gender, of the direct kind in this case, is the often neglected role played by the sex-typing of occupations (chapter 5). It is institutionalized doubly and sequentially: first, by vocational training (among others things, by the relatively narrow definition of the officially taught specialties that are controlled by Swiss law and the federal office charged with supervising its application) and, second, by the ensuing sexual segmentation of large parts of the labour market.⁶

Chapter 10 presents results that are intriguing in still another sense when looked at from the point of view of life-course institutionalization. Among psychiatric patients, when considering three different trajectory dimensions (occupation, intimacy, co-residence), findings show not one "average psychiatric life course", nor wildly diverse trajectory types, but three distinct types. One of them corresponds to standard trajectories in the non-clinical population, the other two are specific to this particular segment: *Institutionalized* and *Unstable*. On various scales of mental health, patients situated in *Institutionalized*, and most of those in *Unstable* trajectories too, show consistently lower scores, i.e., less mental troubles, than those in standard trajectories. These results certainly do not so much give definitive answers as suggest further questions. One such question is the following: since it is not likely that one can consider standard life courses as an outcome of psychiatric conditions, it may be plausi-

⁶ This institutional reproduction is likely to be especially strong in countries with a well-developed system of vocational training (Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and to a lesser extent some others), at least at first sight. However, this remains to be systematically tested because occupational sex-typing is widespread well beyond these countries (Charles and Grusky 2004). One rare study of the institutional mediating of a major life-course transition elsewhere is Person et al.'s (2005) on 2-year colleges in the USA.

ble to consider such conditions as an expression of the pressure exerted by the standard, i.e., institutionally normalized, life course on individuals who are fragile for some reason. The fact that patients living through standard trajectories have a consistently higher level of mental troubles than those living in a psychiatric institution makes such institutions appear as shelters for vulnerable people against the oppressive potential of standard, highly biographized life courses in contemporary society. This possible interpretation ties in with the tradition of research on critical life events, to which it brings a wider angle, i.e., the search for psychically troubling effects in people's life courses, including their "normal" features and not only spectacular biographical "accidents" or turning points. Normal life courses would appear, then, not just as a well-paved way through life with many existential decisions resolved for the relieved life-course passengers by the benevolent institutions surrounding them,⁷ but rather as a somewhat Foucauldian straight-jacket imposing harsh discipline on otherwise volatile individuals. Most likely, both views taken separately are largely exaggerated, much as would be the exclusive insistence on either individual agency or structural determinism. Both, then, should be combined for a more realistic appraisal of existing forms of life-course institutionalization.

Direct *international comparisons* of entire life courses are as yet very difficult. Strictly comparable studies do not yet exist, the rare studies covering different countries do not use the same operationalization in many respects (different populations, different measures of employment, etc.). One comparison is possible in a very approximate sense between our results and those of Moen and Han for the USA (Han and Moen 1999; Moen and Han 2001a, 2001b; Han 2005), at least with respect to life-course and mobility gendering. Despite many operational differences, the gendering of life-course patterns turns out to be quite strong in both countries: three out of the five career types found by Han and Moen (2001a, b) are clearly gendered, and all of Han's (2005) seven "work career tracks" are, the predominant gender's proportion ranging from 68% to 97%, with mobility being a largely masculine phenomenon.

An analytically more promising possibility of international comparison is to look at the relationships between life-course regimes and welfare-state types. As chapter 11 has shown, gendered life-course regimes are quite closely related to the prevailing welfare-state type in a country, mainly depending - for OECD countries - on whether the prevailing logic of state action is family-centred (with institutional fostering of

⁷ This is, of course, a caricature of the old functionalist view of institutions.

gender-stereotypical parental roles), equality-centred (with degendering of trajectories), or non-interventionist, with a strong impact of social status because the possibilities to "outsource" part of childcare mainly depends in this case on a family's purchasing power. A small, but growing, amount of literature on this topic (Blossfeld et al. 2005; Blossfeld et al. 2006a; Blossfeld et al. 2006b; Blossfeld and Hofmeister 2006; Treas and Drobnič 2010; Börsch-Supan et al. 2011) confirms this relationship between welfare-state types and gendered life-course regimes, thus also confirming the analytical usefulness of Esping-Andersen's welfare-state typology and its offsprings (see also Mayer 2001, and the exemplary multilevel analysis of 20 European countries by Elcheroth et al. 2011). This confirmation is a timely reminder that the explicit integration of institutional differences in international comparisons is likely to generate more valuable insights than merely comparing individual countries (another good example of this kind of analytical strategy is the comparative work of Müller and Shavit 1997, about educational systems in the 13 countries included in the CASMIN study). This is simply tantamount to the old heuristic rule of comparatists that requires (country) names to be replaced by variables, or in Kohn's (1989: 23) formulation, to "convert descriptive differences between countries into analytic variables".

5) *Methodological conclusions:* The analyses presented in this volume are largely based on the use of optimal matching analysis (OMA). As this method is more or less in the introductory phase in the social sciences and is still developing, there is sometimes debate as to its methodological and epistemological status, thus, we wish to spell out various conclusions about this side of life-course research. We summarize them in seven points:

1. We feel that our analyses, like those of a series of other researchers since the seminal publications of Abbott, attest to the originality and productivity of OMA, especially as an alternative to the narrow focus on micro-events. It appears to be an important component of the longitudinal researcher's toolbox that cannot fully be replaced by other techniques like, for example, event history analysis, to which it is complementary.
2. Contrary to the argument that OMA is "only" an exploratory and not a confirmatory technique, unlike event history analysis, it is a very interesting instrument in confirmatory designs that combine different techniques. The trajectory types it produces can be fruitfully used as dependent or independent variables in more or less complex

regression analyses that acquire, by this token, a more holistic scope in life-course analysis. (This volume treats them mainly as dependent in order to probe into their social conditioning, but chapter 10, for instance, shows the significant effects of trajectory types on life-course variability or entropy in cohabitational and occupational patterns.)

3. One important methodological innovation presented in this volume is the extension of OMA to multichannel optimal matching. It allows for an even more encompassing view of trajectories as it includes more than one trajectory dimension at a time (practical examples are the analyses of individual trajectories in chapters 9 and 10, and couples' trajectory combinations in chapter 6).

4. Another valuable innovation is the development of techniques for empirical cost finding, as used in several chapters. Their use helps to eliminate, or at least greatly diminish, the somewhat speculative or arbitrary elements usually included in OMA. Certainly, some margin remains for the researcher's subjective appraisal when determining the number of trajectory types through cluster analysis.

5. Analytical interest in complete life-course sequences naturally leads to the necessity of developing a more general methodological view of pattern-seeking in longitudinal data that can integrate and help compare a diversity of techniques; chapters 8 and 14 propose steps in that direction.

6. One open and quite important methodological question is the degree of precision with which sequence data are collected. A priori, researchers tend to feel that more precision brings more information, more differentiation and more variability which help to explain and to understand the data in hand. So one might think that ever finer time granularity (months or days instead of years?) and a more detailed description of the biographical states used to define sequences are, in principle, desirable (e.g., varying rates of employment activity instead of a dichotomous "yes/no" for a person's employment status). Of course, the degree of precision that can be considered optimal depends on the research interest and may be quite different according to whether, for example, the focus lies on the various and changing ways to make the transition from adolescence to adulthood and the possible emergence of new phases between already recognized ones, or whether the focus is rather on the overall shape life courses take considering the full span of their duration. There can be not only too little precision, but also too much of it and, accordingly, the researcher may find socially relevant sequence patterns or miss them. Life-course standardization is a rele-

vant topic here; it is probably located on an intermediate level of granularity with respect to both time and status precision.⁸ Ideally, then, one should be able to vary the degree of precision, not only with retrospective data, with regard to time granularity as well as semantic detail, although this is rather quizzical on the operational level.

7. Another methodological problem results from the informalization (destandardization or increasing differentiation into successive steps) of important life-course transitions, and also from the fact that they mostly consist of processes that may take quite some time. Think of divorce as an illustration: is the formal, legalized accomplishment of a divorce the relevant moment in a person's or couple's life course, or are there phases and transitions that may be socially and sociologically more relevant, like a women's anticipation of a pending divorce and her return to full-time employment for that reason? The informalization or finer differentiation of transitions poses notably the problem of choosing the proper "event" for event history analysis. Alternatively, OMA does not have to choose when the "real transition" occurs, as it can include distinct states for its various constituents (married and living together, married but having distinct residences, separated, divorced, etc.). Are there nevertheless similar or different problems for OMA? The solution is probably to be found once again in the well-considered choice not only of time granularity, but also of the precision of state information and in the differentiated use of various methods.

To end the section on results, let us spell out some empirical *limitations* of the analyses presented in this volume. The first limitation concerns the age range studied. The main focus lies substantively on adult lives between first job entry and retirement, even though the observation periods of the chapters vary and are defined in terms of age and not of specific transitions. The complex transition to adulthood - composed of several more or less chronologically proximate single transitions, such as entering the labour market, leaving the parental household, entering into a personal partnership, becoming a parent - has not been dealt with here, although it is touched upon in some chapters (e.g., chapter 3); even less attention has been given to the early pathways through childhood, the transition to retirement and old age, simply because they escape the data at hand. Another limitation concerns the array of trajectories under study. A series of supplementary trajectories would be interesting, such as health, political activity, network integration on the factual side, but also,

⁸ Rindfuss et al.'s (1987) study of educational trajectories may be a case in point: analysis on too disaggregated a level may miss temporal patterns and suggest erroneous generalizations. We shall come back to this later.

in principle at least, more subjective trajectories, e.g., life goals or projects, political interest and orientation, self-perception, subjective well-being. Again, this limitation is inherent in the available data; these rely on retrospective information which excludes subjective aspects from the outset and also makes it difficult to probe all potentially interesting fields of social activity at one time. The third kind of limitation concerns the "independent" variables used in the analyses. Some variables that one might consider interesting did not yield any results, for example, no significant differences were found between linguistic regions, others might have become more interesting had it been possible to use them in a more differentiated way, like country of origin, and still others were just not documented. Nevertheless, the results of the analyses presented appear as rather solid and clearly profiled, which justifies some confidence in their stability even in confrontation with other possibly potent variables that had to be ignored.

Following these afterthoughts about our results, let us now turn to the theoretical consequences of the results presented in this book, as well as the challenges facing future life-course research as it can now be envisioned.

Theoretical conclusions and challenges

On the theoretical level, our first observation concerns the variety of theoretical references that have been used by the contributors to this volume and through which their analyses produce direct empirical evidence. Let us begin with a short list that picks out only the most directly relevant ones.

The *rational choice* model - specifically dealt with in chapters 5 and 7 - appears to be too partial to tell the whole story about life-course development because of its unilateral exaggeration of individual agency in the face of various social pressures and cultural norms.

The *family development*, or FLC, model (chapter 3) has fared somewhat better, but the predominance of the pattern it postulates has been relativized by a number of other trajectory types concerning cohabitation.

The hypothesis of *cumulative advantage and disadvantage* along the life course has received ample confirmation wherever relevant findings have been obtained (various chapters). This is true even for chapter 7 with respect to the somewhat uncommon aspect of residential trajectories, with results that accredit the novel postulate accord-

ing to which "motility", or the aptitude to be mobile, constitutes a specific kind of capital in contemporary societies, belonging - like others - to the multiple components of social stratification.

The model of *gendered master statuses* has also received consistent confirmation across most of the empirical chapters and therefore merits further development. We shall come back to it later.

In contrast, the "purified" thesis of *postmodernism*, postulating the end of social standardization of any kind, especially for life courses and - at least for some authors - also social inequality and its constituent structure, has been consistently questioned by our findings. In most but not all respects, trends towards less patterning have indeed been observed, but in the sense that models reflect limited pluralization rather than its disappearance. Given the popularity of the debate on life-course destandardization, this topic merits more explicit development.

Bounded life-course pluralization: Pluralization or destandardization is presented by some scholars as a pervasive trend that includes all individuals and all trajectories alike. It is described as the opposite trend to standardization, which is meant to correspond to a secular history, which ended in the 1970s, of uniformization of individual life-courses under the spell of national welfare states and capitalist economies. Pluralization, so it goes, leads to the rise of the individual as a free entrepreneur of his or her life, guided by agentic force. The hundred possibilities of bifurcation within one's trajectory are conceived as signs that lives have become liquid, losing much of their consistency and predictability. The various results presented in this book show that pluralization cannot be regarded in that way: for example, the rather small number of trajectory types compared with all the trajectory dimensions studied, often the relative predominance of one such type (e.g., cohabitational and residential trajectories, as well as male work-family trajectories), the relative robustness of the trajectory types, and also the limited, or sometimes missing, empirical indications of cohort effects or other signs of change). In all instances that the book considers, a finite set of models mostly account for a large majority of individual lives. Changes as indicated by cohort differences are less spectacular than the destandardization discourse would lead us to expect.⁹ In other cases, change is altogether inexistent, as in the case of residential trajectories, and often not homogeneous. Chapter 9 shows, for

⁹ For instance, the *Parental* trajectory type of cohabitation is more frequent in older cohorts and less frequent in younger ones whereas the inverse holds for *Solo* trajectories, but education is as consistent an influence factor as age.

example, that cohort differences in upward careers are not manifest for the aspect of orderliness, but clearly exist with respect to firm loyalty; chapter 8 shows that they concern only specific transitions, particularly from adolescence to adulthood. Chapter 8 also stresses that "the destandardization of men's occupational trajectory mostly concerns the transition from education to paid work and comes to a halt at age 30 in the three cohorts considered. In comparison, women of younger cohorts are in increasingly variable states after age 30". Our results for Switzerland closely resemble other authors' work.¹⁰

These types of trajectories, we conclude, are structured by master statuses, such as gender, social class, civic status, psychological health and other important dimensions influencing social participation. Therefore, we propose the concept of *bounded pluralization*. It implies that a trend towards complexification and diversification of individual trajectories did occur in the last forty to fifty years. This trend is, however, limited in its scope and deeply embedded in the social structures. We contend that pluralization takes place mainly in non-dominant status fields, i.e., in family participation for men and labour market participation for women (chapter 8 shows that diversity is not generally increasing, but is developing according to the master-status principle). Furthermore, it does so to the extent that the life-framing institutions change themselves or give enough leeway for individual agency. Indeed, the pluralization of life courses is in itself a social phenomenon bounded by the institutions of late modernity and by the unequal resources that are available to individuals from their social contexts.

A final caution is in order: it would be an oversimplification to see individualization and standardization as the opposition of mutually exclusive alternatives, as frequently happens in the literature on this question, because not only are life courses sufficiently complex to contain standardized and destandardized elements at one time, but both types of phenomena can be directly interwoven. To give just one concrete example, the decreasing feasibility of anticipating and planning individual life courses and specific transitions or participations, especially in the occupational sphere, can reinforce structural pressure on the family towards gender differentiation. In this case, a process of destandardization induces another process of standardization.

¹⁰ See, among others, for Germany Brückner and Mayer (2005), for Australia Martin (2007) and Great Britain Schoon et al. (2009); specifically for men's occupational trajectories, Mills and Blossfeld (2006) find in their 12-country comparison that "the emergence of patchwork or portfolio careers may be exaggerated and overestimated" (p. 479). Several of the contributions in Scott et al. (2010) and specifically the editors themselves stress the same conclusions.

The concept of *gendered master statuses* may be developed on two levels, both of which can only be touched on here. One line of development consists in spelling out ever more explicitly, and with respect to a wider array of consequences, the basic idea of the gender-specific and complementary assignment of fields of social participation to partners living together, as sketched out in chapter 1. The other line of development is located on a more abstract level of theoretical reasoning and concerns more generally the relevance and scope of *status profiles* that are composed of unequally weighted elements, pursuing questions as to causes, processes and consequences of such weighting. Are "weightier" statuses more determining for the profile holders' behaviour and well-being than "lighter" ones? Are tensions and other problems related to a certain status more relevant for the person who holds it if it bears higher social weight (e.g., in terms of self-image and significant-other reactions)? Thoits' (1992) results testify that people's well-being is decreased not by the sheer suboptimal number of role identities they hold, but by specific constellations that can be interpreted as lacking a master status (such as unemployment for married fathers, but not mothers). Are social costs (sanctions or, more generally, disadvantages, negative labelling or event discrimination) more pronounced if the rules not respected are connected with a "heavier" status?

Another open issue is how master statuses unfold through individual life courses. Our results describe the consequences of master statuses without closely examining the mechanisms that instantiate them. Those mechanisms may have a temporal dimension, i.e., they may be imposed neither deterministically (e.g., by socialization or a once-and-for-all fixed habitus) nor by institutional politics (of labelling, of segregation between men and women, etc.). As individuals to some extent participate in the maintenance and development of the institutional structures that make them unequal, the study of life transitions and turning points is an opportunity to see more precisely how institutional apparatus and individual agency interact, using the acceleration of change that they imply as a kind of social experiment.

Indeed, a direct implication of the more abstract concept of status profiles is the postulate that *transitions* are particularly *critical moments* in a life course, as developed in chapter 1. The potentially critical nature of life-course transitions concerns a vast array of aspects of peoples' social existence, e.g., identity, biographization, socialization, social recognition or prestige, coping (including mobilization of potential and resources), management of change, and resilience. It may be useful to further distinguish, along with Marshall and Bengtsson (2011), between foreseeable and unantici-

pated life-course risks or transitions, even though people frequently do not fully anticipate the consequences of scheduled transitions, as our examination of the transition to parenthood has shown (Le Goff and Levy 2012). Are there basic differences in how people cope with transitions depending on whether they are "normative" in the social-psychological sense, i.e., socially scheduled, or rather unexpected? A direct link to the broad theoretical discussion about *agency* is given by the notion of biographization. This topic is especially interesting if it is not only considered on the ideological level, as the individual or internal attribution of responsibility for one's life course, but also on the behavioural level of factual individualization, the ensuing stress and its management.

The important role of the *family and its life-linking function*, to which our results testify, warns us not to restrict the theoretical analysis of the family to its micro-social small-group aspect. It must also be seen as an institution, not just in the sense of the cultural principle of the "Family", but as the fully-fledged organizational phenomenon that each individual family represents. As such, it is a highly structuring force affecting members' life options, despite the fact that its dissolution lies in their power. It is a major locus of life-course interrelatedness and its - mostly individual - management, as well as a primary locus of life-course gendering.

More generally, the results of this volume make us aware of how important it is to take seriously the *institutional, i.e. meso- and macrosocial, levels* of social organization as a socially constructed, and often objectivized, frame for individual action. This contrasts with the currently rampant tendency towards epistemological "smallism" (for instance, in the form of rational choice theory, preference theory or, more generally, a tendency to exaggerate unilaterally the actorial factor in societies of the postmodern or late modernity, while relegating the notion of social structures and their factuality to theoretical pre-history). The smallest, lowest-level item of social life is not necessarily the "hardest" and most consequential reality, even less, the only one. Social structures of the meso- or macroscopic level can be more "objective" - notwithstanding the fact that they are socially constructed - in channelling people's behaviour and life-courses, although they may leave considerable leeway for variability (this might be called a structural definition of behavioural contingency). For instance, standardization exists on the intermediate level of precision and not on the smallest and most precise scale.

Agency is not only related to the question of individual autonomy with respect to

structural constraints (Settersten and Gannon 2005; Marshall and Clarke 2010), but also to the discussion of the *explanatory status of values, identities, stereotypes* and other cultural elements. Not all demonstrations of the less-than-perfect correlation of structural and cultural elements (see, e.g., Pfau-Effinger, 2010, for more about the analytical interest of values with respect to welfare-state types) go far enough to prove the causal importance of values, norms or personal convictions with regard to actors' behaviour. Other studies testify that, on the individual level, they may be less of a resource for realizing individual action than for the post-hoc rationalization of such action (Ernst Stähli et al. 2009). Most likely, values cannot be treated adequately without distinguishing between individual values and those characterizing a whole society, as Lück's (2006) comparative analysis of international data shows, where national religious and gender culture weigh more heavily than that of the individual for explaining life-course variations.¹¹ He also finds that women's approval of employment for mothers with preschool children contributes positively to their effective employment, but his data do not allow us to rule out the interpretation that this acceptance is a consequence, and not a cause, of factual employment. A plausible hypothesis would be that value convictions, such as ideals of motherhood and care (Charles and Cech 2010), explain individual action in the space left by institutions for agency. In other words, the less constraining the institutional setup of a society is, the more room there will be for agency that is motivated by values, at least as long as there is no collective action to change the society's institutional framework. And, of course, the better that individuals are equipped with socially relevant resources, the easier they will find it to let their action be guided by their values. A special case is, of course, the coincidence of individual values with institutional models of normalcy, because in this particular case individuals' wishes are in conformity with institutional induction, and no discrepancy or tension should appear.

Another theoretical incentive can be attributed to our findings: that of including in our heuristic toolbox the principle of taking a close look at *indirect* and not only direct forms of institutionalization. This boils down to systematically taking into account the old sociological topic of the unintended side-effects of social arrangements. Although most sociologists interested in processes of social stabilization of behavioural

¹¹ There is no need to postulate independence between societal or institutional and individual values, but it would be unrealistic to take it to the opposite extreme and to consider them a priori as identical. Even in the case of rather high value consensus in a society, there may still be considerable interindividual variation, and it is therefore highly interesting to examine the differential impact of values on more than one systemic level.

patterns are accustomed to looking for norms and organizations that contribute in some way to such stabilization by placing a positive sanction on conformity and a negative one on nonconformity, indirect forms also exist, but are much less conspicuous. That is because these indirect side-effects tend to be overshadowed by the direct objects of institutionalization that may be very different from the targets of those side-effects. As Chafetz (1990) explicitly recognizes in her "integrated theory of (gender - RL) stability and change", indirect forms of institutionalization seem to play a particularly important role for structural doing gender. Most life-course-relevant institutions are doing gender, but very rarely directly. One may, for instance, think of schools or places of occupational training that package the disciplines or professions they teach so as to maintain their sex-typing or, more generally, institutions that are not directly geared towards gender, but function according to gendered assumptions of normalcy, thus sanctioning forms of behaviour and social relations that run counter to gender typification.

Towards a sociology of intersections

Life courses are a cross-cutting phenomenon in many respects. As a consequence, life-course scholars are forced to be disrespectful of many boundaries: boundaries between different social science disciplines,¹² and boundaries between specialized subdisciplines within them. This applies especially to those bound to specific age groups (age groups such as childhood, youth, adulthood, or old age are usually treated separately, be it in psychology, social psychology, or sociology, and not in the sense of consecutive phases with transitions between them) or to specific social fields (family, paid work, education, politics, voluntary action, informal networks etc.). As life courses cut through a great number of the social fields existing in a society, life-course sociology has to draw on most field-specific sociologies (sociology of the family, of education, of the workplace, of organizations, of age groups, of social policy, of social stratification and mobility, etc.). The boundary crossing of life-course sociology refers also to boundaries between level-specific perspectives (micro-meso-macro), boundaries between methodological communities and their typical preferences (especially in terms of quantitative vs. qualitative methodologies, but also of specific

¹² Despite some recent caveats (Mayer 2003; Settersten 2009), the study of life courses and their social construction can only be enriched if it ventures across the boundaries between disciplines interested in more or less the same object, such as life-span or developmental psychology, social history, political science (Levy et al. 2005).

techniques like event history vs. optimal matching), as well as boundaries between heuristic priorities in terms of culture vs. structure vs. agency, etc.

Therefore the study of life courses must be adept at bridging many existing gaps between the different scientific subfields, their respective communities and the concomitant epistemological blinders. Just as empirical life courses relate to multiple areas of life, their analysis potentially mobilizes multiple sociologies with their strengths and weaknesses - as modestly indicated by the many theoretical references that come together in the present volume.

Looking at our analyses from a still greater distance, a more general theoretical question should at least be mentioned. The substantial topic of cross-cutting, or more analytically the complex relationships between coexisting dimensions of social inequality (including what Blau, 1977, distinguished as inequalities vs. heterogeneities¹³), is not a new sociological theme and it would be an interesting project to review the various ways in which it has been treated in different fields of research. There is the concept of cross-cutting cleavages (Rokkan 1967), particularly important in political sociology, especially with respect to territorial collectivities. On the (inter-) individual level, there is the concept of intersection that has more recently risen to prominence in feminist theory and research (Collins 1998, Browne and Misra 2003, Walby 2012). There is also the concept of multiple participation, as conceptualized in this volume in terms of the status profile. There is furthermore the somewhat forgotten concept of status inconsistency (Lenski 1954, Stryker 1978),¹⁴ and with a view to meso- and macrosocial levels of social organization the notion of multidimensional stratification in the sociology of social stratification (Blau 1977; Levy et al. 1997); on a more methodological level, one might add the statistical interaction between various factors and its substantive interpretation. Further forms of cross-cutting or interaction might be thematized with regard to cultural or ideological phenomena, e.g., in the case of labelling and stereotyping, and their attention-channelling influence on social perception, especially in the case of the management of cognitive inconsistencies (that may be related directly to status inconsistencies) and status expectations (Meeker 1981; Berger and Zelditch 1985), etc.

The basic question here is how to conceptualize the multidimensionality of social in-

¹³ It may be interesting to remember that this distinction appears as an astonishingly accurate echo of Goblots' (1967) distinction between "barrière" (boundary) and "niveau" (level).

¹⁴ Since Blalock's (1966) methodological criticism, this concept has probably been too readily dispensed with (Slomczynski 1989).

equality with special attention to discrimination and mechanisms of social closure. Different dimensions of inequality can reinforce each other's effects or, on the contrary, weaken or even neutralize them. The former is theoretically the case if such dimensions are positively correlated, because in this situation the privileges and discriminations each of them implies cumulate; the practical examples of multiple or cumulated discrimination discussed under the heading of intersection belong largely to this kind of situation. The latter is the case if cleavages are cross-cutting or more precisely if the dimensions are correlated negatively, because then a minor position with respect to one of them goes along with a senior position on the other; this is the main reason for the tenet of political sociology stating that cross-cutting cleavages - such as the relevant cleavages between regions in Swiss political history - produce less conflict than cumulative ones.¹⁵ Beyond reinforcement or counterbalancing, the coexistence of several socially relevant dimensions of inequality will also complexify the life situations structured by them, including on the level of their cultural structuration and on that of their subjective experience, a topic often discussed under the heading of intersectionality.

More generally, we should be aware that relations between dimensions of inequality are likely to be complexified by unequal weight or social importance of those dimensions - and this may well be correlated with an analogous observation on the individual level (status dominance or master statuses). According to our analyses, two axes of differentiation, gender and stratification, appear to be at the same time closely intertwined and of similar weight in the fashioning of life courses. Other lines of discrimination, especially ethnicity or civic status (race may be the relevant term in other countries), can certainly not be said to be irrelevant, but their working seems less complex as they engage more directly with mechanisms of inequality, thus rendering classical ways of mobility more difficult for the discriminated categories. So this axis of inequality does not seem to completely intersect with the other two, but rather to intervene mainly in the working of one of them, i.e., social stratification.¹⁶ A general hypothesis - not so much as an image of reality than as an incentive for research -

¹⁵ A third logical case is non-correlation of relevant cleavages, in which case each dimension of inequality would stand for itself in a series of separate social hierarchies, without direct relationships with each other. This case, however, seems to be purely theoretical because non-correlation of relevant cleavages is virtually inexistent, and need not concern us further.

¹⁶ In this respect, however, it may well be that Switzerland is something of an outlier. It would certainly be wrong to pretend that there is no cleavage between the Swiss and the non-Swiss with respect to the accessibility of major social criteria of status, but several studies show that the effects of ethnic or national origin tend to disappear in the second or third generation of immigrants, especially with respect to educational achievement (e.g., Suter et al. 2008); however, for a strong demonstration of origin-based job discrimination, see Fibbi et al. 2003.

could be that most dimensions of discrimination intervene as supplementary factors facilitating or making more difficult or even impossible persons' favourable placement and mobility in the existing system social stratification (this insight also shows up in Yuval-Davis', 2011, proposition to merge intersectionality and stratification analysis). Thus, an important - but certainly not exhaustive - part of gender discrimination takes the form of higher barriers for women than for men against attainment of high status in education, occupation, income, or political power, i.e. in dimensions of general social stratification, and the same holds largely for other dimensions of social discrimination - some of which are even politically recognized as such (for example, article 13 of the European Union's Amsterdam Treaty mentions gender, race and ethnicity, handicap, age, religion, and sexual orientation). In this perspective, discrimination appears largely as an instrument of social closure assuring the position of privileged categories (Parkin 1974; Murphy 1988; Cyba 1993). Such a larger perspective will not necessarily solve all puzzles of recent debates about intersectionality (see, e.g., the six dilemmas elaborated by Walby 2012), which are probably the most lively arena of theorizing in this area, but it may help inform them by suggesting an intimate relationship between "class" or stratification in general and "categorical" membership, respecting most of Walby's theoretical propositions (distinguish levels of social organization, especially not confusing the individual, the institutional, the national and the international, distinguishing representations or cultural from structural factors and these from agency, etc.).

Our results do not allow us to go beyond conjectures on these larger questions, but they underscore the caveat that one should be especially wary of international generalization because the social construction and institutional treatment of such dimensions of inequality and discrimination is likely to be to a large extent specific to national contexts and the historical development of their system of social inequalities.

The heuristic paradigm of the life course, composed of a few sensitizing principles as proposed by Elder, has proved to be fruitful and probably adequate for the diversity of sociological resources that are necessary to study the multiple aspects of factual life courses and also to initially mobilize the rather diverse scientific traditions in this field of research. We feel that it is time to try to build a more formal sociological theory of life courses, and the editors and contributors of this volume would be happy if their ventures in that direction encouraged bolder advances in theory building on the

unfolding of social inequalities through individual lives.