Divergent Patterns of De-standardisation - Education and the Family Life Course in Seven European Countries

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Research on changing families, fertility and life transitions has established a major shift in life course patterns in European countries throughout the 2nd half of the 20th century. Initially, the post-war period of economic growth and mass prosperity had fostered highly standardised life courses, marked by stable male employment patterns and a predominant nuclear family structure – the latter being characterised by early marriages, low divorce rates, and high levels of fertility. However, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed a sharp trend reversal, i.e., younger cohorts delayed marriage and family formation, and experienced more heterogeneous living arrangements. Two different theoretical approaches are at hand to explain the corresponding changes in demographic behaviour. On the one hand, it is suggested by 2nd demographic transition theory that processes of value change and individualisation stimulated a radical change in demographic behaviour. On the other hand, it is argued that, in particular since the 1990s, increasing levels of economic insecurity – fuelled by globalisation processes, labour market restructuring, and the recent economic recession in Europe – have impelled a delay in family formation. While both theoretical approaches suggest increasing trends of postponement of life transitions, as well as more discontinuous life course patterns for more recent birth cohorts, they differ with respect to the question which social groups push forward the changes in demographic behaviour described above. While 2nd demographic transition theory suggests that the higher educated, in particular women, are the driving forces behind changes in demographic behaviour, accounts of increasing economic uncertainty rather suggest that it is the lower educated which push forward non-traditional patterns of demographic behaviour (e.g. McLanahan 2004).

With regards to life course patterns, it is argued that the changes in demographic behaviour described above result in more disorderly life courses. These patterns have been described in terms of increasing *de-standardisation* (Brückner & Mayer 2005; Elzinga & Liefbroer 2007). In particular, research has identified the rise of cohabitation and non-marital fertility as major factors stipulating life course de-standardisation. However, studies on changes in family life courses have so far mainly relied on the analysis of life transitions and events. Only recently, more complex patterns and sequences have been addressed by empirical research (for example Robette 2010, Anyadike-Danes & McVicar 2010).

We add to this line of research by explicitly asking how patterns of life course de-standardisation relate to individual resources, in particular *educational status*. While previous research has shown that education is a major factor that differentiates demographic

behaviour, it is less clear, which social strata push on *processes of de-standardisation* in family life courses. Against this background, we focus on the question, whether such processes are more advanced among the *higher* or the *lower educated* strata.

We use data from seven Europeans countries, covering distinct socio-political systems and countries with different economic development from Northern, Western, Central and Eastern Europe. The countries included in our study are Norway, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Estonia and Hungary. We use nationally representative data from the Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS) for respondents born between 1935 and 1969. For Germany, due to limitations with respect to the data quality of the German GGS, we use data from National Educational Panel Survey (NEPS) which provides comparable information for respondents born between 1940 and 1974. In sum, our analyses rest on 70228 respondents. By applying methods of sequence analysis, we compare cohort-specific patterns of family formation between the respondents' 15th and 35th birthday. On a country-specific level, we analyse (a) the dominant sequences of family life courses and (b) the degree of de-standardisation as measured by Optimal Matching, separately for lower, medium and highly educated women and men. We distinguish the three dimensions marriage (not married vs. married), cohabitation with partner (single vs. cohabiting) and fertility (childless vs. with children), and we use the ISCED classification to group the respondents according to their level of general education.

Applying Optimal Matching Analysis (OMA) to analyse developments on a cohort basis leads to several methodological problems. Most important of all, OMA is usually the basis to identify clusters of respondents. One possibility to analyse de-standardisation of life courses is to evaluate the quality of the cluster solutions for different numbers of clusters and cohorts (Elzinga & Studer, 2013). This approach relies on an interpretation of de-standardisation as a process replacing one dominant life course by a variety of life course patterns. With regards to life courses, this approach is questionable, because life courses often rather form a continuum than categorical groups (Halpin 2010). Therefore, more recent definitions of standardisation and de-standardisation relate to parallel processes in more than one dimension, e.g. the uniformity of (a) the timing and (b) the prevalence of events as well as the duration of episodes (Brückner & Mayer 2005). The first aspect refers to the time-span in which life transitions are experienced, i.e. differences between birth cohorts regarding the variety of timing of specific events and transitions. If the variety of timing decreases, life courses are interpreted as getting more standardised. The latter aspect refers to the share of respondents within a group, which experience a specific event. Life courses are defined as perfectly standardised, if for example all cohort members marry, and less standardised, when marriage is only observed in parts of a cohort.

Against this background, we use simple measures of sequence dissimilarity to analyse changes in different life course dimensions. More specifically, we separate the two main operations used in Optimal Matching Analysis: To analyse the timing of events, deletions are used, because they preserve timing, but alter events. To analyse the prevalance of events, substitutions are used, because they alter timing, but preserve events (Lesnard 2006, 2008). The first strategy is implemented to analyse the longest common subsequence of each pair of sequences, e.g. the common structure of the life courses. The latter strategy is used to analyse the share of age points, at which respondents experience the same life course state. In order to compare events between cohorts and countries and to account for the fact that grouping maybe an inadequate way to describe diverse life course patterns (see above), we analyse the mean dissimilarity of cohorts. This also allows a straight-forward interpretation of results.

Even though the empirical results point at several country-specific patterns, a dominant pattern of change can be extracted for the majority of countries. In general, we find that life courses of the lower educated have become more de-standardised than those of the higher educated strata. This is true for both men and women, and for both aspects of de-standardisation (timing and prevalance of events). The developmental patterns differ between countries, however the gap between lower and higher educated respondents increases in all countries under consideration.

In France, Norway, Russia, Hungary and Estonia, de-standardisation affects lower and higher educated groups with different intensity: It is much stronger (or faster) among lower educated men and women. The same pattern is found among Italian women. Among Italian men, de-standardisation only affects the lower educated, while life courses of the higher educated have even become more standardised. In Germany, changes are of much lower intensity and life courses are standardising in all groups. Germany is the only country, in which the educational gap is diminishing.

Taken together, our analysis provides evidence that similar trends in family life course patterns can be depicted in different European regions. However, country-specific divergences point to the necessity to go beyond general hypotheses that focus on long-term trends in modern (and post-modern) life course change, and to take into account more specific institutional features (e.g. welfare state policies shaping family behaviour). Most interestingly, we find evidence that a new standard of family formation is emerging among the higher educated in Germany, France and Norway, which consists of married cohabitation with a prior trial phase of unmarried cohabitation and subsequent family formation. Against that, in most of the countries examined, among lower educated men and women, a greater variety of different paths has evolved.

In the Central and Eastern European countries examined, as well as Italy, a traditional standard life course pattern (marriage and cohabitation starting at same time, followed by fertility) is still dominant. In the former Communist countries, traditional life courses remain more common among higher than among lower educated respondents. In Italy, on the other hand, the share of respondents following a traditional life course is higher among the lower educated, while higher educated men and women are more likely not to have (yet) entered the phase of family formation at all.

Relating to the theoretical discussion we touched above, our results suggest that, for the countries under consideration, processes of de-standardisation are to a lesser extend fostered by value change and a process of individualisation of life styles, and much more by social deprivation and failure to establish stable family trajectories among lower social strata. The higher educated members of the more recent birth cohorts more likely follow a new standard life course pattern in terms of sequence and prevalence of events, while life courses of the lower educated strata have become more diverse with regards to these aspects. The gap between the two groups increases in all countries, in most cases because life courses of the lower educated have become more de-standardised than those of higher educated men and women.

Literature

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