

**Linking Life Courses, Work, and the Family: Theorizing  
a not so Visible Nexus between Women and Men<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** Is there a theoretical link between the gendering of life courses, worklife, and family participation? Is the "primary group" family to be considered part of the social structure? Is it passively exposed to its influences without any autonomy, is it rather an exclave from it, or is it an indispensable focus for understanding the social positioning of women and men? Most sociological analyses of *social stratification*, with their primary orientation on occupation, view the family - if they consider it at all - as hardly more than an alternative sampling unit, or at best as a rather secondary individual status variable ("marital status"). Conversely, *family sociology* pays more attention to social stratification, but here again, only few theoretical attempts focus the relationship between family and stratification. *Life course research*, if it is not practiced as an extension of the status attainment paradigm, has a bias similar to that of stratification research: the family is largely approached as a women's (problem) area, irrelevant to men's trajectories. In or-

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der to overcome the epistemological limitations imposed by the traditional separation of these fields of inquiry, our contribution offers an institution-oriented attempt at linking the dynamics of life courses, family, work participation and gender. Not only interacting individuals are doing gender, but also institutions.

**Résumé:** Y a-t-il une relation entre la sexuation des parcours de vie, la vie professionnelle, et la participation familiale? La famille, groupe primaire par excellence, fait-elle partie de la structure sociale? Est-elle soumise passivement, sans autonomie aux influences de cette dernière, en est-elle plutôt un exclave, ou est-elle au contraire un carrefour indispensable à la compréhension du positionnement social des femmes et des hommes? La majorité des analyses de la *stratification sociale*, orientées prioritairement sur l'activité professionnelle, ne confèrent à la famille - pour autant qu'elle la considèrent - guère plus qu'un statut d'unité d'échantillonnage alternative, ou éventuellement celui d'un statut individuel plutôt secondaire ("statut marital"). De son côté, la sociologie de la *famille* est plus attentive aux relations entre famille et stratification sociale, mais là encore, les tentatives de théoriser leur rapport sont rares. Les études des *parcours de vie*, quand elles ne se limitent pas au paradigme de l'acquisition de statut, sont biaisées d'une manière semblable aux analyses de la stratification: elles considèrent la famille avant tout comme domaine féminin, sans incidences du côté masculin. Afin de dépasser les limites épistémologiques inhérentes aux séparations conventionnelles entre ces domaines de recherche, notre contribution propose une approche focalisée sur le niveau institutionnel des connexions entre parcours de vie, fa-

mille, participation professionnelle et genre. Il n'y a pas que les acteurs individuels qui pratiquent le "doing gender", les institutions font de même.

### I. Sociology: Looking at the "in-between"

Most sociologists would agree that sociology is mainly about social relationships and their forms, and that such relationships exist not only between individuals, but also between social systems, sectors, groups, etc. Sociology's most general explanatory strategy could even be described as trying to find the reasons for the actors' social behavior not within them, but "around" them: in the social relations and institutional arrangements that frame their practical situations.

However, this postulate encounters often decisive limitations, largely because of the social organization of sociology itself. Most sociologists are specialists of more or less traditionally defined areas: of the family, of international inequalities, of deviance, of the economy, of gender, of organizations, etc. Sociology can explain this state of affairs, but hardly justify it.<sup>2</sup> Typically, adult members of actual societies are members of a multitude of social fields, with different logics and structures. They have to cope with their multiple participations and with the conflicts and everyday problems they entail. How are we to understand the complexities of the actors' life-management if we con-

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<sup>2</sup> There is no room to engage here in a serious sociology of knowledge type discussion about the reasons for this state of affairs, but two such hypotheses come swiftly to mind. The first would be that sociological specialization and endogenistic tendencies merely reflect a cultural trend of social perception and ideology existing in society at large. A second one may be less glorious, but sociologically no less sound: specialization can be seen as a result of corporatist strategies of closure, much as in other areas of the labor market.

tinue to look at them from partial points of view - now in a family perspective, now in a social equality perspective, now in a socialization perspective?

## **II. "Looking into..." - only part of the story**

While gender studies today covers virtually all areas and disciplines, we feel that three fields are especially concerned and mobilized in a gender perspective - and that all of them are obfuscated to a considerable extent by such conventional limitations. The three fields are: social stratification, family, and the life course.<sup>3</sup> Each of these fields has developed its own rich conceptual tools and perspectives - but their potential synergy is not really realized, their combination seems to put together a series of blind spots rather than complementary aspects of the same problem. We shall briefly sketch a critical and, of course, selective overview of these three fields, highlighting some of the limitations we have in mind, and accepting the possible charge of being superficial.<sup>4</sup> After that, we shall present some empirical findings from German studies and place them within a conceptual model that helps to break up these limitations, and to develop a more integrated, if complex, approach.

### **a. Stratification research**

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<sup>3</sup> There are of course many other fields that could be discussed in the same vein, but we feel that these three are both particularly crucial and particularly handicapped by such limitations, clearly more than, e.g., labor market research.

<sup>4</sup> It is obviously impossible to do justice in a few paragraphs to such broad and well-established fields of research with all their diversity. Our intent is more modest: to highlight some major features that we, as critical insiders, see as particularly problematic.

*Stratification research*, after having for a long time marginalized gender as an uninteresting or secondary variable (most notoriously so in classical Marxist approaches), or having so to say "controlled" it by studying only men, has recently come to treat classical inequalities between men and women, using sex as either an analytical or a control variable in the study of interactions between achieved and ascribed status variables supposed to measure investments and rewards in a competitive process of mobility-striving by individual actors. Gender has thus been introduced into the status attainment paradigm, but none of the classical traditions of stratification theory, be it Marxist, functionalist, or Weberian, has integrated gender among its basic concepts. Gender differences, measured under the form of different values of status variables for men and women (mostly income, sometimes education), are mainly treated as indicators of direct or indirect discrimination. However, if these differences consist in differential participation in social fields such as the economy, they tend rather not to be treated, because lack of participation means lack of status in or from the field in question (mostly paid work), hence lack of information (missing values). While the male part of a general sample is relatively representative for stratification and mobility analyses, the female part is typically not, at least for many countries (Maruani, 1993), because of systematic variations of women's professional activity with the stages of their life courses. So, only few men, but many women disappear from analyses through what we might call the missing values trap. An intense debate has developed, especially in Great Britain, about whether individuals or rather families (or couples) are the proper unit of analysis (Crompton, 1986). The main practical issue of the debate is the question of how to ascertain

the class status of married women who are not in the labor force: if individuals are the units of analysis, these women are excluded on rather technical grounds, if families are the units, they are given the status of their husbands. This debate has led to quite controversial positions, but it has contributed little to the theoretical clarification of the link between individuals and families, especially when all individuals are to be considered, be they members of families or not.<sup>5</sup>

As a matter of fact, to the extent that family participation prevents women from participating in the labor force, it shoves them into another social field, studied by another sociological specialty, and makes them drop out of the stratification problem. As this "siphoning off" does not regularly happen to men, at least not to employed men, they are the main stuff of stratification analysis. Symmetrically and contrary to women, they appear as not being affected by the family.

#### **b. Family research**

While stratification is often analyzed through the situation of men, the *family* appears to be mainly a woman's problem, although most of the family households are equally populated by men and women. More than stratification research, family sociology seems to have developed in two divergent streams. The mainstream has grown out of and partially gone beyond the functionalist paradigm, as it has been strongly influenced by social-psychological and system-theoretical perspectives. In the process, questions of

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<sup>5</sup> Retired and unemployed persons, male and female, pose a theoretically similar problem. Curiously enough, as far as we know, these three situations are hardly ever compared in these discussions.

gender inequality have tended to be diluted as the systemic perspective relies heavily on the system as a whole and the adequate solution of its problems of functioning without considering the sex of the performers of specific tasks. To paraphrase the resulting heuristic attitude, the basic question is not so much whether it is the man or the woman who decides, than whether the important decisions are taken at all. There may also be more technical reasons related to the difficulty of adequately measuring classical dimensions of gender inequality, such as power in the family. It is true that this is an area with few methodological advances since the first critical appraisals published in the late 1960's, including the difficult question of how to identify and weigh different "resources" or status contributions that may affect the structure of intrafamilial relationships (Safilios-Rothschild, 1969; Szinovacz, 1987). Feminist considerations have stimulated a second stream of research, maybe more systematically centered on the differential distribution of various activities among the partners than on power (Bielby, 1999), but they do not yet seem to really influence the mainstream (Chafetz, 1997; Fox and Murry 2000). The family tends to be treated as a special social space of rather informal nature, principally structured by the two adult partners (if there are two of them), also as a site of personal experimentation when studying non-traditional forms of cohabitation. Men and women living together in a family are considered as exchanging actors, tied together in a relationship that is largely negotiable between them; they are the primary, if not only, autonomous actors to construct their family reality (Berger and Kellner, 1964). Discrimination takes place, if at all, outside the family. Structural contradictions such as the problem of "loving one's enemy" (Firestone, 1970) do not seem to

belong to the prevailing research paradigm in this field. Thus, the family tends to be seen as a relatively insulated social unit whose internal structure results mainly from the negotiated action of its adult members, i.e., in more abstract terms, from endogenous factors.

### **c. Life course research**

Life course research is certainly the most recent and least consolidated of the three fields we have singled out. This could be a reason for research in this area to be less respectful of boundaries between established specialties. Nevertheless, concerning gender, there are some signs of short-sightedness that have already become somewhat traditional. The main problem in this perspective is probably the tendency to analyze individual life courses as simple sequences of stages, framed and standardized by three major social institutions that structure three subsequent life stages, i.e., education -> economic work -> retirement (Kohli, 1985), among which there exist rules of sequential positional equivalence. Much as in the case of mobility analysis, *male* life courses largely correspond to this model as male professional careers are normally not influenced by imperatives of other fields of participation. The idea that this may be so because most of them have a wife who takes care of family work, at least to the extent that its execution by the man would interfere with his occupation, does generally not appear in interpretations of male life courses. In *female* life courses, occupation appears frequently as a secondary activity that remains subordinated to the imperatives of family life and its daily management - so here

again, family is treated as a female problem, seemingly adding nothing to the understanding of male careers. Put in more technical terms: family is a field of dependent variables if looked at from the perspective of men, paid work is a field of dependent variables if looked at from the perspective of women.<sup>6</sup> In this truncated logic, family variables need not be taken into account if (men's) mobility is to be analyzed, and in principle, an analogous reasoning could hold for neglecting women's paid work if the focus is on their family activities.

### III. Inside vs. outside, norms vs. structure

We have outlined a brief and selective panorama of the three areas we find particularly crucial and of some questionable implications and assumptions of the dominating views in them. Our arguments underscore the consequence of insufficient gender sensitivity that can be found in these research traditions (Eichler, 1988; Krüger, 1997). Moreover, they have in common a more general and problematic tendency towards what we could call "epistemological endogenism": the tendency to explain social phenomena not so much by their context and their interactions with it, but by forces and relationships inside of them.<sup>7</sup>

There are of course serious hypotheses and theoretical perspectives that back up such tendencies. Let us mention two widely discussed examples. On a general level, one immediately thinks of the theoretical work of Luhmann (1995) who came to insist vigor-

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<sup>6</sup> It must be added that this is only partly true. Women's labor force participation while living in a family clearly varies, also as a function of the family life cycle, while men's does not (Levy et al. 1997). But as Born et al. (1996) have shown for Germany, the labor market conditions of specific female occupations exert an additional and very important influence.

<sup>7</sup> This invented term enables us to treat epistemological or heuristic problems of essentialism also in cases where the relevant units are not individual persons.

ously on the independence of social subsystems with respect to each other, guided, among others, by the principle of autopoiesis. On a more historical level, we should mention the notion of 'second modernization' and individualization put forward by Beck (1986) that postulates a decisively diminished influence (structuring power on practical behavior of actors) of traditional social structures. Our purpose is not to enter into a general debate about the validity of such theses; we would rather like to formulate the theoretical results of empirical explorations of some practical instances of this general problem.

To illustrate our arguments, we shall discuss two significant results we selected from Helga Krüger's recent studies at the Center of Life Course Research at the University of Bremen, Germany. The first one refers to theories which explain patterns of female labor market participation as effects of personal options and choices; the second one deals with intrafamilial decision making about how to combine family and employment.

#### **a. Patterns of female labor market participation**

Widespread theoretical approaches (see the controversy between Crompton and Harris, 1998; and Hakim, 1998) explain modes of female labor market participation as effects of individual choices between three models of female life course arrangements: a) full-time employment, also during motherhood; b) part-time employment in order to reconcile family and paid work; c) the family-dominated model, e. g., leaving paid work when starting a family or raising children. Even if there are real choices, they are bound to take into account actual constraints and opportunities,

especially concerning the considered occupational activity. Let us have a brief empirical look into this question.

A cohort analysis of the life course patterns of 2130 women in Germany who had finished their vocational training in 1960, 1970 and 1980 in the ten most frequent qualified female occupations<sup>8</sup> and who were surveyed in 1997 shows that - with only little variation between the three cohorts - the occupations determined to a great extent who would continue their employment career within the fields trained for (more than 50% in the five categories on the left in fig. 1), and who would change to other fields, mostly with a loss of qualification and income (less than 50% in the five categories on the right in fig. 1).

(Fig. 1 about here)

These occupation-specific transitions into down-grading careers cannot be fully explained by individual full-time or part-time options, as these two modes are quite equally distributed over the ten occupational fields under study (fig. 2, 3), even if the general level of part-time work is higher among women working in other occupations than those for which they have been trained (mean percentages: 37.1% as against 25.1%). The critical features are related to the occupations themselves as they constitute relatively segregated labor markets, characterized by highly specific profiles of demands and opportunities for staying.

(Fig. 2 and 3 about here)

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<sup>8</sup> Access to the exercise of these qualified occupations depends on formalized and certified vocational training (apprenticeship) during three years in the so-called dual system (for more detailed explanations, see Mortimer and Krüger 2000). These ten most frequent occupations account for about 70% of all apprenticeships.

It seems obvious that these outcomes cannot be sufficiently understood by referring to purely individual choices. Rather, some structural "generative grammar", beyond personal options but linked to the *type* of occupation (i.e., to occupation-specific age norms, daily work schedules, etc.), intervenes into female employment patterns, even if these jobs do not differ from each other with respect to the level of entrance qualifications they require. The usability of qualifications embedded in occupation-specific realities acts out its effects on employment patterns independently of full-time or part-time decisions. Moreover, the analysis of entry into vocational training schemes shows that in a large majority of cases, the choice between such schemes does not principally correspond to personal (or familial) preferences, but first of all to available training options and the chance to be accepted into these schemes (Born et al., 1996). So there is strong evidence for the impact of structural factors related to the various occupations and not to individual preferences.

#### **b. Intrafamilial decision making**

The well-known thesis that links the intrafamilial division of labor to norm-supported gender traditionalism (and male power) is being widely discussed under the heading of "doing gender", supposing interactional mechanisms aiming at establishing congruence between behavior, territory of action, attribution of conformity, evaluation of nonconformity, etc. A comparison of in-depth interviews about family decision making, conducted with women of about 60 years (1990) who had completed their occupational training in the late 1940's, with their spouses (1991/92) and with their adult sons and daughters (1994/95), themselves interviewed in their mid-thirties,<sup>9</sup> leads to findings that put into question the notion of cultural frames in actu, suggesting rather structural gender fixations. On the *discursive* level, we notice a remarkable switch from husband's dictatorship (older generation) to democracy (younger generation). A father's typical quote runs as follows: "A wife is a housewife: married, she has to stay at home" - and a son's: "Women's employment - I can't think of any reasons why not, only reasons for it; to get away from the children and the housework, the pension contributions, getting qualifications, staying in touch".<sup>10</sup> However, a comparison of the *employment patterns* between both generations shows the same tendency: the female patterns are characterized by interruptions, increasing part-time work (especially among daughters') and downward mobility (the latter not shown in the figures), the male ones by steady employment and upward mobility.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> All these data stem from the Bremen Family Data Set, resulting from successive, interrelated surveys between 1988 and 1996.

<sup>10</sup> For more details with respect to the empirical design and the outcomes see Krüger (2001).

<sup>11</sup> „Other activities“ are predominantly household activities for mothers and daughters, military service for the sons and fathers (for the latter mainly participation in the Second world war). There is no category of part-time work in figure 4d as in the fathers' historical working period, this mode did simply not exist for men to any significant extent. The figures also show the dramatic intergenerational increase of educational duration, for young men interrupted by their military service, and the predominantly female typification of part-time work.

(Fig. 4 a-d about here)

The difference in the employment patterns between the sexes remain surprisingly large, although the younger generation no longer reproduces traditional norms<sup>12</sup> but brings into play new calculations of the costs and benefits of various arrangements when negotiating about their family organization. While the older women had to stand up to their husbands, their sons and daughters report regretfully that the division of labor is inevitable because of limited child-care facilities, the restrictive opening hours of shops and public services, the schooling system, the care of the elderly, etc.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the change of norms, favoring gender equality, is neutralized by structural constraints that did not really change, but remained formerly hidden behind the older generation's norms.

Here again, the gender-specific outcomes of intrafamilial decision making correspond to an external "generative grammar", embedded in the German life course regime: the analysis of standardized data shows that about 70% of the interviewees underwent training for sex-typed occupations in accordance with their sex. This means for women that although they sometimes had attained higher educational qualifications than their partners, they were confronted with a lower social status in the labor force, a lack of career possibilities, and a lower market value (Teubner, 1989).<sup>14</sup> In order to establish the "best" balance between family

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<sup>12</sup> This seems to be the case at least on the level of explicit discourse. Personal identities and ensuing normative conviction may remain more sex-typed than actual political correctness admits - and also be more relevant to practical behavior. Nevertheless, this does not cancel the importance of the distinction between personal values and structural incentives.

<sup>13</sup> This reflects the practical situation in Germany, to which we have to add the better salaries for men. We shall presently return to the question of national differences.

<sup>14</sup> A typical quote within this context was: "She doesn't earn that much - and probably won't in the future. But me ... quite promising, although not certain".

and employment commitments, it seems rational that women overwhelmingly agree to reduce their paid work or to quit the labor market, at least temporarily.

We may conclude that, at least in Germany and Switzerland,<sup>15</sup> the segmentations of vocational training and of the labor market interact with the institutions surrounding the family. This institutional interaction is "doing gender", or more precisely reproduces gendered life course differences, acted out through the structural background of our societies, as much as do individual interactants. Norms from yesterday, having informed interactions from yesterday, have become structures of today, i.e., they have become built into the social order and are being reproduced as part and parcel of it, independently of or even against the changed normative preferences of actually cohabiting men and women.

### **c. Societal life course regimes?**

These findings refer to German realities: in the first case to the German occupational structure, in the second to gendered labor market resources (formal vocational training), to the differential functioning of the labor markets themselves, and to family arrangements that have to manage the articulation between family members and connected institutional demands. Both cases point to the fact that an analysis that is limited to options and decisions might just capture the level of performances, e.g. the personal compromises in dealing with institutional constraints outside the family, but fatally miss the institutions' doing gender.

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<sup>15</sup> Morris (1990) reaches the same conclusions on the basis of American and British studies.

Given the institutional differences between countries and what we can call their specific life course regimes, we have to expect some - variable - degree of life course typification or standardization, and moreover typical international differences in various parameters of life courses. Somewhat speculatively, but with some first and still shaky empirical backing (Korpi 2000, Mayer 2001), we may add that our empirical examples reflect what may be called the Germanic life course regime, comprising Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Other institutional histories and profiles lead to different life course regimes: we may distinguish a Scandinavian (social-democratic egalitarian), an Anglo-Saxon (liberal market-oriented), and a Southern-European (familistic) regime. Comparative research in this area is only beginning; we hope to encourage such research with our contribution.

Our reasoning and empirical illustrations point out the necessity of integrating elements from different, traditionally separated fields of research in order to adequately analyze the mechanisms at work in the social (but not only cultural) construction of male and female life courses. In the following section, we propose an abstract conceptual model that integrates what we consider to be the most important elements for a gender-sensitive and non-reductionist research perspective.

#### **IV. A model to capture life-course complexity**

##### **a. Sequential and simultaneous social participation**

Sociological literature has long recognized that the social location of adult persons in modern societies typically takes the form of multiple participation, i.e., participation in several

social fields at a time. Simmel (1908) already pinpointed the multiple "social circles" in which members of modern societies participate. Merton (1968) speaks of status and role sets with respect to the same feature of modern actors' social integration. For terminological reasons, we prefer the term participation profiles. Peoples' movements through social space - i.e., their life course defined in a structural perspective - can be analyzed as their specific sequence of participation profiles. Several aspects of these profiles vary typically or atypically through individuals' life courses; positional changes (upward or downward mobility in a social field), as well as participational changes (transitions or, more exactly, entries into and exits from social fields). This conceptualization points to a dimension of social integration rarely considered in relation with the other aspects: the structural scope of an individual's participation profile which can be partly identified with the number of participations, partly also with the scope of the fields in which one participates. A typical, although far from exclusive pattern across the life course is an initial enlargement of that scope during or after adolescence, some variations during most of adult life, and its shrinking beginning with retirement ("third age").

More systematically, at each moment of a life course, three aspects of participation profiles can be distinguished: the various *participations* belonging to an individual profile, the *positions* occupied by this individual in the fields in which she or he participates, and the *resources* the person has acquired during her/his life. All three aspects combine structural and cultural components with which the person has to cope. A not so obvious part of the resource aspect that is particularly important with

respect to the life course concerns the sex-typing of occupational training and of labor market positioning. The role counterpart of the structural aspect underscored by the term "position" is more conventional, but needs to be explicitly mentioned (with all its background of potential negotiation, interpretation and transformation). By adopting this conceptualization, we do not propose a deterministic perspective.<sup>16</sup> We simply try to construct a heuristic frame of reference that helps us maintain an equilibrated analysis of the relevant aspects of life course differentiation.

Not all the participations in a profile have the same factual and normative importance, some of them weigh heavier than others - and there is an important sex-specificity in this. Empirically, we are confronted with a sex-specific weighting of the participations included in individuals' profiles, especially with respect to the relative importance of family and occupational work. As we have shown, this difference can nowadays no longer be attributed to purely individual convictions and preferences (we leave open the question of whether it has ever been adequate to see it that way). This suggests that there is some form of standardization at work which requires institutional analysis.

#### **b. Institutional framing**

Our main hypothesis is that life courses are institutionalized on both cultural and structural levels. On the one hand, there are what Neugarten et al. (1965) called age norms - social expectations about what participations should roughly be left or, con-

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<sup>16</sup> We prefer an approach based on a dialectic vision of structure and agency of which an early and still basic formulation was proposed by Berger and Luckmann 1966.

versely, taken up at which age, and in what order. Some of these norms may be rather vague and largely informal, such as whether you should marry, when, and how many children you should have. Others may be rather strongly imposed, such as age barriers for educational certification or professional promotion, or even legally fixed, e.g., the minimum age for marriage or paid work (prohibition of children's work), or retirement age. An equally important area of normative framing is that of gender ideologies. However, if the only forms of life course institutionalization were cultural, one would expect a much larger range of actually practiced forms of life or of social integration (participation profiles) than what we observe in most postindustrial countries. We hypothesize that one of the reasons for the resilience of more or less traditional forms of familial cohabitation is the force of additional, structural or organizational forms of life course institutionalization.

In this respect, we can distinguish three ways of institutional functioning: sequential, simultaneous or parallel, and adjacent. They are mostly embodied in different institutional sectors, but it seems to us more relevant to base the distinction on a functional rather than on a structural criterion.

By *sequential institutionalization* we designate types of organizational functioning that process individuals from one standard period of the life course to another. Here, we think above all of the three institutional sectors of education, paid work and retirement which are certainly the ones most systematically discussed in life course research. To varying extents, according to a country's specific institutional regime, these sectors function in ways that channel individuals from participation in one of

them to the next; the individuals' structural location in a subsequent sector depends, again to varying degrees, on their location in the preceding one, this positional carry-over being itself institutionally regulated.<sup>17</sup>

The sequential institutionalization of life courses links institutions in a gender-specific way. The empirical findings presented above (as well as others) point out that especially in the Germanic life course regime, the division of labor between the partners in a couple is preconditioned *before* a concrete family is even founded: by gender-specific resources acquired in a gendered system of vocational training and an ensuing positioning within the gendered labor market. Very little research has yet been done which relates the division of labor *within* the family to vocational training and labor market allocations. In other countries we might find different ways of setting markers for life course differences by institutions in which people typically participate before creating a family, the interesting fact is that in order to understand family arrangements we have to search (also) for structural channeling by institutions other than the family itself, i.e., we have to look beyond the family.

The two other types of life course institutionalization are much less prominent in the current literature on life course analysis than they should be, as we hope to show.

By *simultaneous (or parallel) institutionalization* we single out forms of institutional functioning that imply or even ask for

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<sup>17</sup> These regulations vary enormously between countries, they are one of the main ingredients of a specific society's institutional life course regime. There are countries with highly institutionalized definitions of equivalence between educational certificates and ranges of occupational positions, like Germany, Austria, and - to a somewhat lesser extent - Switzerland. Others operate by firm-specific regulation systems, by selective linking arrangements between certain educational institutions and firms, or still other kinds of regulation; for recent comparisons, see Culpepper and Finegold 1999, Müller and Shavit 1997.

simultaneous instead of sequential participation. By far the most important practical instance of this type of functioning is the simultaneity of family and occupational participation. It is not quite commonplace in the sociological literature to consider the family as an organizational form that participates fully in the institutionalization of life courses, along with the labor market and other differentiated social sectors. In part, this is likely to be so because of the erroneous equation of family and women, but not men. Partly, it may also be the case because we are not used to put the primary group family on the same analytical level of social structures as meso- or macro-social sectors like the ones we just mentioned. However, giving this analytical status to the family is imperative if we are to take into account not only the different ways the institutional structure of modern societies standardizes individual life courses, but also the gender differentiation operated by this standardization, and the fact that family life ties together the life courses of the family members in such a way that they cannot be fully understood as individual trajectories only. Life courses of family members are to be seen as "coupled" or linked among each other.

Finally, we use the term *adjacent institutionalization* for the functioning of all those institutions, some private, others state-run, that offer external alternatives to the classical, "interiorized" accomplishment of household and family work by its members, or, conversely, put constraints on a family's working. This type of functioning mainly concerns institutional sectors (and the individual organizations of which they are composed) with which families, but for many of them also individuals living alone, have to interact in order to live and function normally in

their everyday life: shops, public administration, schools, transportation services, etc. Families with school-children are socially tied to the school system not only with respect to what happens to their children in terms of schooling and educational success, but also in terms of their time management which is entirely different according to whether their children are taken care of during a whole working day or whether one person is continually needed to see a child to school, then the second one, then fetch the first one back, feed them, help with or supervise homework, etc. Paid work on a full-time basis for both parents becomes extremely difficult in the latter case, and in such an institutional context, parents most frequently choose to diminish or even completely abandon the mother's, not the father's, occupational activity, for all "good" reasons one can easily imagine.

This view leads deep into the analysis of the articulations between institutions. Institutional logics not only include the labor market, the family and their linkages, but also the arrangements of costs and schedules of kindergartens and schools, of care-giving institutions for sick and older family members, etc. These create monetary demands but also transportation needs, management and planning requirements to such an extent that Hochschild (1997) calls them producing a 'third shift' (besides those of paid employment and housework). They all have to be taken into consideration as relevant markers of life course structures between the sexes, and their interlacing suggests the gendering of family costs into monetary contributions (male) and time-consuming management (female), although the outcomes for women may become inadequate for modern times and may produce a

contradictory and conflict-laden imbalance between the sexes that puts the family (and love between the partners) at risk.

Individuals and families act not only with reference to norms and values to which they adhere, but also and maybe even more strongly so with respect to the institutional environment that structures their everyday life. Probably more strongly so because you can opt against the wishes of your friends and relatives or against one of your own values if it contradicts another one that is more important to you, but you cannot simply wish away the structural constraints embedded in your immediate context of life.

A large part of life course institutionalization, of all the three kinds we have distinguished, is not intended and direct, but unintended and secondary - and all the more effective.

Schools, the labor market, the synchronies and asynchronies of the institutionalized rhythms of social life have not been instituted with a view to stabilize specific aspects of peoples' life courses, they pursue other, commonly recognized goals. But they have side effects or unintended consequences that often have a major impact on the practical organization of everyday life. The *normalcy assumptions* that are implied by much of this institutional functioning include, e.g., the idea that most children live with people who systematically take care of them, especially parents. They also include the idea that somehow, if not each individual, at least each household can manage to gain a sufficient income by working *and* at the same time be able to participate in market society's patterns of access to everyday consumer goods and services. Even if the traditional, sex-specific assignment of various tasks may not be prominent among these institutional as-

sumptions, it is strongly reinforced by them. An individual person or a couple living together can certainly decide to get organized differently, but the way in which these normalcy assumptions are built into the regular functioning of the structural context of everyday life makes them a factual reference from which to deviate is costly in many respects.<sup>18</sup> So there is considerable, but implicit, pressure on individuals to live in family-like households, and to organize their household in a way that makes one of its adult members mainly responsible for the family's income, the other for the daily chores that maintain the family's functioning. Given cultural stereotypes, gendered identities, and gender discrimination outside the family, this pressure goes a long way to motivate couples to organize themselves according to the logic of two complementary participation profiles, the one dominated by family imperatives, the other by occupational ones, and to establish this differentiation along traditional lines of gender.

#### **IV. Feedback towards general sociology**

Our conception does not have the intention of revolutionizing the analytical tools of sociology, but of attuning them to a reality that is more complex than mostly acknowledged. We propose to redefine the notion of *master status* to summarize and identify our analytical model. The term, although reformulated, goes back to Hughes (1945) but is not yet consistently used in the literature. It serves mostly to characterize interactive differentiation between dominant and non-dominant participations or statuses (Laws,

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<sup>18</sup> This boils down to such concrete things as the differential costs of food packed in single or family portions, of holiday arrangements for singles or couples, etc., but extends also to various forms of social exclusion.

1979; Gerson, 1993). We consider it important to enlarge its theoretical meaning in order to include "doing gender" not only by culturally oriented actors and their constructive achievements, but also the various forms of meso-social institutionalization. Not only individuals do gender through their everyday performances, but also institutional structures - it is in this sense that gender can be considered to be a central feature of social structure. The different, complementary social definitions and institutional framings of male and female master statuses distinguish corresponding, sex-specific participation profiles which are characterized less by the presence or absence of specific participations (this only appears as an extreme case - complete segregation - of a more general phenomenon) than by the domination of one participation in women's profiles, of another in men's.

Our analytical model implies changing some current sociological perspectives in considering the triangle of family, gender and the life cycle:

The *family*, as an institutional arrangement that ties together two types of life courses that are differentially integrated in the social context, moves into the center of our attention, suggesting a more systematic interest in the various forms of adjacent institutionalization.

*Gender* and its institutional consolidation in the form of complementary and interdependent, sex-specific sequences of participation profiles is clearly to be considered important for women and men; contrary to an analytical tendency supported by the general thesis of post-modern individualization, the specificities of

male and female life courses can only be understood when considering their interrelatedness.

The *institutional* side of life course and gender analysis has to take into account the multiplicity of relevant institutions (including the state which we considered only implicitly) and their *interrelations*, it cannot be restricted to one purportedly principal institution (such as the economic sector), especially in the sense that life courses are typically not linear sequences of participations, but include parallel participations with different, asymmetric effects on men and women during major periods of life.

Contrary to what could be inferred by our main arguments, the scope of our approach is not limited to persons living in a couple. By way of the generalized effects of *institutional normalcy assumptions*, the institutionally anchored principle of the sex-specific master status subsumes, as already stated, not only the life courses of people living in a familial relationship, but also those of singles.

Several aspects of this conception are non-conventional: it necessitates the full integration of gender into life course analysis, it forces us to bring the family back into the institutional analysis of life courses and of their gendering, and it leads to a more complex and dynamic perspective on stratification. On a more general level, it induces a stand against analytical reductionism, be it with respect to the structural location of individuals, to the simultaneous inclusion of various institutional fields, to the consideration not only of the individual and macro-social levels of the social world, but also of the various

forms of meso-social structures, or be it with respect to the conjoint and often indirect effects of social structuration by relationships *between* fields and not only by these fields' separate internal functioning and direct effects.

These remarks highlight that gender-sensitive life course research, if properly constructed, has an especially great feedback potential for theoretical renewal in general sociology.

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