

## **What pluralization of the life course?**

### **An analysis of personal trajectories and conjugal interactions in contemporary Switzerland**

Eric Widmer, Jean Kellerhals and René Levy

Eric Widmer is associate professor of sociology, at the university of Lausanne, with an appointment at the Center for Life course and lifestyle studies (Pavie). His long-term interests include family relations, life course research, social norms, and social networks.

Address: Université de Lausanne. Centre PAVIE, Bâtiment Provence, 1015 Lausanne, Switzerland. Email : [eric.widmer@pavie.unil.ch](mailto:eric.widmer@pavie.unil.ch)

Jean Kellerhals is full professor of sociology at the University of Geneva. He has contributed to various dimensions of sociological family research, including conjugal and family functioning, educational strategies within the family, kinship solidarity and distributive justice in small groups.

Address: Université de Genève. Faculté SES. Département de Sociologie. Boulevard du Pont d'Arve, 40. 1204 Genève. Switzerland. [Jean.kellerhals@socio.unige.ch](mailto:Jean.kellerhals@socio.unige.ch)

René Levy is full professor of sociology at the University of Lausanne. He is the director of the Center for Life course and lifestyle studies (Pavie). He has revisited various aspects of life in other research areas, especially stratification, mobility, and family dynamics, in the light of the life course. The relationship between institutional structuration and life course trajectories has been one of his major research interests.

Address: Université de Lausanne. Centre PAVIE, Bâtiment Provence, 1015 Lausanne, Switzerland. Email : [rene.levy@ias.unil.ch](mailto:rene.levy@ias.unil.ch)

Sociological research has underscored trends towards a pluralization of social life in general and, more specifically, of family and work. These two central subsystems of modern societies are hypothesized by some to have become much more heterogeneous in recent years than they ever were before; they are said to follow less recognizable patterns or models, either because of the weakening of social norms or because of the increasing structural complexity of contemporary societies. This chapter addresses the issue of the pluralization of the life course by focusing on personal trajectories (between professional and family activities) and family functioning of contemporary couples<sup>1</sup>, based on the sample of the project entitled “Social stratification, cohesion and conflict in contemporary families”. Does the highly post-industrialized context of Switzerland confirm the hypothesis that late modernity is associated with a strong diversification of work and the family and a weakening of their being socially structured? We shall see that although variability does indeed characterize personal trajectories and family functioning in Switzerland, it is rather bounded and quite strongly embedded in social structures.

### *Professional and relational dimensions of life courses in Switzerland*

What types of personal trajectories characterize individuals having lived the main part of their life course in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Switzerland? What logic underlies these types? In this regard, several hypotheses can be found in the literature that can be summarized by two pairs of contradictory statements. The first pair concerns the increasing standardization versus individualization of individual trajectories; the second pair is about the presence of a unique model of trajectories versus two models, differentiated according to gender.

The first opposition of theses is strongly connected with the debate on individualization as a corollary of the “second wave of modernization”, identified notably by authors such as Beck (1986), Giddens (1992 and 1994; Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994), and more generally by postmodern theorists (for example, Bauman, 1992). In the same vein, some authors (for example, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1994) stipulate that the process of individualization of the life course has been taking place for several decades, as a corollary of the decline of the elements of standardization. From an empirical point of view, this tendency would translate into a multiplication of professional and domestic trajectories, which would not be captured as easily as in the past by a limited number of “types of trajectories”. In contrast, Levy (1977, Levy *et al.*, 1997) and Kohli (1985, 1986) formulate the hypothesis of a standardization of life courses, through an historical process which Kohli, referring to the period ante 1968, decomposes into three modalities: a “sequentialization”, or the emergence of distinct stages following each other in a defined order, such as schooling, employment and retirement; a “chronologisation” or the establishment of a link between life course transitions and age; and finally a “biographisation” or social allocation of the responsibility of the life course to each individual. If this thesis were true, strong regularities of common traits should appear in peoples’ life courses, or even clearly profiled types of life trajectories.

The second opposition of theses concerns the extent to which life courses are gendered. The issue is of special relevance in relation to the standardization process. Some authors indeed consider that the standardization of life courses essentially carries the imprint of the occupa-

---

<sup>1</sup> Many sociological studies focus either on professional work or on family interactions. This was criticized as reifying a gender bias within scientific research. This chapter is based on the observation that professional work and the family are interrelated spheres of activity and that it is scarcely possible to understand what happens in one without taking the other into account.

tional subsystem, from which it draws its functional logic. Based on this model, one may easily assume that women's as well as men's trajectories follow a single model, where possible sex-specific variations would be only sub-variants. The thesis of sex-typed life courses, on the other hand, postulates the existence of two very distinct models of trajectories, one for each sex, which are interconnected but follow quite different logics (Levy, 1977; Becker-Schmidt, 1987; Myrdal and Klein, 1956). In its exclusive version, this thesis states moreover that differences existing within the female and male sub-populations are insignificant. Gendering of the domestic and professional fields is thus presented as the dominant factor in the orientation of trajectories which tends to level out the effects of other dimensions of the social structure.

Between the homogeneity postulated by the hypothesis of standardization, the extreme variability postulated by the hypothesis of pluralization, and the unambiguous differentiation between sexes suggested by the hypothesis of sexuation, we propose a fourth hypothesis, that of a differential impact of various profiles of social insertion. The variability of female professional insertion, at least for women living in a couple, is a fact that has been known and analyzed for a long time. One finds, among its causal factors, the social status of the couple and the education level of the woman (Reskin and Padavic, 1994). Besides these factors associated with social stratification, the arrival of the first child has an important influence on the employment of women (Held and Levy, 1974; Höpflinger, Charles and Debrunner, 1991; Klein and Lauterbach, 1994; Drobnic, 2000) i.e. a typical event belonging to the realm of the life course.

On this basis, one can hypothesize that the differences between male and female trajectories, however important they may be, depend on a variety of other social insertions that modulate the life course. In this regard, the hypothesis of the profile of insertion states that well-differentiated models of trajectories exist within male and female subpopulations, depending on the individuals' location in the social structure of Switzerland.

Similar issues were raised recently about family functioning. Researchers in the field of family interactions have been especially concerned about the problems or crises that today's couples are increasingly presumed to meet. Nevertheless, there are no studies, in Europe at least, which systematically relate these problems to the structure of conjugal relationships. Certainly, some psychological approaches have opened the way (Reiss, 1971 and 1981; Kantor and Lehr, 1975; Olson and McCubbin, 1989). However, they are mostly based on the observation of clinical populations, where the search for a solution to a crisis or an illness is of primary interest and, as a consequence, this relegates to the background the central issues of the social anchoring of domestic functioning and the representativeness of the observations.

From this point of view, two current issues have a particular centrality. A first issue concerns the pluralization of family life since the 1960s. Most scholars have addressed this issue by focusing on household structure and composition. They have acknowledged the great changes in the distribution of household types (nuclear family households, single parent households, recomposed households, etc.) in recent decades. However, this is but one approach to the issue, as those changes are likely to be the expressions of more fundamental changes in intimate interactions within families. Some recent studies on the family and intimacy indeed suggest that contemporary conjugal functioning follows a single global logic, essentially capturing the characteristics of the "modern" family as described as early as 1945 by Burgess (1960) in his ideal-type of companionship family: a union of affinity, with individuals' self-development as

a central (if not unique) function, with internal arrangements essentially based on contractual and egalitarian rules, freed from external constraints, be they institutional or relational<sup>2</sup>.

The profound demographic changes that have occurred since the 1960s seriously question the now classic opposition between the institution and the companionship models, as proposed by Burgess, in characterizing the evolution of the family from traditional practices to modernity. This opposition, and the evolutionist perspective on which it is based, had been challenged by various attempts of definition of styles or models of family interactions, based on four conceptual dimensions: the degree of autonomy of the spouses or partners within the couple; the opening of the couple toward their environment; their instrumental or expressive orientation; and the importance of negotiation in their daily functioning (Kellerhals, Troutot and Lazega, 1993). From there, various typologies were proposed that revealed the existence of a strong correlation between domestic functioning and social status, questioning the hypothesis of a general movement towards a unique model of family relationships. In particular, this was found for Switzerland (Kellerhals *et al.*, 1982; Kellerhals and Montandon, 1991; Kellerhals, Troutot and Lazega, 1993), a context in which it was observed that high economic and cultural resources corresponded to a strong emphasis on individual autonomy and on the opening of couples towards their environment; while low economic and educational resources were associated with an emphasis on traditional status, rigid norms, a priority of collective concerns over individual orientation, a relative distrust towards the environment by family members, and a quite gendered and unequal division of domestic roles and power. The issue to investigate is whether the current situation of couples supports the hypothesis of a limited set of conjugal models, grounded in the social structure, or if it confirms the hypothesis of a pluralization of conjugal relationships around a companionship model, largely disembedded from the social structure.

## 1. Data and method

The data presented in this chapter are drawn from the study “Social Stratification, Cohesion and Conflict in Contemporary Families”, a large survey of 1534 couples and families living in Switzerland. Conducted in 1998, the study’s primary goal was to examine how the subjects’ social status and position in their life course influence cohesion and conflicts in couples. The sample for the project was drawn randomly with a non-proportional stratified design based on the three major linguistic areas of Switzerland. To be included in the sample, respondents had to have been living together for a least one year; the younger partner had to be at least aged 20, and the older partner no more than 70; they had to be living in Switzerland, but neither Swiss citizenship nor formal marriage was necessary to be sampled. We used a computer-assisted telephone survey questionnaire, translated into the three major idioms of Switzerland (German, French and Italian). Data collection took place between October 1998 and January 1999. For each couple, both partners (spouses or cohabiters) were interviewed separately, giving a total number of 3068 interviews completed. For most questions, both partners had to provide an answer. Responses were weighted according to the population size of each of the

---

<sup>2</sup> The most notorious expression of such a perspective is represented by some of the latter work of Antony Giddens. In his books “Modernity and Self-identity” (1992) and “The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies” (1994), the concept of a “pure relationship”, which is an archetype, according to Giddens, of late modernity, directly or indirectly refers to several key dimensions of the companionship model of family of Burgess (1960), viz.: a focus of the relationship on the exploration of the self, the centrality of negotiation processes, a symmetry in power relationships, a weakening of the effects of external constraints on intimate relationships, etc.

three linguistic regions. This first phase included various measures of conjugal interaction, conjugal and family conflict, and conjugal quality. A detailed account of this analysis can be found in Widmer, Kellerhals and Levy (2003).

In a second phase, carried out about three months later, a self-administered retrospective questionnaire was sent to all respondents of the first wave, with the aim of collecting information about the family and professional insertion of the partners or spouses throughout their life, from the end of compulsory education until the year of their participation in the study. Every period had to be dated on a yearly basis. The response rate for this second phase was 46%, with 703 men and 717 women providing usable questionnaires. We found no significant differences between this subsample and the original sample. On the basis of the information thus gathered, we recoded all periods into eight mutually exclusive categories: periods of professional full-time activity, part-time professional activity, interruptions because of unemployment or because of problems of health (“negative interruptions”), interruptions to travel or other intentional leave of absence, etc. (“positive interruptions”), periods at home (homemaker), and periods of training (for details, see Widmer, Levy, Hammer, Pollien and Gauthier, 2003).

## 2. Results

Let us first turn to the empirical results which address the issue of pluralization of personal trajectories and conjugal functioning.

### 2.1 Professional trajectories: plural but structured

For reasons of validity, the analysis of the subsample of individuals who answered the retrospective questionnaire was restricted to those aged 30 and more, decreasing the sampled population down to 677 men and 670 women. Indeed, short life courses can slant the classification because they do not allow the identification of any clear pattern. Regular multivariate statistical techniques do not apply here, because usual measures of distance, such as the Euclidean distance, are ineffective for sequential data (Erzberger and Prein, 1997). We resorted, therefore, to using optimal matching analysis, a multivariate statistical method stemming from molecular biology (Waterman 1995; Delcher *et al.*, 1999), and which has been adapted, in several recent socio-demographic works, to the study of trajectories (Abott and Hrycak, 1990; Erzberger and Prein, 1997; Aisenbrey, 2000)<sup>3</sup>. Based on measures of distance produced by optimal matching analysis, we ran a hierarchical cluster analysis applied separately to women’s and men’s responses. We found that two groups of sequences best characterize the male trajectories. Figures 1 and 2 present the relative frequencies of each category of activity between 16 and 64 years of age for each of the two groups.

The first group of male trajectories includes very homogeneous life courses, characterized by professional full-time activity. It represents the standard life course for men, as it concerns more than 8 men out of 10. This is clearly the dominant model for men.

Figure 1: Men’s trajectory type “Dominant” (n=574, 85%)

---

<sup>3</sup> A short presentation of this method, as well as some references, can be found in Widmer, Levy *et al.*, 2003.

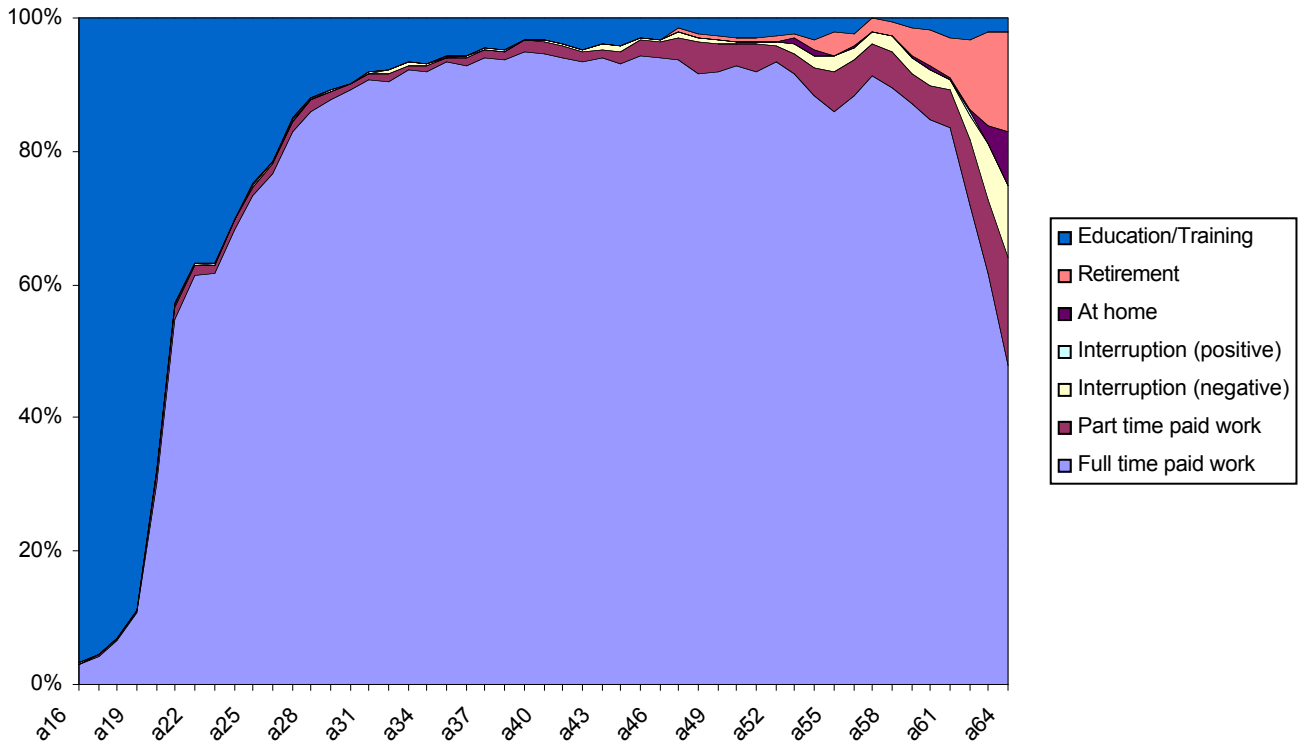
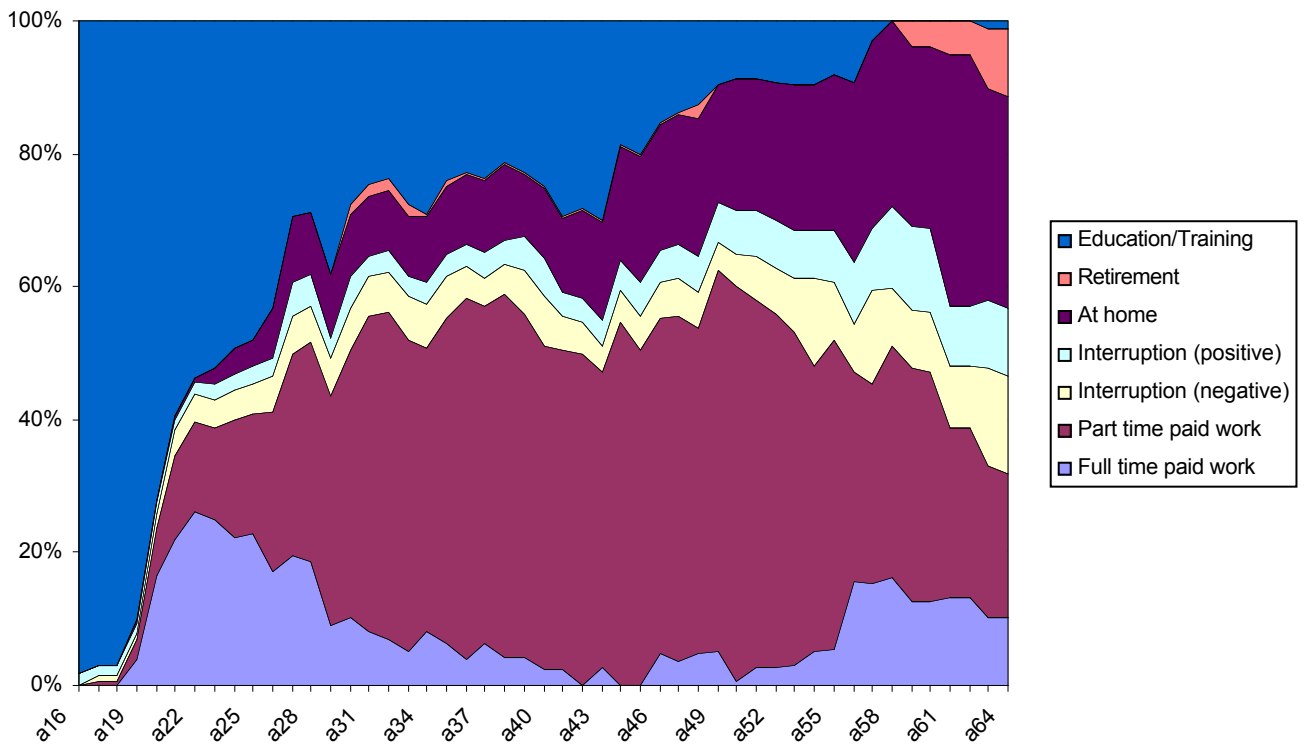


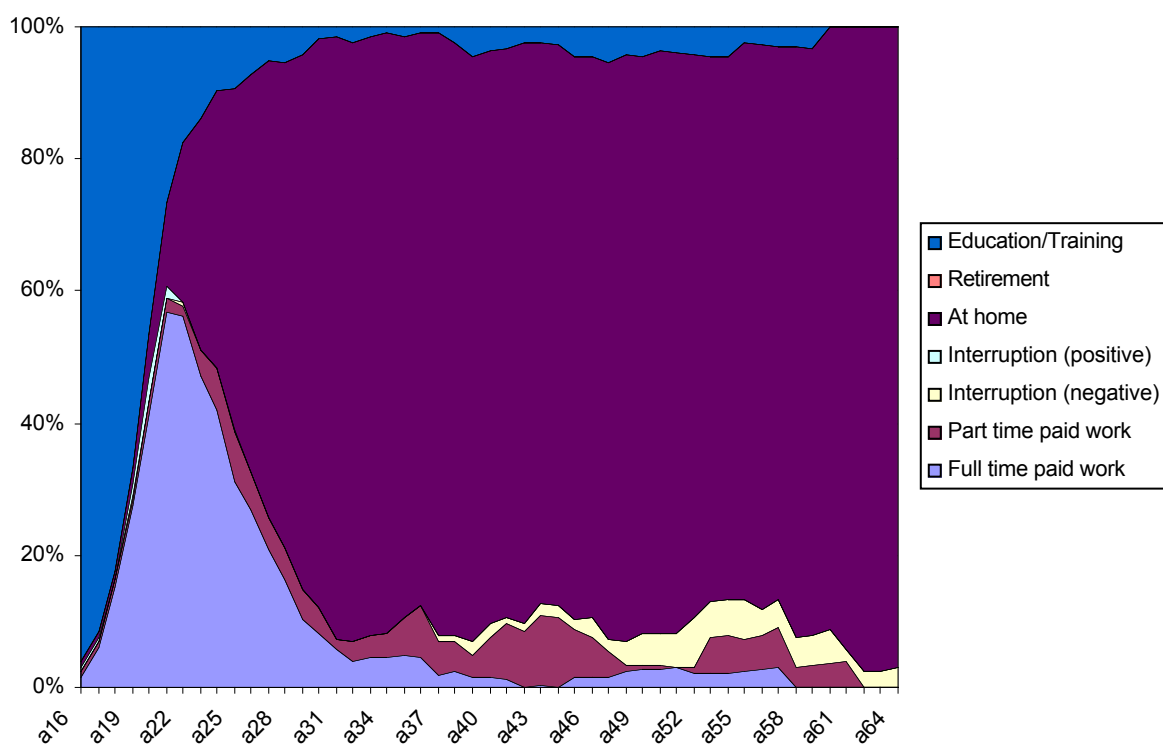
Figure 2: Men's trajectory type "Minority" (n=103, 15%)



The second group concerns only a minority of men (15%) and presents a very dissimilar pattern from the dominant one. First, part-time employment is much more frequent than full-time activity: full-time work represents only 9% of the average trajectory. Part-time employment, however, concerns a proportion of 34% of the average trajectory. Trajectories of this type also include more interruptions due to travel, breaks, etc. and problems of unemployment or health (about 6 months). The very heterogeneous character of these minority trajectories suggests that they do not correspond to a true model, but rather form a residual category.

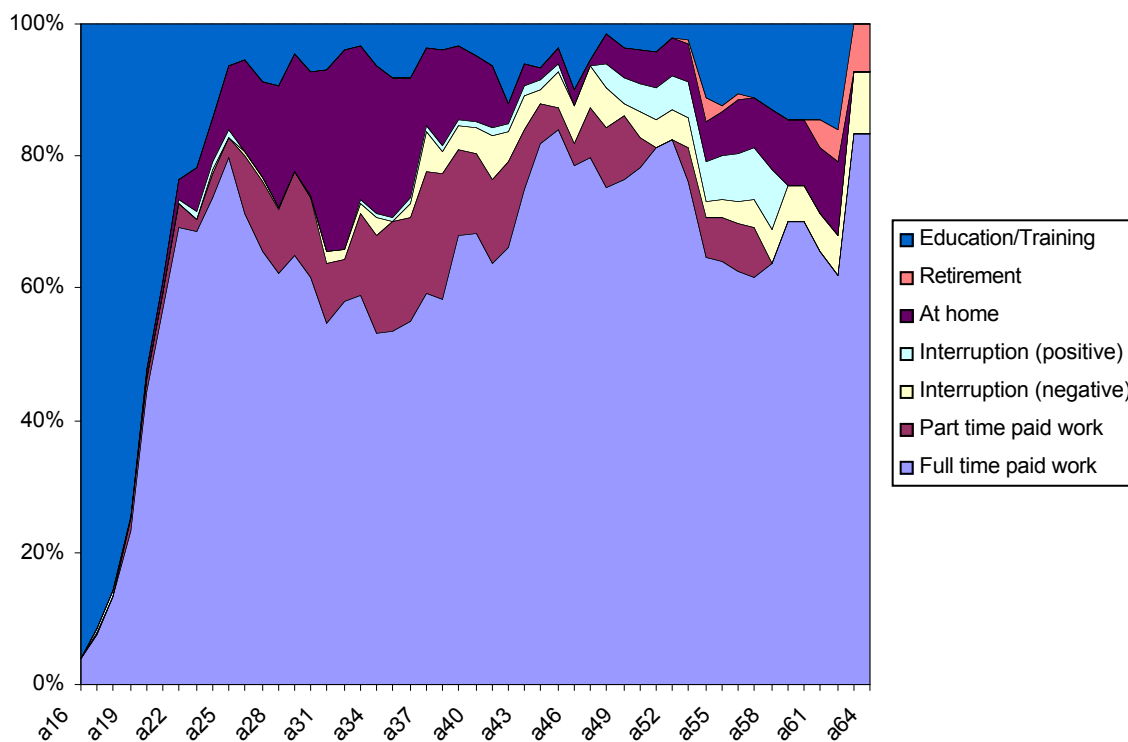
Contrary to men, women have quite heterogeneous models of trajectories. Their trajectories fall into four types.

Figure 3: Women's trajectory type "Homemaker" (n=220, 33%)



The first type of female trajectory is centered on the home. After the period of initial education, the majority of women with this trajectory who enter the professional field via full-time employment remain there for only a short period of time. This is followed by an extensive period at home (66% of the whole sequence considered). Women following this type of trajectory focus on family life and the education of their children after a short period of full-time professional activity, without reentering the professional world again.

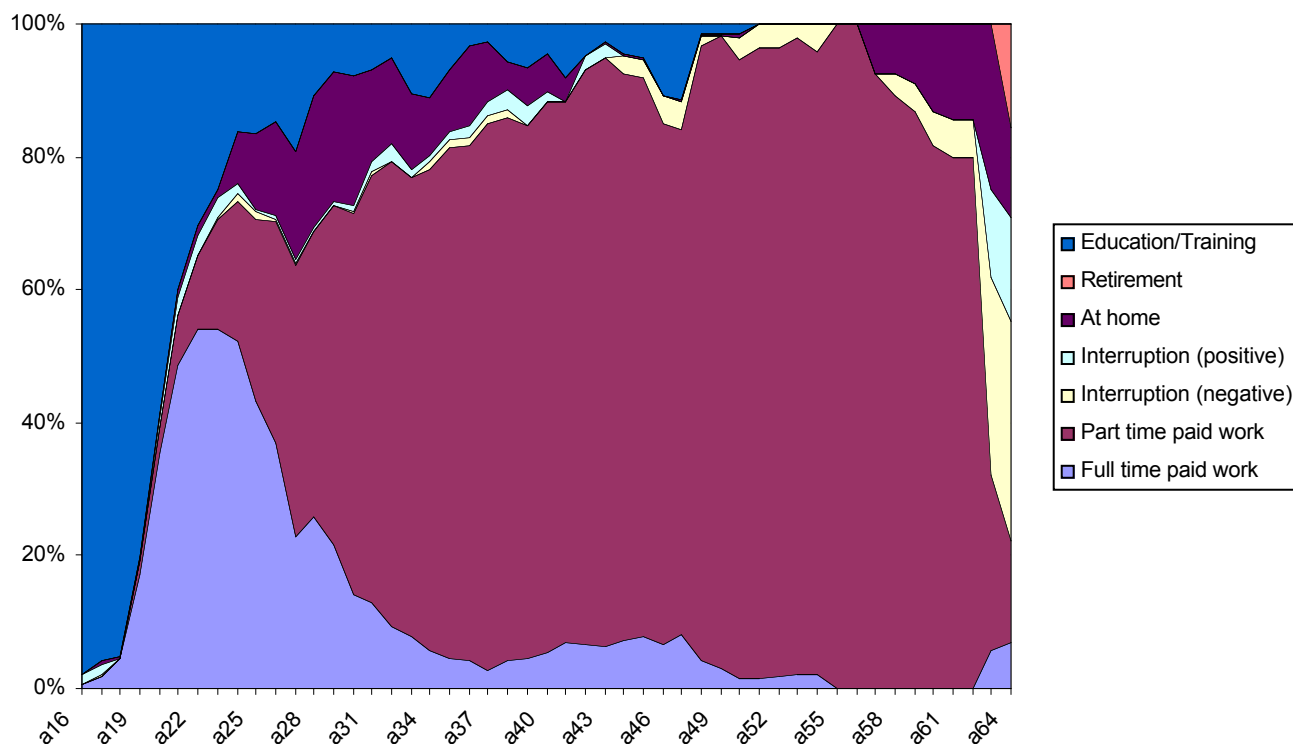
Figure 4: Women's trajectory type "Full-time worker" (n=133, 20%)



The second type is composed of trajectories that are the opposite of the previous type on all accounts. Indeed, full-time employment dominates here. This type is very close to the predominant one among male trajectories.

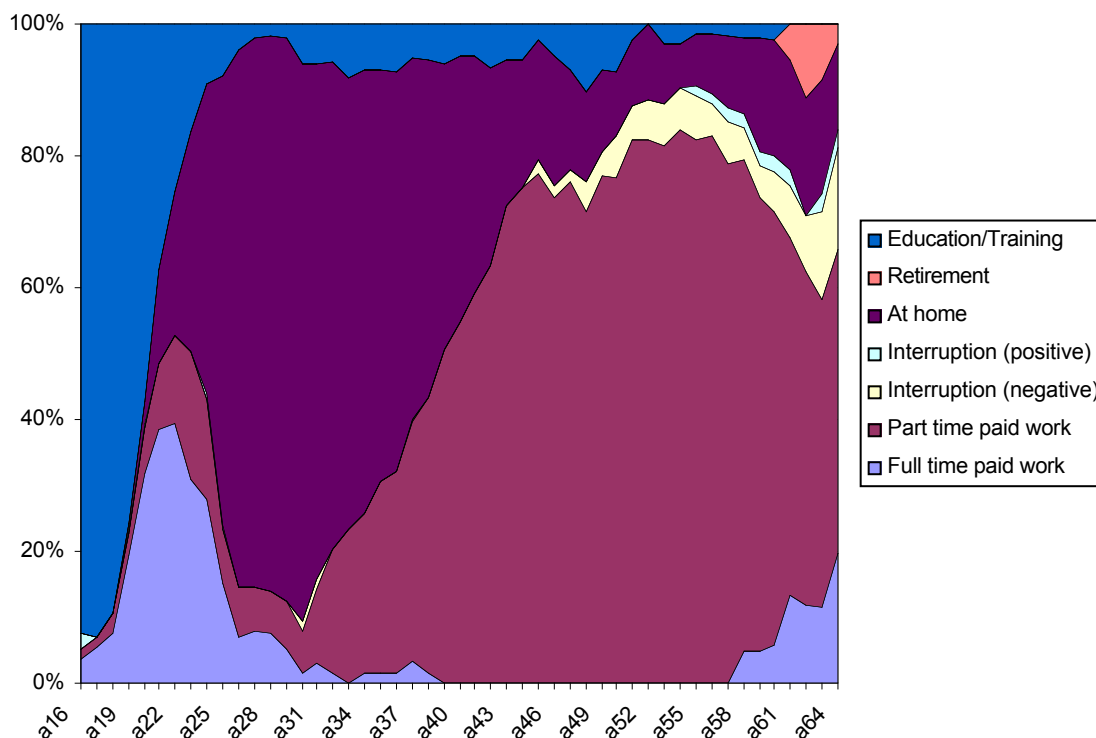
Figure 5: Women's trajectory type "Part-time worker" (n=159, 24%)





The third type of trajectory (Figure 5) corresponds to yet another model. As with the other types, there is a sharp take-up of employment after initial education, initially being generally full-time. As with the previous type, occupational activity is maintained all through adult life, but full-time employment is rather quickly – towards the age of 25 – exchanged for part-time employment which becomes general at about 40. To summarize, part-time trajectories feature an early reduction in the rate of employment.

Figure 6: Women's trajectory type "Back-to-employment" (n=133, 20%)



The fourth type of trajectory (Figure 6) is close to the type “homemaker” but differs from it because its focus on the domestic sphere is only temporary. Indeed, from the age of about 32 years on, there is a very significant increase in gainful employment, though this is generally part-time. This reaches its climax by the beginning of the forties. By this age, this type of trajectory is rather close to the previous one (“part-time”) but it differs from it because periods in the home are much longer and full-time employment much shorter. The major characteristic of this type of trajectory is a late and partial reintegration into the labor market after a relatively long period spent exclusively at home. The last group is very different from all the others as it has an erratic, rather unstructured character. After a brief period of education and, in a minority of cases, a short period of full-time employment, this group of trajectories is characteristic of women having known numerous interruptions due to problems of unemployment and health, or who are involved in a lot of different activities such as voluntary help. These atypical trajectories concern only a very small proportion of cases (less than 5%) and represent a little-typed residual category rather than a specific model of the life course.

To summarize, four dominant models characterize the professional and family trajectories of women in Switzerland: “homemaker” (33%), “full-time worker” (20%), “part-time worker” (24%), and the “back to employment” group (20%). Therefore, our results show that there is a clear differentiation of female trajectories, with most of them falling into four distinct and recognizable models – one of which corresponds to the model predominant among men. A fifth group comprises less clear-cut trajectories, representing only 4% of cases.

## 2.2 A limited number of styles of conjugal interactions

Let us now turn to conjugal functioning. We first want to know how many styles characterize the functioning of today's couples. In order to construct such a typology, we have included six dimensions that are often used in empirical assessments of family functioning (Kellerhals, Troutot et Lazega, 1993):

- 1) The degree of fusion, which designates the extent to which individual resources (time, money, ideas, feelings) are pooled together by spouses or partners (Roussel, 1980; O'Neil and O'Neil, 1972).
- 2) The degree of openness, which designates the extent of informational and relational exchanges occurring between the family group and its close environment (Kantor and Lehr, 1975; Reiss, 1971).
- 3) The main focus, either external or internal, of priority objectives assigned to the couple or the family (Parsons and Bales, 1955; Donati, 1985). Are internal and relational goals (such as affective security, support, tenderness) emphasized or rather external and instrumental goals, such as social integration and upward social mobility?
- 4) The degree of sex-typing of conjugal roles, which designates the extent of the gendered division of household labor and occupational activities, as well as that of relational roles (such as information, goal selection, support, emotions with regard to the spouse or partner (Aldous, 1977; Bott, 1971);
- 5) The normative strength of sex-specific master statuses in the couple. This dimension captures the differential investment of men and women in the domestic sphere relative to the occupational sphere, which is not only a question of time of presence but is also connected with the sacrifices that one can or is willing to make to it. It is based on the hypothesis proposed by Krüger and Levy (2001) that there is a priority sphere of investment attributed to sex categories, the domestic sphere for women and the public sphere for men, which subordinates the investments that the incumbents can put into the other sphere.
- 6) The degree of routinization, which designates the extent to which couples follow a fixed set of norms concerning family timetables, eating habits and territorial allocations (Olson and McCubbin, 1989).

The first three dimensions refer to the more general concept of cohesion, whereas the second three dimensions refer to the concept of regulation. All six dimensions have been measured by a set of indicators that are described elsewhere (Widmer, Kellerhals and Levy, 2003; Widmer, Kellerhals and Levy, 2004b). They were analyzed together in a series of scales that were dichotomized and subjected to a cluster analysis. To determine the number of styles of conjugal interactions, we computed a sequence of hierarchical clusters (based upon Ward's method of clustering). We carefully examined solutions between 3 and 7 clusters and found the solution with five to strike a good balance between within-cluster homogeneity, clarity and parsimony. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Results of cluster analysis based on responses from both partners (column percentages, N=1534)

	Parallel	Companion- ship	Bastion	Cocoon	Associa- tive	Average per- cent- ages (whole sample)	Cramers ' V
Size of cluster (% total)	17	24	16	15	29		
<i>Cohesion</i>							
Fusion (women) <sup>4</sup>	17	57	92	67	5	42	.66**
Fusion (men)	24	91	74	83	13	53	.68**
Closure (women)	81	19	58	65	9	40	.58**
Closure (men)	68	20	28	56	20	35	.41**
Internal orientation (women)	60	16	42	72	11	34	.50**
Internal orientation (men)	16	16	9	95	19	27	.63**
<i>Regulation</i>							
Strong differentiation of functional roles	60	49	79	48	53	57	.21**
Strong differentiation of relational roles	74	38	91	70	60	63	.36**
Strong differentiation of decisional power	31	13	23	18	24	22	.15**
Strong master status	56	24	74	42	60	50	.34**
Strong routinization	45	34	76	56	27	44	.35**

Five strongly contrasted styles of conjugal interactions can be found in this sample of couples representative of residents in Switzerland:

Couples of style Bastion are characterized by a strong tendency to closure, fusion and gender differentiation. In these couples, contacts with the external world are not highly valued. To the contrary, some mistrust exists toward external actors, whereas internal relationships are highly valued and sought. The family as a group precedes individual interests or orientations. This rather close and warm world is sustained by a traditional division of labor between genders, and observes rigid norms about everyday routines. These are couples where each spouse or partner knows well what his or her contributions are supposed to be, depending on gender. This strong differentiation also has an effect on orientation, women being much more internally oriented in this style than men are. 16% of couples show this style of interactions. Couples of the Associative style are opposite to couples of style Bastion on all accounts. They are rather low on both fusion and closure: associative couples are both open and autonomous

<sup>4</sup> Measures of fusion, closure and orientation were included for men and women separately, as spouses may have quite different perspectives in this regard. The dimensions of regulation were measured using only the responses of a single informant per couple (women), as they are more factual.

at the same time. They also demonstrate a fairly egalitarian power and role distribution, with no significant difference between spouses on instrumentality and expressiveness. Their openness is associated with high scores on social participation for men while women are close to the average. On this basis, one can state that the central values structuring this kind of functioning are the quest for personal authenticity and, at the same time, the negotiation of individual rights. Associative couples represent 29% of the sample.

Couples of Companionship style are characterized by a strong tendency toward fusion, contrary to associative couples. At the same time, they are very open. The extent of sexual differentiation is close to the mean. The dominant value in this style of interaction is the use of environmental resources in order to reinforce internal solidarity and communication. Companionship couples represent 24% of the sample.

High levels of fusion and closure also characterize couples of the Cocoon style. Contrary to Bastion couples, they do not, however, present a high-level gender division of domestic and relational roles. They show a strong tendency to emphasize the internal goals of the union for both spouses (in the Bastion couples, only women show such a tendency). Their functioning is concurrently warm, closed and relatively free of gender biases. They represent 15% of the sample.

Couples of the Parallel style are characterized by a strong differentiation of domestic and relational roles between spouses. They are strong on women's expressiveness and on men's instrumentality. Parallel couples have comparatively low scores of fusion and high scores of closure. These are couples who feel threatened by the external world (with respect to the family) while investing little in their own internal relationships. The idea of separate worlds for each spouse seems to be at the center of these couples' functioning. This style includes 17% of our couples.

Various dimensions of conjugal conflict are significantly associated with these different styles of conjugal interaction. *Conjugal problems* were measured by a set of twenty indicators that describe a wide variety of aspects of daily life<sup>5</sup>. They were combined into two general scales, one dealing only with current problems, the other dealing with problems over the whole duration of the conjugal relationship<sup>6</sup>. Multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) was then used in order to find out if those general scales could be decomposed into more specific kinds of problems. Three main types of problems were delineated by this analysis: problems related to violence and other deviant behaviors (such as drug use); problems related to the coordination of activities (i.e. how to fit together the spouses' agendas, how to develop shared usage and rhythms within the couple, how to find a satisfactory division of labor, etc.); and finally relational or interactional problems (problems of communication, affective disillusion, significant difficulties with the spouse's or partner's personality, etc.). Table 2 shows that the different styles of conjugal interaction are indeed associated with different types of conjugal conflict.

---

<sup>5</sup> If either of the two spouses or partners cited a problem, we assumed that the couple had this problem.

<sup>6</sup> See Widmer, Kellerhals and Levy, 2003 and 2004a, for a full description of the scales.

Table 2: *Conjugal conflict, conjugal quality and styles of conjugal interactions (%)*

		<i>Parallel</i>	<i>Companionship</i>	<i>Bastion</i>	<i>Cocoon</i>	<i>Associative</i>	<i>Cramer's V</i>
<i>Conjugal conflict</i>							
% with addiction or violence problems (current or past)		37	17	20	19	36	.20**
% with relational problems		41	17	20	26	39	.22**
% with coordination problems		38	21	25	24	37	.16**
Current open conflicts are frequent		20	12	13	13	21	.20**
Current open conflicts are serious		39	26	25	17	47	.23**
<i>Conjugal quality</i>							
<i>Divorce proneness</i>							
Thoughts of separation	F	44	23	22	21	49	.26**
	M	29	14	14	15	33	.21**
General dissatisfaction is high	F	58	37	48	48	58	.17**
	M	57	34	45	34	59	.22**
Lack of mutual consideration	F	37	22	29	29	36	.13**
	M	35	17	25	26	36	.16**
	C	31	14	16	21	26	.16**
Poor conjugal mood	F	33	13	20	26	29	.18**
	M	34	10	16	17	29	.22**
	C	33	8	12	20	28	.24**
Division of labor not satisfactory	F	21	10	9	11	20	.15**
	M	19	12	16	14	23	.11**
	C	30	15	18	15	31	.18**
Coordination not satisfactory	F	24	10	12	17	22	.15**
	M	17	9	7	8	24	.20**
	C	41	18	20	26	42	.23**
Female shows signs of depression	F	35	15	22	21	25	.15**
Male shows signs of depression	M	15	7	16	14	17	.11**

From Table 2, it is rather clear that the Companionship style of interaction is associated with lower conjugal conflict than any other interactional style. Companionship couples report tension and open conflict less often. When open conflicts do occur, they are much less serious and reconciliation is much easier than for other couples. Companionship couples present conjugal problems of all kinds much less often than other couples.

In contrast, Parallel and Associative couples score very highly on almost all indicators of conflict. Both men and women acknowledge a higher level of tension and more frequent open conflict than average. They show higher rates of problems of all kinds. Cocoon and Bastion couples, on the other hand, show quite similar profiles to those of Companionship couples, although they report slightly higher frequencies of problems and open conflicts.

*Conjugal quality* was approached using three sets of indicators: 1) Divorce proneness, which was measured by a single indicator; 2) Conjugal satisfaction, measured by a general indicator and also by four sets of sectorial indicators, rating the level of satisfaction with the division of labor, conjugal mood, mutual consideration and coordination between spouses or partners (see Widmer, Kellerhals, Levy (2003) for a detailed description of these indices); 3) Depressive symptoms of spouses or partners, measured by indicators such as sorrow, fears, loneliness, aggressiveness, etc. (Radloff, 1977). Table 2 shows that there is quite a strong correlation between styles of conjugal interaction and conjugal quality.

Parallel couples are associated with the highest conjugal dissatisfaction and the most frequent thoughts of separation for both men and women. Companionship couples have the lowest scores on both measures for both genders. Associative couples have a similar profile to parallel couples, although less extreme. Cocoon and Bastion couples lie in between. Correlations between signs of depression and conjugal styles of interactions confirm these results. Again, Parallel couples show the highest scores on the scale of depression, whereas Companionship couples show the lowest scores, the other three styles lying in between. Interestingly, scores of women are more sensitive to conjugal styles of functioning than scores of men, as if women's subjective well-being depends more strongly on the family system (and less on other factors located outside) than men's.

The cluster analysis above shows that contemporary conjugal interactions in Switzerland do not follow a single model. To the contrary, the space defined by the various dimensions of cohesion and regulation considered is largely used, with five styles of conjugal relationships emerging, which are associated with unequal levels of conjugal conflict and conjugal quality.

### *2.3 Insertions in the social structure of Switzerland*

Are personal trajectories and styles of conjugal functioning sensitive to the different ways and degrees to which individuals are inserted in the social structure of Switzerland? This question is an important one, as it indirectly deals with the issue raised by the hypothesis of a pluralization of life courses. One main hypothesis about the life course affirms that individual lives have become more and more disembedded from local social structures and material contingencies, with an increasing impact from an overall planetary culture through the mass media. This "poststructural" hypothesis is often set in opposition to the more classical sociological hypothesis according to which individual action spaces are socially structured and that actions reflect the options, constraints and resources an actor has to deal with in her/his situation. In this section, we shall show that both personal trajectories and conjugal functioning remain deeply embedded within the social structures.

Let us first consider personal trajectories. Table 4 presents a multinomial logistic regression using number of children, level of education and birth cohort as predictors, and the types of trajectory as the dependent variable, with "Homemaker" trajectories as the reference category. The predictors are considered as indicators of insertion into the social structures. Birth cohorts indicate membership in successive "generations", and therefore their unequal susceptibility to participating in the hypothesized process of individualization. The level of education is a classic indicator of social status which corresponds, from the point of view of the life course, to an intermediate stage between ascribed and achieved statuses. The number of children can be considered as an indicator of the weight of the requirements of domestic life.





None	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
One	.70	.18**	.11**	.43	.65	1.55	1.29	1.47	2.06*
Two	.84	.05**	.11**	.38	.12**	1.06	1.35	1.71*	1.23
Three or more	.55	.01**	.08**	.21**	.10**	.66	1.15	1.16	1.36
<i>Educational level of women</i>									
Low	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Middle	1.43	1.97**	2.87**	1.62*	.93	.51**	.65**	.37**	.46**
High	2.08	3.32**	5.09**	1.29	.71	.32**	.48**	.11**	.28**
<i>Women's employment</i>									
None	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Part-time (<50%)	--	--	--	--	--	.54**	.58**	.59*	.29**
Part-time (50-89%)	--	--	--	--	--	.54**	.73	.46**	.38**
Full-time	--	--	--	--	--	.65	1.24	.60	.51*
Chi-square	11.2		252.7**			234.02**			
N	677		667			1530			

\*\*=sig<.01, \*=sig<.05

The number of children turns out to be a highly significant predictor of women's trajectories. Having three children rather than two or one directs women to a home-centered trajectory, while this trajectory is practically non-existent among women who have no children. "Full-time" trajectories much more often concern childless women than others. Levels of education also play a leading role. The likelihood of home-centered trajectories significantly decreases as the level of education rises; "part-time" trajectories are more likely for higher levels of education; however, "full-time" trajectories have a relatively homogeneous distribution between the levels of education. Finally, female trajectories are also sensitive to birth cohorts. The "back-to-employment" trajectory is more present in older generations, while "full-time" and "part-time" trajectories characterize recent cohorts. These results show that women's trajectories are shaped by multiple social insertions. In contrast, (Table 4), men's trajectories are not sensitive to any of the above-mentioned social insertions. Neither birth cohorts, nor children's presence, nor level of education have a significant influence on their trajectories.

Do styles of conjugal interaction follow the same logic of social insertion? In this latter case, we consider not only birth cohort, number of children and level of education, but also women's work participation, which obviously had to be dropped from the list of factors considered as predictors for personal trajectories<sup>7</sup>. Table 4 also presents a multinomial logistic regression with the Associative style taken as the reference category. It shows that the level of women's education has a strong impact on styles of interaction. Low levels of education are associated with a Parallel, Bastion or Cocoon style, while couples with high levels of education develop significantly more often an Associative style of interaction. The number of children also has a significant effect on styles of conjugal interaction: one-child couples develop more often the Cocoon style while couples with two children are more often of a Bastion style. Most importantly, table 3 shows that professional trajectories and styles of conjugal interactions are quite strongly associated, as employed women have a significantly weaker probability than inactive women to be in a couple of Parallel, Bastion or Cocoon style. Full-time employment of women favors a Associative style of interaction whereas part-time employed women have a greater probability of belonging to a couple of Companionship style. Although it is hard to say what is the antecedent variable here, there is, to a large extent, a homology between the way couples organize their interactions and the way female professional careers are shaped in Switzerland.

### 3. Conclusion

Overall, the hypothesis of pluralization of personal trajectories and conjugal interactions received mixed support from the data considered in this research. For men, statistical analysis revealed the presence of one dominant type of trajectory, characterized by almost continuous employment exercised full-time. The non-standard, more chopped and heteroclite trajectories, characterized by periods of training, part-time jobs and various interruptions only concern a minority of men. Men's trajectories are essentially centered on full-time employment, and the hypothesis of a general pluralization of work patterns is clearly rejected by the data. To the contrary, the persistence of a strong "standardization" of men's trajectories is confirmed. In clear contrast, women's trajectories follow several distinct models, only one of which is similar to the dominant male trajectory. The four main models are: the "homemaker" where there is a continuous focus on the home; full-time employment (with a decrease between 25 and 35); part-time employment throughout the trajectory; and fourthly women who re-enter the work environment after a period as homemaker. Only a very small minority of women do

---

<sup>7</sup> A more elaborated list of factors is considered in Widmer, Kellerhals and Levy, 2004b.

not follow one of these patterns. This “bounded diversity” of female trajectories clearly follows a logic of social insertion, as the models we found are strongly associated with the number of children born to the couple, their level of education and birth cohort. Therefore, the plurality of female trajectories is highly sensitive to social insertion. The hypothesis of individualization explains only a very small number of cases of women’s trajectories. Therefore, one should emphasize the fact that both male and female personal trajectories follow a limited set of sequential models. A large proportion of men’s trajectories correspond to the tripartition model (Kohli, 1985). For women, several models exist, and although more varied, are still limited in number and depend on insertion in the social structure. Thus, in both cases, the hypothesis of a pluralization of personal trajectories should be rejected in this sample of couples residing in Switzerland.

How then are we to explain the distinct patterns characterizing men’s and women’s trajectories? The hypothesis of the master status (Krüger and Levy, 2001; Widmer, Kellerhals and Levy, 2003) may help us to understand these differences. This hypothesis advances that there is, for both sexes, a “privileged” domain of activity to which other domains are subordinate. In many Western countries, including Switzerland, the privileged domain of activity for men is still the occupational field, while the privileged domain of activity for women is still the domestic field (family work). The dominance of one domain for each sex does not necessarily imply their exclusion from other domains, it simply means that the investment made by individuals in their secondary spheres of activity depends on the demands of their major sphere of responsibility. So, the majority of the female trajectories are not characterized by an exclusion from the professional sphere – a situation of extreme sexual segregation, doubtless still predominant in some social circles but more and more openly criticized by public opinion and the mass media. Women’s trajectories rather reflect a subordination of their gainful employment to the imperatives of family work. Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize the interdependence existing between male and female trajectories for individuals living in a couple or in a family: if most men can disregard domestic imperatives – often a structural necessity in terms of career – it is because their female partners essentially take care of them. There is a systemic twist here that has its roots deep in the economic organization of many capitalist societies. It represents a particularly clear case of the principle of “linked lives” (Elder 1995) which suggests that in order to understand male and female individual trajectories one should focus on the interdependences that associate them within the family. One can make the hypothesis that this interdependence between master statuses has a highly resistant power in many Western countries, which works against the logic of pluralization of personal trajectories.

What about *conjugal functioning*? The data show that contemporary conjugal interactions do not fit a single model. To the contrary, the space defined by the various dimensions of cohesion and regulation is largely used. It is also worth underlining that these styles of conjugal interactions are associated with the social status of spouses: the Bastion, Parallel and Cocoon styles are much more frequent in couples of low social status. The frequency of the Associative style of conjugal interaction is significantly greater in couples with high social status. Results also show that the different styles of conjugal functioning have other distinct properties: a strong emphasis on autonomy and closure of family life, and a rigid and gendered organization of conjugal roles are associated with increased conjugal problems and a deterioration of conjugal quality<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> For an explanation of these associations, see Widmer, Kellerhals and Levy (2003 and 2004b).

Analysis of both personal trajectories and conjugal functioning reveal the real but limited extent to which we may speak of a pluralization of life courses. A finite set of models, in both cases, captures a large part of the overall variance existing within this sample of couples living in Switzerland. Therefore, the hypothesis that we are in a time of extreme individualization of key aspects of life should be rejected. There are several models available, which highly structure the choices of individuals. In fact, these models are not freely chosen, but rather depend on the resources and constraints associated with specific locations in the social structure. They also have specific consequences, which suggests that they play a structuring role of their own. In this perspective, one may consider models of trajectories and of conjugal functioning, along with social networks (Widmer, Kellerhals and Levy, 2004a), as key process-oriented variables for the production and reproduction of social inequalities in contemporary societies. This suggests that a life course perspective is likely to provide new understanding about social structures and their effects in late modernity.

Are these results specific to Switzerland? To make such a diagnosis is of course a difficult endeavour as long as the comparison is not a common goal of the studies to be compared from the outset. There are so many parameters to be controlled in order to assure comparability in any strict sense that it is highly unlikely to find studies that fit together without having been planned to do so – and this is in fact the case for ours. However, one similar study of work career patterns of men and women exists in the United States (Moen 2003, Moen & Han 2001) and another in Germany (Born et al. 1996, Krüger 2001). Note that their samples are not exactly the same as ours which excludes the possibility to answer some interesting questions and forces us to locate the comparison at the level of interpretations rather than of direct data comparison. Nevertheless four common features stand out rather clearly in all contexts: 1. life-course patterns are strongly gendered, 2. there is one single predominant male trajectory, while there is a higher number of female trajectories (including the male one, but without a clear numeric predominance), 3. only female occupational trajectories reflect variations due to the family life cycle, 4. part-time employment remains limited to women's trajectories and seems to be part largely of their adaptation to the requirements of family life. The main difference we can see singles out the US where the “pure” home-maker career, present in Switzerland (and in Germany), seems no longer to exist. In terms of conjugal interactions, it was underlined that our study is quite unique in its inclusion of a variety of indicators and in its large and representative sample, as well as its inductive method, based on cluster analysis (Widmer, Kellerhals, Levy, 2003). Therefore, intercountries comparisons are even more difficult to do for styles of conjugal interactions than for professional trajectories. Let us however underline that the large number of couples characterized by a high degree of fusion (away from conjugal individualism), by strong sex typing of conjugal roles and by the presence of clearly cut master statuses, do suggest that, despite a large communality among Western countries, including Switzerland, family change has not gone as far in Switzerland as in the United-States and other developed English speaking countries.

Finally, these results open up an interesting question. On one hand, we begin to better understand how life-course regimes in Switzerland may relate to institutional features specific to the country, such as its peculiar school daily schedules, its lack of infrastructures for toddlers, its training system (the apprenticeship), its gendered job market, the military, etc. On the other hand, we find that some rather basic aspects of men's and women's professional trajectories and family interactions are the same in Switzerland as in other Western countries, such as Germany and the United States. The question – that we can only formulate at this time – is then whether there are cultural commonalities between Switzerland and the other Western countries that are sufficiently strong to homogenize life-course and conjugal interaction patterns whatever the country's institutional outfit, or whether there are quite different, but func-

tionally equivalent, forms of institutionalisation in Switzerland as in other countries that produce the same life course and family patterns.

### **References**

- Abbott, Andrew and Alexandra Hrycak (1990). Measuring Resemblance in Sequence Data : An Optimal Matching Analysis of Musicians' Careers, *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 96, n° 1, 144-185.
- Aisenbrey, Silke (2000). *Optimal Matching Analyse. Anwendungen in den Sozialwissenschaften*, Leske und Budrich, Opladen.
- Aldous, Joan (1977). Family interaction patterns. *Annual Review of Sociology* 3, 105-135.
- Bauman, Zygmunt (1992). *Intimations of Postmodernity*, Routledge, London.
- Beck, Ulrich (1986). *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main.
- Beck, Ulrich and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1994). *Riskante Freiheiten. Individualisierung in modernen Gesellschaften*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main.
- Beck, Ulrich, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash (1994). *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.
- Becker-Schmidt, Regina (1987). Die doppelte Vergesellschaftung - die doppelte Unterdrückung: Besonderheiten der Frauenforschung in den Sozialwissenschaften. In: Lilo Unterkircher and Ina Wagner (Eds.) *Die andere Hälfte der Gesellschaft*, Österreichischer Soziologentag 1985, ÖGB-Verlag, Wien.
- Born, Claudia, Helga Krüger and Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer (1996). Der unentdeckte Wandel. Annäherung an das Verhältnis von Struktur und Norm im weiblichen Lebenslauf. Edition Sigma, Berlin.
- Bott, Elisabeth (1971). *Family and Social Network: Roles, Norms and External Relationships in Ordinary Urban Families*, Tavistock, London.
- Burgess, Ernst W., Harvey J. Locke and Mary Margaret Thomes (1960). *The Family: From Institution to Companionship*, American Book, New York.
- Delcher, Arthur L., Simon Kasif, Robert D. Fleischmann, Jeremy Peterson, Owen White, and Steven L. Salzberg (1999). Alignment of whole genomes, *Nucleic Acid Research*, Vol. 27, No 11, 2369-2376.
- Donati, Pierpaolo, (1985). *Famiglia e politiche sociali*, Milano, Franco Angeli.
- Drobnic, Sonia (2000). The Effects of Children on Married and Lone Mothers' Employment in the United States and (West) Germany, *European Sociological Review*, 16, 2, June, 137-157.
- Elder, Glen H. (1995). The Life Course Paradigm: Social Change and Individual Development. In: Phyllis Moen, Glen H. Elder & Kurt Lüscher (Eds.), *Examining Lives in Context: Perspectives on the Ecology of Human Development*. APA Press, Washington, 101-139.
- Erzberger, Christian and Gerald Prein (1997). Optimal-Matching-Technik: Ein Analyseverfahren zur Vergleichbarkeit und Ordnung individuell differenter Lebensverläufe, *ZUMA-Nachrichten*, 21(40), 52-80.
- Giddens, Anthony (1992). *Modernity and Self-identity*. Polity Press, Cornwall.
- Giddens, Anthony (1994). *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Stanford University Press, Stanford.
- Held, Thomas and René Levy (1974). *Die Stellung der Frau in Familie und Gesellschaft*. Huber, Frauenfeld. (En français : *Femme, famille et société. Enquête sociologique sur la situation en Suisse*. Delta, Vevey 1975).

- Höpflinger, François, Maria Charles and Annelies Debrunner (1991). *Familienleben und Berufarbeit. Zum Wechselverhältnis zweier Lebensbereiche*, Seismo, Zürich.
- Kantor, David and William Lehr (1975). *Inside the Family*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Kellerhals, Jean and Cléopatre Montandon (1991). *Les stratégies éducatives des familles. Milieu social, dynamique familiale et éducation des pré-adolescents*, Delachaux et Niestlé, Lausanne.
- Kellerhals, Jean, Jean-François Perrin, Geneviève Steinauer-Cresson, Laura Vonèche and Geneviève Wirth (1982). *Mariages au quotidien. Inégalités sociales, tensions culturelles et organisation familiale*, P.-M. Favre, Lausanne.
- Kellerhals, Jean, Pierre-Yves Troutot and Emmanuel Lazega (1993). *Microsociologie de la famille*, PUF, Paris. [2ème éd.].
- Klein, Thomas and Wolfgang Lauterbach (1994). How Does Women's Level of Education Affect Family Formation and Labour Force Interruption? An Empirical Analysis of Microeconomic Theory, *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 46, 2, June, 278-298.
- Kohli, Martin (1985). Die Institutionalisierung des Lebenslaufs, *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 37 (1), 1-29.
- Kohli, Martin (1986). Gesellschaftszeit und Lebenszeit. Der Lebenslauf im Strukturwandel der Moderne. Die Moderne - Kontinuitäten und Zäsuren, *Soziale Welt*, numéro spécial, 183-208.
- Kohli, Martin, Martin Rein, Anne-Marie Guillemard et Herman van Gunsteren (eds., 1991), *Time for Retirement. Comparative Studies of Early Exit from the Labor Force*, Cambridge University Press.
- Korpi, Walter (2001), Faces of Inequality: Gender, Class, and Patterns of Inequalities in Different Types of Welfare States. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society* 7(2), 127-191.
- Krüger, Helga (2001), Social Change in Two Generations: Employment Patterns and Their Costs for Family Life. in: Victor W. Marshall, Walter R. Heinz, Helga Krüger & Anil Verma (eds.), *Restructuring Work and the Life Course*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 401-423.
- Krüger, Helga and René Levy (2001). Linking life courses, work and the family: theorizing a not so visible nexus between women and men. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 26, 2, 145-166.
- Levy, René (1977). *Der Lebenslauf als Statusbiographie*, Enke, Stuttgart.
- Levy, René, Dominique Joye, Olivier Guye and Vincent Kaufmann (1997). *Tous égaux? De la stratification aux représentations*, Seismo, Zürich.
- Mayer, Karl Ulrich (2001), The paradox of global social change and national path dependencies: Life course patterns in advanced societies. in: Alison E. Woodward & Martin Kohli (eds.), *Inclusions and Exclusions in European Societies*. Routledge, London, 89-110.
- Moen, Phyllis & Shin-Kap Han (2001), Reframing Careers: Work, Family, and Gender. in: Victor W. Marshall, Walter R. Heinz, Helga Krüger & Anil Verma (eds.), *Restructuring Work and the Life Course*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 424-445.
- Moen, Phyllis (ed., 2003), *It's about Time. Couples and Careers*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca.
- Myrdal, Alva and Viola Klein (1956). *Women's Two Roles: House and Work*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
- O'Neill, Nena and George O'Neill (1972). *Open Marriage*, Evans, New York.

- Olson, David H. and Hamilton I. McCubbin (1989). *Families: What Makes Them Work?* Sage, Beverly Hills. [2<sup>nd</sup> ed.].
- Parsons, Talcott and Robert F. Bales (1955). *Family: Socialization and Interaction Process*, The Free Press, New York.
- Radloff, Lenore Sawyer (1977). The CES-D scale: A self-report depression scale for research in the general population, *Applied Psychological Measurement*, 3, 385-401.
- Reiss, David (1971). Varieties of Consensual Experience, *Family Process*, 10, 1-35.
- Reiss, David (1981). *The Family's Construction of Reality*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Reskin, Barbara and Irene Padavic (1994). *Women and Men at Work*, Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks.
- Roussel, Louis (1980). Mariages et divorces: contribution à une analyse systématique des modèles matrimoniaux. *Population*, 6, 1025-1040.
- Waterman, Michael S. (1995). *Introduction to Computational Biology. Maps, Sequences and Genomes*, Chapman and Hall, London.
- Widmer Eric D., René Levy, Raphaël Hammer, Alexandre Pollien, and Jacques-Antoine Gauthier (2003). Une analyse exploratoire des insertions professionnelles et familiales : trajectoires de couples résidant en Suisse. *Revue suisse de Sociologie*, 29, 1, 35-67.
- Widmer, Eric D., Jean Kellerhals and René Levy (2003). Cohésion, régulation et conflit dans les familles contemporaines, Seismo, Zürich.
- Widmer, Eric D., Jean Kellerhals and René Levy (2004a). Types of conjugal networks, conjugal conflict and conjugal quality. *European Sociological Review*, 20, 1, 63-77.
- Widmer, Eric D., Jean Kellerhals and René Levy (2004b). Quelle pluralisation des relations familiales? Conflits, styles d'interactions conjugales et milieu social. *Revue française de Sociologie*.