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THE STRUCTURE OF THE LIFE COURSE: STANDARDIZED? INDIVIDUALIZED? DIFFERENTIATED?

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DE-STANDARDIZATION OF THE LIFE COURSE: WHAT IT MIGHT MEAN? AND IF IT MEANS ANYTHING, WHETHER IT ACTUALLY TOOK PLACE?

Hannah Brückner and Karl Ulrich Mayer

ABSTRACT

We explore both conceptually and empirically whether and how precise meanings and measures can be attached to recent ideas about the transformation of the life course. With data from the German Life History Study (GLHS), we assess social change in the transition to adulthood for birth cohorts born between 1921 and 1971, focusing on the de-standardization hypothesis. While we see increasing de-coupling of events in the connections between the school–training–work nexus and family formation, the institutional environment continues to structure the school–training–work nexus and not much change was seen in the way in which cohort members undergo these transitions. On the contrary, there is actually a homogenization as women's and men's life courses converge in terms of education and labor force participation. It is the family formation nexus that shows the most pronounced changes. This is also the realm in which gender differences persist across cohorts. While we find strong

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evidence for period effects that produce inter-cohort differences in life course patterns, taken as a whole our indicators do not point to a general process of a de-standardization of the life course.

That lives have become less predictable, less collectively determined, less stable, less orderly, more flexible, and more individualized has become one of the most commonly accepted perceptions of advanced societies (Held, 1986; Buchmann, 1989; Myles, 1993). Private lives and family forms are said to have become pluralized, and working lives more unstable, including increased firm and occupational mobility (Beck, 1986; Heinz, 2003). Education and training are perceived to have become more extended and intermittent. More generally, the traditional sequence of life stages into education, work and retirement is said to have given way to a de-standardized life course where people go back to education after periods of work, take sabbaticals, change occupations in midlife and combine work and leisure in prolonged transitions to final retirement (Riley, Kahn, & Foner, 1994). Demographers and family sociologists see the emergence of patterns of sequential promiscuity and the rise of an "autistic society" (Hoffmann-Nowotny, 1980) where singles are only loosely tied to families. Beck (1999) claims that more than half of the (German) workforce is subject to non-standardized labor contracts and predicts that labor markets in advanced societies will soon resemble the widespread marginality of third world countries. Likewise, Sennett (2000) sees the increasing flexibility of both private and working lives as the hallmark of globalized capitalism. De-standardized life courses, then, are fundamental tenets of both theories of Post-Fordism and theories of post-industrialism.

In this paper, we first examine hypotheses concerning de-standardized life courses in different, recent historical contexts. We then explore both conceptually and empirically whether and how more precise meanings and measures can be attached to ideas of the transformation of the life course. Third, we use data from the West German part of the GLHS covering cohorts born between 1919 and 1971 to assess some of the implicit claims in the de-standardization thesis.

THREE HISTORICAL CONTEXTS OF THE DEBATE: MODERNIZATION, POST-INDUSTRIALISM AND GLOBALIZATION

In the 1970s and early 1980s, the social and temporal organization of human lives was developed as a topic within a distinctly historical framework

(Mayer, 2004). The question implicitly or explicitly put forward was a very broad one: What distinguishes "modern" life courses from more "traditional" ones? Some of the answers given were that life courses had become "institutionalized" as part and parcel of the life discipline imposed by industrial work (Hareven, 1981, 1986; Anderson, 1985; Kohli, 1985) or that lives had become more predictable because cycles of poverty (Rowntree, 1914; Myles, 1993) – which characterized manual worker's lives until the last mid-century – had gradually vanished with rising standards of living and increasing protection by the welfare state (Mayer & Müller, 1986; Mayer & Schoepflin, 1989). The long-term historical cohort comparison by Modell, Furstenberg, and Hershberg (1976) showed that events making up the transitions to adulthood had become more universal, were more temporally connected, and showed less age variation. Conceptually, these developments were framed either in terms of a dichotomy between "traditional" and "modern" or in terms of a linear and fairly universal historical trend. In this sense, it is not a mistake to locate this line of thinking within the more general framework of modernization theory (Zapf, 1991; Schelkle, Krauth, Kohli, & Elwert, 2000). Many different processes were thought to contribute to more institutionalized, more predictable and more "standardized" lives (Mayer & Müller, 1986). First, the expansion of secondary and tertiary education and training created career paths within and between educational institutions. It also moved young adults to labor market entry positions at different levels, thereby minimizing or decreasing initial search mobility and more securely launching them on employment trajectories. Second, larger work organizations, strong trade unions, and an increased prevalence of white-collar jobs enlarged the prevalence and length of working lives characterized as "careers." This enhanced occupational stability over the life span. Economic growth and the upgrading of the occupational structure favored voluntary job shifts and upward mobility in contrast to involuntary, horizontal or downward shifts. Third, the provisions of the welfare state institutionalized new kinds of statuses and events, like sick leave, maternity leave or child leave, and fostered continuity in lives by buffering the impact of income loss due to adverse events like unemployment or illness or old age. Finally, the relative security of income, employment and career advancement supported early marriage and a larger number of children (Esping-Andersen, 1999).

While ideas of standardization and institutionalization had a powerful sociohistorical logic, the latter years of the 1980s saw the accumulation of observations which ran counter to the standardization thesis (Held, 1986; Buchmann, 1989; Kohli, 1986, 1989). In fact, as early as the late 1960s and

early 1970s, pervasive value changes (Inglehart, 1977) in connection with youth and student rebellions across a number of advanced Western societies were seen as restructuring the way people organized their private lives. Such value changes manifested themselves in delayed marriage and childbirth and even beyond that, in the rise of non-marital unions, divorce and remarriage. This was coupled with increasing claims to autonomy and self-realization which further mirrored earlier exits from the parental home independent of the event of marriage. This increasing "disorderliness" in young adult lives was believed to result from educational expansion and the inflation of educational credentials, which in turn delayed or jeopardized labor market integration. Some went so far as to describe educational institutions as "waiting halls" (Boudon, 1974; Freeman, 1976; Büchel, Grip, & Mertens, 2003). The women's movement provided an additional, independent and strong force in reshaping the lives of both women and men by encouraging women to pursue education and careers partially independent of family formation. The 1980s also saw the full consequences of the 1973 oil shock hit the training and labor markets for young adults with the result of making the attainment of vocational and professional credentials, as well as the transition to gainful work being more prolonged and more complicated. All of this, however, occurred in a context of increasing welfare state provisions, continued increases in real incomes, and improvements in the material circumstances of parents, which allowed children to invest more in education, to experiment with private living arrangements, and to pursue self-defined goals. It is this curious mixture of value changes, opportunities and adaptive constraints, which fostered the topoi of the "postponed generation" (Mayer, 1994, 1995), and "individualized" or "patchwork" biographies (Beck, 1986).

In the early 1990s, belief in these tendencies continued but was gradually supplanted by perceptions of massive impacts of the forces of globalization, particularly increased international competition, labor market de-regulation and structural unemployment (Mills & Blossfeld, 2003). What some viewed in the 1970s and 1980s as a widening of life pathways due to new options were reinterpreted in the 1990s as difficult adaptations to external constraints (Becker & Hermkens, 1993). These more pessimistic outlooks were interrupted for a short period by the information-technology "bubble" which appeared to foster unconventional lifestyles and careers of almost unlimited opportunities. Another distinctive causal condition which potentially affected life courses in the 1990s were reforms and cuts in the provisions of social security (Esping-Andersen, 1999). These included cuts in the levels of unemployment benefits, health insurance, pension entitlements and benefits to unemployed or underemployed youth. Thus it could be said

that the 1990s increased both the incidence of exposure to risks, especially on the labor market but also in family life, and the level of welfare assistance given such risks (DiPrete, 2002).

In sum, the course of more than 30 years gave rise to a number of different macro-social and macro-economic conditions that are widely believed to have had strong impacts in making life courses less conventional, less standardized, less collectively patterned, less predictable and more exposed to risks both in the public and in the private sphere. In retrospect, the pattern of stable employment, progressive income levels and careers, welfare protection, early marriages and stable family lives, as well as high degrees of social integration at the work place and in the community appear to have been constricted to a fairly short and exceptional historical period, a "Golden Age," that was both preceded and succeeded by more turbulent times and turbulent lives (Mayer, 2001; Myles, 1993). Both academic and journalistic observers, then, have developed a broad consensus and a multitude of personal experiences and illustrative evidence on "post-modern" patterns of a greater variety of partly freely chosen, partly imposed life trajectories.

CONCEPTS FOR CHANGES IN LIFE COURSE PATTERNS

Such sweeping generalizations about changes in life course patterns as sketched above suffer from both a lack of precision in the concepts employed and a lack of systematic data in lieu of casual observations. In this section, we review a number of terms used in the attempt to capture both more historical and more recent transformations of life trajectories. We also offer a set of definitions of these terms and some illustrative examples to explicate their intended meanings. In this way we hope to contribute to a more sophisticated, multi-dimensional set of categories denoting social changes in the area of life course research.

Several concepts are often used interchangeably and indiscriminately to capture salient historical changes in life course patterns. These include "(de-) institutionalization" (Mayer & Müller, 1986), "(de-) standardization" (Modell et al., 1976), "individualization" (Beck, 1986), "pluralization" (versus "homogenization") (Zapf, 1987), and "(de-) differentiation (Mayer, 1991). We suggest that this list of concepts actually taps dimensions that can vary independently from each other and should therefore be distinguished from each other.

The *institutionalization* of life courses refers to the process by which normative, legal or organizational rules define the social and temporal organization of human lives. It can refer to stages or states in lives which can be formally or informally decreed like marriage, education, and retirement. It can also refer to events and transitions like leaving school, entry into and exits from labor contracts, or ages of pension entitlements. Kohli (1985) maintains that modern life courses have become a modus of "Vergesellschaftung", that is, of socialization, social integration and social control, and that they have become as, if not more, important than class structures. The welfare state now recognizes not only a number of broader life course-related states: periods with neither paying nor receiving contributions (childhood), periods paying but not receiving (employment), periods not contributing, but receiving (old age, illness, unemployment), but also more fine-graded episodes such as maternity leave, child leave, rehabilitation and the like (Mayer & Müller, 1986).

Conversely, *de-institutionalization* would then mean that states, stages, events, and transitions, which at earlier times were clearly differentiated, are being reintegrated or fused. One case in point is education and work, which in some countries including the U.S., have come to be highly synchronous activities rather than clearly separate life stages (Shanahan, 2000). Another example is the rise of non-marital unions where the establishment of a joint household is no longer tied to marriage (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Meyer & Schulze, 1983). This is an example where "marriage" becomes partially de-institutionalized, while at the same time the new sequence of first non-marital union and then marriage (with the same or another partner) leads to an increase in the differentiation of the life course by changing into two qualitatively different episodes, whereby it used to be one. The recent increase in home schooling, notable in the U.S., would be a further instance of de-institutionalization of the early phase of education.

The *standardization* of life courses refers to processes by which specific states or events and the sequences in which they occur become more universal for given populations or that their timing becomes more uniform. An example of a highly standardized life course pattern would be, for instance, if all workers retire and all retire at age 65. Apart from the retirement processes increasing standardization has been claimed for gainful employment for women, for secondary education, and, specifically in Germany, for vocational/professional training as well as for maternity leave.

Conversely, *de-standardization* would mean that life states, events and their sequences can become experiences which either characterize an increasingly smaller part of a population or occur at more dispersed ages and

with more dispersed durations. Both marriage and parenthood in this sense first (until the 1970s) became more standardized and then became more de-standardized (Espenshade, 1985). "Stop gap jobs" at career entry in the U.S. (Oppenheimer & Kalmijn, 1995) or the increasing fuzziness of age at retirement in Germany (Ebbinghaus, 2002) would be other cases in point.

Differentiation refers to the process where the number of distinct states or stages across the life time increases. For instance, Mayer (1991) has claimed that early life courses become more and more institutionally differentiated. They are increasingly divided up in publicly defined and recognized periods like pre-school, kindergarten, elementary school, secondary education and tertiary education. Likewise, a process where firm tenure with only one or very few employers has been gradually replaced by frequent shifts between firms could be called a differentiation of the work life (Mertens, 1998). The splitting of a single training period into several ones (Jacob, 2003) would be another instance. Gerontologists have made similar claims for the later life, distinguishing between partial or pre-retirement and retirement as well as between being a "young" old and being an "old" old (Baltes & Mayer, 1999). *De-differentiation* would then refer to processes where formerly split life periods become joined. Still, it is hard to think of examples for the latter process, suggesting that irreversibility of the underlying trend is the more salient phenomenon. While the concept of differentiation of the life course refers to the diachronous dimension of a sequence of life states, the idea of *pluralization* (Zapf, 1987) is usually used to refer to an increase in the synchronous number of states or forms of life activity in a given population or even a given person. Pluralization has mostly been applied to family forms. This refers to the rise of non-marital unions, the increase of persons becoming divorced, increases in the number of single mothers or persons living alone due to divorce or widowhood. A parallel example for a given person would be the increasing frequency of holding multiple jobs.

Finally, the term *individualization* (Beck, 1986; Junge, 2002; Schimank, 2002; Wohlrab-Sahr, 1992) is frequently invoked to refer to many of the changes mentioned above. It is a more interpretative concept according to which individuals are assumed to gain greater control over their lives, thus pursuing a wider variety of life designs and life trajectories. Many of the processes referred to above are then assumed to be the result of increasing individualization. Such a more positive meaning of the concept has in recent years become mixed with notions of involuntary "individualization," of being condemned to pursue and experience trajectories, which are not collectively well-trodden pathways (Buchmann, 1989; Shanahan, 2000).

Obviously, all these different dimensions of general changes in life course patterns could be applied one for one to various domains of life to generate more specific hypotheses. But it may suffice here that we have drawn our illustrative examples from life domains such as education, work, family and social security. However, given its central role in the debate on de-standardization, we want to especially highlight changes postulated for the area of work: the declining employment stability due to generally increasing unemployment, decreases in firm tenure due to layoffs and downsizing, declining durations of staying in a given occupation and declining residential stability. This perception is also connected to hypotheses about increasing rates of downward mobility (Newman, 1999) and income fluctuation across the working life. Such tendencies are frequently generalized under the heading of increasing "flexibility" enforced by employers and made possible by weakened trade unions (Rhodes & van Apeldoorn, 1997; Sennett, 2000; Heinz, 2003). The implicit idea here is that the overall stability and continuity of life courses are seriously undermined by these changes in labor markets.

Two important implications follow from this discussion. First, the processes outlined above do not need to go all in the same direction. For instance, it is possible that institutionalization is coupled with de-standardization as in the case of early retirement policies (Ebbinghaus, 2002) or that pluralization might go hand in hand with standardization, as would be the case if a period of non-marital cohabitation almost universally precedes marriage. Therefore, one cannot assume one overarching unidirectional process and should be careful when making grand generalizations. Going even further, one might question whether the invocation of an overall trend does not lead to more confusion than clarity. Second, the empirical charting of diverse changes in life course patterns cannot simply rely on anecdotal and illustrative evidence. Rather one has to look for systematic data which both proponents and opponents of the de-standardization debate would accept as relevant evidence. Given this situation in the debate, the patient and painstaking measurement of empirical developments becomes crucial.

EMPIRICAL TESTS AND HYPOTHESES

A proper empirical examination of changes in life course patterns requires detailed life histories in various life domains across a larger series of birth cohorts. To be useful, data should be drawn from representative samples, register or census data for a given population. Ideally, one would like to be able to map all the transitions of a given birth cohort through a changing

institutional structure of life states. Of particular interest are the following aspects of these transition processes: (a) prevalence, the extent to which a given transition or state occurs; (b) age variance, the degree to which transitions occur at specific ages; (c) duration variance, the extent to which people stay in a given state or stage; (d) inter-event dependency, the extent to which the occurrence of one event or state is associated with the occurrence of another event or state, and (e) sequence uniformity, the extent to which the temporal sequence and ordering of events and states are uniformly distributed.

Based on these dimensions, we can draw some hypotheses. First, if *de-standardization* is such a pervasive process, we should expect: (a) that prevalence of certain events or life stages has decreased over time; (b) that variances of ages at given transitions have increased; (c) that the variances of given durations have increased; (d) that the inter-event and inter-state dependencies have decreased; and (e) that the sequences of events or states have decreased in their predictability. To corroborate a shift towards *higher flexibility* we should also expect: (f) increased shifts between jobs; (g) decreased firm tenure; and (h) decreased occupational stability. Moreover, according to most of the scenarios we should expect not just very gradual trends, but fairly sudden discontinuities or trend reversals. In the following analyses, we focus on the processes that may result in a de-standardization of life courses. Although we occasionally invoke institutionalization or differentiation in interpreting our findings, we do not attempt to systematically produce evidence related to these concepts, or the related processes of individualization and pluralization. Finally, it is important to note that each of these indicators taken alone can be indicative of multiple processes of social change that in principle may have nothing to do with de-(standardization) of life courses. For example, a delay in family formation could be expected due to changes in educational participation alone, without being indicative of changes in the overall patterning of life courses. Similarly, decreasing job stability may occur during economic up- or downturns, without indicating a societal trend towards de-standardization. Evidence for de-standardization in the conceptualization employed in this paper would require changes in all or at least most of the indicators mentioned above.

DATA

The data used to examine these issues are drawn from the West German part of the GLHS, directed by Karl Ulrich Mayer. This research program

collected detailed retrospective life course information for various birth cohorts of West German Nationals (an overview is given in Brückner & Mayer, 1998; Wagner, 1996; Hillmert, 2003). From 1981 to 1983, 2,171 life histories of a representative sample of people born in 1929–1931, 1939–1941 and 1949–1951 were collected (Mayer & Brückner, 1989). In the years 1985–1987, the cohort group from 1919 to 1921 was added with 1,412 cases, 407 of whom were collected via face-to-face interview, while the remaining 1,005 were collected with a computer-assisted telephone interview (Brückner, 1993). Data for the birth cohorts from 1954–1956 and 1959–1961 were collected in 1989, resulting in 2,008 computer-assisted telephone interviews (Brückner & Mayer, 1995). Finally, the birth cohorts from 1964 and 1971 were interviewed in 1998–1999 with a sample size of 2,909 respondents (Hillmert & Mayer, 2004). For these cohorts, foreign nationals were included in the sample for the first time, reflecting the changing composition of the residential population at that age and time. Our analyses exclude the latter group in order to ensure full comparability with the earlier series. The samples for all parts of the GLHS were carefully evaluated against official statistics (census and micro-census) to ensure that they are representative of their respective populations (documented in the above sources).

For all cohorts, the survey instrument contained detailed questions about family of origin, residential history, education, work life, work interruptions, and family formation, including the formation and dissolution of marital and (for younger cohorts) non-marital unions, as well as children and grandchildren (where applicable). All interviews were carefully checked for errors and chronological consistency. Many respondents were contacted again to clear up inconsistencies in the data, and helped the researchers to reconstruct life histories to the fullest extent possible. The observation window varies for each cohort in the GLHS, from 64–68 years for those born around 1920 to 27 years for those born in 1971.

FINDINGS

In the following, we report findings regarding the experiences of West German men and women born between 1919 and 1971. We explore changes in the timing of selected important life course transitions and in the variation therein. The median age of these events by gender and cohort is reported in Table 1. Fig. 1 shows the inter-quartile range of transition ages. The inter-quartile range is the difference between the age at which 75% of a cohort had experienced an event, and the age at which 25% had experienced

Table 1. Median Age at Selected Life Course Transitions, by Cohort and Gender.

Birth cohort	1920	1930	1940	1950	1955	1960	1964	1971
Men								
Leaving school[a]	14.3	14.3	14.7	15.3	16.0	16.5	16.8	17.2
Completing training[b]	19.3	20.0	19.3	20.3	24.8	24.6	22.3	23.5
1st job[c]	18.1	17.8	18.0	18.8	19.5	19.8	20.2	20.3
Leaving home[d]	29.7	25.7	25.3	24.2	23.9	23.3	23.8	24.2
1st marriage	27.7	25.8	25.4	25.8	26.3	29.5	29.4	—[e]
1st child	29.7	28.3	27.3	30.0	30.6	—[e]	32.6	—[e]
Women								
Leaving school[a]	14.4	14.6	14.7	14.9	16.0	16.5	17.1	17.6
Completing training[b]	18.3	18.9	18.3	18.5	19.5	20.4	20.7	21.6
1st job[c]	16.9	16.5	17.5	18.1	18.9	19.6	20.3	20.4
Leaving home[d]	28.3	23.7	22.2	21.0	20.8	21.0	21.4	21.8
1st marriage	23.3	23.7	22.2	21.5	23.0	25.3	25.5	—[e]
1st child	25.4	25.9	23.8	25.0	27.0	28.2	28.1	—[e]

Source: German Life History Study. Kaplan–Meier estimates.
[a]Primary and secondary schooling.
[b]Includes only those who began a training spell during the observation period; includes vocational apprenticeships, vocational schools, and post-secondary training.
[c]First job with a duration of 2 months and longer.
[d]Age at which first own household was formed.
[e]Less than 50% of cohort had experienced event during the observation period.

the event, and serves as a measure of intra-cohort variation. For marriage and first childbirth, some cohorts had not yet reached the 75th percentile or even the median age, and we will introduce other measures throughout the text to compare the experiences of these cohorts to the older cohorts.

The School–Training–Work Nexus

Table 1 clearly shows the well-documented trend towards delay in major life course transitions. During the observation window, the age of mandatory schooling was raised to age 15, but more importantly, educational expansion led to longer periods of schooling as Germans increasingly graduated from middle school and Gymnasium[1]. Thus, the median age at leaving school rose from 14.3 for men born around 1920 to 17.2 for men born in 1971. For women, it similarly increased from 14.4 for women born around 1920 to 17.6 for women born in 1971. Intra-cohort variation in age at

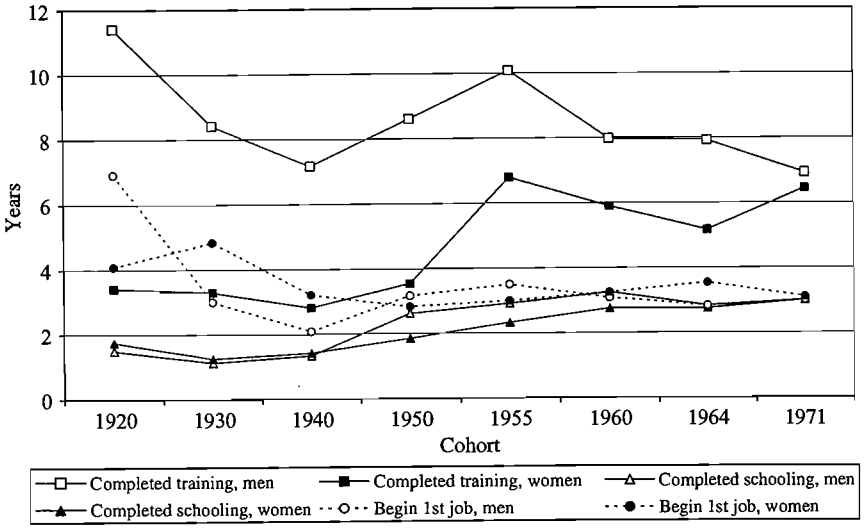

Fig. 1. Interquartile Ranges for Age at Selected Life Course Transitions.

leaving school increased moderately, from 1.5 years for men of the 1920 cohort to 3.3 years for men born around 1960 and 3.0 years for men born in 1971 (see Fig. 1, line marked with white triangles). For women, the increase was more gradual but remarkably similar.

There are more dramatic changes with respect to the age at which cohort members completed their training. Among men who had begun any training during the observation window, completion age rose from 19.3 for those born around 1920 to 24.8 for those born around 1955 (see Table 1). Most of the change happened between the 1950 and 1955 cohorts, when completion age increased by $4\frac{1}{2}$ years. It fell slightly for subsequent cohorts, to 22.3 and 23.5 for those born in 1964 and 1971, respectively. For women, the changes were much more gradual. Completion age rose from 18.3 for women born around 1920 to 21.6 for women born in 1971. Fig. 1 further shows that from the 1950 cohort on, the variation in age at completion of training increased strongly for women, while it declined for men. The inter-quartile range was 3.4 for women born around 1920, 3.5 for women born around 1950, before reaching a peak of 6.8 for women of the 1955 cohort. For men, dispersion was greatest among the 1920 cohort, due to delayed entry into training because of the war and the opportunities for re-entering training after the war. Dispersion then declined steeply for men born around 1930 and 1940,

only to rise again with the greater educational opportunities for men born in the 1950s. The 75th percentile for the 1955 cohort is 29.5, compared to 26.8 for the 1950 cohort and 27.7 for the 1960 cohort. Thus, a substantial minority of cohort members delayed completion of training considerably. The difficult labor market in the mid-1970s and mid-1980s (when these cohorts were in their 20s) may have contributed to a tendency to spend more time in the educational system. Here, the institutions of the educational system served as 'waiting halls' for young people who had few prospects in the labor market. These cohorts have been named the 'postponed' generation for this very reason (Mayer, 1994).

Table 2 shows that the cohorts born after 1950 were also increasingly likely to start and complete several training episodes. For example, more than half of the men born around 1955 and 1960 began more than two training episodes, compared to less than a third for the earlier cohorts.

Table 2. Training Spells[a] Started by Age 27, by Cohort and Gender (%).

Birth cohort	1920	1930	1940	1950	1955	1960	1964	1971
Started training spells, men								
None	13.4	16.4	9.1	3.6	1.5	2.0	2.1	0.8
One	59.7	55.0	58.7	57.1	48.7	43.0	55.7	51.7
Two	20.8	21.0	25.6	28.8	31.0	36.1	33.4	36.9
Three or more	6.1	7.5	6.7	10.4	18.8	18.9	8.8	10.6
Completed training spells, men								
None	27.1	26.6	18.9	17.0	14.4	15.4	12.3	13.8
One	63.6	59.0	57.6	59.1	53.3	56.6	69.6	69.4
Two	7.7	12.7	20.0	19.5	22.8	21.9	16.8	15.2
Three or more	1.6	1.7	3.5	4.4	9.6	6.1	1.4	1.5
Started training spells, women								
None	33.7	53.2	34.9	16.8	7.2	4.3	5.4	2.4
One	46.8	38.5	45.6	55.6	51.5	50.9	58.7	53.8
Two	14.8	7.2	16.3	21.1	29.3	32.1	24.1	29.9
Three or more	4.7	1.1	3.1	6.5	12.0	12.7	11.7	13.9
Completed training spells, women								
None	54.8	65.4	44.5	26.8	16.3	15.5	12.9	13.4
One	39.4	31.0	46.2	56.9	59.6	61.8	70.6	71.2
Two	5.3	3.3	8.5	14.9	19.6	17.8	14.9	13.6
Three or more	0.6	0.3	0.8	1.4	4.5	4.9	1.7	1.8

Source: German Life History Study.
[a]Includes vocational apprenticeships, vocational schools, and post-secondary training.

Similarly, the proportion of men born around 1955 who completed more than three training episodes is more than five times greater than that for those born around 1920, and more than twice that for men born around 1940 and 1950. Almost a third of the men born around 1955 completed two or more training episodes, compared to 9.3% for the 1920 cohort and 14.4% for the 1930 cohort. For the two youngest cohorts, however, the proportion that completed two or more training episodes fell again to 18.2% for men born in 1964 and 16.7% for men born in 1971. Finally, the proportion of men who never completed training fell from 27.1% for the 1920 cohort to 14.4% for the 1955 cohort.

The decline of the proportion that never completed any training is even more dramatic for women. More than half of the women born in 1920 and 65.4% of those born around 1930 did not complete training, compared to 16.3% for the 1955 cohort and 12.9% for the 1964 cohort. Similarly, having two or more training episodes was quite rare for women born before 1940 but became more common for women born around 1950 and later. Overall, the marked gender differences in the distribution of the number of started and completed training that are typical for the older cohorts had pretty much disappeared by the time the 1955 cohort left the educational system, although women still completed their training about 2–4 years earlier than men.

Despite such changes, the median age at labor market entry is comparatively stable. For men, it rose from around ages 18 to 20 across cohorts (see Table 1). For women, it increased more, from under 17 to about 20. For the three youngest cohorts, earlier gender differences in age at labor market entry have virtually disappeared. Cohort members entered the labor market within a relatively narrow range of ages, with the exception of the 1920 cohort, which entered the labor market during and after World War II (see Fig. 1). Men in this cohort reached the 75th percentile only at age 24, compared to 19 for the 1930 and 1940 cohort. For later cohorts, the ages at which cohort members reached the 25th and 75th percentiles rose modestly, leading to a stable inter-quartile ratio across cohorts. The same is true for women. It is noteworthy that for men, the median age of first job is always and increasingly younger than that at completion of training, although the proportion of cohort members who never entered training fell across cohorts. Thus, transitions from labor force participation back into the educational system are increasingly common across cohorts.

Employment mobility is shown in Table 3. A full comparison of life courses across the eight cohort groups is possible only until age 27, the age at which the youngest cohort (1971) was interviewed. Table 3 therefore

Table 3. Experiences by Age 27, by Cohort and Gender.

Birth cohort	1920	1930	1940	1950	1955	1960	1964	1971
Men								
Number of jobs[a]	2.2	2.4	2.4	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.1	3.0
Years worked[b]	3.2	8.3	8.1	6.2	5.4	4.8	5.1	5.1
Jobs per year[c]	1.0	0.4	0.3	0.4	0.6	0.7	0.7	1.8
Number of residences	5.2	3.0	2.8	2.2	2.9	3.0	2.2	2.3
Proportion married	0.41	0.56	0.64	0.57	0.51	0.36	0.32	0.17
Proportion with child	0.28	0.39	0.43	0.30	0.27	0.20	0.19	0.11
Women								
Number of jobs[a]	3.0	2.0	2.0	1.9	2.0	2.1	1.9	2.6
Years worked[b]	7.0	6.9	6.3	5.9	5.4	5.1	4.9	5.1
Jobs per year[c]	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.7	0.5	1.0
Number of residences	3.9	2.6	3.0	2.3	2.9	2.9	2.6	2.6
Proportion married	0.67	0.74	0.85	0.81	0.66	0.58	0.57	0.39
Proportion with child	0.56	0.56	0.68	0.57	0.47	0.39	0.38	0.27

Source: German Life History Study.
[a]Excludes persons who never worked for longer than 3 months.
[b]Includes persons who never worked.
[c]Job shifts per year of labor force participation until age 27. This excludes those who worked less than 2 months.

reports the number of residences and jobs reported up to that age. The average number of jobs held until age 27 is remarkably stable across cohorts with around 2.3 for men and around 2.0 for women. Only the 1971 cohort for men and women and the 1920 cohort for women show a higher mobility: approximately three jobs. The dispersion of number of jobs is similarly stable over time (data not shown). However, because cohort members entered the labor market later and spent more time in the educational system, the average number of jobs per year changes across cohorts. Aside from the 1920 cohort, there is an increase in job changes for cohorts born after 1950. Thus, the same number of jobs is distributed over a shorter period of time for cohorts born after 1950. The rate of job shifts more than doubled for men born in 1971. Fig. 2 shows the dramatic increase in both median number of job shifts per year and in the inter-quartile range for the 1971 cohort and that this trend is more pronounced for men than for women. One source of this may in part be the dramatic rise in unemployment for this cohort (Hillmert & Mayer, 2004)[2]. Mertens and Mayer (2004) further show that, compared to the 1940 cohort, the risks of involuntary firm switches and downward wage mobility have strongly increased for the cohorts born

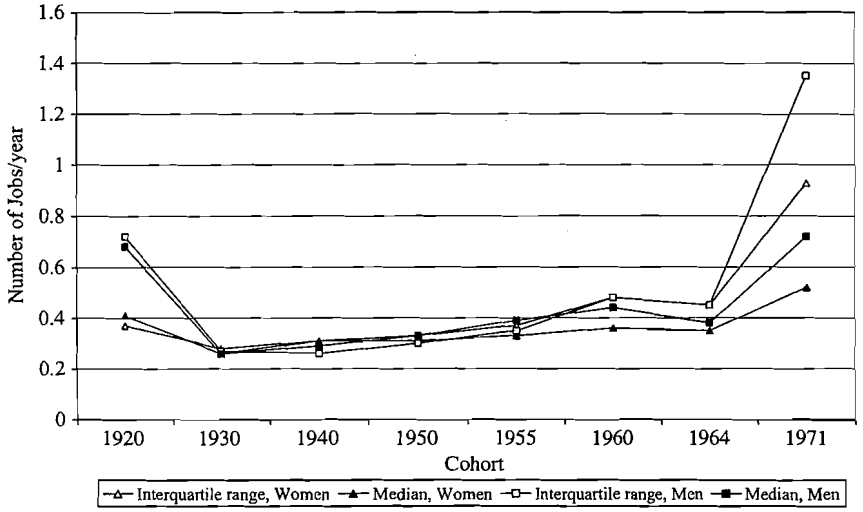

Fig. 2. Job Shifts until Age 27 per Year of Labor Force Participation, by Cohort and Gender.

around 1960 and in 1971, but to a lesser extent for the 1964 cohort. Hillmert (2002), however, has found no decrease in occupational stability for the cohorts born between 1960 and 1971, although their risk of unemployment is comparatively higher (see also Kurz, Hillmert, & Grunow, 2002).

Household and Family Formation

The delay of the transition to adulthood in the school–training–work nexus shown in the previous section did not keep cohort members from moving out and forming their own household. Median age at household formation declined somewhat across cohorts from the late 20s to the early 20s (see Table 1). Fig. 3 shows the inter-quartile range for this transition. There was significant variability in age of household formation for people born around 1920 but this declined steeply until the 1950 cohort. There is a modest increase of variability for the younger cohorts of men (Konietzka & Huinink, 2003).

For residential mobility up to age 27, the 1920 cohort stands out. They reported an average of 5.2 places of residence for men and 3.9 for women (see Table 3). For the other cohorts, the number fluctuates between 2 and 3

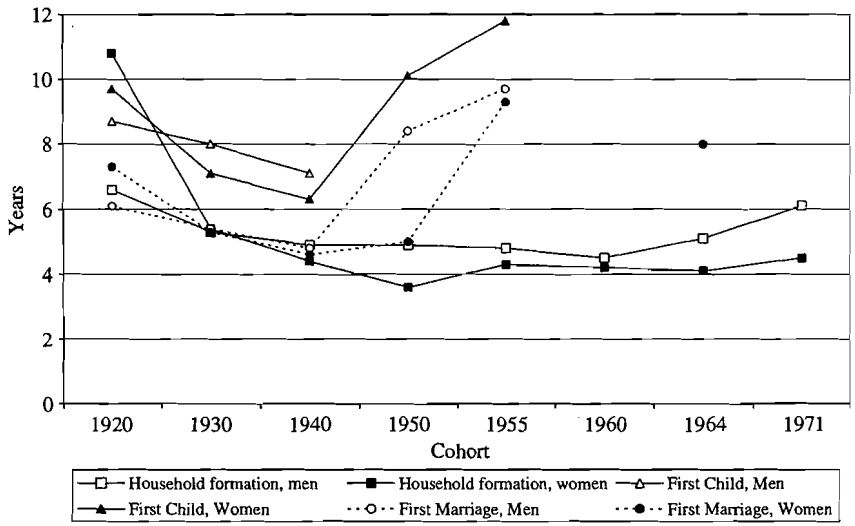

Fig. 3. Interquartile Ranges for Age at Selected Life Course Transitions.

residences without a clear cohort trend. Men of the 1955 and 1960 cohorts are also more likely than others to move two or three times (data not shown). For women, the distribution is quite similar across cohorts with the exception of the 1920 cohort.

By U.S. standards, West Germans marry late and have their first child even later. First marriage occurred late for men in 1920, at almost 28 (see Table 1). Later cohorts married somewhat earlier, but by the 1955 cohort, age at first marriage increased again, extending to 30. The youngest cohort was interviewed at age 27 and thus median marriage age cannot be observed. We can, however, compare the proportion married by this age. Only 17% of the men of this cohort were married at the time of the interview (see Table 3). In contrast, men of the 1940 cohort were almost four times more likely to be married at this age (64%), and even those born in 1960 were twice as likely to be married at this age (36%). The proportion of women who had married by age 27 follows a similar pattern albeit at a higher level. The proportion married increased between the 1920 and the 1940 cohort from 67% to 85%, and then began to fall again. Women born in 1971 were half as likely to be married by age 27 than women born around 1950.

A delay in marriage age does not necessarily imply a de-standardization of family formation patterns – people may marry later, but still experience

this event at pretty much the same time than their age peers, albeit later than their parents and older siblings. Fig. 3 shows an early decline and later increase in the inter-quartile range in age at marriage for those cohorts for whom the process was far enough along to calculate the 75th percentile. The same holds for women. Women marry a few years earlier than men but show the same pattern of inter-cohort change, perhaps somewhat attenuated. Variability increased for women, too. Unfortunately, we cannot observe the age at the 75th percentile for most of the younger cohorts and thus follow our earlier strategy of calculating the proportion of people marrying by a certain age for each cohort. The result for women is shown in Fig. 4; for men, in Fig. 5. If there is such a thing as a standardized age for marriage, we should see a steep curve with short tails. The peak of the curve, if any, should contain most cohort members within a narrow age range. When these age standards degrade, we should see curves that flatten out, have less pronounced peaks, and long tails. For the marriage behavior of West German women, this idea is illustrated in Fig. 4.

Women born around 1940 and 1950 indeed tend to marry at the same ages, and the marriage process is essentially completed by their late 20s. For those born around 1920 and 1930, the peaks are somewhat lower, the spread is greater, and there is a fatter tail. Beginning with the 1955 cohort, the

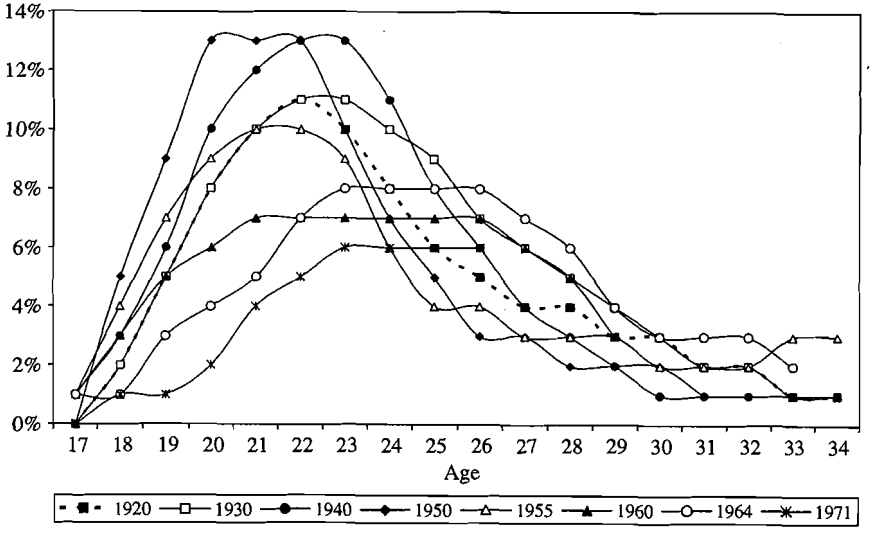

Fig. 4. Marriage Timing by Cohort and Age, Women.

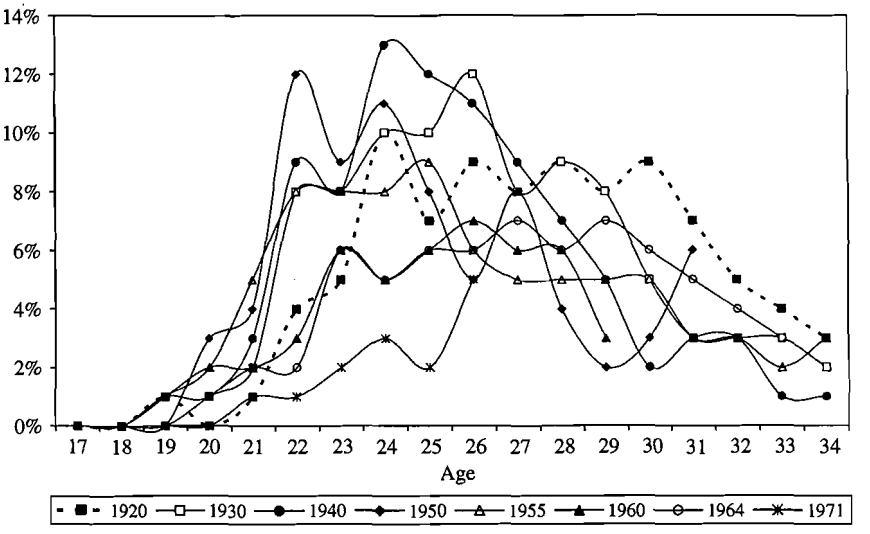

Fig. 5. Marriage Timing by Cohort Age, Men.

curves begin to flatten out. There is still a peak for the 1955 cohort in the early 20s. In contrast, the 1960 cohort has more of a plateau during the late teens through the late 20s and wide tails in both directions. Thus, experiences for these younger cohorts have certainly become more varied. For men, the place of marriage in the life course is much less neat (see Fig. 5). Men born around 1930 and 1940 have peaks in the early and mid-20s, but a substantial proportion marries later. For the 1920 cohort, the curve is much flatter and extends into the early 30s. The younger cohorts, similar to women, have even flatter curves. It is noteworthy that for men born around 1950, there are several peaks, in the early 20s, mid-20s, and early 30s. This is consistent with the thesis that marriage behavior for this cohort is structured by educational participation (Huinink & Mayer, 1995). For the younger cohorts, no such pattern is discernible.

Finally, we turn to age at first childbirth. Median age for this life course event was late for men born around 1920 (29.7) and declined for the 1940 cohort (see Table 1). These are the only cohorts for whom we can observe the inter-quartile range (see Fig. 3), because childbirth occurred even later for the younger cohorts. Comparison of prevalence again illuminates changes over time. By age 27, 43% of men born around 1940 had had a first child, but only 30% of those born around 1950. The proportion declined

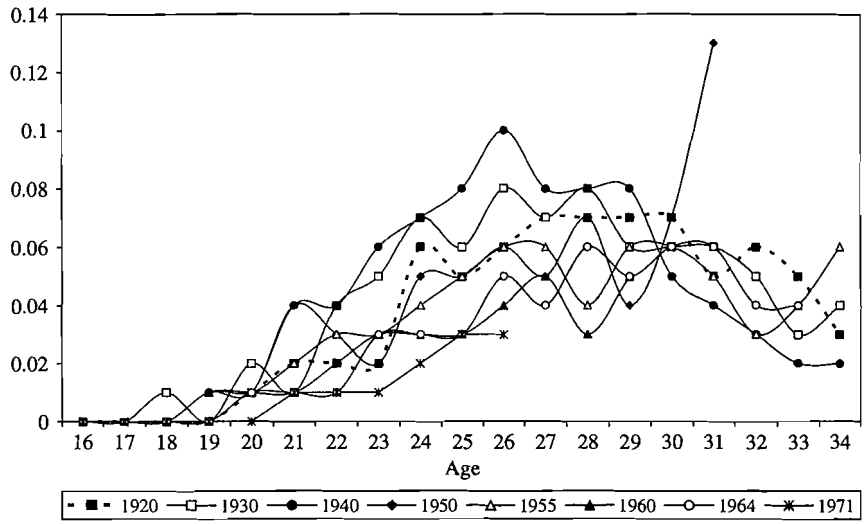

Fig. 6. Timing of First Childbirth by Cohort and Age, Men.

further, reaching its low at 11% for men born in 1971. Although it is therefore difficult to make generalizations about changes in the nature of this transition from our data, Fig. 6 shows the process as far as we can follow the cohort members. Even more so than for marriage, the age at first childbirth varies within cohorts. The line that most resembles a curve with one peak is that for the 1940 cohort. Men born around 1950 have a peak at age 30, but the curve comprises only 55% of the cohort members. The remaining 45% had not yet had children by the time they were interviewed. For the other cohorts, the curves are spread out and rather flat.

Women have their first children earlier than men, but the pattern of inter-cohort change is similar to that of men. The proportion of women who had a child by age 27 reached a peak for women born around 1940 at 68% and then steadily declined to a low of 27% for those born in 1971. Fig. 7 shows that similar to marriage, first childbirth is more age structured for women than for men. The peak is most pronounced for women born around 1940. For women born around 1950, there is a pattern of differentiation with an early peak between age 19 and 24 and a later, flatter peak in the late 20s. Especially for the cohorts born around 1955 and 1960, the curves spread out, and a substantial proportion of women born around 1955 have their first child in their 30s (the 1960 cohort was interviewed when they were around 28 and therefore we cannot observe what happens later on).

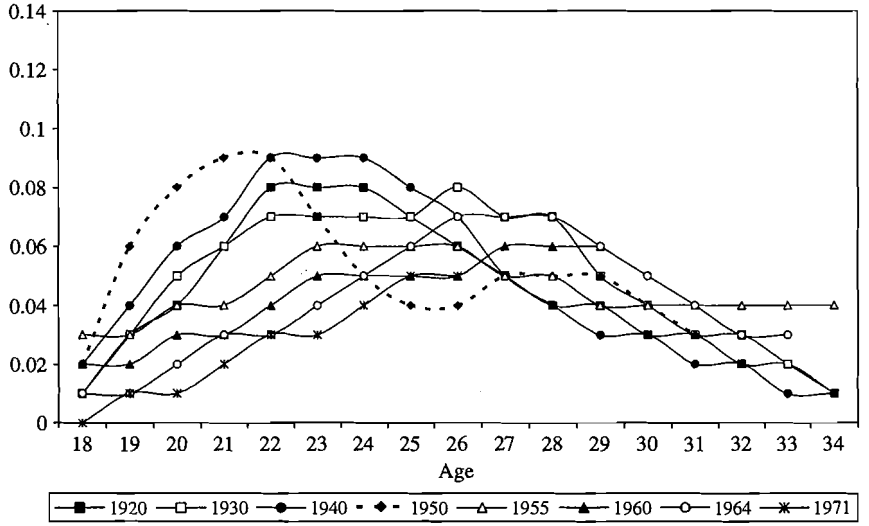

Fig. 7. Timing of First Childbirth by Cohort and Age, Women.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In regard to the nexus between the end of schooling and the entry into the labor market, we find two clear time trends in these data for West Germany. First, transitions occur later and later. Second, the life courses of men and women become more similar in the school–training–work nexus. With respect to the issue of *de-standardization*, we note that the sequencing of training and work becomes fuzzier as participation in the educational system increases. This is especially so for the cohorts born around 1955 and 1960. Especially for women, one consequence of increased participation in training is that the variation of age at completion of education increases as well, converging on that for men. Otherwise, the expected increase of age variation under the de-standardization hypothesis turns out to be non-existent or rather small – at least for the transitions in the school–training–work nexus reported here. There are, however, strong period effects that go against the assumption of linear or generalized transformations of the life course. Of particular note, people born around 1920 experienced quite heterogeneous life courses due to the war, and the cohorts born around 1955 and 1960 took longer to complete their training than any other cohort.

With respect to family formation, we observe a pattern of age consolidation for the cohorts 1920–1940, but this is followed by *differentiation* that may reflect the educational system for the 1950 cohort. There is even more variability for cohorts born after 1950. We also note that this pattern is stronger for women than for men. Variability is pronounced for all female cohorts. Nevertheless, we are still left with the question of whether the trend towards greater variability in the timing of life course transitions can truly be described as *de-standardization*. Imagine a kindergarten in the mid-1960s and assume for simplicity that it is frequented only by first-borns. The age distribution of parents in this kindergarten would certainly be more uniform than that of a similar kindergarten in the mid-1980s or mid-1990s. Conversely, children born to our younger cohort members will be caring for their elderly parents during variable stages of their own life course and there probably will be greater variability in the availability of grandparents to help with childcare when these children form their own families. Lasting friendships formed in the mid-1950s by young adults will be characterized by a more synchronous experience of important life course transitions than those formed by younger cohorts. This may have implications for the usefulness, the formation and the maintenance of support networks that reach beyond one's kin. With respect to the relationship between these various life course transitions, we note the increasing *de-coupling* of events in the connections between the school–training–work nexus and family formation. For example, forming an independent household is no longer coupled with marriage or having a stable job (Konietzka & Huinink, 2003). Nevertheless, the institutional environment continues to structure the school–training–work nexus and not much change was seen in the way in which cohort members undergo these transitions. On the contrary, by the standard employed in this paper there is actually a homogenization of life course as women's and men's life courses converge in terms of education and labor force participation. It is the family formation nexus that shows the most pronounced changes, and is also the realm in which gender differences persist across cohorts.

In sum, our observations from West Germany across half a century show considerable evidence supporting the de-standardization thesis in the area of private lives. Combined with the extant evidence on the rapid spread of non-marital unions before marriage and the rise of divorce, this de-standardization in the family sphere was coupled with some degree of de-institutionalization and a pluralization of family forms. This development seems to have been triggered by three long-term developments: educational expansion with its delaying effects on family formation, the pronounced value

changes starting in the early 1970s and – related to both of these processes – the women's movement. In contrast, we find little support for the de-standardization thesis in the spheres of education, training and work. These transitions have been prolonged, have become more differentiated in regard to multiple training spells and as a result have become less standardized in the degree of orderliness of the sequences of leaving school, training and employment. But with the possible exception of an increasing variability of the age at completing training for women we find a high degree of long-term stability. Rather than a trend or massive changes in recent cohorts we find exceptional experiences of some earlier cohorts, especially the "war" and "post-war" cohorts born around 1920 and 1930 and the "labor market crunch" cohort born around 1955, as well as an increase in job mobility for the 1971 cohort.

Obviously, we should be cautious in passing a final verdict on the de-standardization thesis even in the non-family sphere. On the one hand, we have only examined here a selective set of indicators which all relate to the early part of life. On the other hand, (West) Germany might be a special case where the specific institutions of training and occupationally segmented labor markets still exert strong influences in shaping life courses. While we are constantly baffled by the contrast between what our data show for the past and how contemporary commentators interpreted the social condition, we would be hesitant to extrapolate this into the future. Indeed, there are indications of a profound change in the most recent cohort that may require time to see their full significance. We have only scratched the surface in understanding the mechanisms that produce the life course patterns we observe. But these facts are a better starting point for this task than the speculations that tend to dominate this field both in social science and the public debate.

NOTES

1. The West German educational system has three main tracks: the *Hauptschule* is the main avenue into vocational training in the manual occupations. Graduation took place after normally 8 years until a ninth grade was added in the late 1970s. Lower secondary school is the main avenue into vocational training in clerical occupations and takes 10 years to complete. The *Gymnasium* is the academic track and takes 13 years to complete (Cortina, Baumert, Leschinsky, Mayer, & Trommer, 2003).

2. The duration of labor force participation until age 27 is very similar for the cohorts born after 1950 and therefore the increase of job shifts for the 1971 cohort cannot be contributed to search behavior at the beginning of the work life – if that

were the case, we should see the same numbers of job shifts for the 1960 and 1964 cohorts.

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