

Whose Lives? How History, Societies, and Institutions Define and Shape Life Courses

Karl Ulrich Mayer
Yale University

This article outlines how current sociology constructs life courses. First, a set of general heuristics is provided. Second, the development of life course sociology over the last 50 years is traced as an intellectual process whereby the *life course* has emerged as an analytical construct in addition to such concepts as human development, biography, and aging. A differential life course sociology has gradually developed in which contexts are specified according to time and place. Third, these differential constraints operating on life courses are illustrated from the perspective of 2 research areas. One perspective introduces historical periods as a sequence of regimes that regulate life courses. Another perspective looks at cross-national differences and especially focuses on institutions as the mechanisms by which life courses are shaped. The article concludes with reflections about the relation between the variable social contexts of life courses and human development.

In recent years, there has been a marked shift in the way human development and human life courses are being perceived. Infants and children are seen as producers, or at least as coproducers, of their own development (Lerner & Busch-Rossnagel, 1981). Parent–child relationships and socialization processes are categorized much less as one-way streets where parents and other socialization agents imprint and impose their values and habits on children and adolescents but rather as areas of mutual interaction where it remains open who influences whom more (Krappmann, 2001; Kreppner, 1999). The old idea that teachers effectively transfer knowledge and character has given way to unending reports about unruly classes and resistant pupils. Sociologists have newly celebrated the significance of human agency (Giddens, 1984) and the individualization of life decisions and

Requests for reprints should be sent to Karl Ulrich Mayer, Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Center for Sociology and the Study of the Life Course, Lentzeallee 94, D-1495 Berlin, Germany. E-mail: Sekmayer@mpib-berlin.mpg.de

lifestyles in patchwork biographies (Beck, 1986). Fewer daily working hours, coupled with considerable disposable income, open up a variety of self-chosen milieus and habitus. Ever earlier onsets and ever later conclusions of adolescence and transitions to adulthood are being interpreted as significant extensions of personal autonomy: “getting into one’s own” (Modell, 1991).

In contrast, development regulated by universal biological principles of maturation and decline (Piaget, 1970); the harsh discipline of families, workplaces, and a variety of other institutions (Foucault, 1977); and life courses determined and constrained by tradition, collective class fate (Thompson, 1976), or the whims of historical catastrophes such as the Great Depression (Elder, 1974), the world wars (Winter, 1986), and the Holocaust (Kertesz, 1992; Levi, 1995) seem to echo pictures of an old past. If at all, it appears as if it is the lack of limits of options, the unlimited flexibilization (Sennett, 2000) and pluralization that pose the post-modern condition.

Under such premises it seems almost odd to raise the question of how life courses are shaped by forces external to the individual person, how historical conditions, the good or bad fortunes of national citizenship or institutional arrangements built the tracks that individual trajectories are bound to follow (Mayer, 1986). Three lines of argument can be used to defend taking up such seemingly outmoded perspectives. One line of argument goes back to Immanuel Kant, who insisted in his philosophy of the mind that determinism and autonomy, constraint and choice, are regulative principles of potential knowledge and moral behavior that do not rule each other out but rather constitute different and mutually exclusive modalities of how to view the world. A second line of argument reminds us that “individualism” and its opposites are in themselves historically variable sociocultural constructs (Meyer, 1986). The relative extent to which we perceive the person and his or her life as actors with their own scripts is a matter of culturally pre-fixed lenses. Thus, whether it is at all possible to resolve the issue of growing or declining personal autonomy, of relative degrees of choice and constraint, is open to debate. The third line of argument insists not only that lives in countries less fortunate than the G-7 club are to a much higher extent bound by the arbitrariness of the social class and national citizenship into which one is born but that also after the exceptional postwar periods of relative affluence, constraints and dependency are on the rise.

In this article I outline how the social construction of life courses is currently being defined and developed in sociology. In a first step, I summarize my version of a general theory of the social organization of the life course. In a second step, I portray the development of life course sociology over the last 50 years as an intellectual process whereby the *life course* has emerged as an analytical construct in addition to and separate from such notions and terms as *human development*, *biography*, and *aging*. Moreover, general ideas of how human lives are shaped by

social and historical circumstances have been gradually replaced by a kind of differential life course sociology in which contexts are specified according to time and place. After these two introductory stepping stones, I look at the social constraints operating on life courses from the perspective of two different research areas. The first perspective introduces historical periods as a temporal sequence of contextual regimes that regulate life courses. The second perspective looks at cross-national differences in patterns of life courses and especially focuses on institutions as the mechanisms by which lives are channeled in specific ways. Here I argue that the development of life course sociology has benefited greatly from recent advances in the fields of comparative welfare state research (Leisering & Leibfried, 1999) and from the research on “varieties of capitalism” (Hall & Soskice, 2001). I conclude the article with some reflections about the relation between the variable social contexts of life courses and human development.

My aim is not to provide a systematic review that would do full justice to the literature and state of empirical research in this field but rather to present arguments in a more exemplary manner. I rely heavily on my own material (and that of my colleagues) and evidence from the nine cohort surveys of the German Life History Study (Brückner & Mayer, 1998), and I borrow liberally from a wide array of publications that originated in the Center for Sociology and the Study of the Life Course at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, which I have directed since 1983. Although I heavily rely on work from my associates in the German Life History Study, they share no responsibility for the edifice I am going to build upon it.

THE LIFE COURSE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIOLOGY

With the term *life course* sociologists denote the sequence of activities or states and events in various life domains spanning from birth to death.¹ The life course is thus seen as the embedding of individual lives into social structures primarily in the form of their partaking in social positions and roles, that is, in regard to their membership in institutional orders. The sociological study of the life course, therefore, aims at mapping, describing, and explaining the synchronic and diachronic distribution of individual persons into social positions across the lifetime. One major aspect of life courses is their internal temporal ordering, that is, the relative duration times in given states as well as the age distributions at various events or transitions.

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How do order and regularities in life courses come about? Sociologists primarily look for three mechanisms to account for the form and outcomes of life courses. The first mechanism is the degree and kind to which societies are internally differentiated into subsystems or institutional fields (Mayer & Müller, 1986). This is often taken to be the most obvious and important mechanism. The second mechanism lies in the internal dynamic of individual lives in group contexts. Here, one searches for conditions of behavioral outcomes in the prior life history or in norm-guided or rationally purposive action. The third mechanism derives from the basic fact that it is not simply society on the one hand and the individual on the other that are related to each other, but aggregates of individuals in the form of populations such as birth cohorts or labor market entry cohorts (Mayer & Huinink, 1990).

I now illustrate each of these three life course mechanisms in turn. How do institutions corresponding to various subsystems shape life courses? The educational system defines and regulates educational careers by its age-graded and time-scheduled sequences of classes; its school types and tracks; and its institutions of vocational and professional training and higher learning, with their hierarchical and time-related sequence of courses and certificates. Labor law defines who is gainfully employed and who is unemployed or out of the labor force and, thus, employment trajectories. The occupational structure defines careers by conventional or institutionalized occupational activities, employment statuses and qualification groups, segmentation, and segregation. The supply of labor determines the opportunity structure and, thus, the likelihood of gaining entry into an occupational group or of change between occupations and industrial sectors. Firms provide by their internal functional and hierarchical division of labor career ladders and the boundaries for job shifts between firms and enterprises. In a similar manner, the institutions of social insurance and public welfare define the status of being ill, the duration of maternity leave, the age or employment duration until retirement, and so on. Family norms and laws constitute the boundaries between being single or in nonmarital unions, married, and divorced. Finally, the spatial structure of societies, as well as forms of property, define the interaction with family roles and forms of household trajectories of residential mobility, household changes, and migration.

The second mechanism for shaping life courses focuses on life trajectories and their precedents. Descriptively, research tends to concentrate on transition or hazard rates, that is, the instantaneous rates at which a well-defined population at risk makes certain transitions, for example, into first employment, first motherhood, retirement, and so on, within given time intervals. The explanatory question for life course research, then, is whether certain life course outcomes are shaped not only by situational, personal, or contextual conditions but also by experiences and resources acquired at earlier stages of the biography such as incomplete families in childhood (Grundmann, 1992), prior job shifts (Mayer, Diewald, & Solga,

1999), prior episodes of unemployment (Bender, Konietzka, & Sopp, 2000), educational careers (Henz, 1996), or vocational training and early career patterns (Hillmert, 2001a; Konietzka, 1999; Solga, 2003).

There is one important additional point to be made in this context. Looking for causal mechanisms on the micro level of the individual biography does not resolve the issue of whether the individual is more of an active agent or more of a passive object in the processes that shape the life course or—to put it in different terms—whether selection or adaptation by choice is of primary importance (Diewald, 1999, chap. 2; Nollmann, 2003). Sociologists tend to be split on this issue. Some would emphasize cultural scripts, some would stress social norms, and others would bet on rational choice. On the whole, however, sociologists tend to believe more in selection than in choice. First of all, already the institutional contexts as described earlier narrow down to a large extent which life avenues are open and which are closed. Second, within given institutional contexts, individuals are probably more frequently being selected than selecting themselves. This is related to another sociological axiom: If material resources, power, and authority, as well as information and symbolic goods, are distributed very unequally within given societies, then it follows that more people have to accommodate than have the opportunity to exert control.

The third mechanism that one can look for in unraveling patterns in life courses has to do with the fact that it is not single individuals but populations that are allocated to, and streamlined through, the institutional fabric of society across the lifetime—for example, the size of one's cohort, as well as the preceding and succeeding cohorts, influences individuals' opportunities way beyond individual or situational conditions (Hillmert, 2001b; Ryder, 1965, 1980). Similarly, the dynamics of union formation and marriage through which one's own chances to find a partner are shaped change over time depending on the behavior of others searching at the same time (Hernes, 1972, 1976).

From the perspective of sociology, then, life courses are considered not as life histories of persons as individuals but as patterned dynamic expressions of social structure. These dynamics operate in populations or subsets of populations, are governed intentionally or unintentionally by institutions, and are the intentional or unintentional outcomes of the behavior of actors. Patterns of life courses are, however, not only products of societies and a part and parcel of social structure but also important mechanisms for generating social structures as the aggregate outcome of individual steps throughout the life course. One transparent example of these processes is evident in the fact that the age and cohort structure of a population is the highly consequential result of a multitude of fertility behaviors and decisions. Likewise, the employment structure is the outcome of a multitude of individual employment trajectories.

Finally, the relation to historical time is crucial for the sociological study of life courses because life courses are embedded in definite strands of historical periods

as well as in the collective life history of families and birth cohorts. Life courses are subject not only to historical circumstances at any time but also to the cumulative or delayed effects of earlier historical times on the individual life history or the collective life history of birth cohorts (or marriage cohorts or employment entry cohorts).

Our heuristic for the study of life courses is thus guided by four signposts (Huinink, 1995; Mayer & Huinink, 1990): First, individual life courses are to be seen as part and product of a societal and historical multilevel process. They are closely tied to the life courses of other people (parents, partners, children, work colleagues, etc.) and the dynamics of the social groups of which they are a member. They are highly structured by social institutions and organizations and their temporal dynamics. Second, the life course is multidimensional. It develops in different mutually related and mutually influencing life domains, such as work and the family. It also unfolds in the context of biological and psychological maturation and decline. Third, the life course is a self-referential process. The person acts or behaves on the basis of prior experiences and resources. Therefore, one must expect endogenous causation already on the individual level. Via aggregation this then also becomes true for the collective life course of birth cohorts or generations. Individuals' and generations' pasts facilitate and constrain their futures. This is the meaning of the phrase *die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen* (the contemporaneity of the untemporaneous) characterizing the interdependency of generations. The various age groups live together in a common present, but each brings to it its own particular past. Fourth, through the manner in which people live and construct their own individual lives, they reproduce and change social structures. This can either happen through "simple" aggregation processes or through immediate or intermediate institution formation. An example of the latter would be that a growing proportion of fully employed mothers exert electoral pressure to change schools into institutions that take care of children for most of the day.

One might also ask in which sources sociologists of the life course expect the greatest share of variance in life course outcomes to be explained. The largest part of variation will usually be expected to reside in those external structures within society that are closely tied to the division of labor, that is, the occupational structure and the structure of employment in various industrial sectors and the educational systems. The reason for this is that both the distribution of initial resources, of resulting income rewards, and the distribution of positions that form the basic opportunity structure and into which people are sorted, are intimately tied to these institutional fields. Thus, life course patterns are expected to vary greatly across social classes or status groups (Mayer & Carroll, 1990). The second-largest source of variation sociologists tend to locate would be in the division of labor within households, that is, the way women and men in families and other unions allocate their lifetimes for economic and family roles (Ben-Porath, 1979; Sørensen, 1990). The third important source of variation life

course sociologists would look for relates to the differential intervention of the state in the form of the modern welfare state (Huinink et al., 1995; Leisering, 2003; Mayer & Müller, 1986). It is, therefore, the so-called *welfare mix* (i.e., the relative importance and manner of interconnectedness of economic markets, the family, and the state across historical time and across contemporary societies) that sociologists see as the major determinant of life course patterns (Esping-Andersen, 1999).

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF LIFE COURSE SOCIOLOGY

Life course sociology emerged and developed over several decades (see Figure 1). The first stage coincided with the years between the two world wars. Theoretical notions of development and the life cycle as proposed by psychologists such as Charlotte Bühler were not clearly separated from the methodological instrument of life histories (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918) designed to capture personality development, social conditions, and historical context at the same time. In the same period, Karl Mannheim (1952) proposed another very synthetic concept—the generation—that fused quite general ideas about the social metabolism (i.e.,

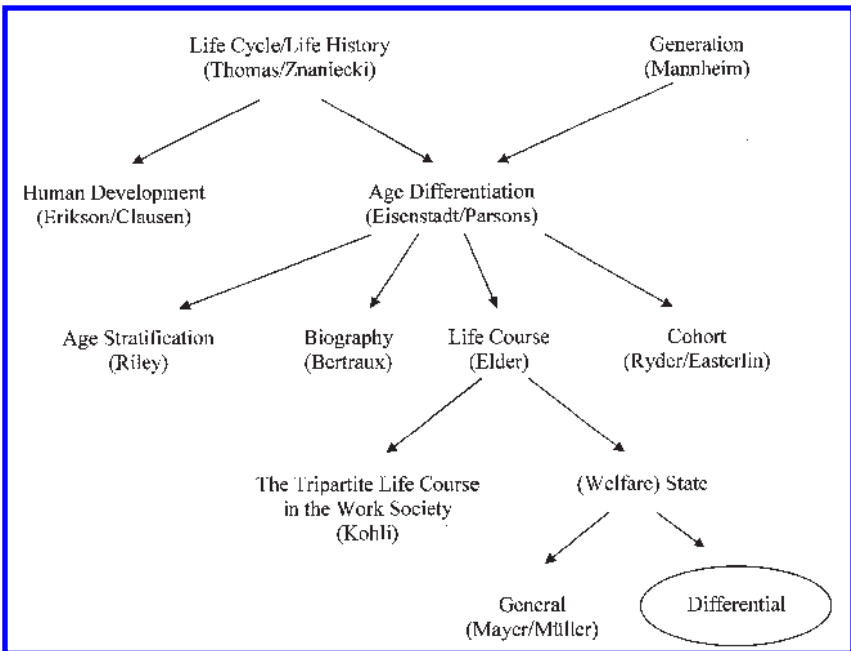


FIGURE 1 The “archaeology” of comparative life course sociology.

social change via the succession of cohorts) with ideas about historical styles and historically specific collective actors.

During the second stage—in the 1940s and 1950s—the more psychological traditions of human development (Clausen, 1986; Erikson, 1980) focusing on internal personal dynamics in mostly group contexts became more clearly distinguished from the sociological concept of age differentiation (Eisenstadt, 1964; Parsons, 1942) as a structural category. It should be stressed, however, that the close link among psychological, social psychological, social, and historical perspectives remained a major focus, as demonstrated, for instance, in the extensive work of Glen Elder (1974, 2001).

During the third stage—in the 1960s and 1970s—the broader concept of age differentiation was further subdivided by:

1. The narrower concept of age stratification (Riley, Kahn, & Foner, 1994), which stressed not only functional specificity but also inequalities in resource allocation and power.
2. Biography as subjective narrative (Bertaux, 1981; Kohli, 1981).
3. Generation as a cultural construct (Bude, 1995).
4. The life course as the social organization of lives.
5. The demographic concept of the cohort (Ryder, 1965, 1980).

It is worth noting, however, that in almost all of these attempts at concept formation and theory building the major focus was still on the development of fairly broad universal and general notions. Personal dynamics were now more clearly seen in contrast to diachronic social contexts and historical experiences, and the quest for subjective meaning in life designs and life reviews was pitted against the objectivity of demographic accounts on collective cohorts. Only very slowly, and under the pervasive influence of social historians such as Aries (1973), Hareven (1986, 1996), and Modell (1991; Modell, Furstenberg, & Hershberg, 1976), did it become possible to have the knowledge about the variability in the social and cultural organization of life courses come to the forefront.

During the fourth stage—in the 1970s and 1980s—there were several attempts to pinpoint the specificity of life courses (and biographies) both within and in contrast to past societies. On the one hand, Kohli (1985) and others tried to demonstrate how life courses derive from the prerequisites of (capitalist) economies where lives and life stages center around work. On the other hand, the uniqueness of modern life courses was derived from the emergence of the welfare state (Mayer & Müller, 1986; Mayer & Schoepflin, 1989). Even during this stage, however, “the work society” versus “the welfare state” and “modern” life courses versus “traditional” life courses were the focus of the debate rather than related to cross-national and historical variation.

It was only in the middle half of the 1980s and 1990s that something like a “differential” life course sociology developed, that is, descriptions of how patterns of life courses varied between more and more delimited historical periods and between societies. Although rough dichotomies, such as traditional versus standardized life courses or open versus closed societies, were used at first, gradually more institutional specifics were marshalled. One early case of the latter was the attempt to relate processes of job mobility to the institutional variation in education and training systems (Allmendinger, 1989b). The more detailed the supportive evidence was, the closer one also moved to the question of what accounted for the observed differences. It is my thesis that the development of historical and cross-national comparative life course research opened up the opportunity to come to grips with the mechanisms that might explain how social contexts shape individual life courses.

LIFE COURSES ACROSS (RECENT) HISTORY

That human lives are embedded in social contexts and are powerfully regulated and constrained by such contexts can be made plausible especially well by historical comparisons. On the one hand, there is the universal human condition handed down by an evolutionary process spanning many thousands of years. In this respect one can easily recognize that maturation and functional decline; sexual and material reproduction; and social hierarchies based on age, gender, and collective symbols form an underlying constant in shaping life courses (Linton, 1945). On the other hand, it is hard to underestimate the huge difference between the short life spans in early hunter/farmer societies lived in almost completely natural environments and the long life spans in present-day societies lived in mostly man-made physical and institutional environments. Although such comparisons across history are able to demonstrate the dependency of each individual life on its varying social context, they are also highly suggestive about the existence of long-term trends in the direction both toward greater diversity within populations at a given historical period and toward ever-greater autonomy and control of individual actors in how they live out their own lives.

Of course, there are also dangers and drawbacks in historical comparisons of life course patterns. One danger is that one is constructing images of the past that appear much tighter and orderly than it probably was and how it appeared to the contemporaries. Another drawback is that historical periods, however one defines them, do not usually coincide with the life spans of people and generations. The closer one gets to the present, and the smaller one’s time unit of historical periods becomes, the more often will individual lives actually spread across several periods. In which sense, then, could one postulate that the social conditions of given periods “shape” life courses (Mayer & Hillmert, 2003)?

There exists by now a stylized history of the development of life courses which—in different versions—has been well described by, among others, Modell et al. (1976), Buchmann (1989), Anderson (1985), Hareven (1986), and Myles (1990, 1993). Life courses are said to have developed from a traditional/pre-industrial type, to an early and late industrial type, and after that to a postindustrial type; from the Fordist to the post-Fordist life cycle; from the standardized to the destandardized life course (see Table 1). Next, I briefly sketch and summarize such attempts. Let me stress, however, that the historical periods depicted must be taken as theoretical constructs rather than validated empirical generalizations.²

Under the traditional, pre-industrial life course regime, life centered around the family household and its collective survival. Schooling was nonexistent or short (only in winter when children were not needed on the farm), and training was part of family socialization in one's own or other families as servants. Marriage was delayed until either the family farm could be inherited or a farm heiress could be married off or until a sufficient stock of assets could be assembled to establish a household, build a house, lease some land, and so on. Life was unpredictable because of the vicissitudes of nature in harvests and the probability of sickness and early death (especially for women in childbirth). Economic dependency and debts were widespread. The subjective counterpart of such a life course regime was a collective rather than individual identity, fatalism, and religious complacency.

The early industrial life course regime is well captured in Rowntree's (1901/1914) image of a life cycle of poverty where industrial workers could only for a short time in their life rise above poverty when the family was still small and physical working capacity at its peak. Schooling was compulsory but ended at a relatively early age. Dependent work started with ages 12–14 and ended only with physical disability in old age. Marriage was delayed until sufficient resources for establishing a household (furniture, dowry) were accumulated and until employers were prepared to pay a family wage. Unemployment was frequent.

The next stage is postulated to be the industrial, Fordist life course regime. It is characterized by distinct life phases: schooling, training, employment and retirement, stable employment contracts, and long work lives in the same occupation and firm. A living wage for the male breadwinner could allow women to stay at home after marriage. The risks of sickness, unemployment, disability, and old age were covered and softened by an ever-more comprising system of social insurances. Age at marriage and first birth decreased into the early 1920s. Families could accumulate savings to buy their own house or apartment, and wages were age graded. Real incomes and purchasing power increased for a good part of the working life and then stabilized until retirement, when pensions and low rents or mortgage payments ensured a standard of living comparable to the one of the ac-

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TABLE 1
Historical Changes in Life Course Regimes

<i>Life Course Regimes</i>	<i>Traditional (ca. 1900)</i>	<i>Industrial (1900–1955)</i>	<i>Fordist/Welfare State (1955–1973)</i>	<i>Post-Fordist/Postindustrial (1973–Present)</i>
Unit	Family farm/firm	Wage earner	Male breadwinner, nuclear family	Individual
Temporal organization	Unstable, unpredictable discontinuity	Life cycle of poverty, discontinuity	Standardized, stabilized, continuity, progression	Destandardized discontinuity
Education	Minimal elementary	Medium compulsory	Expansion of secondary and tertiary education and of vocational training	Prolonged, interrupted, lifelong learning
Work	Personal dependency; family division of labor	Wage relation, firm paternalism, unemployment	Full lifelong employment, upward mobility, income progression	Delayed entry, high mobility between firms and between occupations, flat income trajectories, unemployment
Family	Partial and delayed marriage; instability due to death; property centered, high fertility; early death	Delayed universal; fertility decline	Early universal marriage, early childbearing, medium fertility	Delayed and partial marriage, pluralized family forms, low fertility, high divorce rate, sequential promiscuity
Retirement/old age	With physical disability, old age dependency, early death	Regulatory or by disability, low pensions	Regulatory, medium pensions	Early retirement, decreasing pensions, increasing longevity, increasing chronic illness

Note. Reprinted from “The Paradox of Global Social Change and National Path Dependencies: Life Course Patterns in Advanced Societies” by K. U. Mayer. In A. E. Woodward & M. Kohli (Eds.), *Inclusions and Exclusions in European Societies* (pp. 89–110). Published by Routledge. Copyright © 2001. Used by permission.

tive years. Relative affluence allowed children to receive more education and training than the parental generation, and parents could afford to support their children in buying their own homes.

The subjective hallmark of such a life course regime was material progression and accumulation but also conformity to given roles within the economy and the family. Its logic followed the logic of division of labor within the nuclear family and of the family welfare as a joint utility function of the family members. Social identities were well defined and stable. Stratification homogenized, and workers were integrated into, society socially, economically, and politically.

The standardized linear and homogeneous life course that emerged in post-World War II society is generally attributed to the coming together of two forces: (a) Fordist industrial mass production, in which a relatively secure working class earning a moderate wage became established as the “universal” class, and (b) the welfare state’s guarantee of income across the entire life cycle of the family. The standardization of the life course meant in a sense that workers’ life chances became “middle class.”

The postindustrial, post-Fordist life course regime, in contrast, can be characterized by increasing destandardization across the lifetime and increasing differentiation and heterogeneity across the population. Education has expanded in level and duration; vocational and professional training, as well as further training, have proliferated. A number of life transitions have been delayed, prolonged, and increased in age variance, and the degree of universality and of sequential orderliness has decreased. Entry into employment has become more precarious; first work contracts are often temporary; and employment interruptions due to unemployment, resumed education or training, or other times out of the labor force have increased. The rate of job shifts increase and occupations are increasingly not lifelong. Careers become highly contingent on the economic fates of the employing firms; therefore, heterogeneity across working lives increases. Downward career mobility increases relative to upward career opportunities. Working lives shorten because of later entry and frequent forced early retirement. The experience of unemployment becomes widespread but is concentrated in women, foreign workers, young people, and older workers. Age at marriage has increased. Nonmarital unions exploded and became a normal phase before marriage. Parenthood is delayed and for a significant number of couples never comes about. Divorce increases as has the number of children growing up in a single household and/or without a father present in the household. Women overtake men in their share of general education and greatly increase their occupational qualifications. Women want to work lifelong, and they have to work to augment the family budget or support themselves as single mothers. The standard of living in old age is threatened by reduced pension entitlements. The relation between the home and the working place is changing rapidly. Women are out of the house most of the day.

The subjective counterpart is *hedonistic individualism*, whereby all persons—even within a family—have their own life designs and life projects or, rather, follow egotistically the shifting material incentives and consumption idols from situation to situation.

A question then arises: Which institutional configurations shaped these various life course regimes? The following is a preliminary suggestive list:

- The traditional life course regime was regulated by the demographics of high mortality and high fertility, by prerequisites and vicissitudes of a rural economy without the benefits of the agrochemical fertilization of soil and scientific animal husbandry.
- The early industrial life course regime was subjected to an untamed capitalist economy with a weak labor movement and—because of the first demographic transition—a high supply of labor.
- The late industrial life course regime was made possible by effective coordination between capital and labor, mass production and mass consumption, macroeconomic policy intervention stabilizing economic cycles, full employment, rising real wages and standards of living, and, finally, welfare state expansion.
- For the postindustrial, post-Fordist life course regime or life course disorder, a manifold of culprits have been named: educational expansion and its unintended effects, the women's movement, value changes, individualization and self-direction, weakness of trade unions, de-industrialization, the labor market crises with spiraling structural unemployment, globalization of economic markets, and the demographic crunch produced by the low levels of fertility and decreasing mortality.

The various attempts to develop empirical accounts of historical changes in life course regimes provide strong evidence for the high degree of context-boundedness of life courses. At the same time, such historical comparisons suffer from the same weakness as the parallel and related tradition of intercohort comparisons (Mayer, 1995; Mayer & Huinink, 1993; Modell et al., 1976). “Cohorts” or “historical periods” mark differences, but the assumptions as to what causes such differences remain mostly foggy. The holistic assumption of overall regulation regimes resulting in specific patterns of life course outcomes such as “Fordism” and “post-Fordism” is more postulated than proven (Boyer & Durand, 2001; Mayer & Hillmert, 2003; Myles, 1993). Moreover, it is apparent that the assumed trends or period differences can claim little general validity as to specific timing, turning points, and direction. Cross-national comparisons and intracountry developments promise remedies in both respects and could facilitate an understanding of the mechanisms bringing about varying patterns of life course outcomes.

CROSS-NATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN LIFE COURSE REGIMES

For illustrative purposes, I now consider four categories of countries (for a more detailed discussion, see Breen & Buchmann, 2002; DiPrete, 2002; Hillmert, 2002; Leisering, 2003; Leisering & Leibfried, 2001; Mayer, 2001; Mills & Blossfeld, 2001): (a) the Scandinavian social democratic welfare states, (b) the liberal market economies, (c) the continental conservative welfare societies, and (d) the southern European countries. These are the “three Western worlds of welfare capitalism” depicted by Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1990), augmented by Italy and Spain (see also Esping-Andersen, 1999).³

Liberal market societies are characterized by the following institutional configuration: little stratification in the school system; no well-developed institutions for vocational training; a poor performance in training the workforce for skilled labor; high labor market flexibility in reallocating workers between firms; a relatively low level of welfare income redistribution; low social insurance levels; citizenship-based and targeted, means-tested social provisions; and poor family services.

The conservative welfare state, of which Germany is the major exemplar, caters institutions that make for stratified and selective schooling; a well-developed training system; a good performance in skill formation, and therefore high internal labor market flexibility; but highly segregated, segmented, and rigid labor markets. Social insurances are generous in comparison and are based on entitlements derived from employment. Family services are relatively poor and therefore make it difficult for women to maintain continuous work careers.

The social democratic welfare states do not stratify and segregate their secondary school system and are relatively efficient in providing vocational training within the school system. Their citizens enjoy very high levels of social insurances based on universal citizenship rights and the general tax base. Family services are excellent and therefore allow women to become fully integrated into the labor market, not least in the family services themselves.

Finally, the southern European familistic residual welfare states have stratified schooling systems, firm-based vocational training, low transfers except for pensions, and high labor market rigidity.

What are the consequences of these four different institutional configurations and political economies for the predominant life course regimes?

To capture essential aspects of such life course regimes (see Table 2), I have selected nine aspects:

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TABLE 2
Political Economies and Life Course Outcomes

<i>Outcome</i>	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Social Democratic</i>	<i>Familistic</i>
Leaving home	Early, high variance	Medium, high variance	Early, low variance	Late, high variance
Age leaving school/training	Medium, homogeneous	High stratified	Medium	Low stratified
Labor market entry	Early, stopgap, low skill	Late, integrated, high skill	Early, integrated	Late, marginal
Firm shifts	High	Low	Low	Low
Occupational shifts	High	Low	High	Low
Income trajectories	Flat, high variance	Progressive, low variance	Flat, low variance	Progressive, high variance
Careers of women	High participation, medium level, continuous	Medium participation, low level, interrupted	High participation, low level, continuous	Low participation, low level, dualist
Family	Unstable, medium fertility	Stable, low fertility	Stable, medium fertility	Stable, low fertility
Retirement	Low replacement, high variance	High replacement, low variance, early	High replacement, low variance, late	Late, high variance

Note. Reprinted from "The Paradox of Global Social Change and National Path Dependencies: Life Course Patterns in Advanced Societies" by K. U. Mayer. In A. E. Woodward & M. Kohli (Eds.), *Inclusions and Exclusions in European Societies* (pp. 89–110). Published by Routledge. Copyright © 2001. Used by permission.

- leaving the parental home,
- the age of leaving school or formalized training,
- the process of labor market entry,
- the rate of fluctuation as work life mobility between firms,
- the rate of work life mobility between occupations,
- the shape and distribution of income trajectories,
- the degree of career involvement of women,
- fertility and the stability of families,
- median and dispersion of age at retirement.

Universal and comprehensive schooling without institutionalized apprenticeships in the liberal market societies make for a fairly standardized age at leaving secondary school around age 17. There is some variance due to high school dropouts in the United States and due to the differences between O- and

A-levels in Britain, but in comparison nonselective, comprehensive school systems standardize the length and finishing age of the formative period (Hillmert, 2001a). Labor market entry comes early even for college graduates, but the transition between education and full labor market integration is often marked by a sequence of stopgap jobs (Allmendinger, 1989a, 1989b; Oppenheimer & Kalmijn, 1995). Low-paid and marginal employment, as well as unemployment, is widespread among young workers. Educational certificates are of minor importance and occupational identities are weak, and therefore work lives are primarily structured by individual attempts to make good earnings. Commitment to given firms is low, and job shifts between firms are frequent. Deregulated labor markets foster employment but depress and polarize wages. Mean income trajectories are fairly flat across working lives because efficiency wages and seniority premiums are weak and effects of the business cycle are stronger than age effects. Labor income inequality is high, but the stability of relative income positions across the working life is low. Employment opportunities for women are good, and employment trajectories are highly continuous, but women's work is hardly optional because their share in the family budget is badly needed. Therefore, women's full-time work is the standard rather than part-time work (Blossfeld & Hakim, 1997). Probably because of the relative economic independence of women, divorce rates are high, but so are remarriage rates of women with children, who could hardly cope otherwise. Nonetheless, and despite bad family allowances and services, fertility among these countries is not at the lowest. At retirement, the replacement rate of pension income compared with the final wages is relatively low, and there is a high variance of the median age at retirement, because on the one hand, older workers can be fired easily, and on the other hand, older workers continue to work even at lower wages because of the low level of expected pension income. The major risks in this life course regime include low skills, low wages, and being one of the working poor below or close to the poverty level. For a considerable proportion of the people, the threat of a cumulative cycle of disadvantage is very real.

Conservative, corporatist welfare states stratify school and training tracks and thus induce a higher variance in the ages at which young adults leave the formative period. A prolonged educational period also pushes the age of leaving home upward, but its variance is also tied to educational and training decisions. To the extent to which training is also organized within firms, transitions to employment are smoother and integrated along the lines of occupational tracks. Training investments by both firms and young people are high, and therefore the attainment and the later use of certified skills play a large role in young people's lives. Job shifts between firms are rare, and changes between fields of occupational activities are even rarer. For those who successfully manage their labor market entry, mean income trajectories are progressive up to the early 40s and then flatten out.

Efficiency wages and seniority schemes are widespread, even in the private sector. The industrywide binding character of collective agreements and informal wage coordination between industry unions ensures relatively low degrees of wage inequality. Labor market rigidities go hand in hand with high rates of unemployment, especially for younger workers of foreign descent, women, and older workers who become laid off. Although the labor force participation of women has been increasing rapidly, the opportunities and commitments for married women with younger children are greatly limited. Career interruptions in the early years after childbirth and later part-time work are normatively expected and institutionally supported by restricted child-care and child leave options. Marriages are comparatively stable, but fertility is low. Especially for women with higher education, a dualistic behavior pattern is observable: either high career commitment with no children or career withdrawal and two children. Retirement comes early, because firms try to get rid of older workers with higher wages, but this is increasingly limited by tighter disability and old-age pension rules. The major life course risks in this political economy are long-term unemployment and being pushed into the group of labor market outsiders.

Life courses in the Scandinavian welfare states are distinct, especially in the following regard: the full-time, full working life integration of women into the labor force, a somewhat higher level of fertility until the 1990s, the nontemporary character of nonmarital unions, and the public support for people who are out of the labor force and for their reintegration (with the result of early leaving of the parental home), and, finally, relatively late ages at retirement. The major life course risks are the transitions from comprehensive school to employment with now-high levels of youth unemployment or enrollment in employment policy measures and the entrapment into low-wage, low-skill employment in the public sector for women. There is then the risk of "welfare careers" both inside and outside the employment system.

Life courses in the residual welfare states of southern Europe are for men and women closely tied to the fortunes of the larger family. Not only is access to employment highly dependent on family and kinship connections, but also most of the welfare burdens are put on families. The large number of unemployed or marginally employed young people live with their families longer than anywhere in Europe, and the care for chronically ill old people is left almost exclusively to families, with the Filipina-in-residence being the richer families' solution to old age care. Women have caught up with men in their educational attainments and occupational qualifications, and many of these qualified women delay or renounce childbearing to escape the burdens connected with motherhood. In family patterns, marriage is still almost universal, but childbearing diverges greatly between north and south, city and country, and according to the educational level of women. As a consequence, inequalities between families are high, and for individuals they tend to be cumulative across the life course. Only in regard to pen-

sions for certain occupational groups does the southern welfare state show surprising generosity, partly in level, but especially in regard to the early age of eligibility.

One can try to summarize these life course regimes along four dimensions:

- Which is the action unit around which life courses are primarily organized?
- What is the predominant temporal organization of states and events across the lifetime?
- How heterogeneous and unequal are life courses between social classes and between men and women?
- How do inequalities within birth cohorts develop across their collective lifetime?

In liberal market societies, the basic unit and actor in life courses is the individual. The organization of life time is not well standardized and exhibits a fair degree of discontinuity. Income inequalities in a cross-sectional perspective are both high and unstable. They are accentuated by highly unequal and dualistic access to social insurance. Individuals who can afford private insurance are well covered, and those who cannot afford private insurance are at risk of falling into poverty. The high labor market integration of women, in contrast, tends to favor equality between men and women. The relative income position across the life course is quite unstable but still tends to result in cumulative cycles of privilege and disadvantage and thus an increasing inequality across the life course.

Conservative welfare societies organize life courses around the nuclear family, although with increasing shares of life time spent outside conventional families. In comparison, life courses are still highly continuous and standardized. Cross-sectional inequalities are in the medium range and fairly stable across work life and retirement. Inequalities, however, increase between individuals who are integrated into the highly protected labor market and those who either have a hard time entering or are being phased out into early retirement via temporary unemployment or are being kept out (at least partially in life time and in working hours), as in the case of women. Some of these outsiders are cushioned by social wages and others by their families. Gender inequalities decrease somewhat: most in general education; less in occupational training, tertiary education, and employment; and much less in occupational careers. These gains are threatened, though, when external pressures increase and risks are disproportionately shared by women and foreigners.

Social democratic welfare state societies favor the individual as the unit and agent of the life course. Their still-high degrees of social protection support the continuity across life, and this tends to standardize life courses. The income distribution is still quite equitable, and transfer incomes stabilize and equalize income trajectories. In the southern European familistic welfare societies the bulk of in-

creasing risks of unemployment and of an aging population is loaded onto the families. In such a social context, the individual life course depends highly on the relative ability of families to cushion risks. This should increase cross-sectional and life course inequalities. Thus, considerable evidence has accumulated to demonstrate not only how patterns of life courses differ between countries of even similar levels of economic and social development but also how these differences are linked to specific institutional configurations and public policies.

MACRO-SOCIAL CONTEXT AND LIFE COURSE BEHAVIOR AND PROCESSES: THE MISSING LINKS

The reader is probably convinced by now not only that history, society, and institutions have large impacts on individual lives but also that it is possible to demonstrate in detail how life course outcomes and institutional configurations covary. However, students of human development traditionally want also to know how social contexts differentially affect individual development (and aging) and how, despite and in addition to social context, personal characteristics and processes forcefully influence life course outcomes. What is in the black box of the missing links between individual lives and macro-social contexts?

On a general level, one can differentiate six modes linking the macro-social context to characteristics and processes of persons (Diewald, 2000; Mayer, 2003). First, if one assumes that social contexts are highly variable, but that psychological dispositions as traits acquired in evolution are highly general and universal or normally distributed across populations, then knowing what is in the black box of cognitive, volitional, and emotional dynamics is interesting but adds little explanatory power. This is the basis both of using theoretical models of rational choice as “as-if” explanations (Coleman, 1990) that do not need to be ascertained empirically and of more modern versions of “nonrational” decision heuristics and experimental game theory (Gigerenzer & Todd, 1999). Second, because explicit selection processes are crucial components of gatekeeping in modern educational systems and work organizations, one must assume that social institutions differentially and effectively recruit members with psychological dispositions that they see as fitting to the tasks and environments they represent. The selection of workers either into public employment, with their corresponding bureaucratic mentalities, or into the private sector, are intuitive cases. Social actors will anticipate such selection criteria and might even adapt their self-representation in advance. A well-known case illustrating selection, self-selection, and anticipatory adaptation is the sorting of university students into different fields. For instance, students of business administration differ markedly in these regards from students of social work. Third, institutions socialize, and people accommodate to, the pressures of their social environments.

Fourth, types of social organization and modes of production “produce” corresponding personalities. Max Weber, for instance, in his famous study on farm labor in East Elbia, argued how the introduction of market forces into a feudal estate system favored the emergence of less deferential, less passive, more calculative, and more enterprising persons. Likewise, the entitlements and provisions of the welfare state that protect to some measure against the income losses resulting from illness, unemployment, maternity, and old age should favor the rise of other psychological dispositions than liberal market societies with much less protection would (Mayer, 1997; Mayer & Müller, 1986; see also Breen & Buchmann, 2002). For instance, many U.S. Americans constantly need to worry about restricted unemployment benefits, their health insurance coverage, the future yields of their retirement funds, and how their parents and themselves would be covered in case of chronic illness, whereas Swedes do not need to pay any attention to these matters. One would expect that U.S. Americans should show higher stress levels and stronger future orientations. Another good example is how different ways of institutionalizing the transition from school to the labor market require and reward different psychological resources and have consequences for psychological dispositions and personalities (Alfeld-Liro, Schnabel, Eccles, Baumert, & Barber, 2000). So far, all these suggested linkages suggest a primacy of the social contexts relative to the goals, values, and scope of actions of individual actors. However, it would be shortsighted—and indeed, misleading—to restrict oneself to a view of life courses where these would be seen exclusively or even predominantly as the outcome of social role playing, structural constraints, institutional regulation, and the socioeconomic circumstances of given historical periods. As much as life courses are the products of culture, society, and history, they are also the product of people as natural organisms, individual decision makers, and personalities (Diewald, 1999; Nollmann, 2003). Value orientations, for instance, play a large role in preferences for occupations over and above mere demand factors such as opportunities. The aftermath of the value changes in the 1970s (Inglehart, 1977) has provided a lot of *prima facie* evidence of how individuals not only are subject to their social contexts but also can actively and purposively influence and create them. Obvious instances are changes in living arrangements between men and women, preferred forms of child care, and so on.

There are also *a priori* reasons why an overly “sociologistic” construction of the life course is untenable. It would imply that actors are largely influenced by external factors (or chance). This would necessarily lead to beliefs in low efficacy of their own actions and would result in low self-esteem and low life satisfaction. Such a general outcome is inconsistent with the empirical evidence of psyches as positively self-equilibrating systems (e.g., in the Berlin Aging Study; Baltes & Mayer, 1999). The sociologistic position would also have to assume that, given the large inequalities in power, wealth, and prestige, most people would have to

follow secondary, accommodative strategies rather than primary control strategies (Heckhausen, 1999; Mayer, 2003), which again does not seem to square with the empirical evidence.

One might well argue, therefore, that the genetic, physical, and psychological constraints on how people live out their lives and the interindividual variations resulting from them are not only non-negligible but also probably overwhelming compared with the determinants resulting from sociocultural differences (Rutter, 1997). It is obviously difficult, if not impossible, to assess such relative weights, although one might at least tender the hypothesis that across evolution, social and cultural construction and elaboration would tend to increase in their relative weight and other factors would recede in importance.

In stark contrast, however, Heckhausen (1999) argued why psychological modes of regulation of the life course should become more important than structural or institutional constraints. She made a distinction between *external* and *internal* regulation: External regulation is equated with social conditions such as legal sanctions, group pressure, or organizational rules; internal regulation is equated with relatively stable psychological dispositions related to modes of adaptation and coping or with regard to substantive preferences. Analogous to the theory of the civilizing process of Norbert Elias (1969), she claimed that “external enforcement via societal power has gradually, over centuries, been transformed into internalized rules and norms of conduct and behavior. This process of internalization renders the need for external societal enforcement obsolete” (Heckhausen, 1999, pp. 34–35). Heckhausen’s position is consistent with sociologists’ claim that life courses become deinstitutionalized; that cognitive biographical scripts about the normal life course become more important (Kohli, 1985); that institutions and traditional collectivities lose their binding power and that, therefore, individualization increases (Beck, 1986); and that more subtle forms of psychological influence have replaced the crude mechanisms of physical force and material incentives in controlling behavior (Foucault, 1977; Pizzorno, 1991).

Although one can hardly deny the historical thrust of the argument à la Elias and Foucault, I have many doubts as to its applicability to modern life courses as far as the role of normative orientations is concerned. According to John Meyer (1986), although internalized and strong religiously based norms in guiding life courses may have been appropriate and widespread in the 17th to 19th centuries, they would be highly dysfunctional in present-day societies, where very flexible situational adaptation is required (Mayer, 1988; Meyer, 1986). The relative importance that people and cultures accord to their lives as an overall developmental project is highly variable (Brandtstädter, 1990).

One rare instance in which one could empirically test which role psychological dispositions play in life course processes and whether they are responsive to changing social contexts is the transition of East Germany from a socialist society to a market economy. Indeed, psychologists have argued that personality charac-

teristics should show most salience in times of sudden change and turbulence but are then also more vulnerable to modification (Caspi & Moffitt, 1993; Elder, 1974). In the context of a study of life courses during the transformation of East Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Mayer et al., 1999), Diewald, Huinink, and Heckhausen (1996) examined first how control beliefs, control strategies, and feelings of self-respect varied among groups of different age and different occupational experiences before 1989 and between 1989 and 1993. Second, Diewald (2000) tested whether control beliefs had a net impact on unemployment, downward mobility, upward mobility, and occupational shifts between 1989 and 1993. It is noteworthy that control cognitions (as measured in 1993 and presumed to have been stable prior to this) played an important role in preventing unemployment but that they had no significant effects on upward and downward mobility. For the two variables already measured in 1991—internal control and fatalism—only fatalism showed any effect at all, and on only one of the four dependent variables: unemployment. In general, the evidence from these studies points more to psychological dispositions being the outcomes of (in this case, dramatic) life course events rather than being a strong influence on life course adaptation. At any rate, it is still a long way until the emerging differential life course sociology can be matched with a similarly differential study of the linkages between macro social contexts and human development.

My aim in this article was to illustrate and to elaborate how sociologists currently are constructing the life course analytically and how in their empirical research they are mapping varieties of life course regimes. Such a differential sociology of the life course has rapidly developed within the last 20 years, and it has augmented and progressed beyond the prior, more general conceptualizations of the social organization of human lives. Both detailed historical comparisons and cross-national research have contributed greatly not only in showing the variety of life course outcomes but also in suggesting close causal linkages to the web of institutions specific to given societies and periods. Along this scientific and intellectual journey, the different perspectives of psychology, demography, history, and sociology—that is, of human development, biography, aging, cohorts, and generations—have been refined and become distinct. Now is the time when a differential sociology of the life course needs to be reintegrated into the interdisciplinary study of human development, which in turn has to live up to the newly won knowledge about the force and variety of constraining and enabling social and historical contexts.

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