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Individualization, opportunity and jeopardy in American women's work and family lives: A multi-state sequence analysis☆

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ABSTRACT

Life course sociologists are increasingly concerned with how the general character of biographies is transformed over historical time – and with what this means for individual life chances. The individualization thesis, which contends that contemporary biographies are less predictable, less orderly and less collectively determined than were those lived before the middle of the 20th century, suggests that life courses have become both more internally dynamic and more diverse across individuals. Whether these changes reflect expanding opportunities or increasing jeopardy is a matter of some debate. We examine these questions using data on the employment, marital and parental histories, over the ages of 25–49, for five birth cohorts of American women ($N = 7150$). Our results show that biographical change has been characterized more by growing differences between women than by increasing complexity within individual women's lives. Whether the mounting diversity of work and family life paths reflects, on balance, expanding opportunities or increasing jeopardy depends very much on the social advantages and disadvantages women possessed as they entered their prime working and childrearing years.

1. Introduction

Understanding historical change in the biographies of individuals has become a central focus of life course research. While the very definition of the life course as a sequence of events or activities implies a sensitivity to change over individual lifetimes, sociologists are also concerned with how the general character of biographies is transformed over historical time – and with what this means for individual life chances (Mayer, 2004). The contemporary era in industrialized nations is seen by many as one in which long-term biographies are less predictable, less orderly and less collectively determined – more "individualized" – than in the middle of the 20th century (Beck, 1992; Buchmann, 1989). Some interpret the shift as a reflection of weakening constraints and, by implication, as evidence of expanding opportunities and the growing freedom of individuals to direct the course of their lives (Giddens, 1990). Others are not so sanguine. They argue that the transformation implies growing jeopardy, especially for those without the requisite resources to reflexively negotiate their biographies, as the breakdown of collective determination has left individuals personally accountable for the active planning of their lives in a context where many face ever-narrowing options (Beck &

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Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Charles & Harris, 2007; Côté & Bynner, 2008).

Nowhere is there more fertile ground for examining individualization processes than in the work and family lives of adult women – so radically altered over the course of the past two generations. And nowhere is the juxtaposition of opportunity and jeopardy more salient than in the United States, where the championing of individual initiative coexists with deep and persistent racial and socioeconomic inequalities (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Kochhar, Fry, & Taylor, 2011). For American women, as for women in many industrialized nations, the once-dominant role of full-time mother/homemaker married "till death do us part" to a male breadwinner has given way to a range of "choices" about whether, when and how to engage in paid work, marriage and parenthood. Yet, options have proliferated within a context of unyielding inequalities, producing disturbing evidence of growing polarization in the work and family circumstances of women (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012; Dozier, 2010). Once-closed doors may have opened, but the persistence of structural barriers in education and employment (Bailey & Dynarski, 2009; Dolado, Felgueroso, & Jimeno-Serrano, 2002) and a long-standing scarcity of public supports for motherhood (Cohen, 1996; Henneck, 2003) continue to constrain what is possible for many women. These conditions, coupled with the decline in long-term marriage (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002), may have left certain women in no position to actively plan their lives (at least, in the sense envisioned), and placed them in harm's way even as others have benefited from broadening horizons.

The twin themes of opportunity and jeopardy, as they pertain to the individualization of women's adult biographies, are only beginning to be explored in the life course literature. Findings from this small body of work speak to two key dimensions of life course change: (1) growing diversity *between* life courses, as trajectories in key domains lose their putative universal character; and (2) increasing fluidity *within* individual life courses, as patterns of employment and marriage grow increasingly unstable (Aisenbrey & Fasang, 2010; Brückner & Mayer, 2005).

Empirical evaluation of these trends is challenging. It rests on the detailed assessment of retrospective and/or extended panel data on respondents born in different historical periods. Moreover, it demands the use of techniques designed to evaluate lengthy and often complicated life course sequences, a class of methods generally less well-known in the social sciences. Existing studies of individualization processes in the lives of adult females are therefore few (Widmer & Ritschard, 2009). And, while they lay the foundation for understanding women's changing life courses, they fall short in at least five key ways. First, they often focus exclusively on employment trajectories, despite the long-standing and continuing significance of family responsibilities in women's lives (Treas & Drobnič, 2010). Second, without exception, they consider employment and family biographies independently of one another, thereby failing to do justice to the entwined nature of these key life domains (Han & Moen, 1999; MacMillan, 2005). Third, they generally do not distinguish the between-person and the within-person dimensions of biographical change and, as a result, muddy the conceptual waters somewhat (Aisenbrey & Fasang, 2010). Fourth, the few existing studies apply to a very limited number of countries, and their findings may not be generalizable to other settings in which women's lives have been equally transformed. And, finally, few researchers consider the extent to which broader stratification processes affect *which* women experience *which kinds* of biographical change.

We advance the discussion of individualizing life courses in several ways: (1) we focus on adult females during a period of rapid social change in women's life courses; (2) we analyze both work and family biographies; (3) we examine these domains separately and in combination; (4) we distinguish the between-person and the within-person dimensions of life course change; (5) we use data for the US, a nation seldom considered in the investigation of individualization processes; and (6) we investigate the social patterning of change processes. We ask whether American women's work and family lives over the ages of 25–49 became less alike during the period of rapid social transformation that followed World War II, whether their biographies became more complex and whether (and with what implications) change processes differed for women who entered their prime working and childrearing years in contrasting social positions.

The paper begins with an outline of our theoretical framework for examining change in women's life courses, then proceeds to a review of existing empirical evidence, gleaned from both cross-sectional time series and panel studies. The next section describes the data and methods we use to examine women's evolving work and family biographies. This is followed by a detailed presentation of the results of our analyses, distinguishing the between-person, within-person and socially patterned aspects of life course change. The paper concludes with a brief summary of our findings and a discussion of their implications for individualization processes, expanding opportunities and growing jeopardy.

2. Theoretical framework

Much existing research on changing life courses is framed by the individualization thesis (Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Beck & Lau, 2005). "Individualization" reflects the assertion that, since approximately the mid-20th century, an epochal transformation of social institutions, and of the relationship between individuals and society, has been occurring. To put an extremely complex argument in simple terms, the controllability, certainty and security that underpinned institutions and action during the Enlightenment-based modern era are said to have been replaced, in the current period, with uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity. The changes are such that we are seen to have entered a new epoch, often referred to as the second, or reflexive, modernity.

Two key overlapping dimensions of individualization link these macro-level changes to individual life courses