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Changing employment patterns of women in Germany: How do baby boomers differ from older cohorts? A comparison using sequence analysis

Julia Simonson^{*}, Laura Romeu Gordo, Nadiya Titova

German Centre of Gerontology, DZA, Manfred-von-Richthofen-Str. 2, 10437 Berlin, Germany

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ABSTRACT

In the present study, we examine employment biographies of women using the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP). Specifically, we compare the cohort of the baby boomers (1956–1965) with two older cohorts (1936–1945 and 1946–1955) by carrying out sequence analyses to investigate changes in their employment careers. Based on the biography sequences, we consider four different clusters to identify typical employment patterns of the three cohorts. Results show that women's careers have changed in the sense that there is an increase in the proportion of discontinuous careers and a decrease in the percentage of women with a continuous full time employment biography. At the same time, part time employment biographies gain in relevance and housewife biographies become less common. Within all types of employment patterns, the degree of plurality rises and biographies become more inhomogeneous in the sense that the number of transitions as well as the number of different states increases.

Regarding the specific developments in West and East Germany, results show that on the one hand both regions are growing more alike in the sense that the high percentage of women primarily in full time employment dominated careers in East Germany has dropped and the percentage of housewife biographies in West Germany has decreased. On the other hand, there are still relevant differences between the employment patterns of West and East German women: West German women are still much more likely to experience a housewife biography, and part time work is much more relevant for women in West Germany. East German women still have to a large degree full time employment oriented biographies, but in East Germany in particular, there is a distinct trend towards discontinuous and de-standardized careers.

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1. Introduction

In the second half of the last century, the employment biographies of women in Germany changed significantly due to several demographical, historical and social developments. The employment careers of women belonging to the demographically highly important baby boom cohort (born in the period from mid 1950s to the first half of the 1960s) were particularly affected by the relevant modifications.

On the one hand, labor market participation rates increased notably in the last decades. In the 1950s and 1960s, many women in West Germany were housewives and worked only sporadically. Since then and until the beginning of the present century, there has been increasing labor market participation by women. From the 1950s up to the 1990s the combination of family and full time work for women was more accepted and more developed in East Germany due to state-run childcare, although women were still primarily responsible for childcare and the home. However, labor market participation by women increased during this period in East Germany too.

On the other hand, the life courses of younger cohorts like the baby boomers are marked, according to the

^{*} Corresponding author. Tel.: +49 30 26074027; fax: +49 30 7854350.
E-mail address: julia.simonson@dza.de (J. Simonson).

literature, by increased pluralism and inhomogeneity (Leisering et al., 2001). Biographies have become less continuous, and unemployment, part time employment and self-employment episodes are more common. Furthermore, the family biographies of younger cohorts deviate more often from traditional family norms.

Both trends might affect the lives and material situations of the baby boomers in the future – especially given the particularly high birth rates of this cohort followed by much lower birth rates in the successive cohorts. The changing employment participation, pluralization trends and high birth-rates of this cohort raise the question of to what extent the existing old age security structures are prepared to adapt to these developments.

In the present paper we give a solid empirical response to the following questions: how have employment careers of the baby boomer women changed in relation to older cohorts? Have employment episodes (both full and part time) gained in relevance in the employment biographies? Have employment biographies of women become more diverse or plural as a result of a process of de-standardization? Have employment biographies of women become more inhomogeneous given an increasing number of transitions between different states?

Furthermore, we analyze whether the inhomogenization and pluralization trends differ significantly between East and West Germany. While baby boomers developed their careers after German reunification, East German women of the older cohorts spent most of their employment biographies (until the age of 45) in the former GDR. Differences between East and West Germany in the older cohorts help us to understand the role played by institutional aspects in the inhomogenization and pluralization trends of the baby boomers.

Although changes in employment biographies have gained in relevance in the literature, not many quantitative studies are able to deal with these questions. One reason for this is that describing employment biographies and measuring changes between cohorts is no mean task. It requires longitudinal data containing information on individual biographies, and at the same time it must allow comparison between different cohorts, which requires a very long panel.

In the present study we examine the employment biographies of women using the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) which is a nationally representative household study and allows us to observe the employment careers of women and compare the employment careers of baby boomers and two other reference cohorts. Specifically, we compare the cohort of the German baby boomers (1956–1965) to the birth cohorts (1936–1945) and (1946–1955). Women belonging to the baby boomers entered the labor market after societal conflicts in the 1960s which initiated the gender equality discourse in society. They were affected by German reunification and the subsequent economic and labor market changes at the peak of their working lives. The women from the first cohort (1936–45) experienced their labor market entry between the 1950s and the mid-1960s and therefore in West Germany at least, within a period of economic revival with relatively highly standardized biographies (Konietzka, 2010, 73) and rising

birth rates. Women from the second cohort (1946–55) entered the labor market between the end of the 1960s and the middle of the 1970s and were also affected by the societal changes of the 1960s and by a less favorable economic cycle than the first cohort.

We compare the three cohorts by carrying out sequence analyses which, in contrast to standard descriptive analysis, take into account the full complexity of sequences. This technique considers the whole sequence of multiple transitions between states and thus allows questions to be answered about the composition of changes across labor market states (Malo & Muñoz Bullón, 2003).

Based on the biography sequences, we consider clusters to identify typical employment patterns of the three cohorts. In this way, we investigate whether labor participation of women has increased, distinguishing between full time and part time work. Moreover, we investigate whether female employment biographies have changed, becoming more diverse, with the idea that there is a trend towards 'pluralization'. Finally, we examine whether there is an 'inhomogenization' trend, which means that the life course is composed of an increasing number of transitions between different states and becomes less stable.¹

2. Changing life courses of women: what do we know?

2.1. From housewives to working mums

During the last century, there have been significant changes in the lives of women.² In the pre-industrial society, women held a central economic position in the family economy through their work, especially in rural areas. In urban areas on the other hand, the housewife model of the male breadwinner gained in relevance. But it was not until the 1950s that this model became widespread social practice, with women often giving up their jobs after they married or after the birth of their first child. Gainful employment of married women was relatively common for the unprivileged social classes, but women who could afford it stayed out of the labor market. Some women made their status as housewives compatible with marginal employment ('*geringfügige Beschäftigung*') working only few hours a week.

In the 1970s, within the framework of a process of social liberalization influenced by the students' movements of the 1960s, attitudes of women to motherhood and employment began to change. Gainful employment started

¹ The present analyses were done within the framework of the research project 'Life Course, Aging and Well-Being' (LAW). This project is carried out by the three cooperating institutions German Centre of Gerontology (DZA), German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) at the DIW, and German Federal Pension Insurance (DRV). It is financed by the Volkswagen Foundation (2009–2012). More information is available on www.law-projekt.org.

² Due to the comprehensiveness of the developments and the underlying mechanisms, we can only give a short overview of the changes in women's lives. In this we mainly refer to Pfau-Effinger (2004) who carried out a comprehensive review of the changes of the role of women in the economy and in the family during the last century.

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