



Residential mobility across the life course: Continuity and change across three cohorts in Britain



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ABSTRACT

Although a buoyant literature has emerged examining residential mobility across sections of the life course, a full life course perspective has remained lacking. This paper exploits an as yet under-used data source – the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing – to achieve this. The lifetime residential mobility trajectories of older men and women in three birth cohorts born between 1918 and 1947 are compared, examining how these are associated with changes in cohort members' socio-historical contexts, and life course events in the domains of employment, partnership and fertility. Results indicate that change in residential mobility between cohorts is gendered, with persistent continuity between male cohorts, and marked change between female cohorts. Such gender differentials are particularly notable during young adulthood, highlighting the significance of de-standardising pathways to adulthood and the changing role of women in society. Generalised mobility pathways from birth to age 60 for men and women are identified using sequence analysis, and the paper discusses how these may be associated with contextual changes and life course characteristics. In conclusion, the research reflects on the benefits of the life course perspective for understanding the complexities of residential mobility, and the importance of socio-historical context in understanding trends and patterns in this area.

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1. Introduction

The widespread adoption of the life course perspective across the social sciences has given rise to a burgeoning literature examining partnership, family and occupational trajectories (Berrington & Diamond, 2000; Wu, Bumpuss, & Musick, 2001; Elzinga & Liefbroer, 2007; Hagestad & Call, 2007; Heinz, 2007; Sefton, Evandrou, & Falkingham, 2011). Residential mobility has become more prominent within life course research in recent years (Findlay, McCollum, Coulter, & Gayle, 2015). Some studies have identified the importance of particular life course events as 'triggers' and 'constraints' for residential moves (Clark, 2013; De Groot et al., 2011; Michielin & Mulder, 2008), while others have focused on the synchronicity of mobility trajectories with occupational and family careers (Clark & Davies Withers, 1999,

2009; Mulder & Cooke, 2009). Like most other life course research, studies of residential mobility have tended to examine trajectories in a piecemeal way, focusing on *sections* of the life course. This has in part stemmed from the lack of appropriate data tracing individual residential mobility across the *full* life course.

To address this gap, this paper takes advantage of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) life history module, which collected lifetime residential histories from respondents in 2006/2007. Drawing upon these data, residential mobility across the life course in three birth cohorts (born between 1918 and 1947) is compared. The paper explores how these dynamics may be associated with the socio-historical contexts of respondents and how residential mobility is interconnected with other life events (partnership, fertility and employment). Building on this, sequence analysis is used to identify how the individual lifetime mobility pathways of ELSA respondents aged 60 and over are clustered into common 'types'.

In examining cohort and gender effects across the whole life course up to age 60, we advance what has been achieved in more focused, single-cohort, studies of residential mobility across particular life course stages by shedding light on how the accumulation of experience, advantage/disadvantage, and

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changing socio-historical context across long periods of time can shape individual long-term pathways. The application of sequence analysis then enables us to examine *within*-population variation in residential mobility over the life course, including identifying those who stay put i.e. non-movers, as well as movers. This represents a significant advancement for residential mobility research using innovative longitudinal methods, drawing upon an underused data source. The paper begins with a review of pre-existing literature examining the intersections between residential mobility and the life course, before outlining the theoretical framework for the study. It is recognised that the paper is essentially historical in nature, focussing on moves that have taken place from the 1920s–1990s. Nevertheless the findings have relevance for understanding lifetime mobility for both past and current cohorts.

2. Residential mobility and the life course

Interest in the connections between residential mobility and the life course can be traced back to Rossi's (1955) pioneering work on intra-urban migration almost 60 years ago, but has gathered pace over the last 10–15 years as the life course perspective has become more prominent in geographical research (Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999). This is evidenced by a proliferation of research on family migration (Cooke, 2008; Michielin & Mulder, 2008; Clark & Davies Withers, 2007), mobility and life course transitions (Finney, 2011; De Jong & Graefe, 2008; De Jong and Graefe, 2008), life course events as mobility triggers (Clark, 2013; Mulder & Wagner, 2010) and the synchronicity of mobility, employment and family trajectories (Clark & Davies Withers, 2009; Geist & McManus, 2008).

Before the emergence of the life course as a theoretical framework within mobility studies, age-mobility schedules were a common feature of research in this area. The pioneering work of Rogers and Castro (1981) in modelling migration age-schedules may be seen as an early attempt to introduce a life course perspective using cross-sectional data. Rogers and Watkins (1987) identified four mobility peaks associated with particular age groups and 'stages' of life: early childhood (0–3 years, indicative of family migration), early participation in the labour force (17–30 years), retirement (57–67) and late old age (80–90). More recently synthetic measures of lifetime migration using cross-section data such as gross migration rates and migration expectancy have been developed, with estimates of the average number of moves people make in a lifetime being derived using age specific mobility rates in a similar manner to that in which total fertility rates calculated (for more detailed discussion see Rees, Bell, Duke-Williams, & Blake, 2000; Bell et al., 2002). As the life course perspective has become more prominent, there has been a shift in focus onto *transitions* and *events*. Warnes (1992) identifies specific transitions that can be associated with increased mobility including: leaving the parental home, career promotion, divorce, retirement, frailty or chronic ill health; and indicates an age range within which these transitions may occur. This is a helpful development for theorising the life course-mobility interface, but still relatively restrictive in the sense that it does not allow for life course diversity (i.e. individual pathways including many or few of these transitions, gender differences etc.).

The recent buoyancy in life course research on residential mobility has been fuelled by the increasing availability of longitudinal data and propelled by the application of longitudinal methods to examine the *timing*, *sequencing* and *synchronicity* of mobility and other life events (see for example Blossfeld, 2001; Blossfeld & Mills, 2001). Clark and Davies Withers (2009) defined 'windows' around events that trigger mobility (such as fertility and labour market changes including entering, leaving or losing employment, changing employer, changing place of employment)

to examine their synchronicity, using the Panel Study of Income Dynamics from the USA, while others have used event history techniques to trace sequential change (e.g. De Jong & Graefe, 2008)

Such studies reach similar conclusions about the *complexity* of residential mobility decision-making, involving interactions between trajectories in multiple areas of the life course. The value of the life course approach for revealing this complexity is highlighted by the role that other dimensions, or trajectories, of individuals' lives play in influencing mobility decisions (Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999). This echoes an earlier call by Halfacree and Boyle (1993) for more in-depth analysis of the complexities of migration decision-making.

What these studies also have in common is that they tend to focus on *sections* of the life course—in particular the mid-phase where individual moves are made as part of a move affecting the whole family. This is often due to the limited timespan of longitudinal data sets. What sets our study apart is the use of individual mobility histories from *birth to later life*, enabling us to trace individual mobility pathways *across the life course*. This is achieved through the optimal matching of individual mobility sequences (see methods section for a fuller description), through which clusters of 'typical' mobility pathways are identified.

3. Theoretical framework

Outside of mobility studies, life course scholars have often framed their research in the work of Beck (2000), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), Beck and Lau (2005), Beck, Bonß, and Lau (2003) and Giddens (1991), who trace the transition from first to second modernity. Key changes include the growth of individualism; the de-standardising of normative pathways through the life course; the changing role of women in society; population restructuring and the changing structure of the life course; changing partnership and family formation; globalisation and increased mobility; and increasing social and spatial inequalities (Wadsworth & Bynner, 2011).

In the 1970s, mobility scholars explicitly used the transition to modernity as a framework for theorising mobility over the last century (for example Zelinsky's 'Mobility Transition', 1971). These theorisations are largely deterministic and have been widely criticised for this reason by contemporary mobility scholars (Woods, 1993; Cadwallader, 1993). More recently, the transition to modernity has implicitly underpinned the use of structuration theory to transcend the structure-agency dichotomy, instead stressing "the actions of contextualised individuals" (Boyle, Halfacree, Robinson, & Boyle, 1998: 81; Giddens, 1984). The emergence of the biographical approach (Halfacree & Boyle, 1993) built on structuration theory, allows us to reinterpret the life course approach for application within mobility studies.

We align with Halfacree and Boyle's (1993) biographical approach; accordingly we aim to understand the *mechanisms* behind mobility events across the life course, and how these relate to the socio-historical context of the respondents making decisions related to mobility. Below we draw upon pre-existing research to outline the main mechanisms for mobility that occur during each life course phase and identify some of the major socio-historical landmarks that are likely to have impacted on the mobility of the specific birth cohorts within the ELSA sample that are the focus of this paper, i.e. those men and women born between 1918–1947.

3.1. Cohorts and context

3.1.1. Cohorts

ELSA was designed to help understand the "unfolding dynamics of ageing and the relationships between economic circumstances, social and psychological factors, health, cognitive function and biology as people move through retirement into older age" (Banks,

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