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De-standardization and gender convergence in work–family life courses in Great Britain: A multi-channel sequence analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the question of de-standardized life courses from a gender perspective. Multi-channel sequence analysis is used to characterise the domains of work, partnership and parenthood in combination across the adult life courses of three birth cohorts of British men and women between the ages of 16 and 42. Three research questions are addressed. First, we examine whether there is evidence of increasing between-person de-standardization (diversity) and within-person differentiation (complexity) in work and family life courses across cohorts during the main childrearing years. Second, we investigate whether men's and women's work–family life courses are converging over time. Finally, we assess the link between educational attainment and work–family life courses across cohorts. Data are from the MRC National Survey of Health and Development 1946 birth cohort ($n = 3012$), the National Child Development Study 1958 birth cohort ($n = 9616$), and the British Cohort Study 1970 birth cohort ($n = 8158$). We apply multi-channel sequence analysis to group individuals into twelve conceptually-based work–family life course types. We find evidence of growing between-person diversity, across cohorts, for both women and men. In addition, partnership trajectories are growing more complex for both genders, while parental biographies and women's work histories are becoming less so. Women's and men's work–family life courses are becoming increasingly similar as more women engage in continuous full-time employment; however, life courses involving part-time employment or a career break remain common for women in the most recent cohort. Continuous, full-time employment combined with minimal family ties up to age 42 emerged as the most common pattern for women and the second most common for men in the 1970 cohort.

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1. Introduction

Like many countries, Great Britain has seen dramatic changes in the nature of work, family and the normative gender divisions between them over the past forty years. Social institutions that divided labour between the sexes

(public, paid labour for one, unpaid caring and domestic labour for the other) have been steadily eroding (Kan, Sullivan, & Gershuny, 2011; Office for National Statistics, 2013), potentially leading towards 'gender convergence' in the distribution of paid work and family caregiving. Notably, continuous employment is now a fact of life for the majority of British women, including mothers (Dex, Ward, & Joshi, 2008; Hansen, Hawkes, & Joshi, 2009; ONS, 2013). Alongside this development, the institution of marriage is in decline (Morgan, 2011; Office for National Statistics, 2011, 2012), although the trend towards fewer and later marriages has been partly offset by rapid increases in the prevalence of non-marital cohabitation (Office for National Statistics, 2012; Coleman & Glenn, 2009). Parenthood, however, remains an event which often re-sets gender relations within families, with much evidence suggesting that mothers adapt their work patterns in response to the birth of a child, while fathers do not (Guidici & Gauthier, 2013; Pailhe, Robette, & Solaz, 2013; Schober, 2013), even over the long term (Fourage et al., 2010).

These social changes and continuities, mainly documented through cross-sectional snapshots of population trends, are often seen as evidence for the de-standardization of life courses—the idea that lives are less predictable and orderly than in a previous era where the male-breadwinner/female-caregiver model reigned supreme, at least for socioeconomically-privileged groups. The increasing availability of longitudinal, cohort data has allowed for the empirical testing of de-standardization processes. To this end, researchers are interested in capturing variation *between* individuals' life courses over time, as well differences *within* them (Aisenbrey & Fasang, 2010). Broadly, they have found growing diversity between life courses, as trajectories in key domains lose their putative universal character; and increasing fluidity within individual life courses, as patterns of employment and marriage grow increasingly unstable (Aisenbrey & Fasang, 2010; Bruckner & Mayer, 2005). Most of this work, however, has treated employment and family trajectories as separate domains.

In recognition of the interwoven nature of family life and paid work over the life course for women and, perhaps increasingly, for men, the current study uses multi-channel sequence analysis to investigate *combined* work–family trajectories for men and women in three British birth cohort studies. More specifically, we test for historical change by investigating whether work–family life courses are becoming more complex (within-person differentiation) and more diverse (between-person de-standardisation) across cohorts. We assess whether these processes differ for women and men and, as a final step, examine the links between educational attainment and work–family life courses.

1.1. Life course de-standardization, and differentiation

It is now commonly understood that biographies have become less predictable, less orderly and less collectively determined – more de-standardized – in recent decades (Beck, 1992; Bruckner & Mayer, 2005). Life course theorists

have distinguished between a variety of relevant concepts in relation to these social changes (Aisenbrey & Fasang, 2010; Bruckner & Mayer, 2005). Here we examine two distinct aspects as described by Aisenbrey and Fasang (2010): diversity *between* individuals in their work–family life courses (de-standardization), as well as movement between states *within* an individual life course (differentiation). The empirical study of de-standardization assesses the extent to which individuals are turning away from a normative, or at least statistically dominant, life course (Bras, Liefbroer, & Elzinga, 2010; Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Kohli, 2007; Macmillan, 2005; Shanahan, 2000) in the face of an expanding array of 'options' about whether, when and how to engage in paid work, marriage and parenthood. In addition, researchers investigate the growth in complexity, or movement between states within an individual life course, as biographies become more dynamic in response to fluctuating risks across cohorts (Elzinga, 2010).

A number of studies have now used sequence analysis to examine de-standardization empirically in relation to family life courses (Elzinga & Liefbroer, 2007; Widmer & Gauthier, 2013) and employment histories (Anyadike-Danes & McVicar, 2010; Blair-Loy, 1999; Levy, Gauthier, & Widmer, 2013a,b; Martin, Schoon, & Ross, 2008; Simonson, Romeo Gordo, & Titova, 2011). Studies of parenthood and partnership fairly consistently suggest increasing between-person diversity across cohorts (Elzinga & Liefbroer, 2007), at least before the age of 30 (Widmer & Ritschard, 2009). Evidence regarding the de-standardisation of working life courses is less consistent. Using the two more recent British cohorts included in this study, Martin et al. (2008) reported greater diversity in the employment trajectories in young adults in the 1970 birth cohort than in the 1958 birth cohort. However, other studies suggest that de-standardization may be gendered. For example, Widmer and Ritschard (2009) observed, for the Swiss Household Panel, that women's employment trajectories became more diverse over time, while men's did not change.

1.2. Gender convergence and individualization

Some contend that life courses have also become more unstable as the breakdown of collective determination ushers in new risks (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). These life course changes are sometimes interpreted in light of the individualization thesis (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). "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. Simply stated, the controllability, certainty and security that underpinned institutions and action during the Enlightenment-based modern era are said to have collapsed. In their place have arisen the uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity that characterize the current period, often referred to as the second, or reflexive, modernity. Indeed, the weakening of patriarchal social structures in determining gender roles has been at the heart of descriptions of individualization in western

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