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Advances in Life Course Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/alcr



Editorial

Fertility analysis from a life course perspective

1. Introduction

In the past decades, the life course approach has gained importance in the social sciences (Billari, 2009; Elder & Giele, 2009; Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2004; Heinz, Huinink, & Weymann, 2009; Mayer, 2009). Although it is far from being fully theoretically developed, the life course approach can be perceived as an essential framework for studying and explaining fertility decisions as it allows for the integration of different streams of research (Huinink & Kohli, 2014). Therefore, it is not surprising that this approach is currently used as the standard in longitudinal studies on the timing and incidence of childbirth. The empirical foundations for studying the interconnections between economic, social, and spatial living conditions and fertility, as well as fertility-related decision-making from both an individual's and a couple's perspective, are steadily improving. Long-term panel studies provide appropriate data to investigate, in an increasingly differentiated fashion, fertility and closely interrelated processes in the life course.

The vast international literature on the interdependence between fertility on the one hand, and education, employment career, and the spatial mobility of women and men on the other hand has been dominated by studies adopting a life course approach since the late 1980s. These studies have made remarkable contributions to our understanding of the dynamics and mechanisms of family formation and family extension over the life course (Balbo, Billari, & Mills, 2013; Huinink et al., 2011; Kulu & Milewski, 2007). However, the analysis of fertility still faces challenges and here we discuss at least three aspects that should be considered in future research in more detail.

First, while the analysis of fertility in the context of interdependent life courses has mostly been concentrated on manifest behavior, future research in this field should emphasize *pre-decisional individual dispositions and behavioral intentions*. Second, one should take into account more seriously that fertility takes place in the context of *interdependent social relationships and social groups changing over time* from the intimate relationships between partners to the cultural expectations of the social

environment. Third, one should consider more explicitly that while fertility is embedded in the context of changing socio-structural conditions of the individual life course, also changes in the *cultural and institutional environment* need to be addressed. We summarize these three aspects by a call for more complex fertility research that follows a life course theoretical approach.

The aim of this special issue is to present a series of empirical studies touching upon some of these aspects and therefore substantially contributing to progress in contemporary longitudinal fertility research. These studies are based on a broad range of international data sets. In particular, the twelve contributions to this double issue deal with:

- Childbearing intentions and outcomes in multidimensional life courses (Berrington and Pattaro; Testa; Lutz; Kreyenfeld and Andersson; Helfferich, Hesslering, Klindworth, and Wlosnewski)
- Dyadic decision-making and social influences on fertility (Bauer and Kneip; Ivanova, Kalmijn, and Uunk; Pink, Leopold, and Engelhardt; Arránz-Becker and Lois)
- Spatial mobility, regional context, culture, and fertility (Nauck; Fiori, Graham, and Feng; Kulu and Washbrook)

In this editorial we first summarize what we see as the central concepts of the life course perspective on fertility. Then, we give an overview of the articles that follow by emphasizing their particular contribution to the existing literature on fertility analysis.

2. The complex structure of the life course

What do we mean by the complex structure of the life course? We see the life course as a process of individual welfare production, i.e. a process in which one's subjective wellbeing is maintained or improved. This process is characterized by various dimensions of interdependence (Mayer, 2004). In order to capture the whole complexity of the life course for fertility analysis we should consider (at least) three points.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2014.04.001>

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First, the life course approach should be based on an adequate theory of action (Huinink & Feldhaus, 2009).¹ We assume that individuals try to maintain or improve their wellbeing over time by pursuing various and situational varying instrumental goals. These goals are valuable because achieving them contributes to relevant dimensions of individuals' subjective wellbeing. In this respect, family formation and parenthood are perceived as instrumental goals of individual welfare production over the life course. Decisions in favor of or against having children and the timing and spacing of births are influenced by personal expectations about the welfare gains and losses arising from having children in the short and long run, as compared to other options of welfare production. The validity of this comparison depends on any given present and future living conditions. Individuals try to find a subjectively satisfactory balance between investments in and gains from activities in different domains of the life course.

Second, the analysis of fertility from the life course perspective has to take into account that there are three kinds of essential interdependence (Huinink & Kohli, 2014):

- (a) *Time dependence of the life course*: Childbearing intentions and fertility are influenced by experiences, decisions, and activities in the past, while future opportunities to act are molded by the outcomes of current activities (Birg, 1991; O'Rand, 2009). This is why fertility is influenced by plans for the future and by the anticipation of how family formation would impact on the future life course.
- (b) *Multilevel structure of the life course*: Fertility decisions are affected by the conditions surrounding individual action in different ways. "External conditions" or the "external opportunity structure" of goal pursuit over the life course refer to structural, economic and institutional circumstances at the societal or regional level, as well as at the level of social environments and social relationships (e.g. social networks, neighborhoods, partnerships). At the individual level, we address individual resources as means of goal pursuit (e.g. education, money, time). "Internal conditions" or the "internal opportunity structure" of action at the intra-individual level comprise physiological aptitudes, personality traits, dispositions, values, and aspirations.
- (c) *Multidimensionality of the life course*: Fertility decisions intersect with all other life domains (e.g. education, work, partnership and leisure), which are also mutually interdependent. One can differentiate between two types of interdependence of life course dimensions here (Diewald, 2012; Huinink & Feldhaus, 2009; Lutz in this issue): *interdependence in regard to resources* and *interdependence in regard to outcomes*.

Interdependence in regard to resources means that an activity in a life domain A can enable or support activities in a life domain B by providing resources for activities in B. An example is the income obtained by being employed (life domain A), which is needed to run a family (life domain B).

At the same time, an activity in A can hinder activities in life domain B because resources needed for activities in A are missing in B and thus options to act in B are restricted. This resource, for example, could be time for work, which cannot be doubled for use in family activities.

Interdependence in regard to outcomes means that goal achievements in life domains A and B are interrelated with respect to their contribution to individual wellbeing. One can differentiate between substitution (or compensation) and spillover effects. Spillover effects occur if positive or negative outcomes in a life domain A influence the outcomes of goal achievement in a life domain B (Schiemann, Glavin, & Milkie, 2009). For example, stressful working conditions may have an impact on the quality of social relationships in the family (Mills & Täht, 2010), which in turn may delay the realization of fertility intentions (Rijken & Liefbroer, 2008). Substitution means that outcomes in a life domain A may substitute or compensate for missing goal achievement in a life domain B. For example, nurturing relationships with children might be substituted by other kinds of social relationships or success in work life.

Third, the complexity of this model of the life course is augmented by the fact that the three dimensions of interdependence we just addressed interact with each other too:

- (a) *The connection between the time dependence and the multilevel structure* refers to the fact that life courses are embedded in historical time and individual development (Kohli, 2007; Leisering, 2003; Mayer, 2004). Institutional settings and the structural requirement to master the life course in a modern society imply rules and guidelines that structure the life course. These rules and guidelines provide certainty for long-term decisions but they might also lead to disadvantages if actors do not follow them. Furthermore, a changing external opportunity structure is connected with individual development, in turn accompanied by changing internal conditions; the further development of individuals is influenced by the age at which certain historical events and instances affect these individuals (Elder et al., 2004). Finally, the consequences of individual activities over the life course can hardly be anticipated in a valid way if times are changing fast. Therefore, it is crucial to know whether the economic and institutional conditions that encompass dynamic "programs" affecting individuals' life courses are stable over a longer period of time, or whether these conditions change quickly.
- (b) *The connection between the time dependence and the multidimensionality of the life course* means that opportunities in one life domain are influenced by earlier activities in this and in other life domains, positively (supportively) or negatively (restrictively). For example, past investments in one life domain (e.g. early motherhood) or decisions (e.g. choice of partner or occupation) may restrict future opportunities in other life domains. Then, an important question is whether potential parents anticipate problems in the reconciliation of parenthood with activities in other

¹ These considerations follow the theory of social production functions that has been developed by Lindenberg (Lindenberg & Frey, 1993).

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