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Social Change and the Timing of Family Transitions in West Germany. Evidence from cohort comparisons

Simone Scherger

Abstract

This article addresses the timing of family transitions in early adulthood. Theoretical and empirical analyses are used to investigate the appropriateness of the notions of destandardization, differentiation and individualization for characterizing recent changes in West German life courses. Data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) are used for a comparison of (West German) birth cohorts and the respective timing of moving out of the parental home, first marriage and first parenthood. These transitions have, in fact, undergone a certain temporal destandardization. However, the results suggest that this destandardization is limited to certain dimensions, is clearly socially structured and is in part brought about by changing structural conditions. Furthermore, these changes in timing can be partly explained by differentiation according to education. Individualization, too, is only applicable to a certain degree and in particular to women's life courses.

Keywords: destandardization; life course; marriage; moving out of the parental home; parenthood

Introduction

Many concepts are used to describe and analyse how life courses have changed in recent decades. This article aims to examine three of these concepts more closely, both theoretically and empirically.[1] It advocates an accurate and careful use of the theoretical concepts, employing a descriptive and multi-dimensional notion of destandardization, as well as stressing the importance of broader historical comparison. Apparent surface similarities of life courses and the timing of transitions have to be distinguished from the various possible factors underlying these similarities, such as individualization. While the assumption of a destandardization of life courses is partly accepted, the results suggest that this destandardization is limited to some dimensions, is clearly socially structured and is in part brought about by changing structures.

Three connected questions are tackled. First, how are the changes in individual life courses linked to general social change? By drawing together different perspectives on this relationship, a broader frame of analysis is established (section 2). This frame allows one to describe the special conditions under which 'modern' life courses have developed. This theoretical background is necessary for addressing the second question, which is discussed in the third section: how can the very popular diagnoses of destandardization, differentiation and individualization of life courses be defined more clearly and in a way that makes them useful for empirical analyses? I take up these three diagnoses and tease out what they could mean and what their theoretical contexts are. On the basis of this, I thirdly ask if there is any evidence for these changes actually taking place and how the related hypotheses can be differentiated, for example, regarding different periods of life courses, certain transitions, etc. Here I will refer to family transitions in early adulthood as examples, in particular the move

out of the parental home. The data and the proceedings of the empirical analysis are described in the fourth section of the article. Sections 5 and 6 present the descriptive findings. After discussing the conditions around leaving the parental home (section 7), the results of a logistic discrete-time model are presented (section 8). These are finally followed by some concluding remarks.

The data basis of the empirical analyses is the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP), a broad panel study which began in 1984. It contains retrospective biographical information on many key transitions in the life course, so that several cohorts and the timing of their transitions can be compared. In order to concentrate on one level of comparison, namely the historical one (the former German Democratic Republic), the analysis is restricted to West German respondents. East Germany, for which the same data are at least in part available, is a special case; its analysis would require a discussion of its very different historical background and connected period effects. However, the case of East Germany informs the following discussions as well as international comparisons, which teach us a lot about life course regimes. (← p. 107)

The Life Course in Modern Societies

The course of an individual's life is embedded in other social time schedules in manifold ways (Kohli, 1986a; Mills, 2000). A whole range of factors has been discussed as shaping the sequence and timing of transitions in individual life courses.

On the level of *culture*, norms and values influence the shape of life courses and pervade every other level mentioned in this article. This includes age norms, gender norms, temporal norms and patterns of individual ascription. The latter references the modern conception of the individual actor who is seen as largely accountable for his or her life (Kohli, 1986b, 1988; Beck, 1983/1994). The rules of biographical construction and interpretation ('right time and right context', Wohlrab-Sahr, 1992) are closely connected to this.

Natural conditions, historical events, the economic situation, the size of birth cohorts or other demographic characteristics frame the appearance of life courses too, and these are only some examples of a whole range of broader *structural conditions*. Central to the emergence of the modern life course regime are *three institutions* that can be found (in one way or another) in most modern societies: the labour market, the education system and the welfare system (Mayer and Müller, 1986; Mayer, 2004). The degree to which they are organized as private markets is connected to the typical structure of individual life courses (Mayer, 2001), as international comparisons show.

On the *intermediary level* (probably the least examined), companies, schools, certain milieus, etc. have an effect on the timing of important life course events. *Families*, *friends* or other *linked lives* (Born and Krüger, 2001) play a part in most important life course decisions (e.g. marriage or retirement, see Wagner, 1996). Biographical actors take into consideration what their partners, children, close friends or parents do or think. Furthermore, families and other networks are often the places where one finds role models for transitions. On the *individual level* of life course formation, there are objective factors, like path dependencies (that occur mainly in later life) and the natural boundaries of the actor's body, and subjective factors, like education and preferences, past biographical experiences and the individual view of future biographical decisions (Fischer-Rosenthal, 2000).

All of these influences are difficult to separate from each other. Factors on higher levels are filtered and mediated by those on lower levels (Blossfeld, 1996); the impact of an economic crisis on people's lives is mediated by their employer, their personal experiences, their close relationships, etc. Therefore, most changes in life course patterns, including the ones examined here, are due to a complex, historically contingent interplay between structure and agency. While institutional structures themselves can hardly be changed by individual actors, they nonetheless have to be 'filled' with individual action because, in (**← p. 108**) most cases, they do not determine individual behaviour but offer a certain scope of action.

Two key debates concern all of the decisive transitions in the life course, including the timing of the move out of the parents' house, first marriage and first parenthood which will be discussed here. First, the nature of how individual actors decide on making these transitions or not is disputed. Theorists of rational choice claim that biographical actors calculate the expected costs and outcomes of a transition and, if the outcomes are positive and the costs are not too high, they will decide to move out, to marry or to have a child. Others insist that norms and values, traditions and culture, must be included in this decision model because they also inform the costs and outcomes (Blossfeld, 1996). If one is stigmatized because of moving in with one's partner without marrying, or because of staying in one's parents' house until the age of 40, one will consider this in making one's choice. All three of the transitions looked at in the following are an object of negotiation with other persons, e.g. parents and partners. On the macro level, they are clearly influenced by the education system, welfare system, and job market.

A second discussion regards the question of whether actors take decisions by pursuing a short-term logic that only takes into account the direct outcomes of an action, or if these decisions have to be seen in the broader context of biographical experiences and long-term biographical planning. Although, of course, some people make decisions within a rather limited biographical perspective, many people take into account long-term considerations which sometimes reach far into the future and the past, as studies based on narrative biographical methods show clearly (for examples, see Chamberlayne et al., 2000). The nature of quantitative data is often far too crude to reveal these biographical perspectives. More refined theories of the respective transitions need to embrace these debates.

Key Concepts of Change in the Life Course

The terms destandardization, differentiation and individualization are often used to describe recent trends in the timing of life course transitions – and there are many others, such as flexibilization, (de)institutionalization or pluralization. For all these concepts, it is important to pay attention to how they are being invoked and applied. In the following, I clarify how destandardization, differentiation and individualization are utilized in this article. It is not possible, however, to account for the related discussions completely as this could fill books (for an overview see Brückner and Mayer, 2005; Scherger, 2007). (**← p. 109**)

Destandardization

One characteristic of the temporal structure of societies (of which the life course is one aspect) is the extent to which social processes are standardized, i.e. the extent to which the

incidence of transitions, and their beginning, end, duration, succession and rhythm, are fixed. Standardization thus manifests the aspects of universality and uniformity (Brückner and Mayer, 2005), with universality referring to the spread of certain states and transitions, and uniformity to the more or less fixed temporal form of their incidence. Standardization and destandardization can be applied not only to single states and transitions but also to their sequence and their coincidence, i.e. to their diachronic and synchronic relatedness. In the case of high uniformity sequences are relatively fixed.

Two aspects of this notion of destandardization should be stressed. First, it is a relative (i.e. gradual) term. This means that life courses can only be seen as standardized or destandardized in historical or spatial (geographical) comparison. This might seem self-evident but is often forgotten. Second, I suggest it is productive to remain with a reduced, descriptive notion of the term which does not consider the underlying norms of biographical structuration. In this constrained meaning, destandardization would *not* be synonymous with the disappearance of or change in the underlying values and norms. Disappearing or changing biographical norms might be the reason for destandardized patterns of timing, but this need not be the case, and temporal patterns can become more blurred without changes in the underlying norms. By using destandardization only for the observable temporal structure of life courses, the intermingling of the obvious changes on the 'surface' of temporal structures and the manifold potential reasons for these changes can be usefully separated.

Differentiation

In this context, differentiation will be employed as designating a certain mechanism possibly underlying new or changed temporal patterns of life courses; other, often more general meanings are not discussed here.[2] Differentiation is non-random change in which new and more numerous patterns of timing, for example, arise. Yet the number of these patterns is limited and the distribution is socially structured, with certain patterns for instance appearing in certain groups. If we find increasing heterogeneity in the timing of a transition when looking at a population as a whole, this impression could be corrected if we distinguish different subgroups by their education level. If the patterns of transition are homogeneous within these groups of education but become increasingly different between these groups, this results in an increasing overall heterogeneity. The destandardization of life courses might be explained by the differentiation of unequal timing in different subgroups, for example based on () education (Kohli, 1986a) – but one can also think of other dimensions of differentiation.

Individualization

The term 'individualization' is often used in an unclear way or without any definition of its meaning. According to Ulrich Beck[3] and Martin Kohli, individualization denominates a mode of integration into society which works less via traditional roles and small groups, like village communities, but which is instead fitted to an individual actor (Beck, 1983/1994; Kohli, 1985; Beck, 1986; Kohli, 1986c). Primary institutions are, in part, replaced by what Leisering (1997) calls 'secondary' institutions (see also Leisering and Leibfried, 1999; Beck, 1986). Whereas primary institutions work by applying direct control and sanctions, secondary institutions do so to a much lesser extent. Instead, they exert an indirect control which offers

some leeway and sets incentives rather than direct sanctions. In these institutions, individuals mostly have more choice than they had before, but they also *must* choose and are regarded as responsible for what they choose, even if they do not choose actively. This imposes new constraints. Furthermore, different actors have different amounts of (material, cognitive, psychological and other) resources at their disposal for dealing with these choices competently. In some cases, the marginal position of actors does not leave them any choice.

In this view, individualization does not mean less social control but a new structure of control.[4] Classical examples of secondary institutions are the welfare state or job markets. From these examples, it should be clear that individualization does not mean the end of social inequality or the dissolution of social structures, as Beck has often been misread.[5] What individual actors do is still affected by their socio-economic position, but in a less direct way than before. The association between social positions and identities becomes less clear. Individualization does not imply that one's relationships to others become weaker.[6] There are only more patterns in which one's more flexible social relations can be organized – which is not to be conflated with a random multiplication of possibilities. Actors have to decide on them reflectively, still limited by the given structures of inequality.

Finally, a useful clarification is that between the structural and the cultural dimension of individualization (Wohlrab-Sahr, 1992). Individualization processes comprehend, first, structural processes – the differentiation of new options – and, second, the emergence of cultural patterns that ascribe responsibility to individuals for their own lives. Individualization can only take place if these two processes coincide. If there are, for example, only changes on the cultural level and there is no real choice structurally given for anyone, individualization becomes an illusion or an ideology. (← p. 111) From this, two inferences can be drawn: first, individualization is also a gradual, relative notion – societies can be more or less individualized and no society is 'completely' individualized. It is also very important to note that certain groups of population can be precursors of individualization, whereas others just follow; opportunities for individualization and individual agency are unevenly distributed. Second, if we speak of the current individualization processes in Western societies, these occur already on the basis of precedent individualization processes that have mainly taken place in the bourgeois class. Modern life courses owe much of their structure to these much earlier individualization processes, and therefore it is more precise to speak of a second or new thrust of individualization for the last decades, if something like this has occurred.

Individualization might result in destandardized or differentiated timing of life course transitions, but this is not necessarily so. The data presented in the following article illustrates the structural processes underlying individualization, for example the differentiation of new options. The cultural dimension of individualization, the ascription and experience of agency, cannot be directly seen in the data and remains essentially an area of reference to contextual information and to other studies using different, qualitative methods.

Data and Methods

The findings shown in the following are based on the data of the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP), a longitudinal study running since 1984 (for general information on the GSOEP, see SOEP Group, 2001). The GSOEP includes biographical information on its respondents' life courses. This data is gathered by, first, asking every member of the sample

to complete a mainly retrospective biographical questionnaire once when they join the panel; second, important life course events which happen during the study period are recorded when the respondents are interviewed yearly. This results in several shortcomings in the data:

1. Given that, in the case of the older cohorts, the most important transitions are only registered retrospectively, all computations rely on annual information only, although for some of the younger cohorts more precise information would be available. One must bear in mind this inaccuracy in the data and its partly retrospective nature which may lead to distortions.

2. Some information is not asked directly but has to be derived from other questions. In some cases, it is therefore slightly inaccurate (Scherger, 2007).

3. There are indications that certain groups are less well represented in the data, e.g. very poor people. Conclusions concerning income and status are hence avoided; statements based upon education are better founded. (← p. 112)

In the following empirical analysis, cohort comparisons serve as a means of describing potential changes in the timing of life course transitions. In the first instance, this analysis involves describing the timing of moving out of the parental home, first marriage and first parenthood by giving the quartile ranges of the age when these transitions are undergone by the different cohorts. Second, the quartile ranges for leaving the parental home are shown differentiated by education. Third, the transition of moving out is analysed multivariately. For this purpose, a discrete time model, similar to a logistic regression, is applied.
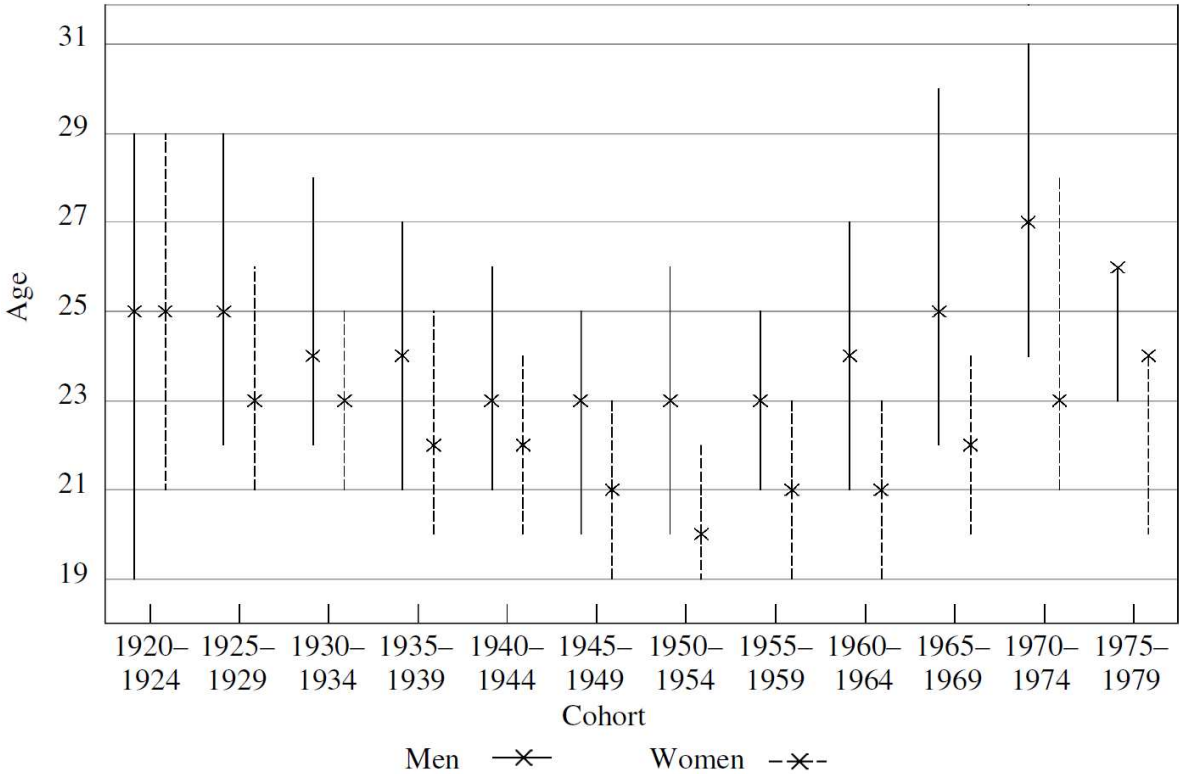
Findings

Timing of single transitions

In the first step of the descriptive analysis, the quartile ranges of moving out of the parental home, first marriage and first parenthood are shown. These quartiles are calculated on the basis of the product-limit procedure of Kaplan and Meier, which allows the inclusion of right censored cases, i.e. cases which did not experience the respective transition until the end of our observation period in 2004 (for more details, see Kleinbaum, 1996). This procedure neither shows the exact timing for the 25 per cent of the respondents who are the first within their cohort to undergo the respective transitions, nor for the 25 per cent who are the last to do so. However, they form part of the results and we know that they moved out respectively earlier and later than the shown quartile range.

Figure 1 shows the quartiles for the age on leaving the parental home, i.e. the temporal distance between the ages at which 25 per cent and 75 per cent of the respective cohort have already left their families of origin behind.[7] In the last birth cohort (persons born from 1975 to 1979), only between 50 and 75 per cent have experienced this transition, so complete quartiles cannot be given.

The median age on leaving the parental home decreases across the cohorts and then increases again. In all cohorts, women move out at median two or three years earlier than men; in the youngest cohort, the difference actually amounts to four years. The age on moving out is most concentrated in the cohorts born in the 1940s and 50s. After that, a clear destandardization can be seen, especially in men. However, their age on moving out has always been more varied

than that of women. In the youngest cohort, 50 per cent of the women, have already moved out by the age of 24, while, for men, this age is 26. This estimation is at the upper edge of what other data give.[8]

The age on moving out initially becomes more concentrated and decreases. The cohorts in the middle thus constitute a relatively standardized exception, not only in comparison to subsequent cohorts but also to those before. Therewith, the current processes of destandardization are relativized by historical compari-(← p. 113) son; nonetheless, the destandardization in the youngest cohorts exceeds that in the oldest ones.

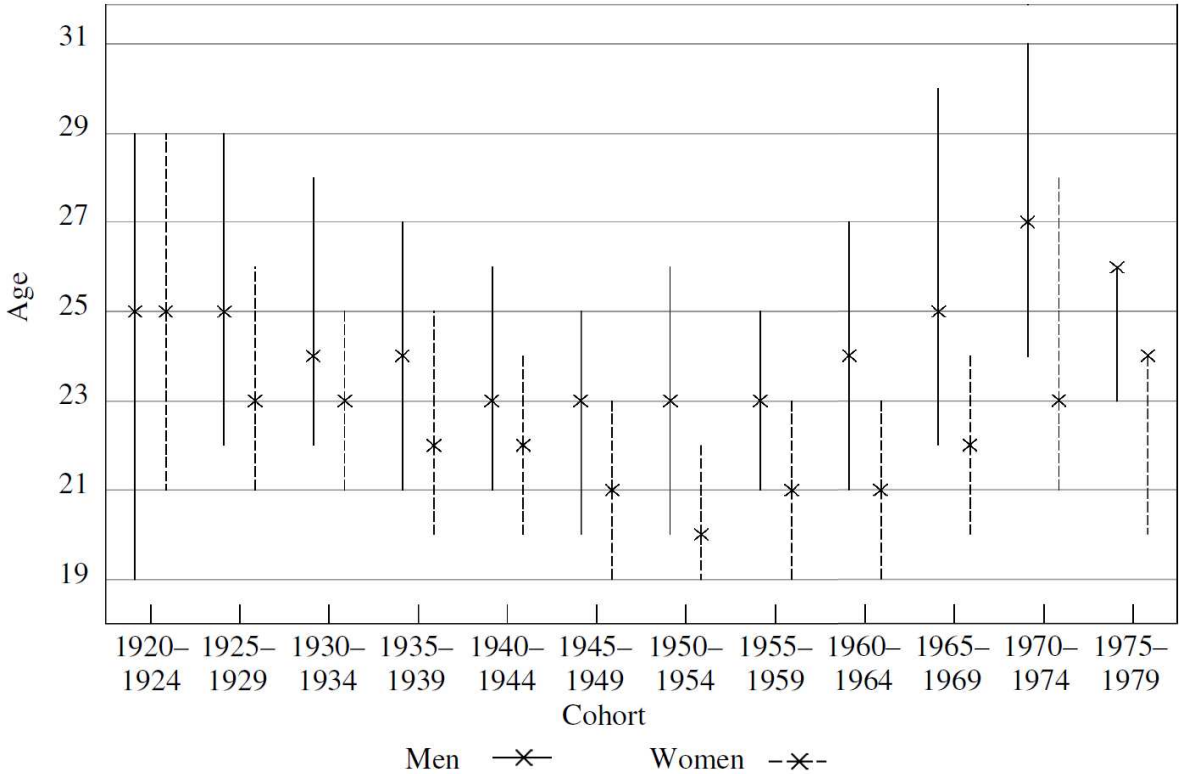*Source*: GSOEP 1984 to 2004; *n* = 7527 (6916 events).

FIGURE 1: Age on leaving the parental home, quartile ranges

Figure 2 gives a similar picture concerning first marriage.[9] Women are at median two to four years younger than men when they marry for the first time. Women and men born at the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s marry the earliest; namely, at the median age of 22 (women) or 25 (men). In the birth cohort of 1920 to 1924, by contrast, the age of first marriage averages out at 25 for women and 27 for men; in the last birth cohort, this is 27 and 31 years old, respectively.

The interval between those who marry early in the life course and those who experience this transition rather late, amounts to at least four or five years in the middle cohorts and six years in the oldest cohort. In the youngest cohort the interval is eight years for women and ten years for men. In the case of marriage, too, the youngest cohorts return to a less standardized pattern. Again, they exceed the oldest cohorts with regard to temporal variation.

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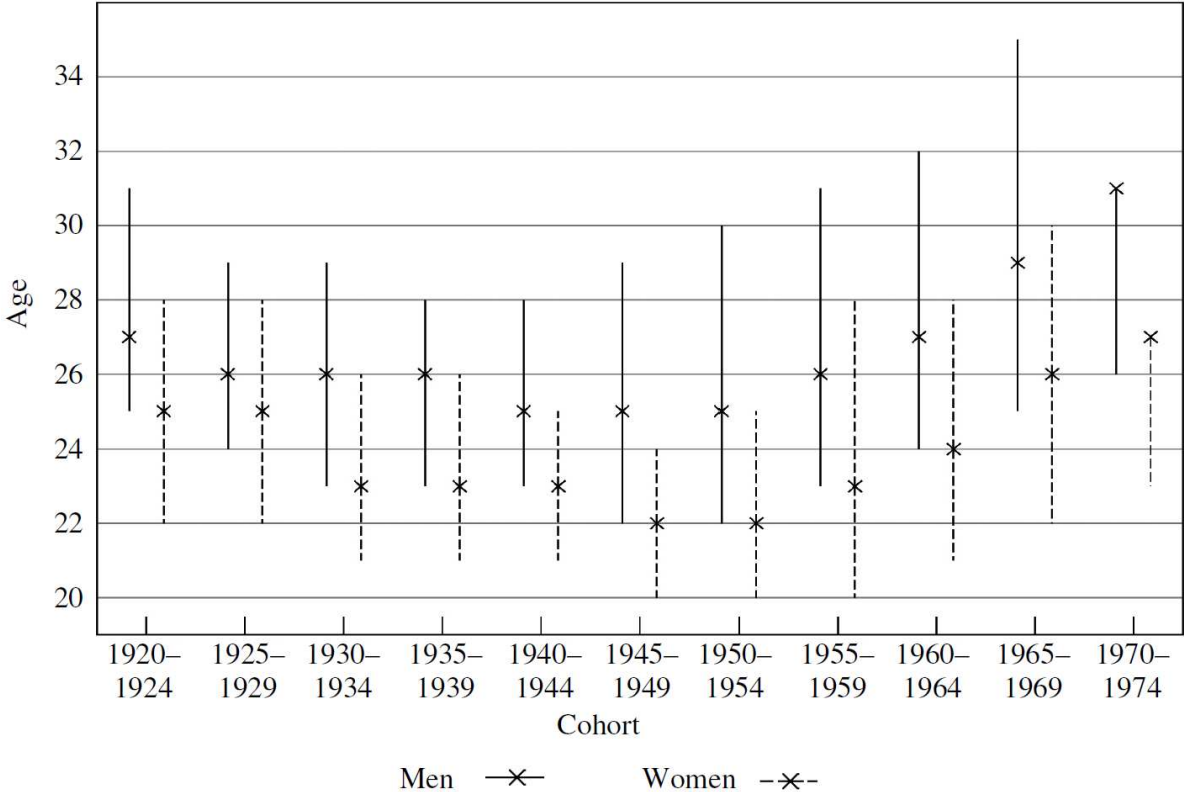

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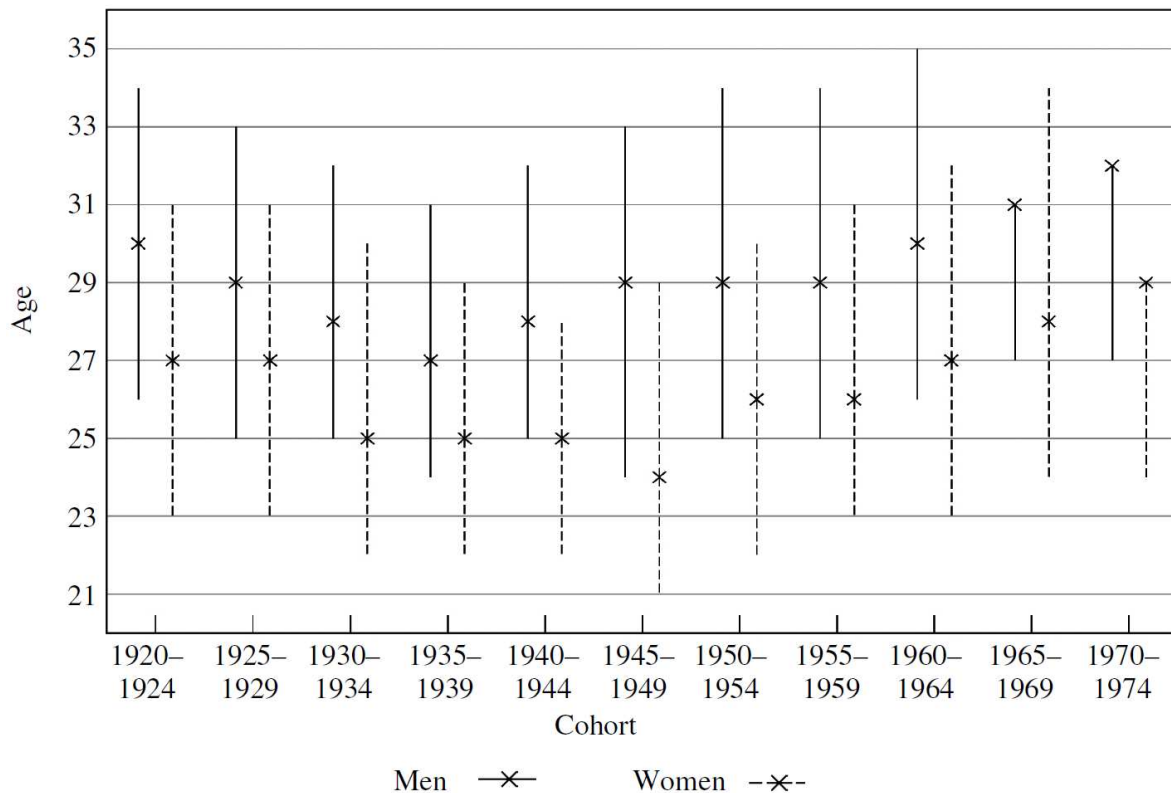
For first parenthood (see Figure 3), the trend is, in principle, the same, but the (**← p. 114**) age of this transition is more varied in all cohorts. The medium age of becoming a parent rises, too. The interval between the age when women become mothers for the first time and the analogous age at which men become fathers for the first time remains stable; namely, approximately three years.

Source: SOEP 1984 to 2004, *n* = 17.192 (15,853 events).

FIGURE 2: Age on first marriage, quartile ranges

Destandardization of family transitions becomes evident in their temporal sequence, too. As respective calculations show, the younger cohorts demonstrate more variation in the succession of these transitions. For example, more people than in the older cohorts only marry after having a child. Yet this increase in variation is very limited. At some points, there is even a new standard sequence, particularly regarding the move out of the parents' house and first marriage (respectively, first cohabitation): in the older cohorts, most of the men move out only when they get married and some women even stay in their parents' house with their spouses after getting married. In contrast, the respondents in the youngest cohorts mostly live alone (or with an unmarried partner) for a certain period after having left the parental home and before marrying. (**← p. 115**)
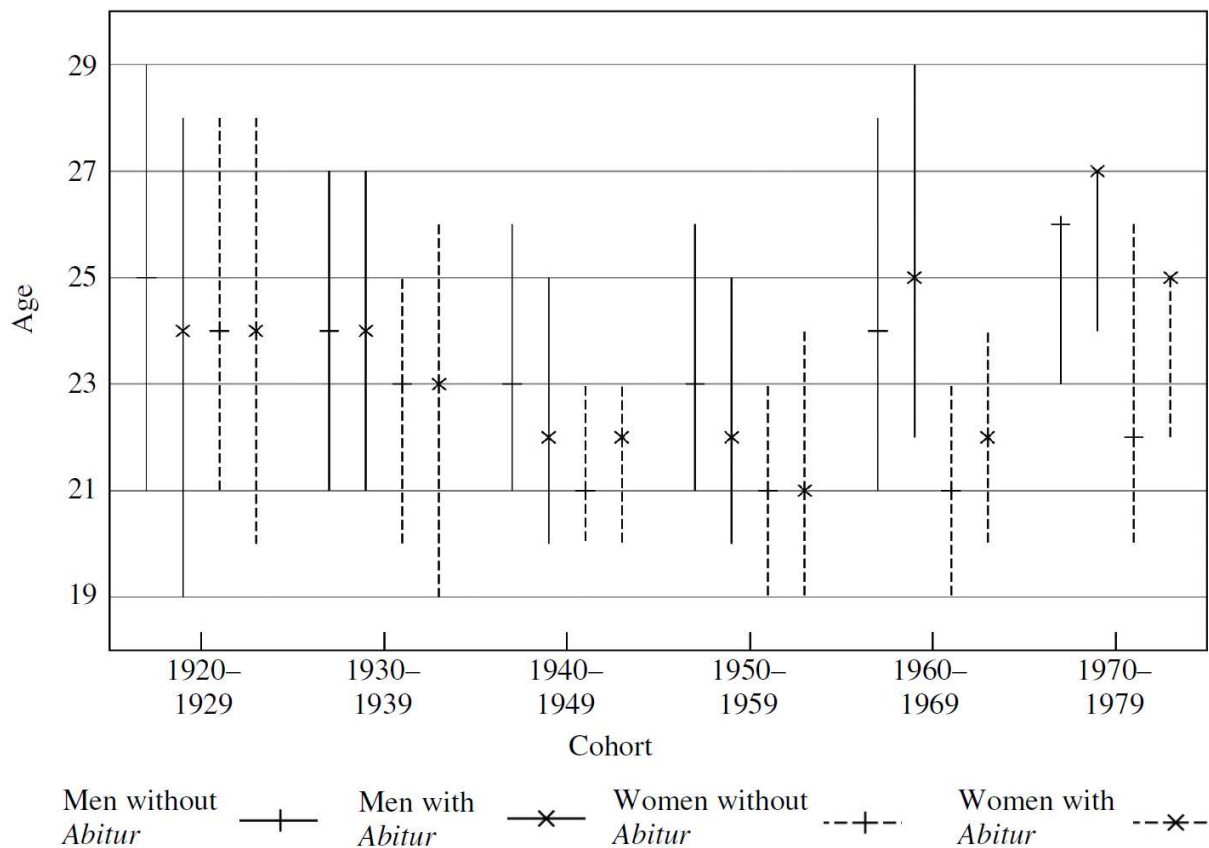
Source: SOEP 1984 to 2004, *n* = 15,722 (13,479 events).

FIGURE 3: Age of first parenthood, quartile ranges

Differentiation according to education

A closer look at the move out of the parents' house serves to explore if its temporal destandardization is related to differentiation according to education. Obviously, leaving the parental home is closely related to education, so possibly the educational expansion of the 1960s and 70s, leading to a greater proportion partaking in higher education, boosted the number of people moving out of the parental home relatively late. This might be reflected in a larger overall heterogeneity, with the medium age within the groups staying the same. In this case, the increasing temporal variation would be caused by the fact that groups with different transition timing diverge more and more.

Education is one of the most important social differentiations besides that of gender. Young people participating in higher education leave the parental home (and marry) later because they achieve financial independence later. For those young adults who are still in (full-time) education, leaving home is only possible with the aid of parental support or a part-time job.[10] (← p. 116) Figure 4 displays the age at leaving the parental home, this time not only differentiated by gender but also by education: persons with *Abitur* are distinguished from those without (*Abitur* corresponds to A-levels and is a prerequisite for studying at university level). School leaving certificates are most suitable for differentiation because further degrees (from universities or apprenticeships) have often not yet been achieved at this point in life.

Source: SOEP 1984 to 2004, *n* = 7489 (6887 events).

FIGURE 4: Age on leaving the parental home (by school education), quartile ranges

Up to the cohort born in the 1950s, there are only small differences between persons with and without *Abitur* – in some cohorts, men with *Abitur* even leave their parents' houses earlier than those without. Only in the cohorts born in the 1960s and later do those with higher education remain longer with their families of origin; the difference in the median is one to three years. The upper and lower limits of the quartiles point into a similar direction of a growing difference. In the groups without *Abitur*, however, leaving home is also deferred and temporally destandardized, even though less clearly. The destandardization seen earlier (← **p. 117**) is thus not only or not mainly caused by differentiation. The age on leaving the parental home is destandardized in all educational groups. Additionally, it is differentiated according to school education.

Conditions for leaving the parental home

In early research, destandardization and the delay in life course transitions in early adulthood have been explained by the changed values and preferences of biographical action. Meanwhile, the focus of the search for causes has moved to the incentives and constraints resulting from extended education, from the difficult transition into employment and from less continuous occupational careers in general (Brückner and Mayer, 2005).

This last argument can be relativized in two ways. First, particularly regarding the differences between men and women, it is insufficient to consider the timing of family transitions as a mere adaptation to the exigencies and problems of the labour market. Only if values and

gender roles have changed can new living arrangements evolve and break down the old patterns completely, in part or temporarily, even though a concrete incentive to do so might well come from the labour market. Second, if family transitions are reduced to their (of course, important) dependence on the domain of employment, the inherent dynamics of life courses are foreshortened. There is, in fact, a connection between family and employment transitions but its arrangement is, in principle, variable. It is moderated by many other factors and can change over time.

Economic market models or cost-benefit models take centre stage among the classical theoretical approaches to moving out of the parental home (Hill and Hill, 1976; Da Vanzo and Kobrin, 1982). The decision is sometimes ascribed to the parents, sometimes to the child and sometimes to negotiations between both parties. The economic resources of the parents and child, the characteristics of the family (siblings, divorce of parents, etc.), the attitudes of both sides, the parents' housing situation and the housing market are all part of the decisionmaking process. Context variables, such as the housing market, are particularly relevant in international comparison, similar to welfare arrangements.

Other life course transitions radically change the preconditions of the decision to move out and are thus important explanations for the timing of leaving the parental home. This includes first cohabitation, marriage, the birth of a child, and also occupational and educational transitions, such as moving to a new city to study, follow an apprenticeship or take up one's first employment with a regular income (Lauterbach and Lüscher, 1999; Aassve et al., 2002; Rusconi, 2004).

Different reasons for the deferral and temporal destandardization of the move out of the parents' house have been discussed. As described already, the extended period of education and late entry into employment in particular delay both leaving the parental home and marriage (Blossfeld et al., 2005). (← **p. 118**)

Multivariate findings

In the following multivariate analysis, I employ the data already seen in a discrete-time model, including all cases. The example illustrates the logic in which family and employment transitions are linked. These linkages of different transitions are another aspect of standardization. For this logistic model of transition rates, the data are transformed into annual spells and analysed by means of logistic regression analysis. At the same time, this proceeding is convenient insofar as other transitions can easily be included as time-dependent variables. All information is only given in years. Therefore, the influence of the time-dependent independent variables must be conceived of as a temporal linkage and not only a causal one: regarding biographical contexts, a causal influence need not precede the dependent event. For example, a marriage which one plans six months ahead can lead to one's leaving the parental house. In this case, the planned marriage causes (or motivates) one's moving out, although the former follows the latter. Hence, even monthly data would be insufficient to capture the exact direction of the interrelation.

In order to compare the cohorts regarding their timing of the move out of the parental home, the relationship of timing to age, gender, first employment and the transitions into marriage and parenthood are checked.[11] How have the influences on leaving the parental home changed, or have the former correlations come to nothing in the younger cohorts? If the

transition is, in fact, increasingly destandardized in the sense of the loosening of the former linkages, some associations should become weaker across the cohorts. Age effects, which persist despite other influences, are possible indicators of age norms.

As regards the transition into first employment and first marriage, a positive influence is expected because they operate as a kind of pull-factor to the formation of one's own household. At least in the older cohorts, the same applies to first parenthood. Since a certain proportion of these respondents remain in their parents' house even after marriage, the birth of a child is a further incentive to leave the parental home as, for instance, housing space becomes scarce.

Table 1 shows the exposed values of b for the discrete time model that has been computed. The exposed values of b indicate by which factor the odds ratio ($p / 1 – p$) changes under the influence of the respective category of the variable and in comparison with the reference group. A value beyond 1 stands for an increase in the odds ratio and the probability of the event happening, and a value smaller than 1 for a decrease.

The influence of age on the odds ratio of moving out is highest for those who were born in the 1930s and 40s. In the 21 to 23 age bracket, these cohorts show a greater tendency to move out than the last born. Even after the age of 30, the cohorts born in the 1930s and 40s have increased odds of leaving the parental home. For the two youngest cohorts this does not apply. The few people still liv- ing in their parents' house after age 30 do not have a significantly different probability of leaving their parental home compared to those aged 18 to 20. On the contrary, the probability tends to be reduced with reference to the youngest.

TABLE 1: Leaving the parental home and the transition into employment (discrete-time logistic models)

Birth cohort	1920–29	1930–39	1940–49	1950–59	1960–69
			Exp (b)		
Age					
(reference: 18–20 years)					
21–23	0.98	1.42**	1.76***	1.60***	1.38**
24–26	1.13	1.91***	1.96***	1.97***	1.79***
27–29	1.13	1.38	2.28***	1.15***	1.68**
30–32	0.81	1.97**	2.19**	0.69	0.65
33–35	1.25	2.54**	1.38	0.28*	0.64
Gender (reference: male)					
female	1.02	1.07	1.23*	1.47***	2.02***
Time-dependent variables					
Ever been employed	0.81	1.02	0.75*	1.17	2.09***
(ref.: never been employed)					
First marriage in same year	45.71***	57.74***	51.01***	32.40***	28.52***
(ref.: other years)					
Birth of first child in same year	1.68*	1.99*	2.59***	3.33***	1.81
(ref.: other years)					
Constant	0.06	0.05	0.07	0.07	0.04
Nagelkerke r^2	0.39	0.48	0.48	0.37	0.26
n / years	6194	6551	5827	5198	4215
n / persons (events)	765 (693)	972 (946)	1035 (1018)	999 (969)	675 (636)

Source: GSOEP 1984 to 2004 (* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$).

In the oldest cohort, age has no significant influence on the odds ratio of leaving the parental home; obviously, other forces are crucial. Only in the following cohorts does age (amongst other factors) determine the timing of the moving (**← p. 120)** out; it becomes a criterion for organizing one's life course. Whereas there is no significant gender effect in the first two cohorts, it becomes significant in the younger ones: during the observed period of 18–35, women move out more often than men this is an indication of the increasing number of men staying at the parental home longer.[12]

The expected relationship between moving out and first employment[13] can only be found in the youngest cohort, whose odds ratio doubles after entry into first employment.[14] This relation can be interpreted in two ways: people who work can more easily afford a home of their own, and people who have already left the parental household are more likely to be forced to work, e.g. in a part-time job. In the cohort born in the 1940s, there is an effect contradicting the thesis of a positive relation to first employment which is difficult to explain (but only weakly significant).

As expected, the influence of the first marriage on leaving the parental home decreases, but it is still the strongest factor in the cohort born in the 1960s. In contrast, the linkage between moving out and first parenthood has disappeared in the last cohort. There are hardly any

couples left who stay in their parents' house after marriage so they have all already moved out when the first child is born.

The explanatory power of the regression model (Nagelkerke's r2) is best in the cohorts born in the 1930s and 40s. It is halved in the last cohort. In the oldest cohorts – referring to the historical time of the 1950s and 60s – there is a close linkage between moving out and first marriage. Young men and women often stay in their parents' house until they have found a spouse, and the marriage is the signal for moving out. The end of education and entry into first employment are factors that do not play an independent role. Nonetheless, the duration of education, which is rising across the cohorts, has to be considered here: in the oldest cohorts only a very small proportion of persons obtained the *Abitur* or even a university degree, and this applies even more so to women. Therefore, education was often finished before or at the age of majority.[15] In these cases, finishing education *could* not influence the decision to leave the parental home, if one assumes that only persons of full age have their own household.

With the extension of education, more and more people first live alone for a certain time (or move in with their partner) before they marry. At the same time, other influences become more important in relation to leaving the parental home, such as economic independence. However, this must have been preceded by a normative change, in the course of which one's living alone as a young adult, especially as a young woman, has become more accepted. Since the parents of young adults are often able to support financially the spatial independence of their children in education, the entry into first employment is not a necessary condition for moving out, but it at least promotes it. **(← p. 121)**

Conclusion and Further Perspectives

Altogether, a certain amount of temporal *destandardization* can be seen, in particular concerning the temporal uniformity of single family transitions in early adulthood. These destandardization processes are a result of a growing variety of individual circumstances under which the moving out of the parental home happens and of a certain *differentiation* according to education. With regard to the connection of different transitions, there is only evidence of a very confined degree of destandardization. The linkage between leaving the parental home and marriage is reduced but still existing. If destandardization takes place, it clearly follows socially structured patterns. The analysed examples show that the notion of (de-)standardization is most fruitful if it is not only used with relation to single transitions but also with relation to sequences and the association of different transitions which together form the interconnected system of life course transitions.

The logic of family transitions in the first half of life did not change completely. On the contrary, many connections of different transitions are relatively stable, although, admittedly, the nature of the data shown does not enable us to say anything about the underlying logic of biographical decision making. Possibly, biographical constructions are transformed more than can be seen from the data. The changes that have been described seem in part to be due to continuing principles acting on the life course, such as the norm that education and first marriage are mutually exclusive, that families are ideally formed on the basis of a secure income, and so on.

The significant relationships between moving out and age and between moving out and marriage did not disappear. Across the cohorts, the transition into one's own household is

increasingly structured according to participation in education, first employment and gender. Neither the employment situation of the young adult (and the associated question of whether one can afford one's own household) nor the spatial mobility caused by education and employment are solely crucial (see Konietzka and Huinink, 2003). In the oldest cohort, only marriage and parenthood determine the time of leaving the parental home, while age as such is ineffective. On the one hand, it is possible that World War II and its consequences delayed the transition for some cohort members and accelerated it for others, so that opposite effects neutralize each other, resulting in a very blurry picture. On the other hand, the less standardized timing could also be symptomatic of the life courses experienced by the cohorts before. This is supported by similar findings for other countries, to which the war argument does not or hardly applies (for the case of Canada, see Ravanera et al., 2004). Without data reaching back further into the past, a well-founded choice between these two alternative interpretations is impossible.

Nonetheless, the apparent resemblances between the youngest and oldest cohorts are not supported on further examination. There are few plausible **(← p. 122)** reasons for interpreting the changes occurring in the youngest cohorts as the recurrence of a less clear, less structured life course as that of the cohort born in the 1920s. The multivariate logistic regression shown earlier indicates that, for the youngest cohort, the destandardized move out of the parental home is much more structured by age, gender and the transition into employment than in the oldest cohorts. Historical context information on the change of norms and values (legal and other) in the field of marriage and living arrangements support this argument too (see, for example, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1994; Pfau-Effinger, 2000). Therefore, the destandardization of the last decades is not a return to the apparently less structured normality of the first half of the twentieth century and before (see Kohli, 1986a).

The changing pattern of leaving the parental home can also be interpreted as part of *individualization* processes, although these do not explain everything and cannot be measured statistically as such. Individual actors are increasingly being forced to find their own solutions to the problem of combining the different transitions in young adult life, with the result that the ways of handling the transition steps become more varied. Biographical actors have to deal with this under the particular conditions of their own situation.

The possibilities for agency in the period between growing up and the formation of one's own family have pluralized. This applies especially to women because, in earlier cohorts, their options were more limited in comparison with men. Younger cohorts of women define themselves, at least in their early careers, less through their (future) families than older cohorts and make decisions more independently. In this sense, the increasing individualization of women, in particular their inclusion in the employment market, is one of the dynamic factors in the recent development of life course patterns (see Lewis, 2002; Kohli, 2003). Increasingly, both genders are following the same logic of connection between first employment and first parenthood, but there is still no assimilation – and considerable gender differences regarding the timing of family transitions continue to exist. Individualization processes in women's life courses can be seen as 'catching up' in comparison with men, with many differences still persisting.

In spite of these indications of individualization processes, the idea of agency without limits, sometimes connected to the notion of individualization, seems inappropriate, as is the idea of a destandardization in the sense of a dissolution of life course structures. The real spaces of

action are different for different actors, depending as they do, for instance, on the financial situation of one's parents or one's own income. Hence the notion of individualization invoked here does not imply that the biographical space that has appeared between leaving the parental home and marriage is exempt from structurations.

A considerable proportion of the changes are reactions to biographical uncertainty. Economic independence, decisive for men's marriage, is now already (← p. 123) important for the preceding step: moving out of the parents' house. This also holds true for women. Moving out of the parental home is delayed because of the combination of longer education and the related economic uncertainty with circumstances that facilitate staying at the parental home (enough space, good relationship with parents). The fact that leaving the parental home is still dependent on age, despite controlling for other factors, confirms the character of the life course as a binding sequence programme, operating beyond concrete incentives and obstacles. For the deferral of marriage and first parenthood, the uncertainty argument applies even more. Here, biographical uncertainty is often created by the precarious transition into first employment (for more detail, see Nazio and Blossfeld, 2003; Scherger, 2007).

Further research could productively investigate whether the transition into cohabitation is also an incentive for moving out or whether a period of living alone after leaving the parental home has become typical for young adults of all classes and both genders. There is, for example, no exhaustive answer to the question of whether women are more likely to live alone for a certain time than men, or whether men with little education tend to leave the parental home only to move in with a partner without having lived alone before – there are some indications of this in Germany.

Regarding the question of what drives the change of the timing of family transitions in early adulthood, neither the education system nor the employment market can be seen as determinant. New living arrangements have filled the space of action in young adulthood and this is also the result of a normative change. At the same time, economic uncertainty and the restrictions of the labour market are particularly manifest at life course transitions and limit individual agency. For further study, the following assumption can be formulated. The destandardization of the timing of family transitions is, at least partly, caused by the fact that certain rules of connecting different transitions in the life course persist or are only transformed instead of disappearing. The coupling of moving out and marriage becomes looser, and it is legitimate for both sexes to live alone in young adulthood or to move together with an unmarried partner. Yet people are more likely to do so under clearly defined circumstances that are connected to their biographical perspectives. Life courses are not simply destandardized – a precarious transition into employment causes biographical uncertainty and can lead to the behaviour of delay. The latter implies following the norms of biographical action rather than breaking them, for instance by marrying or becoming a parent despite still living in the parental home, being in education or being without a job; and the majority of biographical actors continue to try to avoid this. It remains to be seen whether younger cohorts will become habituated to uncertainty in employment and in other areas. If such habituation occurred, family formation would be realized more self-evidently under a broader range of conditions, not only those of (economic) certainty. (← p. 124) Long-term temporal and financial security was not only important to older cohorts but continues to play a key role in biographical acting and decision-making today.

Notes

[1] I am very grateful to the two referees for their helpful comments and to Niamh Moore for her valuable editorial work.

[2] With regard to changes in life courses, differentiation can also refer to the emergence of new, separate stages of life, but this is not implied here.

[3] Beck has not facilitated the clarity of the discussion because he exaggerates some of the trends he describes and is not always consistent in his argument. It is therefore no accident that some of his ideas have been contested intensely.

[4] Besides the dimension of release (highlighted by Beck and others), Beck describes two other dimensions of individualization; namely, by disenchantment with the world of traditional security ('*Entzauberung*') and a dimension of reintegration and control (Beck, 1986: 206f).

[5] On the contrary, he observes an astonishing continuity: 'the distances in the hierarchy of incomes and fundamental characteristics of wage labour have stayed the same, generally viewed' (Beck, 1983/1994: 45). But these inequalities are no longer structure-generating, in the sense that they are linked to determined socio-cultural experiences (and the formation of collective actors).

[6] See also the interesting metaphor of Berger (1996). He compares individualization processes to the change in a transport system from collective transport to individual (car) travel.

[7] The age on leaving home of the older cohorts has been collected retrospectively in 1985. It is assumed that this information refers to the final move out of the parents' house, although there is no such specification. For persons who moved out after 1984, the date of moving out is determined by comparing household numbers (similar to Lauterbach and Lüscher, 1999). In these cases, a proportion of approximately 10 per cent leaves the parental home twice or more often; here, the earliest date was applied. By this procedure, at least in some cases, different steps of moving out are unavoidably compared, but this mistake should not overly weaken the results. In the worst case, the last move out (of the older cohorts) is compared to the first move out (of the younger cohorts). Rather, given the actual increase in respective age, this leads to an underestimation of the difference. Vice versa, a clear difference between the cohorts should provide a very robust result. Moves out of the parental home at an age of less than 18 years are excluded.

[8] This is put into perspective by the fact that only yearly information is used. If one wants to be exact, the median would have to be interpreted as follows: 50 per cent of a cohort has already moved out in the year of their (for example) 24th birthday.

[9] Only implausible cases who married under the age of 16 are excluded. Today, as before 1975, marriage at the age of 16 or 17 years is possible in Germany, but only under certain conditions.

[10] With regard to marriage, there are three further arguments. First, more flexible relationships (e.g. without a shared household) are more attractive than marriage for **(← p. 125)** individuals in their early adulthood because their future prospects are uncertain and they are rarely financially independent (see Blossfeld et al., 1999). Second, Becker (1981) argues that, after a women has invested greatly in her education, a marriage and later family formation are not 'profitable' for her any more because they are less attractive in comparison with the lost income (for a critique of this, see Oppenheimer, 1988, 1994, 2003). Third, in certain milieus, marriage is not part of the normatively favoured life course model (Lauterbach, 1999).

[11] For reasons of clarity, the categorical variable of age has been bracketed into three year periods; in one-year brackets, its exploratory power would be best (also better than a metric variable). In the total models (across all cohorts), the differences between the cohorts are largely significant. By including the ages from 18 to 35 years, 97 per cent of all events of moving out (in the respective cohorts) are covered. As the members of the cohort born between 1970 and 1974 have not reached the age of 35 years by the year 2004, this cohort is excluded.

[12] Additionally, age and gender interact (which is not shown here): during the age period 18–35, men move out significantly later than women.

[13] Several versions of coding the variable of employment have been tested; for example, its reduction to full-time employees. All versions provide results which are nonsignificant or worse than those presented earlier. A variable for unemployment (in the same year, for at least a month) does not produce a significant result either.

[14] Because of their high correlation to first employment, neither participation in education nor educational level are included, although they are important. In models which are not shown here, only some of the educational coefficients are significant. Across the cohorts, current participation in education bars the respondents increasingly from leaving the parental home. Educational participation of every kind defers moving out, but only starting with the birth cohorts of the 1940s and 50s. The strength of this influence varies according to gender and kind of education. Students are more likely to move out than apprentices, but are mostly older than these when doing so. The deferring effect of a higher educational level is only confirmed in the last cohort and is weaker than expected. A linear relation between level of educational qualification and age on leaving the parental home is only found in men, if at all.

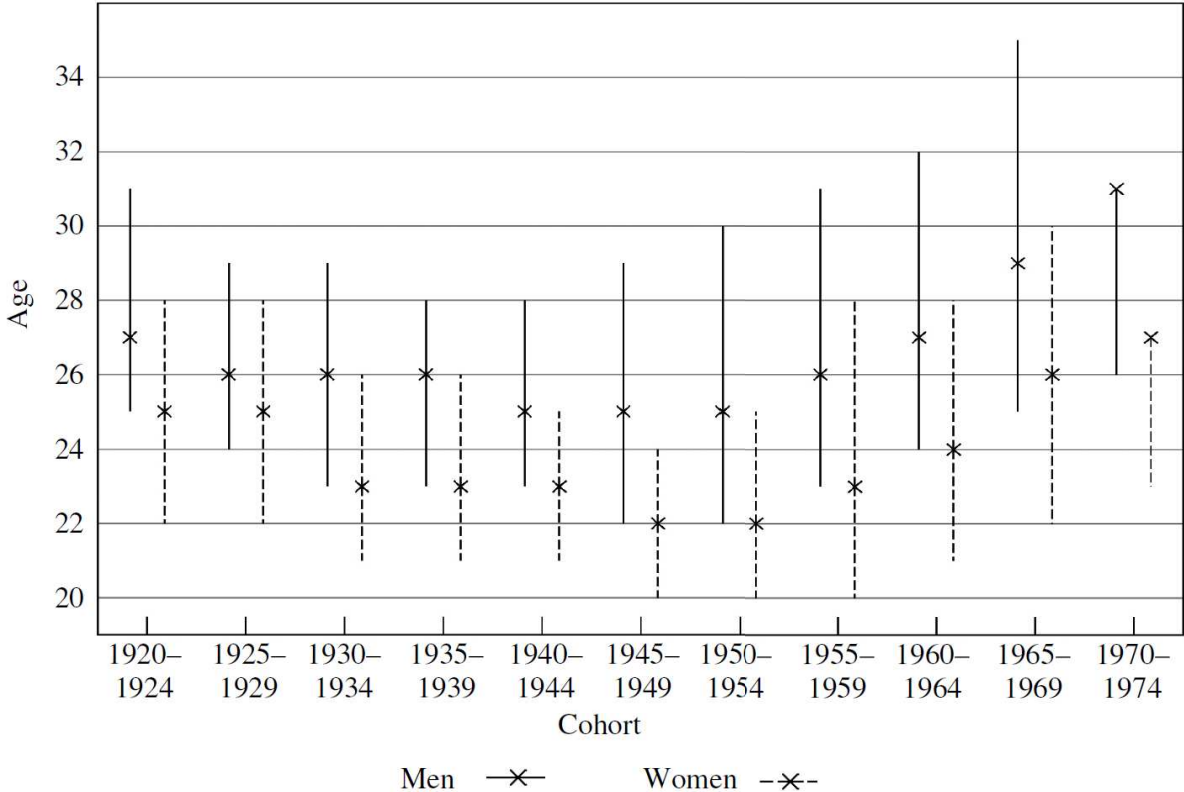[15] Furthermore, the age of majority was 21 prior to 1975 when it was lowered to 18.

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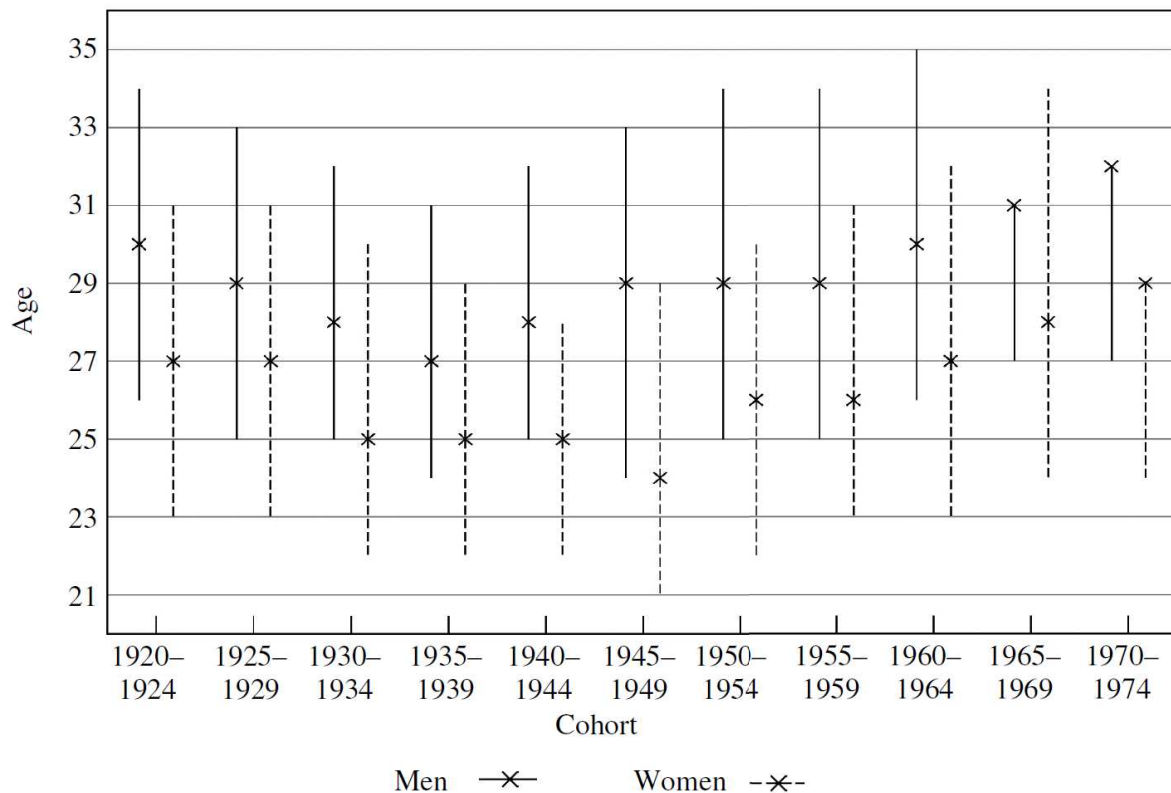
For first parenthood (see Figure 3), the trend is, in principle, the same, but the (**← p. 114**) age of this transition is more varied in all cohorts. The medium age of becoming a parent rises, too. The interval between the age when women become mothers for the first time and the analogous age at which men become fathers for the first time remains stable; namely, approximately three years.

Source: SOEP 1984 to 2004, *n* = 17.192 (15,853 events).

FIGURE 2: Age on first marriage, quartile ranges

Destandardization of family transitions becomes evident in their temporal sequence, too. As respective calculations show, the younger cohorts demonstrate more variation in the succession of these transitions. For example, more people than in the older cohorts only marry after having a child. Yet this increase in variation is very limited. At some points, there is even a new standard sequence, particularly regarding the move out of the parents' house and first marriage (respectively, first cohabitation): in the older cohorts, most of the men move out only when they get married and some women even stay in their parents' house with their spouses after getting married. In contrast, the respondents in the youngest cohorts mostly live alone (or with an unmarried partner) for a certain period after having left the parental home and before marrying. (**← p. 115**)
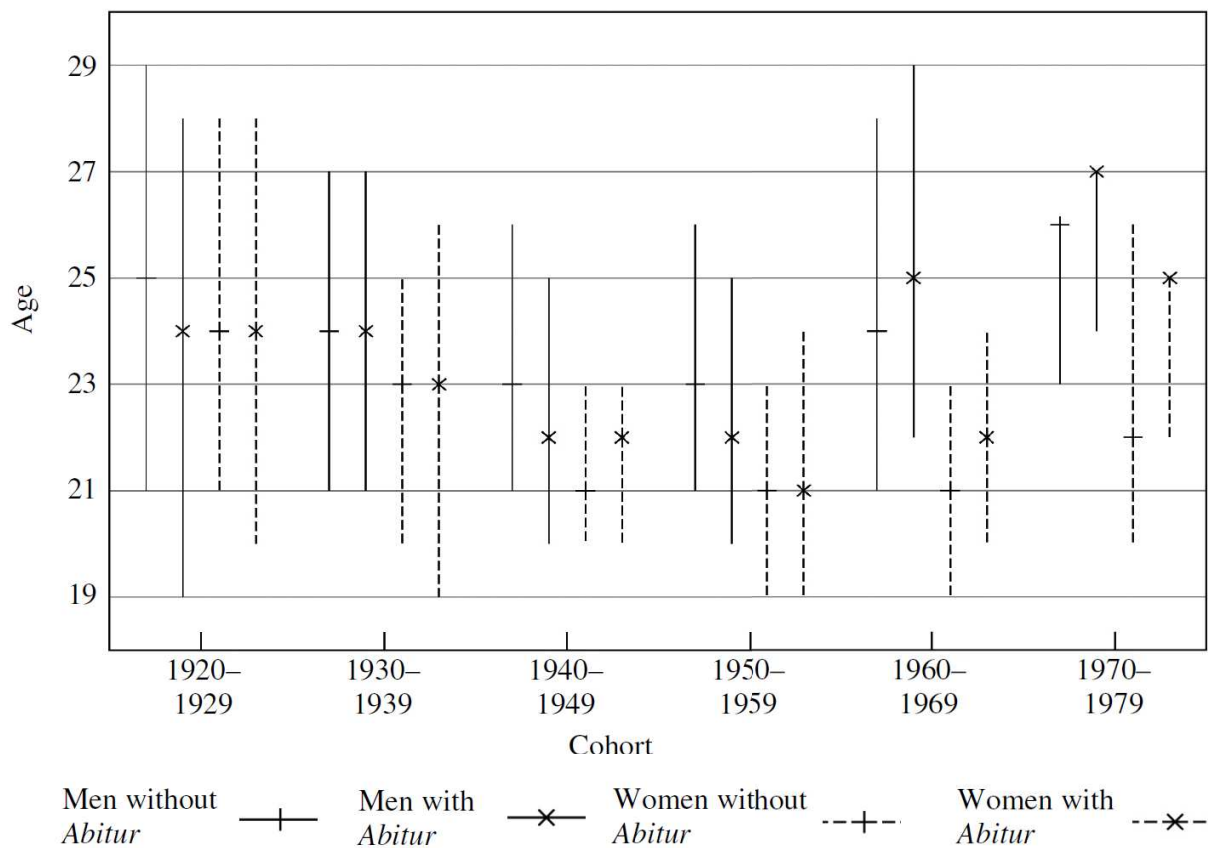
Source: SOEP 1984 to 2004, *n* = 15,722 (13,479 events).

FIGURE 3: Age of first parenthood, quartile ranges

Differentiation according to education

A closer look at the move out of the parents' house serves to explore if its temporal destandardization is related to differentiation according to education. Obviously, leaving the parental home is closely related to education, so possibly the educational expansion of the 1960s and 70s, leading to a greater proportion partaking in higher education, boosted the number of people moving out of the parental home relatively late. This might be reflected in a larger overall heterogeneity, with the medium age within the groups staying the same. In this case, the increasing temporal variation would be caused by the fact that groups with different transition timing diverge more and more.

Education is one of the most important social differentiations besides that of gender. Young people participating in higher education leave the parental home (and marry) later because they achieve financial independence later. For those young adults who are still in (full-time) education, leaving home is only possible with the aid of parental support or a part-time job.[10] (← p. 116) Figure 4 displays the age at leaving the parental home, this time not only differentiated by gender but also by education: persons with *Abitur* are distinguished from those without (*Abitur* corresponds to A-levels and is a prerequisite for studying at university level). School leaving certificates are most suitable for differentiation because further degrees (from universities or apprenticeships) have often not yet been achieved at this point in life.

Source: SOEP 1984 to 2004, n = 7489 (6887 events).

FIGURE 4: Age on leaving the parental home (by school education), quartile ranges

Up to the cohort born in the 1950s, there are only small differences between persons with and without *Abitur* – in some cohorts, men with *Abitur* even leave their parents' houses earlier than those without. Only in the cohorts born in the 1960s and later do those with higher education remain longer with their families of origin; the difference in the median is one to three years. The upper and lower limits of the quartiles point into a similar direction of a growing difference. In the groups without *Abitur*, however, leaving home is also deferred and temporally destandardized, even though less clearly. The destandardization seen earlier (**← p. 117**) is thus not only or not mainly caused by differentiation. The age on leaving the parental home is destandardized in all educational groups. Additionally, it is differentiated according to school education.

Conditions for leaving the parental home

In early research, destandardization and the delay in life course transitions in early adulthood have been explained by the changed values and preferences of biographical action. Meanwhile, the focus of the search for causes has moved to the incentives and constraints resulting from extended education, from the difficult transition into employment and from less continuous occupational careers in general (Brückner and Mayer, 2005).

This last argument can be relativized in two ways. First, particularly regarding the differences between men and women, it is insufficient to consider the timing of family transitions as a mere adaptation to the exigencies and problems of the labour market. Only if values and